

For what he has achieved, congratulations. We are blessed with his presence¹
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For months, since being granted the honor of writing the introduction to this book, I have been trying to select the right approach. I am not just dealing with the ordinary biography of an important and distinctive individual. After

all, this publication, however skillfully written and enjoyable to read, still deals with just some highlights of a vast personality and unique character that perpetually generates innovation and renews on its own energy.

Talal's record of accomplishment is too large to be summarized here, or even in a book such as this. What I hope to impart in this introduction is a sense of who this man is and of the mission and vision he was born with.

I strongly believe that Talal has not changed since I first met him sixty years ago. He is still the same person I met at the American University of Beirut campus and the same person I have known ever since.

But every time we meet, I discover a new feature about him. I detect variations and learn new things. That may be difficult to comprehend, but it is the reality of Talal, a consistent reality I can attest to from countless examples.

Talal the student, just evicted from his home in Palestine in 1948 to live as a destitute refugee, one of the youngest of a large family that seemingly had no hope or future, is the same Talal who now sits at the head of a huge empire involved in business, education, humanitarian endeavors, economic and social development, institution building, and so much more.

All along—from a penniless refugee to a successful entrepreneur, from a helping hand at a music shop to chairing a company with more than 100 offices worldwide—Talal kept true to his mission of doing more for others than himself.

Perhaps nothing in his life defines him more than his thirst for education and appreciation of its power. His experience as a poor student, putting himself through school while shouldering the responsibility for his family, motivated him to build and partner with academic institutions to give thousands of

students access to the transformative power of learning.

But none of this was inevitable or preordained. It is because Talal also had the courage to take risks, sometimes suffering setbacks and losses that would have finished a less determined and creative character. No idea was too ambitious; it got to the point where even some of his closest friends would accuse him

of being a crazy dreamer. And no obstacle was too high to overcome the determination that we also sometimes called rigid stubbornness. I can think of so many times where those close to Talal believed fervently that he was wrong, but witnessed, in awe and admiration, as time and again he was proven right.

There were times he fought years-long legal battles with capable foes, all the way to the end. Along the route, his best legal advisors suggested he'd be better off saving his time and money, rather than pursuing these futile goals. He disagreed, and in the end won.

But I also have no doubt that Talal is a man who would prefer to lose honorably while defending his high principles than to win by sacrificing them.

At almost seventy-six years of age, Talal still has the indefatigable energy he did as a bright young student. He works around the clock and loves what he does. Once, in response to a question by a BBC interviewer about his work habits and whether he leaves himself time to relax and rest, he replied that the heart—the symbol of life—never rests. The moment one's heart decides to rest, life ends.

Talal believes that energy comes from activity, and if we are inactive and uncurious, our minds and bodies will, in time, lose energy and be overtaken by lethargy. He demands no less of others than he demands of himself and he believes that each and every person who works with him is capable of delivering it. In business matters he is firm, uncompromising, and demanding, but never unfair or unkind.

Though dedicated, serious, devoted to his noble goals, and unwilling to compromise on perfection, Talal is anything but dull.

He is endlessly humorous and cheerful. He never lets one of his characteristics develop at the expense of the other. While tackling the most delicate and difficult tasks at hand, I've never seen Talal's face turn grim. Quite the opposite, the bigger the challenge, the happier he seems to be. That is undoubtedly the result of the huge reservoir of confidence he commands.

I remember one time in Brussels some thirty-five years ago, we were sitting together and trying to solve a financial problem one of his major initiatives

was facing. I asked if it would not have been wise to have kept some money aside for emergencies. I also suggested that he should have also separated some of the generated income for his family's needs.

He laughed. He said that if his goal was to make money, he would have been much wealthier already and would spend time vacationing around the world in luxurious yachts without any worries. But for him, money was only a means of achieving his vision. He had so many ideas that could make the world better and money was only a tool to realize them, never an end in itself.

Had he wanted only to run a prosperous accounting and auditing firm and live well off the income, that would have been—for him—the easy path. But he wanted to do much more. He wanted to develop a profession and infrastructure as part of his mission to put the Arab world on its feet.

This, not a desire for income, is what drove him to expand into Intellectual Property, legal consulting, training, education, and information technology. A year still does not go by without him taking up new challenges driven by a boundless curiosity.

Talal insists that he has always kept away from politics. That might be true in a conventional sense—he never sought government office or the exercise of political power, though he undoubtedly would have been a force to be reckoned with had he wanted to.

As young, impoverished students at the American University of Beirut, we nonetheless shared the hope that we could do something for the country from which we were evicted. We were filled with youthful optimism when we joined the Arab Nationalist movement.

In this book he tells some of that story, and why in the end he chose a path away from frontline politics. But one thing never changed: in everything he did, he maintained an unyielding dedication to Palestine, the country he was born in. These pages reveal only some of the great work he does for Palestinian youth in the areas of education, training, and knowledge development.

I have no doubt that had he been willing to compromise on this commitment, he might have seen many more opportunities for business open up. But no matter the cost, Talal would never sacrifice his commitment to the goal of regaining the homeland and rights of the Palestinian people usurped from them in 1948. His resolve never wavered or hid behind the “pragmatism” of doing business.

For Talal, wisdom comes naturally, though it is undoubtedly sharpened with the ups and downs of experience. And for Talal, knowledge—gained through such experience—is the true meaning of wealth. In his mind, you are poor, whether you are a nation or an individual, only when you are unproductive. And that too is consistent with his focus on creating the conditions and opportunities for everyone to achieve their potential.

I have had the good fortune of seeing Talal in the closest settings, to see his humanity, humility and compassion among colleagues, friends, and family. For someone with so many responsibilities, he has the remarkable talent of making anyone feel as if they are the only person who matters in the world.

This book will give you a glimpse into the life and mind of a remarkable person. For sixty years, he has inspired me and continues to do so today.