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*Arab Nationalism at the Brooklyn Bridge:
An Examination of Ameen Rihani's Nationalist Ideas as an Arab American*

Ameen Rihani, the early 20th century Arab-American writer, carried on many ideas of the Arab renaissance while adding a unique Arab-American perspective to his writings. His work, both literary and political, evolved throughout his career as situations changed in the Arab world and his works stand as an early example of balancing his ties to both the East and West.

Rida, Yaziji and Bustani

Yasir Suleiman looks at the use of the “past” in nationalist discourse and says that looking at the past is a flexible way for people to define themselves in the present. (Suleiman 38) Rihani has an idea of the past that I believe is similar to the flexible past that Suleiman describes. In Rihani’s essay “The Spirit of Language”, he says that he respects the past if it conforms with or is beneficial to the present. (Rihani, The Spirit of Language, 53)

Rihani also lays out his ideas on how to improve Arabic, which echo other Arab renaissance writers, especially Rashid Rida and Ibrahim Yaziji. Rihani calls for the establishment of an Arabic Academy to “bring into it (Arabic) some modern scientific and technical terms and allow the use of some popular idioms.” (Rihani, The Spirit of Language, 54). Rida also called for the establishment of a language academy to both protect and modernize the Arabic language. (Suleiman 90) Yaziji also called for planning and improving Arabic by up-to-date grammars and dictionaries, which contain new words and ideas that have been made into Arabic words. Yaziji was concerned with the

communicative function of language, making it easier for people to understand and use Arabic, especially in relating new concepts. (Suleiman 98, 99) Rihani also called for making Arabic clear, alive and understandable to the particular generation in which writers are writing. He also calls for a modern and unpolluted Arabic dictionary, which is free of “barbaric words, nomadic synonyms, vulgar words, proverbs that do not apply to our daily life and outmoded expressions. (Rihani, *The Spirit of Language*, 55) This is in keeping with Rihani’s view of only keeping from the past what is beneficial to the present.

In Rihani’s books on his travels in the Arabian Peninsula, one can see his attitude towards outdated and flowery Arabic. He is very tongue-in-cheek when he quotes a very ornate letter from a Qadi’ Arashi (who served Imam Yahya). He says that he is “tempted to include in this chapter a translation of the Qadi’s letter to the Imam as a specimen of the official style of correspondence.” After reading Rihani’s earlier essay on the Arabic language, one can come to the conclusion that he may be trying to make a point when he quotes this lavish letter with all of its unnecessary add-ons and filler.

Themes: 1900 to World War I

In Rihani’s writings from approximately 1900 to World War I, his writings reflect his experiences in America balanced with concerns for freedom and justice in the Arab world. We also see Rihani’s beginning ideas about Arab nationalism in the form of Greater Syrian nationalism in his English novel, “*The Book of Khalid*”.

Rihani is different from many Arabs who wrote about the “West” in the 1800s. While many Arab writers spent some time in Europe and some lived there, Rihani lived for many years in America and became a naturalized American citizen. I believe this

gives him a unique perspective. He was not looking at America as a visitor or just for study. He was an American of Arab descent, looking at America from both an insider's and outsider's perspective.

In Rihani's "From Brooklyn Bridge", from the viewpoint of the Brooklyn Bridge, Rihani looks at the Statue of Liberty and asks when freedom will turn its face to the world. He asks when the boats of commerce, bringing products to the world, will bring freedom to the shores of the Red, Yellow and Indian seas. But Rihani's wish for freedom and justice is not calling for a complete acceptance of America's ideals. Instead what he seems to be asking for is more of a cultural exchange. He says that the West should

"carry to the East the dynamism of the West and bring back to the West the Eastern quiescence. Take to India a parcel of the practical American wisdom and return to New York with some bags containing seeds of Indian philosophy. Spring on Egypt and Syria the outcomes of the engineering science and come home with a stream of Arab deeds." (Rihani, From Brooklyn Bridge, 11-12)

A collection of essays about Ameen Rihani say that he was a pioneer of bridging East and West (Funk and Sitka) but I think that Rihani goes beyond just bridging East and West and calls for a combining of the beneficial traits of the East and West to enhance both cultures. In the same essay, Rihani says that three sites have influenced him and that people can look to all of these places for inspiration and ideals. The first is Lebanon and its coasts seen from the Sanin Mountains. This is nature to him and people should go to nature to acquire inspiration from its colors, sights, forms and rhythms. The second site is Paris seen from the Eiffel Tower which is, to him, artistic industry. People should visit Paris to "learn the subtlety of industry, the refinement of style, the peculiarity of innovation and the secret of creation." Next, is New York, as viewed at night from the Brooklyn Bridge, is the site where people will learn to struggle, endure and persevere and they will become successful. It seems that Rihani is saying that you need a combination

of all of these things in order to reach your fullest potential. This builds upon his earlier idea in the essay of giving and receiving between Western and Eastern culture, that one can't be complete without the other.

At the same time as Rihani is wishing for freedom from America to spread to other parts of the world, he is critical of society and culture in America. I believe at this point, Rihani is speaking as an American within American society. In two essays, "Over New York's Roofs" and "When Hell Seems Like Paradise", we see that Rihani was deeply affected by the unfairness of America's capitalist economic system. This critique is seen through the prism of workers in the coal mines in the early 1900s. In "Over New York's Roofs", Rihani says that every day miners risk their lives for very little in exchange. He says that society is corrupt and unjust when it benefits from the suffering of a part of that society. He says that although slavery has been abolished in the West, it now comes in a different form. (Rihani, Over New York's Roofs, 15-18)

"When Hell Seems Like Paradise" is also seen through the prism of the coal miners but this time, Rihani is looking at the strikes of the coal miners for decent wages and living conditions. He talks about the effects of the strike, the mine owners refused the miners demands and raised the price of coal and started selling less, so that everyone was suffering, not just the miners.

He tells a poignant story of a father losing his job and his child dying of cold, from the lack of coal to run the factory or heat the house. He uses this story to criticize not just the mine owners, but the wealthy in general "who conspire with the law and use the power of government to achieve their goals". (Rihani, When Hell Seems Like Paradise, 21) America is supposed to be the place of justice and equality, but how is it

that wealthy men are allowed to control society by ignoring the needs of other people and despising and disobeying the government. Rihani also seems to be criticizing the American government for allowing the “monopolists” to become rich and exploitative.

In “The Book of Khalid” we see Rihani’s concerns for Arab nationalism emerge. I believe this nationalism has a distinctly Lebanese flair, as evinced by references to the Phoenician ancestry of Syrians. The pan-Arab imaginings of Khalid come together when he begins to speak in Damascus where he advocates Arabs to free their mind before they work for the revolution of the state (The Book of Khalid, 312) which seems to be the beginnings of Rihani’s demand for more education in the Arab world, also a demand of earlier *Nahda* writers.

Rihani’s ideas of Arab unity first occur in fictional form in Khalid’s mind as he dreams of “The soul of the East-the mind of the West-the builder of a great Empire. The triumph of the Idea, the realization of a great dream: the rise of a great race who has fallen on evil days; the renaissance of Arabia; the reclaiming of her land; the reviving of her glory.” (The Book of Khalid 323) Rihani will, in 1922 with the broken promises of the Hussein-McMahon correspondence, the Balfour Declaration and the failure of the Arab kingdom in Syria, take up the actual call for Arab unity by undertaking a trip to the Arabian Peninsula to arouse the leaders there for the cause.

Themes: After World War I

In Rihani’s writings in American newspapers, journals and his travelogues of his trip to the Arabian Peninsula, we see Rihani’s earnest desire for Arab unity expand and take on a less ephemeral quality. He actually made the journey to the Arabian Peninsula to meet the Arab kings and ask for unity among them. His identity also seemed to change

in the 1920's. He seemed to identify more with being Arab and was looking for a way, as a Christian Arab, to fit into the dominant Muslim Arab culture. He is looking for this new way of belonging not only for himself but for Arabs in general to make the Arab world stronger.

Rihani's most famous English books detail his trip to the Arabian Peninsula. These are part travelogue, part ethnography, part social commentary and part political commentary. One might wonder why Rihani is focusing on the Arabian Peninsula for Arab unity when he himself is from Lebanon and King Hussein's attempt at Arab unity began in Syria and Palestine. But Rihani says that to focus on building Arab unity by starting with Syria and Palestine is like building the roof of a house before the foundation and the foundation is the Najd, Yemen and Asir. (Around the Coasts, 116) I assume that Rihani's idea of Arab unity had to come from the place where the Arabs and Arabic first came out of, in the Islamic conquests.

Rihani is also continuing and developing his work on helping Americans and the West in general understand the Arab world by writing these books in English. In *Arabian Peaks and Deserts*, Rihani says that it is part of his life's work to bring about better relations, "based on sympathy and understanding between Europe and Arabia" (140). One of the most striking things about the three books is that Rihani is not sugarcoating the situation in Arabia. He shows both the good and bad of the Arab world. In *Ibn Sa'oud of Arabia*, Rihani praises the personality and generosity of Ibn Sa'oud (Ibn Sa'oud, 40, 123-136) but he speaks frankly and often critically of Wahabbism throughout the book. In Yemen, Rihani speaks of the justice and fairness shown by Imam Yahya but Rihani is disgusted by the way some Yemenis speak of the Jews of Yemen (Arabian Peaks, 83,

181-183). He tells about how King Hussein tormented his minister of finance to amuse himself (Around the Coast, 22-27).

I believe that this unflinching assessment of the peoples and conditions of the Arabian Peninsula is one of the strongest features of the books, in terms of Rihani's commitment to true understanding between the Arab world and the West. By accentuating both the good and bad, I believe that Rihani wanted to show what was working and beneficial in Arabia and show what needed to be improved or changed. In this time period when the Middle East was beginning to be featured regularly in newspapers and periodicals but was yet still little known or understood, to have an honest outlook from someone involved in both cultures would have been a great addition to the discourse. One can also see above, in *Excerpts from Ar-Rihaniyat* originally written in Arabic, that Rihani didn't overemphasize the good or bad in America to the Arab world.

In addition to the English books, Rihani wrote a book about his travels in Arab called *Maluk Al Arab*. In Geoffrey Nash's, *Arab Writers in English*, he characterizes Rihani's writing in both languages as a "natural consequence of Rihani's biculturality" (Nash, 47) but I think that this may downplay any choices Rihani made about publishing in both languages. While it may have been easy to write in English and Arabic because he was fluent in both, Rihani's background and growing concerns about Arab politics make me believe that it was not just a natural consequence. To write in English means to introduce the rulers and people of Arabia to Americans at a time when most knew little or nothing about the Arab world even though its prominence was rising. To write in Arabic may have been to give his ideas and plans more credibility. It may have even given his "Arabness" more credibility. Rihani speaks in each book about Arabs thinking he was an

English spy (Rihani, Arabian Peaks, 71) or an American missionary or someone working for a corporation trying to get economic concessions from the Arabs. (Rihani, Ibn Sa'oud, 38) In fact, in Yemen, Rihani seems to have been met with suspicion from Imam Yahya and in one of their first meetings; he clarified his position by saying:

“Before I begin, I would assure your Eminence that I have nothing to do with the English; I am not connected politically or commercially with any interests in America; nor am I an official representative of King Husein. I am a self-appointed missionary of civilization.” (Rihani, Arabian Peaks, 139)

I think that writing a book in Arabic about his travels and the acceptance he received from many people within Arabia would have gone a long way to showing that he was genuinely concerned with the problems in the Arab world. It would also have showed that he was an Arab and his concerns were Arab concerns.

Rihani explains the purpose of his travels in Arabia to Imam Yahya in San'a, “to see the country, to write about it and to be of some service to its people and their cause.” (Rihani, Arabian Peaks, 95). To Ibn Sa'oud, he says something similar, that there were three purposes of his trip, to meet the Arab leaders (especially Ibn Sa'oud), to eventually write what he had encountered, and to bring start the work towards Arab unity by bringing together for “a meeting...all the ruling Ameers for acquaintance first and a common understanding” (Rihani, Ibn Sa'oud, 39). It is the last of these three goals that really propelled Rihani to Arabia. He is constantly bringing up the idea of Arab unity and defining what it would be, both directly and indirectly and in personal and aggregate ways.

In his first meeting with Imam Yahya, Rihani defines himself by saying,

“Although a Syrian by birth, an American by naturalization, I am in my blood an Arab; and although Christianity is the religion of my inheritance, I am also of the faith of the great poets and philosophers of Arabia- Al Ghazzaly, Al Farid and Abu'l Ala- as well as of the young Arabs of today who are working for union and independence, and seeking to reinvest their country with its former prestige and power....”Who upholds Arabia, upholds Al-Islam.” (Rihani, Arabian Peaks, 95)

Not only is Rihani self-identifying himself as an Arab, he seems to attempting to put himself and other religious minorities in the Arab world into the dominant Arab Muslim culture. He does this identification throughout his travels. When the commander of the army in Mawia, Yemen assumes that he is Muslim and a descendent of the prophet, asks him if he is a Husaini or a Hasani, Rihani replies that he is an Arab who identifies with all sects of Islam and quotes a line of poetry about loving all the tribes of Arabia. (Rihani, Arabian Peaks, 42)

Rihani's rejection of sectarianism is seen also in his idea of Arab unity based on Arab ethnicity and language rather than a pan-Islamism in the Arab world which would leave out people of religious minority communities. He tells Imam Yahya that race brings people together while religion separates them. He says that the Christian of Syria is an Arab like the Muslim and that an Arab nationality will unite the Arabs and keeps them united while religion separates them. (Rihani, Arabian Peaks, 96 and Nash, 53)

In his time with Abd'ul Aziz Ibn Sa'oud in the Najd, he brings up the idea of Arab unity many times. When he first meets, he asks for Arab unity. (Rihani, Ibn Sa'oud, 39). At the Ojair meeting between Ibn Sa'oud, the British and the Iraqis, Rihani asks that work be done to benefit the Arabs and says that a "strong man is never afraid of making concessions in the interest of peace" (Rihani, Ibn Sa'oud, 53). Again, in conversation with Ibn Sa'oud, Rihani says that he again broached the subject of Arab unity, or pan-Arabism as he called it. He "argued for treaties of friendship and peace between the different rulers as a corner stone, a foundation, to the proposed unity." (Rihani, Ibn Sa'oud, 64). In an excerpt from his diary, Rihani says that if King Faisal were to make a pact with Ibn Sa'oud, the foundation of Arab peace and unity would be laid. (Ibn Sa'oud)

While Rihani is very enthusiastic about Arab unity, his comments and suggestions show that he is realistic about the idea of Arab unity. He knows that concessions will have to be made and that Arab unity must begin slowly on the level of treaties and peace before it moves to Arab unity on a grand scale. It is clear that Rihani's plans for Arab unity, although pan-Arabism ultimately failed, were set out carefully and with much thought as to the realism of the expectations. In Yemen, he recognizes that Yemeni society and the rule of Imam Yahya are based on three things, religion, race and isolation. Rihani doesn't want to change their religion but he recognizes that with education and contacts and treaties with other countries will broaden their views on race and connect them with others. (Rihani, Arabian Peaks, 140)

While all the Arab leaders listened to Rihani, most had reservations, the Imam Yahya was a supporter of pan-Islamism and Ibn Sa'oud worried about treachery among even the Arabs closest to him. King Hussein spoke of unity by inviting the Syrians of America to come to the Hijaz to help build an Arab kingdom based on Arab unity. I think that, given the time of Rihani's trip (1922-23) that Hussein would have been desperately grappling at anything that would help him to regain and restore some of the power and credibility he had lost from the failed attempt at Arab nationalism from the Hussein-McMahon correspondence, the failed Arab kingdom in Syria and the rise of Ibn Sa'oud in the Najd. Rihani details the rise of the Pan-Arab movement under King Hussein and also details Hussein's mistakes and his downfall as the leader of the Arab unity movement. Rihani praises Hussein leading the revolt against the Turks and how he made the Arab cause known to Europe but seems to criticize him for being more motivated by

ideas of Hussein's desire to be "King of the Arabs" and for only being considered with certain areas. (Around the Coasts, 96-119)

Concern for Palestine

By the mid-1920s, while Rihani and many others still supported the idea of pan-Arabism, it became clear that the rights of the Palestinians, in the face of Zionist aims to create a Jewish state, needed to be defended. Ameen Rihani was one of several Arab-Americans (and arguably the most prominent) to defend Palestine. From 1929 to 1939, Rihani frequently returned to the United States from Lebanon to give lectures about the Arab world and particularly the situation in Palestine. (Funk and Sitka 160). He entered into debates with Zionists and met with different American government officials to defend the Palestinians.

On September 6, 1929, Ameen Rihani, along with other Arab-Americans met with Secretary of State Henry Stimson. They requested that the American government support the Palestinians in calling for the revocation of the Balfour declaration, restriction of Zionist immigration to Palestine and the establishment "of a national representative government in accordance with the pledges and promises of the Government of Great Britain" (Arabs Ask Stimson) They also stressed that the uprising in Palestine (referring to the uprising occurring in Palestine at the time) was not because of religious or racial differences, but was a conflict between "the Arab nationalism of the native majority and the Zionism of a small majority of foreign Jews." (Arabs Ask Stimson)

In the November 1929 issue, Current History magazine published an article from the Arab viewpoint by Rihani and an article from the Zionist viewpoint by Meyer W. Weisgal. The articles were a response to the dispute over the Wailing Wall and to address

the confusion about the demands and complaints of the Arabs and the aims and purposes of the Zionist movement. Rihani gives a history of the Arab nationalist movement as a thorough backdrop to the conflict in Palestine. He says that Arabs had been fighting and protesting against Turkish rule long before World War I and that the British, knowing that they would need the support of the Arabs against the Turks and Germans in the Middle East, entered into the Hussein-McMahon agreement which clearly gave Arabs the territory of Palestine. Despite the Arabs, including many from Syria, Palestine and Iraq, rising up against the Turks in 1916, the British reneged on that promise with the Sykes-Picot agreement and the Balfour Declaration. (Rihani, *Palestine Arabs*, 272-278)

On November 1, 1929, Rihani gave the Arab point-of-view while Jacob De Haas represented the Zionist cause at a Boston Foreign Policy Association meeting (Two Factions'). In another Foreign Policy meeting in New York City, Rihani again debated with Jacob De Haas saying that the Balfour Declaration was the root of the troubles in Palestine and that Muslims throughout the world were concerned with the situation in Palestine. He also warns that the uprisings will continue if the British do not revoke the Balfour Declaration, saying that "if Great Britain breaks its promises to the Jews as it did to the Arabs, the Arabs will be satisfied." (Sees *Zionist Aims*)

Then again in 1931, Rihani debated with two people that supported the Zionist project. Rihani again said that the Balfour Declaration broke an earlier promise to Arab nationalist aspirations while Maurice Samuel discounted Arab nationalist claims by saying they represented only a small fraction of Arab popular opinion. (Defend and Attack)

Rihani returned to the Middle East after 1931 but came to the United States in 1937 to again take up the Palestinian cause. Representing the Arab National League, Rihani, Peter S. George and Reverend Benjamin Hofiz met with Secretary of State Cordell Hull to ask America to listen to the Arabs regarding their demands in Palestine. The delegation reiterated what Rihani had previously said about Arabs not being against the Jews, just against political Zionists. (Hull Hears Arab Plea)

A dinner was held by the Arab National League honoring Ameen Rihani in June of 1937. The anti-Zionist speakers included Rihani, William Ernest Hocking of Harvard, Izzat Tannous of the Arab Delegation to London, Faris Malouf a Boston lawyer, Dr. John Howland Lathrop of the Church of the Savior in Brooklyn and Fuad Shatara president of the Arab National League. Rihani acknowledged the Jewish population in Palestine and said that the practical solution at that point was to stop Jewish immigration to Palestine and allow the Jewish homeland to grow from within. He advocated a national representative government where Jews and Arabs would have equal status. This meeting was broadcast over the radio which I believe shows a growing American awareness and interest in events in Palestine.

Although Palestine was his main concern during this time period, Rihani also spoke on the mandate in Syria for the sixth national Conference on the Cause and Cure of War saying that the French were not going along with their mandate in Syria and were making Syria dependent on France rather than building up the country for independence. (Schuler, 1 and Colonial Ambitions)

Some of the lectures and articles Rihani presented on Palestine were collected posthumously by his brother Albert Rihani. These essays show the prescience Rihani had

into the outcome of the Zionist movement in Palestine. He says that “Peace in the Near East depends on peace in Palestine; and peace in Palestine depends upon the settlement of this Zionist question, which has caused...several uprisings in Palestine” (Rihani, Fate of Palestine, 27) Rihani also recognizes that the Middle East had become and would continue to be the “field of political rivalry and jealousy for more than two of the European powers.” (Rihani, Fate of Palestine, 28) This statement foreshadows many of the conflict in the Middle East in which Europe, Russia and the US played a role in for their own respective benefits.

Rihani also recognizes the cultural, social and economic achievements of the Jews in Palestine and throughout the world and invites the Jews to continue their cultural mission within Palestine without the idea of establishing a Jewish nation there. One of his most impressive ideas calls for first, wisdom and moderation on both sides. Based on the Passfield White Paper of 1930, he calls for the temporary suspension of Jewish immigration without revoking the Balfour Declaration. He says that if modified the Zionist experiment may continue under a new regime in which both Arabs and Jews suspend their “all or nothing” ideas and work together. He states that the experiment should be done for ten years and he believes after that time period that Arabs and Jews will be able to work together in Palestine. (Rihani, Fate of Palestine, 45-47) Rihani’s passionate support for the Palestinian cause tempered by his realistic view of the situation offered many ideas and suggestions for the satisfactorily resolution of the Palestinian conflict.

Present Day Implications

Although I do not believe that the Arab world, Arab politics and Arab-Americans etc. should always be looked at through the prism of September 11, Rihani's writings and work can add to the discourse of the Arab world and especially add to the discourse on Arab-Americans' place and role in American society today. A conference under the auspices of the Ameen Rihani Institute convened to discuss Rihani and what they said was his call for East-West reconciliation. This idea of East-West reconciliation fits into a larger theme of sorts in Rihani's writing that is pertinent to society today.

Rihani writes as an Arab who became an American citizen. With the events of September 11, Arab-Americans became the object of intense scrutiny as to their actions within American society. Rihani can serve as an example of one of the first Arab-Americans who publicly really balanced his ties between America and the Arab World. Not only did he work for reconciliation and understanding between them, but he was also politically active in both parts of the world. He must have had some faith in the power of the American government to help the Arabs and he became involved in Arab politics when he undertook his Arab unity trip. He was able to balance praise and criticism of both the US and the Arab world. With Arab-Americans today increasingly evaluating themselves and coming more and more into the political process, I think that the greatest effect of Rihani would be as an example of action to Arab-Americans. From his literary works such as *The Book of Khalid* and *The Path of Vision* to his trip to Arabia to work for peace and unity among Arabs; to his active engagement in American political life for the causes he believed in, he shows how any Arab-American, indeed any American, can balance their personal heritage with their political and social ideals and ambitions.

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