

Response to Adam Serwer at Mother Jones

Contributed by Atef Harb
Monday, 31 October 2011

Adam Serwer has constructed his own version of Walid Phares.

I read his books, both in Arabic and in English. How come Serwer didn't mention Phares's first and most important book in Arabic "Pluralism in Lebanon," where he calls for mutual recognition between ethnic and religious communities, or his second book "Democratic Dialogue," or other published lectures and articles during the 1980s, all calling for the establishment of a federal regime in Lebanon? Instead, he quoted hearsay by a woman (Regina Snaifer) who was a secretary to a Lebanese politician, and Karim Pakradouni, an ally of Syria and frequent visitor to Iran. Serwer is lying to his readers and trying to trash a respectable expert. Why didn't he mention the fact that Phares headed a social democratic Party — on the left of the political spectrum — or that he founded a labor union and a coalition of ethnic minorities? These lapses in Serwer's article are indicative of the unprofessional journalism behind it. Serwer based his piece on phone calls he made to Lebanon from his comfortable couch in the U.S. and didn't do his job, like reading the books and articles of Phares, not even mentioning their titles. Serwer is not expert in the Middle East, let alone in Lebanese history. Worse, when he tries to research that history, he doesn't reach out to historians or archives. Instead, he reaches out to political enemies of the person he is writing a piece about. Classic.

Here is what Serwer didn't tell his readers: Lebanon's war began in 1975 as a conflict between Lebanese Christians (multiple parties and militias) and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). In 1978, Syria's army invaded and the Lebanese Christians formed the Lebanese Forces (LF) to resist the Syrian invasion. The LF had multiple parties, including liberals and conservatives. The LF became a local government in East Beirut until the end of the War in 1990.

In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon and fought with Syria and the PLO. Iran formed the Hezbollah militia. The conflict wasn't just a civil war, but a regional war. The LF defended their own areas and did not invade Syria.

The political council of the LF had many parties represented like a parliament. Dr. Phares, as a representative of his own social democratic party, was one of the many unarmed political groups represented in that council (local government) and was in charge of foreign affairs and emigres issues for two years.

But, more importantly, Phares published five books between 1979 and 1987. Based on his books, he presented hundreds of lectures in Lebanon, not only to the LF, but on campuses and in communities across the country. His lectures, published in the Lebanese press, were about the history of the Middle East, Lebanon and the federal system. Since he has entire books about his thoughts, why would lazy journalist Serwer ask an obscure Snaifer (who, by the way, hated Samir Geagea personally) to share her view of what Phares's thinking was? It would be like a journalist determining the thinking of Bernard Lewis or Samuel Huntington by asking a failed student in their class about the entire literature they produced. Serwer showed how biased he is.

According to the Library of Congress, Phares's book on the Clash of Civilizations was published 14 years before Huntington's, in Arabic.

In regards to Phares's work during the last two decades, Serwer manufactured an identity of Phares inconsistent with reality. Phares wrote five more books, including the most prescient, "The Coming Revolution: Struggle for Freedom in the Middle East," which was the only book that predicted the Arab Spring, a matter Serwer and his acolytes in the CAIR network can't deny. Phares has lectured on civil society uprisings for years, including on Arab reformers, dissidents and minorities. However, none of that was mentioned in Serwer's article. It seems all he wanted to do is bash Phares, due to his affiliation with the Romney campaign. Fair enough in politics, but producing an "identity theft" about Phares's intellectual achievements is below the belt. There are hundreds of students who have studied under Dr. Phares and tens of thousands of people who have read his books. You may agree or disagree with his ideas, but to write a silly, uninformed and trashy article, bordering on libel, is the sum of unprofessional journalism.

Phares has briefed and testified to the U.S. Congress and European Parliament for two decades, has advised NGOs on UN affairs, taught at universities, lectured and published extensively. Dr. Phares has offered two decades of service and advice to the U.S. Government and educated the public. You may disagree with him, but you can't overlook these facts.

Phares is an immigrant, like millions of Americans. He had a life filled with publishing and public statements when he was in his 20s and has had a life filled with intellectual achievements as an American citizen. When he was defending the identity of his mother country, as any Pole, Estonian, Cuban, Greek, or Irish would do when they lived in the mother country, he wasn't yet an American citizen. This should certainly be admired, or at least acknowledged, even if you don't agree with everything he has ever written or said.

Criticize him on his politics for supporting a political candidate you don't like. That is fine. But, to trash his achievements as an immigrant, before and after he became a citizen, is un-American. To those critics who worry about a scholar who committed to his mother country in the best ways he could, you would be insulting your own grandfathers and grandmothers and ancestors who, like every American, except native Americans, came from some other country.

Mr. Serwer, you thought you served your political agenda through this trashy article, but you didn't. Your readers can simply compare your tract to the comprehensive work of Dr. Phares posted online at www.walidphares.com and realize how far off from the truth you were.