

Student Rights, Advocacy and the Cost of Higher Education in Jordan: The Case of the National Campaign for Defending Students' Rights—*Thabahtoon*

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The National Campaign for Defending Students' rights or *Thabahtoon* (which means “you have slaughtered us”) was founded in Jordan in April 2007 in the wake of student-organized protests against university tuition hikes. From its inception, the campaign, which is closely associated with the leftist Jordanian Democratic Unity Party (*Wihda*) and its student wing, has stood in defense of student rights, particularly the right to affordable education, the right to representation in university governance, and the right to basic political freedoms on campuses. Through its skilled use of media and new communication technologies, the campaign has maintained a consistent spotlight on what it views as a policy of incremental privatization of public universities as well as the limited freedoms of student association and representation on campuses around the country.

In many respects, *Thabahtoon* is unlike other student movements. It has a loose membership with a core group of activists in several universities working to recruit other students. According to one female student interviewed by the monthly *al-Sajil*, those active in the campaign are typically male, pay high tuition fees, and have party affiliations. A steering committee comprised of students, recent graduates, members of *Wihda*, and other activists coordinates the research and media work of the campaign. Many of its activities involve rallying support from individuals and groups from a broad political spectrum. It has positioned its role as a monitoring and advocacy group, often beyond the space of the university campus. By regularly reporting on issues of concern, *Thabahtoon* has managed to create and sustain a public voice on behalf of students in Jordan and to become a source of information in a context where often little transparency exists on topics such as budgets, government subsidies, and financial policies.

Four goals constitute the official agenda of the movement:

- Forestalling increases in college tuition and working to ensure tuition rates are adjusted to reflect income levels of Jordanian citizens.
- Removal of the existing student disciplinary regulations in universities.
- Ending the appointment of students to the student council at Jordan University (the first public university in the country, founded in 1962), and ending the “one person one vote” system of election of students to student councils.
- Establishment of a General Union of Jordanian Students.

Thabahtoon has sought to achieve these goals primarily through social action and advocacy, research, reporting in the media, and the organization of workshops and seminars. Its efforts in research, monitoring, and advocacy have been the most effective in creating and sustaining a campaign in the public eye.

Thabahtoon acts as official monitor of activities on university campuses in Jordan. In particular, its members follow any new developments related to government funding for higher education, tuition fees, university budgets, student elections, university student disciplinary regulations and specific cases brought against students, and new legislation pertaining to higher education. To spotlight an issue of concern, *Thabahtoon* usually prepares press releases, which it posts on its website and sends to the media and, in some cases, to human rights organizations. It also drafts letters of protest addressed to the relevant university and/or government officials; these letters are also circulated to the press and posted on the organization's website. In addition,

the campaign has released several reports that document the decreasing state support for public universities in the country as well as a number of violations of students' rights on campuses.

Other actions include workshops and seminars on issues such as the status of privatization of higher education and violence within universities. These events have become platforms for presenting the findings of the organization's own research, a means of bringing together a broader group of stakeholders, and a forum for the campaign's own brainstorming and self-evaluation. *Thabahtoon*a has also engaged in more direct actions like demonstrations, marches, and sit-ins, organized mostly off-campus as they are technically forbidden on campus. A few of these events have attracted wide media attention, and in one instance the presence of reporters deterred security officials from breaking up the *Thabahtoon*a-organized protest, even though it was officially pronounced in violation of laws on public gatherings.

Official responses to the movement have been largely negative, with some exceptions. In keeping with a history of government crackdown of student social and political activism in Jordan, *Thabahtoon*a student activists have faced harassment from state security forces. The official position of university administrations has been to ignore or deny the campaign's existence or efficacy. In general, university administrations have responded to activism on campus by seeking to prevent it and punishing the students involved. In a context of constrained spaces for political activity in contemporary Jordan, *Thabahtoon*a exemplifies the ways in which new media and technology can be mobilized to open up alternative spaces for social action.

*Thabahtoon*a organizers point to a number of successful efforts of their movement on behalf of student rights in Jordan. For example, it was part of the opposition against appointing the student council representatives at the University of Jordan. In the fall of 2008 the university administration revised its policies in this regard and instituted full elections of the student council. After this important success, the campaign continued to monitor student elections and to speak out about infractions. It also played a role in halting tuition increases and in reversing university decisions regarding student fees. In addition, it has been successful in advocating on behalf of students who have faced disciplinary actions in their universities, either in having the actions downgraded or cancelled altogether.

In general, *Thabahtoon*a has enjoyed a wide coverage of its activities in a number of Jordanian media and occasional coverage in the regional media such as al-Jazeera as well as the newspaper *al-Quds al-Arabi* published out of London. For some observers, this is one of the explanations of the campaign's staying power. Another one of its strengths is the fact that by focusing on the cost of higher education, *Thabahtoon*a indirectly highlights broader concerns of Jordanians about privatization of public services, income inequality, and the difficult economic situation in the country more generally.