

Walid Phares' Identity Theft by As'ad Abukhalil

Contributed by Jed Ipsen
Monday, 31 October 2011
Last Updated Monday, 31 October 2011

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In his article titled "Romney's Scary Middle East Advisor: The Three Careers of Walid Phares," As'ad Abukhalil led two criticisms against the academic who was recently appointed as one of Governor Mitt Romney's Foreign Policy Advisors. One criticism had to do with Professor Phares' public activities before he emigrated to the United States and the other with his achievements over the past 22 years as an American citizen. Mr. Abukhalil's many charges had many factual errors, omitted Phares' achievements and obscured his real, well-published and documented positions on the Middle East and national security-related issues. The result of Mr. Abukhalil's article was almost an intellectual identity theft.

Let me note that when a writer and scholar has produced more than a dozen books, in multiple languages, hundreds of articles and conducted thousands of interviews on three continents over three decades, including during two decades in his adopted country, it is silly to repackage him as less than an achiever. Dr. Phares' work has been criticized and can be scrutinized at will, on substance, but this doesn't strip him from the recognition he obtained nationwide and worldwide by national leaders and scholars, liberals and conservatives alike. The list of those who have endorsed his books includes prime ministers, lawmakers and scholars, on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as Christians, Jews and Muslims. Mr. Abukhalil can lash out at all of them, if he wishes, but it wouldn't change the well-deserved recognition Dr. Phares has received.

Dr. Phares had at least two career changes in his life and endured the hardships that all emigres experience after having lost their homes, social networks and freedom. Abukhalil reconstructed Dr. Phares' life during his twenties in strange and malicious ways.

Criticism of Phares' Career before Emigrating

Mr. Abukhalil charged that Phares' "first career began early in the Lebanese civil war of 1975-1990 when he allied himself with the right-wing militias, armed and financed by Israel." Born at the end of 1957, Phares was just over 17 when the War started. It is hardly believable he was able to launch a high-profile career as a high school pupil. It was four years into the conflict when Phares, as a graduating law student, published his first book, "Pluralism in Lebanon" (University of Kaslik Press) in 1979, at the age of 22. The book, widely debated in the country's press by commentators on both sides, opened his public speaking career and political advising. In three short years, he became a practicing lawyer and published three more books, including "Democratic Dialogue." He also founded a weekly newspaper, in two languages, called Mashreq International, which was dedicated to the fate of minorities in the Middle East. Given all this, it was hard to understand Abukhalil's rant about Phares' CV, where he stated he was a writer and lawyer in Lebanon.

Without explaining the complex evolution of the Lebanese war, which lasted fifteen years, and mutated into a regional confrontation with Syria and Israel, Abukhalil over-simplified that Phares "assumed a political position in the hierarchy of the militias and founded a small Christian party in the late 1970s and early 1980s." As a native of Lebanon and teacher of Middle Eastern history, Abukhalil should have explained that the coalition of political parties, some of which possessed militias when the state collapsed in 1975, formed a de facto authority (call it a local government) in East Beirut around 1978 under the name of Lebanese Forces and Lebanese Front. In 1980, these dispersed groups were unified under one authority of the main political parties in the areas not controlled by the Syrians. At that stage, Lebanon was under Syrian control, the south under Israeli control and the rest called "free areas." Indeed, Phares was part of a group called "Christian-Social Democrats" as of 1984, and as such, was invited to represent his party in the political coalition in 1986, overseeing the Lebanese Forces, towards the end of the conflict. Among his colleagues, were judges and former ministers, in addition to the main political parties. He appeared on TV and radio and was assigned the task of meeting diplomats and reaching out to Lebanese emigres to seek support against the Syrian occupation.

Another incorrect fact made by Abukhalil was to claim that "General Michel Aoun assumed the presidency of Lebanon in 1988," because he was appointed Prime Minister. Abukhalil advanced another falsehood when he added that "Phares joined the right-wing coalition known as the Lebanese Front, which consisted of various sectarian groupings and militia." The Lebanese Front was a political coalition headed by Danny Chamoun and had no militias. Besides, Aoun was struggling against Assad, not against Muslims, as the latter formed a significant part of his Army.

Abukhalil, referring to a clipping from the al Nahar Daily published years after the end of the war, claimed that Phares had "served as vice chair of another front's political leadership committee, headed by a man named Etienne Saqr, whose Guardians of the Cedar militia voiced the slogan "Kill a Palestinian and you shall enter Heaven." In reality, the coalition's press release, published in daily al Nahar, was an attempt to revive the old Lebanese Front in exile and never materialized. As to associate Phares with alleged graffiti drawn by unidentified people on Beirut's walls in 1976 and attribute it to an organization headed by a politician, is too much of a stretch.

Instead of hearsay, Abukhalil should have informed his readers that Phares helped launch a workers union, a student group and a committee for the advocacy of Middle East minorities, all of which have been reported in Lebanon's press and on TV. More importantly, Phares' ultimate community office was his appointment as Secretary General of the World Maronite Union, which represented millions of Maronites in many countries. The Lebanese diaspora included prominent public figures from Mexico, Brazil and the United States, including members of Congress and of the various administrations, many of whom were supportive of and met with the leaders of the Lebanese Front.

Criticizing Phares' Accomplishments in His American Life

The second package of criticism leveled against Dr. Phares targeted his life in America. Abukhalil railed against Phares' "expertise on terrorism," while it has been widely sought by governments, the private sector and media consistently for many years. Next, Abukhalil attempted to demolish Phares' standing in Middle Eastern studies, as he recounted a so-called meeting of the Lebanese Studies Association in the 1990s, where Phares didn't feel welcome. In fact, Dr. Phares was invited by the said association to join while he was a member of the Middle East Studies Association and presented at the latter's panels several times.

Strangely, Abukhalil was bothered by Phares' "Arabic name," denying the latter was indigenous enough and stunned that Phares, who wrote many books in Arabic, even uses the language. Then, Abukhalil claimed that Phares uses so-called "Israeli definitions of terrorism," in which indiscriminate violence against civilians, even the killing of children, when perpetrated by Israel, do not qualify. Phares has never used such a narrative in his literature or in his research. Abukhalil then asserted that Phares' statements in Arabic on al Jazeera are softer than those in English, but in reality, Phares has vigorously debated Iranian and Islamist commentators on that very channel numerous times.

As far as substance goes, Abukhalil's evaluation of Dr. Phares' writings do not deviate much from the apologist literature found in U.S.-based Middle Eastern Studies and in the petrodollars activist circles. He compared them to the "cold war alarmist terrorism literature." But, even in substance, Abukhalil made an analytical blunder as he confused Phares' well explained paradigm that the problem is an ideology known as Jihadism, with the vague notion that "Islam was the real threat to Western civilization." Simply put, Phares' books do not deal with Islam, but with Islamism, as does the debate in the Arab world. Phares is sought after worldwide by counter-terrorism entities precisely because he makes major distinctions between Hezbollah, Hamas and Al-Qaeda, which proves that Abukhalil's claim that Phares' analysis that "they amount to one global organization" is baseless.

And in the end, came the classic and predictable accusation of "pro-Zionism," which is usually leveled by activists against their intellectual and political opponents. Hence, Phares owes his appointment, not to his achievements, but to the cabal of the so-called "Israel lobby." Abukhalil withdrew the title of "scholar" from Phares, simply because he doesn't cater to the appropriate political camp in the Middle East.

In this season of American electoral politics, advisors of leading presidential candidates, on both sides of the debate, are open to scrutiny and criticism, but Abukhalil's article has no place in our civil discourse. Not only was it marred with factual mistakes, but it attempted to mislead Salon's many readers with an identity theft of his targeted victim.

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