

THE AMEEN RIHANI ANNUAL LECTURE SERIES

General Editor: Suheil Bushrui

Towards a Diverse and Pluralistic Arab Society

by

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Foreword by the Editor

The Ameen Rihani Annual Lecture Series is designed to address the thought and achievement of Ameen Rihani (1876-1940), as reflected in his English and Arabic writings. It will concentrate on his published and unpublished works in both languages, and explore other relevant and important material in international archives. Particular attention will be paid to the influence upon Rihani of his Lebanese and Arab heritage on the one hand, and of his American experience on the other. This lecture series will also address in general terms the major issues discussed by Ameen Rihani in his English and Arabic works such as: East/West relations, the future of the Arab world, and inter-religious and inter-faith understanding.

The significance of Rihani's work can scarcely be lost on modern day scholars and politicians alike. Some of the answers to the problems of today were provided by him over half a century ago. There is surely no more crucial contemporary issue than the importance of East/West relations, something Rihani not only realized but did his utmost to promote. His work, therefore, deserves consideration on two levels: in the context of the prevailing atmosphere of the times in which he lived, and in the light of present-day issues on which his influence still has an enduring bearing.

His Excellency Dr. Marwan Muasher graciously accepted to deliver the Inaugural Lecture of the Ameen Rihani Annual Lecture Series on 24 September 2008. No one is more qualified to inaugurate this very important series of lectures than Dr. Muasher himself – one of the most eminent Arab statesmen who has achieved international recognition as an astute diplomat, a builder of bridges between the East and the West, and a great friend of Lebanon.

Suheil Bushrui
Professor and Director
Kahlil Gibran Chair for Values and Peace Project

The Arab world today, while abundant with talent and potential for growth, still lags behind other regions of the world in terms of economic progress, human development, and political reform.



Towards a Diverse and Pluralistic Arab Society by His Excellency Dr. Marwan Muasher

Provost Farvardin,
Dean Montgomery,
Professor Bushrui,
Members of the Rihani Family,
Distinguished Guests,

Thank you for your kind introduction, Dr. Bushrui. I am deeply touched by your warm welcome. I have known you since I was a student at the American University of Beirut more than thirty years ago and you were already a renowned educator and humanist then. I have tremendous respect for you and your notable work which continues to be a source of inspiration for me and many others in this room. I am a firm believer in your message that we in the Arab world must uphold Arab tradition not only by understanding its leading role in shaping history, but also by creating an environment of mutual respect and engaging in cultural dialogue with the West. I am grateful for your invitation and humbled to be amongst such a distinguished group of thinkers and academics, dear friends, and family.

It is truly an honor for me to take part in the Ameen Rihani Annual Lecture Series and to humbly continue on the path that he has carved – the path toward diversity and pluralism in the Arab world, and toward peaceful co-existence with other civilizations.

Tonight, dear friends, to honor Ameen Rihani and his resounding contributions to both Arab and American cultures, and to uphold the values of acceptance and inclusion that he espoused, I will speak to you with both passion and reason. For I believe Ameen Rihani was well equipped with both, driven by his passion to promote the rich culturally diverse heritage of the East, and directed by his reasoning that if we in the Arab world lose the passion to live in a free and just pluralistic society, we will be swept aside by forces of extremism and ignorance.

Dear Friends,

Throughout my educational and professional journey in the Arab world and in the West, I have come to embrace the values of acceptance, inclusion, respect for diversity, peaceful co-existence, and moderation. In over twenty years of public service I have come face to face with the challenges as well as opportunities in not only promoting these values, but also in taking part in a collective effort to implement them in the Arab arena. This collective effort has evolved over the past two decades to form the idea of an Arab Center which rests on three principal pillars: peace, reform, and inclusion – three basic ingredients that our region is in dire need of today given the complex set of economic, political, and social problems it faces.

The Arab world today, while abundant with talent and potential for growth, still lags behind other regions of the world in terms of economic progress, human development, and political reform. In terms of economic growth, the Arab world has witnessed higher growth rates in the past five years – thanks to skyrocketing oil prices – but as the Arab World Competitive Report last year notes, despite this spectacular growth the region is “still far from realizing its full growth potential.” Unemployment remains soberly high, averaging between 20 to 30 percent in total and 25 to 40 percent amongst the Arab youth, who in turn comprise more than 50 percent of the total Arab population. More than 35 percent of the Arab population is fifteen years or younger – which translates into a higher labor supply in the future – but employment opportunities

remain limited in the private sector and there remains a skill mismatch in the labor market. In fact, according to the World Bank, both the public and private sectors in the Arab world must create 100 million new jobs by 2020 in order to accommodate these young Arab job seekers. The combination of soaring unemployment rates and a widening youth bulge across the twenty-two Arab countries is alarming – especially in the midst of regional political instability and lingering conflict.

For the Arab youth especially, unemployment tends to confirm their status as the “lost generation” rather than being the “leaders of tomorrow.” Combined with limited openings for youth participation in civic and political life, their socioeconomic insecurity further reinforces their sense of disenfranchisement and exclusion, making them soft targets for radical ideologies and violence.

A colorful mosaic of different ethnic and religious communities as well as political ideologies sharing the same language, history, and cultural heritage, the Arab world today is diverse. There are Muslims (Sunnis, Shiites, and other schools of jurisprudence), Druze, Bahá’ís, Christians of all denominations, and Jews. There are Kurds, Armenians, Circassians, Chechens, and Berber. However, this diverse society is being directed by two groupings that have exploited this diversity to achieve their own political objectives. Both the entrenched “status quo” mentality of the elite and the forces of religious fanaticism have activated boundaries of “us versus them” within and across the different religious and ethnic groups, thereby emphasizing our differences, preaching monolithism, and encouraging radicalism.

Essentially, this diversity has become a mere demographic spreadsheet treated as a source of weakness and disunity rather than a source of strength, and individual as well as communal empowerment. It has come to be regarded as a “negative” force, further reinforced and most apparent in our education system. Our generation was taught to think monolithically, one-dimensionally, and was guided by absolute truths about our historical narrative, our identity, and cultural heritage. Critical and independent thinking was absent or discouraged. Values of acceptance of others and inclusion were swept aside by confusing allegiance to the country with that to the ruling party or leader. Sadly, these challenges persist. The education problem in the Arab world today is not limited to unequal access to educational opportunities, or to student-to-teacher ratios and gender discrimination. The content of the educational material, the direction in which it guides our youth and the teaching methodology are the core of the education problem. According to the UN Arab Human Development Report, “raising the quality of education at all levels” remains a serious challenge across our region. While positive steps have been undertaken by some Arab governments to address this challenge in the past five years – most visibly in Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and elsewhere – the curricula in most Arab countries to this very day include discriminatory practices that foster tensions, exclude taboo topics, and emphasize the superiority of our civilization over others.

Consequently, our knowledge base continues to lag, and progress in producing knowledge and spurring innovation has been limited and slow. The Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation, for example, reports that “in one year, the twenty-two Arab countries produce 6,000 books while North America produces 102,000 books.”

And to quote the man whose ideas we are celebrating today: “Ignorance is oppression, it is fanaticism, blind obedience.” This is indeed felt across the Arab social and political spheres. The two groups that are dominant today – the ruling political elite and the religious extremist groups – are engaged in a battle of ideas. On one hand, the patriarchal ruling elite are resisting political reform and are fighting to maintain their monopoly on defining what is in the best interest of their people. The ruling elite – unchecked by a free press, opposition parties, or a vibrant civil society – have fallen short of governing, of delivering, and have grown increasingly non-transparent. The World Bank governance indicators point out that none of the Arab countries rank above the 75th percentile in measures of rule of law.

On the other hand, religious extremist groups are also fighting to impose their ideology as another absolute truth, as THE solution to the people's sense of hopelessness and distress. Islam was used by these religious groups as a political tool to garner support with the populace. More importantly, these political Islamist movements branded the Islamic faith through an effective network of social services and through nifty slogans that fed off the lingering conflicts in the region.

However, we must be clear in differentiating between these political Islamist movements for they are far from comprising one monolithic group. There are three principal groupings. First: the violent, extremist, exclusionist movement which adopts an ideology of hate and has waged war against all those who do not subscribe to their values including other Muslims. And we have witnessed terror attacks that defined their battleground: New York, Madrid, Amman, Riyadh, Sharm el Sheikh, Casablanca, and elsewhere around the world. Second: the militant resistance movement which includes political non-state actors that espouse violence as the means to national liberation and struggle. These groups, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, were born in conflict zones and are empowered by the continuation of conflict. And third: the peaceful Islamist movement which has worked through the governing systems they live under such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan and Islamists in Morocco. This differentiation is crucial in defining the challenges we face in the region. For the lack of political openness limits the channels available for the peaceful movements and further consolidates the popular and political appeal of the militant ones.

Dear Friends,

Our diversity has become the source of ethnic and religious tensions in Iraq, in Lebanon, in Sudan, and in the Palestinian-Israeli and the wider Arab-Israeli arenas. Consequently, our region today is seen by others in the international arena, and especially in the West, as a volatile zone of conflict which foments instability. According to the 2008 Failed State Index – which ranks 177 states in order of vulnerability to violent internal conflict and societal deterioration – published by the Fund for Peace and Foreign Policy magazine, only four Arab states (Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, and Oman) are ranked in the category of stable or sustainable states. Four Arab states (Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan, and Somalia) are ranked amongst the critical or alert states. And the rest of the Arab countries fall within the “in danger” and the “borderline category.” Heightened tensions amongst our diverse Arab society could expand the recruiting grounds for militant and terrorist groups especially in the Palestinian Territories and Iraq. The continuation of conflict means that there will be a continuous source of grievances that fuel the vicious cycle of radicalization – once again – especially amongst the unemployed, the disenfranchised, and the youth.

Dear Friends,

The myriad of challenges I have outlined tonight have rendered our Arab society increasingly introverted and exclusionist. We risk becoming the “lost civilization” rather than building on our rich history to engage with other civilizations. Calling for the abolishment of so called “crimes of honor” – or should I say crimes of *dishonor* – committed against women, is branded by the traditional and religious extremists as succumbing to Western domination. Western academia, literature, and philosophy are seen as anathema to Arab culture and are rejected. Even hosting international fora and festivals of international culture and Western art is opposed and protested as threatening our national identity and Arab heritage.

We cannot allow our societies to be intimidated by those who use religion or power or arms to dictate their views forcefully and to label reformers of change as unpatriotic agents or traitors. In the words of Ameen Rihani: “Whatever the characteristics of the age we live in, its principal tendency is one of exchanges – exchange of culture as well as commodities. We give of our surplus for what we receive of the surplus of others.” Tragically, we are not producing enough to give, and we refuse to receive surplus of culture from the West for the mistaken fear of losing the identity of the East.

We cannot acquiesce any longer and we must not stay silent. As Rihani notes in his essays on East-West relations: “If we can preserve the intellectual wealth of the West and the spiritual worth of the East and bring them both within the reach of each people...we shall be contributing something solid and enduring to the advancement of mankind.” We in the Arab world must work together with other civilizations in Europe and America, as well as South and East Asia to reverse the culturally constructed paradigm of a clash of civilizations, and replace it with a dialogue of civilizations based on the principles that have guided Rihani and many others in the region: peace, moderation, inclusion, pluralism, and positive diversity.

Dear Friends,

In the battle of ideas, we cannot keep the Arab World hostage to two equally unattractive forces: a political elite that has not invested in developing a system of checks and balances so that the pillars of democracy can evolve, and a radical religious ideology that might threaten the political and cultural diversity of society. There is a third way: one that works for a pluralistic, peaceful, and inclusionist Arab society; one that is pro-actively moderate across all issues; one that is as passionate about reform as it is about peace; and one that is as insistent on the sanctity of life, peaceful co-existence, and interaction with other civilizations as it is on the rule of law and good governance.

Preserving our rich yet fragile diversity in the Arab world today presents us with many challenges as I have outlined. But more importantly, it also ushers many opportunities for the way forward. The most valuable opportunity before us is our human capital. Our youth represent our best hope for a brighter and more prosperous future. The largely ignored 50 percent of the Arab population – Arab women – are agents for change. Our emerging civil society, while volatile in some cases and limited in others, represents a crucial step towards pluralism. And most importantly, the silent voices of moderation, reform, and peace are the movers and shakers for a better tomorrow.

Of course, the path towards diversity and pluralism is laden with obstacles, and change will not come easy – there are no shortcuts. We must recognize as we move forward along the path of Ameen Rihani and other reformers of our past and present that reform is a *gradual process*. We will not reach the pinnacle of achievement overnight. We will also not succeed if we continue to isolate ourselves from the global arena. We must work together within the region and across regions, engage in dialogue, benefit from the transfer of knowledge, think creatively, and innovate. We must also understand that a democratic, pluralistic culture is not achieved through free elections only, but through the essential building blocks of all the pillars of democracy: a free press, an independent judiciary, women’s empowerment, respect for human and individual rights, respect for the rule of law, and a peaceful rotation of power, among others. This is a process that might take several decades, but a process that Arab societies must be committed to starting in a serious way if we hope to close the increasing gap between us and the rest of the world. To accomplish this, we should lead with two guiding principles: first, a commitment to political and cultural diversity; and second, a commitment to peaceful means.

To prevent one party or group from using their power to monopolize our cultural identities and intellectual thought, our way of life and political spheres, each Arab society must arrive at a national consensus in which all parties commit to political and cultural diversity at all times and in which any group would be legally prevented from denying the right to organize for other groups. Majority rule, but also minority and individual rights. That is the key element of the culture of democracy.

Moreover, all political parties or individuals must also commit to pursuing their objectives through peaceful means. Parties participating in a pluralistic system cannot bear arms, cannot form their own private armies, and cannot use violence and force to garner support under any conditions. We must also be candid. Violence against civilians cannot be acceptable

under any conditions, nor can support for those who commit such acts of violence. That is incitement, not freedom of speech.

If these two principles are adhered to, in deeds as well as words, and become part of the national dialogue and culture as well as national constitutions, we will witness real political development while assuring society that the principle of a peaceful rotation of power is respected.

And as we move forward in this journey of political and cultural development, we must take immediate action to improve governance, to address human rights abuses, discrimination against women and minorities, corruption, and circumscribed freedoms. And we must do so by amending the legal environment and most importantly by revamping our education systems. It is no longer sufficient to merely ensure that the education system is free of incitement or intolerance. Rather, the curricula must also teach values of tolerance, diversity, respect for others, acceptance, and peaceful co-existence. To quote Rihani again: "Revolutions do not help... education is the sole solution," it is the "basis of prosperity." We must start teaching the next generation in the Arab world how to think, not what to think.

Moreover, the Arab world must continue to work with the international community and the United States to peacefully resolve the lingering conflicts in the region. A collective Arab effort based on the principles of moderation and peace has given birth to the Arab Peace Initiative at the Beirut Arab Summit in 2002. We have endured enough bloodshed and destruction in the region as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Today, there is urgency for both Arabs and Israelis to move from conflict management to conflict resolution, to embrace diversity in the region rather than demonize it as a destructive force, and to adopt policies of inclusion. If Israel wants finally to abandon its iron wall policy and be accepted in the region, it needs to accept and indeed, work for the right of Palestinians to live on their land free of occupation.

And in Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan, and elsewhere in the Arab world, political leaders must also adhere to the principles of diversity, inclusion, and peace in order to live free of fear and to bridge the divide amongst their diverse ethnic and religious communities.

If we are to be triumphant in our journey towards pluralism and diversity, we need to be committed to the values of acceptance, inclusion, and peaceful co-existence. We must not be threatened into submission by any force that continues to resist change, reform, or cultural diversity, be it from a traditional political elite concerned about losing its privileges under the status quo, or from radical ideologies that do not believe in pluralism or inclusion.

Perhaps it is fitting to close with the words of Ameen Rihani in his call to teachers, be they political leaders, guides, gurus, imams, priests, or rabbis: "You teachers," he says, "teach your pupils freedom in thought and deed, honesty in thought and deed and tolerance in thought and deed."

Thank You.

If we are to be triumphant in our journey towards pluralism and diversity, we need to be committed to the values of acceptance, inclusion, and peaceful co-existence.



A Biographical Note

DR. MARWAN MUASHER, a prominent Jordanian diplomat, has been instrumental in shaping Middle East peace efforts for nearly twenty years.

In 1995, Dr. Muasher opened Jordan's first embassy in Israel, and in 1996 became Minister of Information and the government's spokesperson. From 1997 to 2002, he served in Washington again as Ambassador, negotiating the first free trade agreement between the United States and an Arab nation. He then returned to Jordan to serve as Foreign Minister, where he was deeply involved in the peace process. In 2004, he became Deputy Prime Minister responsible for Reform and Government Performance. In 2007, Dr. Muasher joined the World Bank as Senior Vice President of External Affairs.

