

## **Clash of civilizations or cultural cooperation? Nayef Al-Rodhan explores shared history of Western and Arab-Islamic cultures**

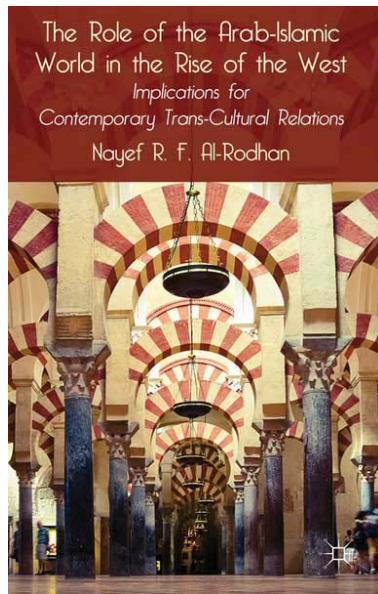
New book challenges "Eurocentric" view of Western history, with hopes of healing cultural relations between West and Middle East.

Geneva, Switzerland (MMD Newswire) November 14, 2012 - Can cultural relations between the Middle East and the West be saved? Prize-winning philosopher and geostrategist Dr. Nayef Al-Rodhan says yes, and towards that end has just released his newest book, "THE ROLE OF THE ARAB-ISLAMIC WORLD IN THE RISE OF THE WEST: Implications for Contemporary Trans-Cultural Relations." Nayef Al-Rodhan says, "The book couldn't have come at a better time, given the current climate of global cultural discourse and rampant denigration and demonization of Arab-Islamic culture and history, with predictable and ubiquitous misunderstanding and mistrust."

It's no secret that millions in the West have deep misperceptions and ignorance about the values, culture, achievements, and history of the Arab-Islamic world. "These misperceptions," Nayef Al-Rodhan says, "have produced reflexive, negative, and antagonistic stereotypes and convictions - manifested in everything from legitimate (though sometimes misguided) military action abroad, to heightened security measures (real and hyped) at home, to ignorant and hateful individuals' rants on blogs and social media sites." Nayef Al-Rodhan adds that the problem is exacerbated by widespread mainstream negative coverage in the media, educational material, and the entertainment industry, as well as electioneering sound bites that, he says, "are meant to unite and excite the masses."

While some concerns about threats to safety and security from extremist elements are legitimate, Nayef Al-Rodhan notes, these fears also serve to further polarize the West and the Arab-Islamic World, fostering an "us-versus-them" mentality and reinforcing the false notion that one culture is superior to another. This ignores the fact that the vast majority of people in the Arab-Islamic world do not subscribe to these extremist attitudes and have consistently suffered from them. If the distinction is not made between these fringe extremist elements and the majority of populations, the ignorance and the stereotyping will continue. This is disastrous for cultural relations and even worse for the prospects of lasting global peace, notes Nayef Al-Rodhan. He adds, "Focusing purely on extremism, whether in the Arab-Islamic world or the West, will not alleviate the root causes of tensions between members of different cultures. It will only alienate those who do not recognize themselves in those stereotypes, and it will generate more fear and misunderstanding."

To counter this polarizing mindset and the damage it can do, Nayef Al-Rodhan's new book offers a collection of scholarly historical perspectives about the influence of Arab-Islamic culture on European/Western history. The work strongly challenges the "Eurocentric" view of the rise of the West, exploring the many positive ways in which Arab-Islamic culture contributed to European history. Nayef Al-Rodhan also disputes the widely held notion that history is a narrative of linear progress and that the "rest of the world" remained despotic and stagnant until influenced by the West. That is not only a simplistic but also a highly inaccurate and even insulting view, he believes.



Throughout his new book, Nayef Al-Rodhan methodically examines the cultural transmission of ideas and institutions in a number of key areas, including science, philosophy, humanism, law, finance, and commerce, as well as the Arab-Islamic world's overall impact on the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment.

While some may think Nayef Al-Rodhan's careful examination of the past is an indirect way to address the very real and pressing problems of today, many others recognize the value of this approach. For instance, William Granara, Professor of Arabic at Harvard University, says, "Against the current climate of divisive religious and cultural discourse and within the dynamic process of globalization, Nayef Al-Rodhan brings together an eclectic collection of thoughtful essays that disturb the widely held view of the West as sole purveyor of reason and modernity, and argue persuasively for the Arab-Islamic contributions to modern civilization. This timely collection both illuminates and reminds us that we are, and have been for a very long time, united through our intertwined histories, interdependence, and shared convictions of the human capacity for reason and of our insatiable thirst for knowledge."

Similarly, Charles Burnett, Professor of the History of Islamic Influences in Europe and Co-Director of the Centre for the History of Arabic Studies in Europe at the Warburg Institute at the University of London, says, "Dr. Nayef Al-Rodhan...offers a new perspective on the often neglected and unacknowledged Arabic-Islamic contributions to contemporary science, civilization, and morality."

Indeed, Nayef Al-Rodhan's aim in publishing his new book is not to prove the "superiority" of one culture over another, but rather to put developments into historical and geopolitical perspective. "My objective isn't to question the importance of commonly identified landmarks in the rise of the West, but to argue that they are in part the result of the contributions of the Arab-Islamic world," says Dr. Al-Rodhan. And his purpose is not only to acknowledge the role that Arab-Islamic culture played in the rise of European history and Western culture, but also to explore how the two cultures are interdependent.

Interdependence is a key theme in Nayef Al-Rodhan's work. As he says, "The history of human civilization is a history of mutual borrowings." It is important, he believes, for all of us to understand our shared history and to nurture positive and respectful transcultural relations. After all, as Nayef Al-Rodhan puts it, "There is only one human civilization, which is one fluid human story to which everyone has contributed." He adds, "This understanding is deeply important and is really our only hope for minimizing exceptionalism and cultural arrogance, while promoting mutual respect and diversity."

Cultural (and religious) arrogance are not confined to the West, of course, says Dr. Al-Rodhan - they show up in stark and sometimes violent ways in the Middle East and elsewhere - but there is certainly arrogance in the notion that the West possesses all of the advantages over the Arab-Islamic World in everything related to civilization and culture. One case in point is that the so-called "Arab spring" - a series of uprisings in the Middle East that began in late 2010 - was interpreted by some in the West as a sign that the Arab world was finally waking up to more "Western" principles of freedom and even democracy. To a large degree this idea both fueled and was fueled by a Eurocentric perspective and by the myth of European/Western exceptionalism, notes Nayef Al-Rodhan. Yet as is the case with most historical developments, the truth about the Arab Spring is considerably more complex than that romantic Western notion.

Instead, these uprisings were motivated by aspirations for human dignity, justice and equality, all of which are deeply held Arab-Islamic - and universal - values. However, Nayef Al-Rodhan explains, "The brilliant potential of populations in the Arab-Islamic world were long held down by authoritarian regimes, aided by narrow and short-sighted external geopolitical interests." He adds, "The revolutions in the Arab world, like those in European and American history, take time to mature. But the end result will be a much more vibrant, innovative, ascendant, prosperous, and tolerant Arab-Islamic World - as it once was during its previous golden age."

While it is important for all of us to keep ourselves apprised of what is going on in the world today, Nayef Al-Rodhan's view is that we cannot fully understand what is happening now without having a broad and deep historical perspective. Apart from providing historical perspective, however, Nayef Al-Rodhan has an even larger aim: to help shape workable policies for the present and the future. His life's work revolves around promoting what he calls "sustainable history, [www.sustainable-history.com](http://www.sustainable-history.com) " which involves, among other things, "understanding the motivations of human nature, the role of emerging technologies, and past pains and triumphs of various cultures and sub-cultures, in order to build a more sustainable global order for humanity as a whole without leaving anybody behind, no matter how distant or different."

In outlining his "sustainable history theory" Nayef Al-Rodhan says, "I define sustainable history as a durable progressive trajectory in which the quality of life on this planet or other planets is premised on the guarantee of human dignity for all, at all times, and under all circumstances."

Nayef Al-Rodhan elaborates, "A sustainable progressive trajectory also depends on our collective triumph. For this to occur, transcultural synergy is essential. This is because the success of any one geo-

cultural domain is likely to be dependent on that of another: In our new interconnected and interdependent world, no geo-cultural domain can excel in a sustainable way in isolation from others."

A key message that Nayef Al-Rodhan has always tried to convey is that the values that contribute to what he calls "collective civilizational triumph" are universal. He insists, "Many of the great achievements in history that are commonly attributed to one geo-cultural domain often owe a great debt to those of others. In this sense, some of the greatest achievements of human civilization have been collective efforts and are part of the same human story.

"Each high point in the history of human civilization has taken place where the conditions were ripe, and has borrowed and built on the achievements of other cultures whose 'golden age' may have passed." Regarding those "golden ages," Nayef Al-Rodhan says, "Almost every golden age of geo-cultural domains has been characterized by good governance, exchanges, borrowing, innovation, and the adaptation of earlier contributions to forms of knowledge, and rationalism."

In regard to the topic of his new book, he says, "My own cursory examination of the golden ages of the Arab-Islamic world suggests that good governance, a high value placed on learning, an openness to critique, toleration, and respect for diversity are vital ingredients for enabling innovation of all forms to flourish. Good governance is therefore a vital component of sustainable history."

Nayef Al-Rodhan adds, "In my opinion, a life governed by reason is likely to be more dignified than one shaped by dogma and unbridled emotions."

To have a life - and a society - governed by reason, it is necessary to take a new, more objective look at history. Nayef Al-Rodhan states, "For instance, a new look at the history of relations between the Arab-Islamic and Latin Christian worlds calls into question the notion that their relations have been marked by blood and conquest. Conflict certainly existed, but there have also been mutually enriching exchanges that have helped to shape the world we live in today. We need therefore to engage in individual and collective efforts to salvage these more hopeful parts of our common history in order to construct a narrative that is not marked by the division between 'us' and 'them,' but is testimony to our capacity to coexist peacefully."

Peaceful coexistence leads to collective civilizational triumph, which, Nayef Al-Rodhan notes, "is important because if it is not actively sought, conflict between members of geo-cultural domains may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. But collective civilizational triumph is not a zero-sum enterprise that favors one geo-cultural domain over another."

Nayef Al-Rodhan also emphasizes, "There are all kinds of moral truths that see the world from different perspectives, and none of them has to necessarily be more 'right' than the other. The educational systems all over the world need to emphasize this concept in order to ensure a more well-educated, tolerant, and peaceful world."

In other words, Nayef Al-Rodhan affirms, "We are all in this together, and our connected and interdependent world will either be safe and prosperous for everyone or for no one."

Dr. Nayef Al-Rodhan's new book is available at Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble.com, and directly from the publisher.

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#### About the Author

Dr. Nayef Al-Rodhan is Senior Member of St. Antony's College, University of Oxford, UK, and Senior Fellow and Center Director, Centre for the Geopolitics of Globalization and Transnational Security at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Switzerland. He is a philosopher, neuroscientist and geostrategist. A prize-winning scholar, he has published 21 books proposing many innovative concepts and theories in global politics, security, philosophy, and history. Dr. Al-Rodhan was educated at Yale University, the Mayo Clinic and Harvard University. He is best known for several philosophical and analytical books on global politics that include : "Sustainable History and the Dignity of Man" ; "Emotional Amoral Egoism" ; "Neo-Statecraft and Meta-Geopolitics" ; "The Politics of Emerging Strategic Technologies" ; " The Meta-Geopolitics of Outer Space" ; and "Symbiotic Realism."

For more information about the author, his works, and his concepts, visit [www.Sustainable-History.com](http://www.Sustainable-History.com)

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