

# **Student Rights, Advocacy, and the Cost of Higher Education in Jordan: The Case of the National Campaign for Defending Students' Rights—*Thabahtoon*<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

In recent years, Jordan has witnessed the emergence of a number of local social and political campaigns or movements with provocative names such as *Thabahtoon* (meaning “you have slaughtered us”), *Zawadtooha* (“you have overdone it”), and *Halaktoona* (“you have exhausted us”) (al-Amd 2009). *Thabahtoon*, the National Campaign for Defending Students' Rights, is the most prominent and enduring of these campaigns in Jordan today. Emerging from a relative lull in student activism since the 1980s, *Thabahtoon* in many respects represents a new form of activism in higher education, enabled by technology and produced by a political environment in Jordan that has pushed some student activism into the cyber-realm.

The National Campaign for Defending Student's Rights has become a public voice for the issues and concerns of university students in the country. Initially focused on the increasing costs of higher education, the campaign has established both a monitoring and an advocacy role for affordable education, fair and transparent university disciplinary policies, student representation in university governance bodies, and the right to participate in political activities on campus. The campaign has maintained a regular spotlight on what it views as a policy of incremental privatization of public universities as well as the reality of limited freedoms of student association and representation on campuses around the country. The staying power of this often provocative campaign has been a source of much speculation. Thus it is important to understand how this movement emerged, who are its primary actors, and how to situate the work of *Thabahtoon* in broader efforts to achieve academic freedom in Jordan and in the region more broadly.

*Thabahtoon*'s activism exemplifies the ways in which new media and internet technology can be mobilized effectively in the constrained spaces for political activity in contemporary Jordan (Eickelman and Anderson 1999; Wheeler 2006). In the context of persistent restrictions on political freedoms in the country, and the limited space for officially

sanctioned student associational and representative life on campus, *Thabahtoon*a is a kind of student activism that is in many respects unlike any other before it. In some of its activities, namely reporting and monitoring, it functions more like an NGO than a grassroots advocacy organization; however, it maintains both financial and administrative independence that many Jordanian NGOs lack (Ryan 2005; Wictorowicz 2002). Furthermore, *Thabahtoon*a's close links to the Jordanian Democratic Popular Unity Party—a political group with official status popularly known as the *Wihda* party and which has participated in calls for a boycott of parliamentary elections<sup>2</sup>—means that the organization is linked to political activism that goes beyond university campuses (Schwedler and Sowalsky 2010).

This report begins with a brief history of student movements in Jordan. The next section describes the emergence and establishment of *Thabahtoon*a, the evolution of the campaign and its goals, and its major activities to date. This is followed by a discussion about official responses to the campaign as well as the most significant challenges it has faced. Finally, the report addresses the effectiveness of the campaign and its implications for student rights and governance as well as freedom of expression more broadly.

The initial research for this case study began with an extensive internet-based search for information about *Thabahtoon*a. Given the significant media coverage about the campaign, its official website, and the Facebook account maintained by its members, the information was extensive.<sup>3</sup> In addition, in the summer of 2009, I interviewed twelve Jordanians, five of whom were actively involved in *Thabahtoon*a.<sup>4</sup>

### **History of Student Movements in Jordan**

Although higher education has a relatively recent history in Jordan (Jordan University was the first to be founded, in 1962), student activism preceded the establishment of higher education institutions by at least two decades. As early as the 1930s high school students engaged in protests particularly in opposition to Zionism and related political developments in Palestine, especially in the city of Salt (Anderson 2005). The emergence of organized student movements dates back to the 1950s (Kharinu 2000). The impetus for student organizing was two-fold during this time. First, the region witnessed a political awakening, spurred by the increasing popularity of Arab nationalist movements. Political activism also emerged in response to the 1948 establishment of Israel and subsequent dispossession of the Palestinian people in what is known

in Arabic as the *Nakba*, or catastrophe, as well as the persistence of colonial control in surrounding Arab countries. Branches of different Arab nationalist parties were established in Jordan and a Jordanian nationalist movement emerged (Anderson 2005). At the same time, a cadre of university graduates was returning to Jordan from their studies in Beirut, Damascus, and Cairo. Many of them had become deeply immersed in political actions while in university, and they returned to Jordan determined to carry on these activities and organize their peers. Some of these graduates became school teachers in the burgeoning public school sector where they started organizing their peers and students. High school students were regularly involved in political meetings, demonstrations, and other forms of activism. As the Jordanian Nationalist Movement increasingly became viewed as a threat to the regime, government officials attempted to rein in school teachers and moved to regulate political activities in schools (Anderson 2005).

With the imposition of martial law in 1957, very little political space was afforded to student movements, although groups persisted, functioning clandestinely and organizing themselves outside Jordan's borders as many Jordanians went abroad to study in other Arab countries as well as in Eastern Europe. Inside Jordan, student Baath and communist groups were also active in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1970s, student groups affiliated with various Palestinian political parties also emerged, and in the 1980s and 1990s, those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood grew in influence and popularity (Kharinu 2000).

Furthermore, due to the limits on political organizing within the country, Jordanian students abroad organized their own student unions. In his account of Jordanian student movements Kharinu cites the establishment of the General Union for the Students of Jordan in Cairo by Jordanian Baathi students in 1959 (2000, 52). Eventually, with the founding of Jordan University, members of this student union established their headquarters in Amman in 1968. However, soon thereafter political events pushed them outside of Jordan again. In the early 1960s, another union was established by students in the Communist Party, many of whom were studying in Eastern Europe. Their numbers abroad were significant and a smaller group of students in the Communist Party were active, albeit underground, in Jordan. According to Kharinu, a major protest by these students against the Camp David Accords in 1979 led to a government crackdown on their activities (66).

Although these student groups typically organized around particular political ideologies, and were often preoccupied with and motivated by regional political events, they also took up

more narrowly defined “student issues” such as the high cost of tuition, academic policies, and the demand for a general union for Jordanian students.<sup>5</sup> In 1969, students formed an union at Jordan University that included students of various political persuasions. This group organized marches against tuition hikes in 1973, which were met with the intervention of security forces, the suspension and expulsion of some students, and the dissolution of the union in 1975 (Kharinu 2000, 76).

During the 1980s and 1990s, students held occasional protests usually in response to political events. However, two major student campaigns in these decades were triggered by changes in university policies on student issues. The most prominent of these campaigns occurred in 1986 when Yarmouk University decided to charge students in the College of Engineering a fee of 90 Jordanian dinars for their practical training. In protest, the student association of the college organized marches that went on for several days. A few weeks later, the university made a decision to suspend thirty-two students for different lengths of time because of their involvement in the protests. Security forces arrested a number of students as well. These actions ignited huge demonstrations demanding the cancelation of the suspensions, the release of the arrested students, and the end of interference by security forces in campus affairs. A student strike followed, and on May 14 security forces surrounded the university, and the demonstrators refused to leave. Early on the next morning of May 15, security forces invaded the campus, physically assaulting students and shooting in the air. Official reports state that three students were killed in this incident; however, student activists claimed that the number of deaths were higher. This series of events also witnessed strong alliances between leftist and Islamist students (Kharinu 2000).

Thus, since the 1960s, with the establishment of Jordan’s first university, students in the country have organized in response to regional political crises as well as around a more narrow student agenda, often meeting with repression from the regime. In this historical backdrop *Thabahtoon* emerged as a new student force whose advocacy efforts have remained focused “inward” on student issues and the economics of higher education as well as student rights to representation and organization on campuses. Indeed, some observers argue that it is this singular focus that has enabled *Thabahtoon* to continue to function in the current political environment. However, by focusing its attention on the cost of higher education, the campaign

indirectly highlights broader concerns of citizens about privatization of public services, income inequality, and the difficult economic situation in the country more generally.

## **Background, Structure, and Activities of *Thabahtoon***

### ***The Establishment of the Campaign for Defending Students' Rights***

In September 2006, the *kutle*<sup>6</sup> (student bloc) Arab Renewal, affiliated with *Wihda*, called for a campaign against government-announced tuition hikes under the banner of “No to the bourgeoisization of education; no to tuition increases.”<sup>7</sup> Soon thereafter, in January 2007, students and party members involved in the campaign held a seminar during which they presented their research on the rising cost of higher education. Attendees included union and numerous student representatives as well as members of parliament. After the seminar, the organizers decided to continue their work in this vein, and the youth group of the *Wihda* party formed a committee in order to further develop the idea for a campaign around higher education. Out of these discussions and consultations with other student groups, including Baathists, communists, and Islamists, the National Campaign for Defending Students' Rights was launched in April 2007.



*Thabahtoon* literally means “you have slaughtered us” or “you are killing us.” The image above shows the logo of the campaign, depicting the word *Thabahtoon* as if written in blood.

Campaign organizers very deliberately chose a name they felt spoke to the popular sentiment in Jordan surrounding the cost of education. Despite pressure by some to choose “a more serious” name, the organizers insisted on keeping *Thabahtoon*, as they wanted to emphasize what they viewed to be a shared popular anger and frustration with the increasing cost and inaccessibility of higher education (*al-Sajil* 2009).

Dr. Fagher Daas, a dentist who is active in the *Wihda* party and its youth group, is the public face of the campaign, appearing on television, writing opinion pieces for the press, and

making himself regularly available for media interviews. *Wihda* is a small leftist party and most of the leadership of *Thabahtoon*a have links to it and/or have been cultivated through its youth branch. A steering committee comprised of students, recent graduates, members of the *Wihda* youth party, and other activists coordinate the research and media work of the campaign. A core group of active students at several universities works on recruiting other students; membership is loose and many of the activities involve rallying support from a larger group of students from different blocs on a particular issue. According to one female student interviewed by the monthly *al-Sajil* (2009), those active in the campaign are typically male, students who pay high tuitions, and affiliated with parties.<sup>8</sup> The students I interviewed all said that they had some political interests and leftist leanings before joining the campaign.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Goals of the Campaign***

The focus of the campaign has grown, in large part as *Thabahtoon*a has responded to other new developments in higher education and grievances raised by students at Jordanian universities and colleges. The overarching goal, as outlined by campaign organizers, is the “defense of student rights.” In this respect, the organizers frame affordability and accessibility of higher education as issues of student rights. Under this umbrella, the campaign has enumerated the following goals (Thabahtoon

1. **Forestalling increases in college tuition and working to ensure tuition rates are adjusted to reflect the average income of Jordanian citizens.** This is the most popular of the campaign’s demands as it links higher education issues to issues of high cost of living and the difficulty ordinary Jordanians face in educating their children.
2. **Removal of the existing student disciplinary regulations at universities.** *Thabahtoon*a has argued that disciplinary regulations violate student freedoms and are so vaguely written as to make almost any kind of student activism appear as a violation. With respect to this issue, the campaign has targeted disciplinary guidelines set by the Ministry of Higher Education as well as regulations at Jordan University in particular.
3. **Ending the appointment of students to the student council at Jordan University, and ending the “one person one vote” system in the election of students to student councils.** *Thabahtoon*a initially focused heavily on changing the policy of appointing half the student council at the University of Jordan as well as Zarqa University. The campaign

has also taken a stance against the system of “one student one vote,” which they argue promotes tribalism.<sup>10</sup>

4. **Establishment of a General Union of Jordanian Students.** This has been a longstanding goal of student activists, as discussed above.

These goals, first articulated when *Thabahtoon*a was founded, are still part of its official agenda and consistent with the campaign’s two-fold objective: the right to affordable education and the right to representation and basic political freedoms on campuses. Practically, the campaign has been regularly engaged in a number of activities related to these goals over the past years.

Although it has on occasion taken up other issues not entirely within this purview, it has largely focused its efforts on these priority areas and related issues of student rights.<sup>11</sup> The campaign has sought to achieve these goals primarily through: 1) social action, namely protests and sit-ins; 2) monitoring, reporting, and public advocacy via the media; 3) research and reporting; and 4) workshops and seminars.

### ***Social Action***

*Thabahtoon*a, or student groups connected to it, have organized demonstrations, marches, or sit-ins. Although typically small in numbers of protesters, a few of these events have been widely covered in the media. Most of these actions take place off-campus as they are technically forbidden on campus; however, on some occasions students have held sit-ins at the university in an effort to get the administration to listen to their grievances.

One of the first of such actions was a silent protest in front of the Syndicates Complex in Amman (*al-naqabat*) held in April 2007 when the campaign was launched to protest proposed tuition hikes (Tuba 2007a). In that same month, *Thabahtoon*a organized a protest in front of the Parliament despite official refusal to grant them a permit for the protest (Tuba 2007b, 2007c). Although *Thabahtoon*a was in violation of laws regarding public gatherings, the government allowed the protest to proceed. According to *Thabahtoon*a activists, the large presence of media deterred security officials from breaking up these actions.<sup>12</sup> In June 2007, *Thabahtoon*a once again held a protest without official permission, this time in front of the office of the prime minister, to raise their grievances about new student disciplinary guidelines at universities; approximately thirty students participated. This time, however, the security forces dispersed the group shortly after the protest began (Tuba 2007d; al-Nimri 2007).

In May 2008, *Thabahtoon*a again staged a protest against student disciplinary guidelines in front of the National Syndicates Complex (al-Nimri 2008b). A year later, it organized a protest in front of the Parliament. Among other demands, organizers called for an annual Day of the Student on May 13, in commemoration of the students killed in the protests at Yarmouk in 1986 (“Thabahtoona sits-in” 2009; Ghabun 2009a; “Protest in front of parliament” 2009). In addition to these rather high-profile demonstrations, students active in *Thabahtoon*a have also organized protests on their campuses, most frequently to oppose fee hikes,<sup>13</sup> changes in policy related to tuition, and harassment of fellow students engaged in political activities. These students have at times acted with the tactical support of *Thabahtoon*a. Although, these public actions have had some role in raising the campaign’s public profile—and *Thabahtoon*a has been quite savvy about garnering media coverage of these actions—their efforts in research, monitoring, and advocacy have been the most effective in creating and sustaining a campaign in the public eye.

### ***Monitoring, Reporting, and Public Advocacy***

The campaign acts as an unofficial monitor of activities on university campuses throughout the kingdom. In particular, its members monitor any new developments related to: (1) government funding for higher education, university/college tuition and fees, and university budgets; (2) student elections; (3) university student disciplinary regulations and specific cases that have been brought against particular students; and (4) new legislation pertaining to higher education. In some respects, *Thabahtoon*a’s monitoring activities are similar to those of human rights groups as its members work to make the public aware of what they see as violations of student rights. The spotlight is brought to bear on particular issues or incidents via regular press releases, which the organization posts on its website and sends to media outlets and, in some instances, to human rights organizations.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the steering committee typically drafts letters to the relevant university and/or government officials when it wants to make a complaint and these letters are in turn circulated to the press and posted on the official website.

The campaign’s adeptness at employing the media to highlight its cause is impressive. Making good use of technology to regularly report on issues and incidences of concern, as well as to articulate its own position on a range of topics, *Thabahtoon*a has sustained a public voice on higher education issues. It has enjoyed wide coverage in a number of Jordanian media as well as occasional coverage in the regional media, such as al-Jazeera and the newspaper *al-Quds al-*

*Arabi* published out of London. All relevant press coverage is linked to the website and announced via Facebook messages.

In addition to regular press releases and letters of protest, the campaign has undertaken more systematic research and reporting on higher education issues. Indeed, a number of interviewees noted that *Thabahtoon*a has become a source of information in a context where often little transparency exists on questions such as budgets, government financing, and financial policies. One of the first major reports released by *Thabahtoon*a, entitled *The Reality and the Future of Jordanian Public Universities: In the Shadow of the Higher Education Policies and Strategies* (2009), documents the decreasing state support for public universities in the country and the implications that this would have on the quality of education. For example, the authors argue that the universities' financial difficulties precipitated by decrease in government subsidies have led to increased enrollment, which has in turn strained the already limited infrastructure and has increased faculty-to-student ratios.

The release of the report received extensive coverage in the media and has highlighted inconsistencies in official statements about government budgets and the funding of higher education institutions (see, for example, al-Nimri 2009). Observers of *Thabahtoon*a have cited the extensive data in the report, some of it not readily available elsewhere, as an important contribution. However, at least one commentator (a member of parliament) has publically taken *Thabahtoon*a to task for inaccuracies in some of the figures in this report.<sup>15</sup> Responding to these criticisms, *Thabahtoon*a has argued that the information had been given to them by official sources and, in the case of the said discrepancy, was a figure that had been circulated to parliamentary representatives. Other observers have pointed out that given the limited data available to the public on matters such as the budgets of universities and the Ministry of Higher Education, the bulk of information made available by *Thabahtoon*a has been of great importance.<sup>16</sup>

In 2008, the campaign released the report *The Status of Student Freedoms* and announced that this would be the first in a series of annual reports on student rights in Jordan (the second such document was released in August 2009).<sup>17</sup> These reports provide a summary of violations of students' rights and a forum in which to report student grievances from the previous year.<sup>18</sup> In them, *Thabahtoon*a has reported on issues such as: student disciplinary regulations and limits on student rights, regulations pertaining to student councils and associations as well as incidents of

interference on the part of university officials and security forces in election procedures, and specific student complaints about violations of their rights.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Workshops and Seminars***

*Thabahtoon*a has held a number of workshops and seminars on topics related to the status and privatization of higher education. These events have become platforms for presenting the findings of their own research, a means of bringing together a broader group of stakeholders, and a forum for the campaign's own brainstorming and self-evaluation. For the campaign's second anniversary in April 2009, seminar organizers invited speakers to present their assessment of *Thabahtoon*a.<sup>20</sup> The January 2010 workshop discussed violence within universities ("Thabahtoona searches" 2010), a topic that the campaign had previously touched upon. In response to a number of high-profile incidents of tribal-based violence on campuses in 2009, *Thabahtoon*a increased its focus on this issue and connected it directly to questions of political freedoms. Its position has been that the failure of university and government officials to allow for a free political environment on campuses has exacerbated tribal-based allegiances and tensions as no space is created for alternative commitments. Thus, *Thabahtoon*a's workshops aim to engage a broader group of stakeholders in debates and discussions, to frame the terms of the debate, and create a space for broader public engagement around their key issues that it seeks to highlight.

### **Official Responses to *Thabahtoon*a and Related Challenges**

A brief look at the official response to *Thabahtoon*a highlights how the broader political context in many respects shapes and delimits the form that such a movement can take in Jordan. Although the campaign has remained active and increasingly vocal, official responses have been largely negative, with some exception. The official position of most university administrators has been to ignore or deny the existence or efficacy of *Thabahtoon*a (Al-Ersan 2009c). This was corroborated in interviews with university officials, in the media, and by one of the journalists interviewed for this report. One university official respondent repeatedly blamed the press for "exaggerating problems" in universities, he never acknowledged *Thabahtoon*a, even when asked directly about it. One result of this refusal to reckon with, and in some cases even recognize, *Thabahtoon*a has been to leave the public arena of the media to the movement, which has filled

this space and is often the only voice and source of information on events and issues in higher education.

In practice, university administrations have responded to activism on campus by seeking to prevent it and punishing the students involved, although some university officials have been more hostile to the activities of the campaign than others. Such a response is consistent with the overall situation of students undertaking any type of organizing or political activities on campus. *Thabahtoon*a has actively monitored harassment of student activists and regularly reports on what it deems infringements on student rights, making the campaign that much more unpopular on campus.

At one university, students who had been distributing pamphlets about *Thabahtoon*a and its goals were called to the office of the dean of student affairs. Although they were not punished, they were told that should any other literature associated with *Thabahtoon*a be found in circulation at the university, they would be held personally responsible and be expelled. Early in the campaign, students active in *Thabahtoon*a tried to gather signatures for a petition against tuition hikes; two students at Yarmouk University were arrested by security officials for collecting signatures.<sup>21</sup> In another incident, *Thabahtoon*a accused the administration of Hashemite University of facilitating the arrest of one student who participated in a sit-in on campus; the university denied any wrongdoing (Al-Sarira 2007). At al-Bayt, *Thabahtoon*a condemned university officials for allowing campus security to physically assault a student distributing fliers in May 2009, and then again assaulting students who were trying to hold a sit-in as a protest against the initial assault (Ghabun 2009b; al-Ersan 2009b). Students at Hashemite University went head to head with the administration several times in 2009. These are just a few of the reported incidents of suppression of *Thabahtoon*a's activities on campuses.<sup>22</sup>

The response of university officials is very much in sync with the government's position on such student organizing. In keeping with a history of official harassment of student social and political activism, *Thabahtoon*a student activists have faced harassment from government security forces (Kharinu 2000). In particular, they have been summoned and interrogated by security forces and in some instances—arrested.<sup>23</sup> One of the interviewed students said that he was summoned by the *mukhabarat* (state intelligence organization) every day for three weeks. Each day he was made to sit and wait until 3 pm at which time he would be released, but required to return the next day. This served to derail his studies for that semester as he missed

lectures and exams for three weeks. Other students involved in *Thabahtoon*a suffered the same fate.

The journalist Muhammad al-Ersan (2009a) published an article in *Amman Net* that analyzes frankly the presence of security forces on campuses and their interference in student and university life. Al-Ersan's article documents accusations of interference in student elections and harassment of student activists, and points to the presence of security officials in universities especially in student affairs offices and as part of campus security forces. One university official interviewed by al-Ersan denied the presence of security forces in universities and accused *Thabahtoon*a of exaggerating the situation. Al-Ersan juxtaposes the picture of excessive security interference painted by several informants with "royal assurances" that "political and party activities are not security issues." Comments by the minister for political development in the article try to explain this apparent contradiction: "A number of players are not committed to implementing political reform and reject it," implying that state officials are not of the same mind when it comes to "political reform." These remarks mirror a state-sanctioned public discourse about the need for reform in Jordan that is allowed to subsist as long as the monarchy and the royal family are left out of the story.<sup>24</sup> Here, the minister seems to imply that higher-level government officials are committed to political reform, but some state officials—perhaps in the security forces—are recalcitrant.

Interestingly, the Ministry of Political Development has made at least two overtures to *Thabahtoon*a. The previous minister, Muhammad al-'Awran, actually met with a delegation from *Thabahtoon*a at his request, but nothing came of this meeting. Under Minister Kamal Nasar, *Thabahtoon*a was invited to participate in a conference that would bring together student councils from all universities to "invigorate the role of student councils" and to implement political development goals ("Thabahtoona refuses invitation" 2009). However, *Thabahtoon*a refused to participate on the grounds that the conference was not initiated or directed by students, and that it appeared to circumvent the goal of establishing a General Union for Jordanian Students.<sup>25</sup>



The above political cartoon by the well-known Jordanian cartoonist Emad Hujjaj gives a clear picture of the limits on political activity in Jordan, and particularly on university campuses (Hujjaj 2006). Here Abu Mahjoob, the primary character of Hujjaj’s cartoons, stands at the gate of what appears to be Jordan University giving his son advice about participating in the political life of the university. He starts by enthusiastically encouraging his son to partake in elections and political activities, to criticize the government, and join a political party. At one point he tells his son: “And if you want to, join a party. After all, the state is inviting people to join parties.” However, in the final panel he makes clear to his son that if he becomes involved in politics, his son better not tell anyone that he, Abu Mahjoob, is his father.<sup>26</sup>

Here, Hujjaj conveys the persistence of fear on the part of ordinary citizens with respect to political participation and conveys skepticism about government pronouncements encouraging citizens to be active in the country’s political life. The apprehension on the part of university students, their peers, and families is real and represents a logical response to the actual policies and practices of university and government officials that penalize students for participating in activities deemed threatening to the state and national unity. The challenges *Thabahtoona* has faced are numerous and in many respects have delimited and shaped the nature of the movement in particular ways.

The overall political climate limits the effectiveness of a campaign such as *Thabahtoona* even as this same climate has in many ways helped engender the campaign and the particular

form that activism is taking. The harassment and repression of student activism on university campuses is a serious deterrent to student participation in significant numbers. Indeed, although there seems to be a core base of students who are working with *Thabahtoon*a on various campuses, the numbers appear small in relation to the public “presence” *Thabahtoon*a has been able to establish via the media, reporting, and the use of technology.<sup>27</sup> Some social scientists and activists also explain the lack of extensive student participation in terms of generational difference, characterizing the current generation of students as overly consumerist and apathetic (e.g., Kharinu 2000). Although this is clearly part of the picture, as is a changed economic context, the overall political context has been instrumental in limiting or suppressing student activism. Furthermore, as Philip Altbach has argued, historically the number of students actively engaged in student movements has been quite small (1989, 7).

### ***Building a Broader Political Base***

A variety of political parties and organizations were involved in the launching of *Thabahtoon*a, such as the Popular Unity Party, the Jordanian Communist Party, the Arab Baath Socialist Party, the Nationalist Movement Party, and the Islamic Action Front (*al-Sajil* 2009). Several student blocs also took part, including Arab Renewal, Student Struggle, Student Vanguard, the Islamic Union, Gathering Student Strength at the University of Jordan, and the bloc called Our Way (*Thabahtoon*a 2009, 45). Although most of these groups are listed as partners and participants in the movement, some are not active in the work of the campaign. For example, the active participation of the Islamist student bloc and the Islamic Action Front party has dissipated over time. Two reasons can explain this. One informant attributed this pulling back to a “typical competition” between political groups, speculating that since the leftist-affiliated students, and particularly the Arab Renewal *kutle* affiliated with *Wihda*, were taking the lead in the campaign, other groups did not see this movement as their own. Another informant speculated that the Islamist student groups were more wary of putting themselves in the public spotlight for fear of official repression.

Nevertheless, *Thabahtoon*a takes up the concerns of a broad base of students and regularly draws attention to the violation of student rights regardless of their political leaning. Although the campaign is primarily directed by *Wihda*’s youth wing and the related student

political bloc, Arab Renewal, it is supported by actors and groups from a broad political spectrum.

### **Effectiveness of the Campaign to Date**

Despite official repression and related challenges, the persistence and regular public “presence” of *Thabahtoon*a in the media speaks to its effectiveness. As one journalist commented in an interview for this report, “The fact that the campaign has survived in the existing political climate is an accomplishment in and of itself.” Most importantly perhaps, *Thabahtoon*a had created and *filled* a space for a critical discussion about the costs of higher education and the rights of students. It clearly has a large presence in the media and in any public discussion on these issues.

*Thabahtoon*a organizers point to a number of successful efforts that they have accomplished on behalf of student rights in Jordan—some of which have been corroborated by independent observers.<sup>28</sup> The campaign has had some success in halting tuition increases and in reversing university decisions regarding student fees. In an incident at Hashemite University in the summer of 2009, students active in *Thabahtoon*a organized protests against a policy change that would require students to pay before registering. The opposition activities were widely covered in the press and the university president initially denied there was any change planned (even though announcement of the changed policy had been posted on the university’s website) (“*Thabahtoon*a demands” 2009; “*Thabahtoon*a calls Al-Maani” 2009; “Hashemite University” 2009).<sup>29</sup> Under pressure, the university rescinded this policy decision (“Hashemite University retreats” 2009; “Hashemite University responds” 2009).<sup>30</sup> Most significant here, *Thabahtoon*a has created an environment in which any changes in tuition or fees are publically scrutinized. As one parliamentarian put it, “The government has started to think twice before they raise tuition” due to the presence of *Thabahtoon*a.<sup>31</sup>

Another important success has been in student representation on campus. One of *Thabahtoon*a’s primary initial grievances was against a policy that allowed university administrators to appoint half of the student council representatives at the University of Jordan. In the fall of 2008, the University of Jordan revised its policies in this regard and instituted full elections of the student council.<sup>32</sup> Although *Thabahtoon*a was not alone in opposing the policy of appointing students, it was one very vocal voice on this issue and deserves some credit for the

change. The campaign continues to monitor student elections and to speak out about infractions. For example, when students in the Islamic Labor Front accused Mu'tah University of irregularities during student elections, *Thabahtoon*a took up this cause and demanded that the election be made void and re-done ("Representatives of Islamic Labor" 2008).

Furthermore, the campaign has been successful in advocating on behalf of students who have faced disciplinary actions at their universities, either in having the actions downgraded or cancelled altogether. For example, in April 2008, *al-Ghad* reported that four students who had been suspended for distributing fliers at Hashemite University had their punishment downgraded to a warning. *Thabahtoon*a had advocated on behalf of these students, sending letters to the university pleading their case (al-Nimri 2008a). And a month later, *al-Ghad* reported that a student had been suspended for posting fliers about Gaza on the grounds that no such fliers should be distributed or hung on university property without prior approval. At the time, *Thabahtoon*a released a statement and sent a letter to the university calling on them to respect student rights and to rescind the decision to suspend the student (Ghraibeh and al-Tamimi 2008). On June 12, the paper reported that the university had revoked the suspension and *Thabahtoon*a publically took credit for this decision, arguing that it was evidence of the important role it plays in protecting students' rights (Ghraibeh 2008). Several other incidents were reported in the press in 2008 and 2009, pointing to *Thabahtoon*a's successful intervention on behalf of students. Its annual report on student rights has also highlighted the cases of individual students. Thus students have come to see *Thabahtoon*a as a resource or an organization they can turn to when issues emerge on campus and/or if they are seeking a broader audience for their grievances. Given that student complaints often fall on deaf ears, the significance of this role should not be underestimated.

One prominent social scientist, who was asked during an interview for this report what *Thabahtoon*a's accomplishments have been, responded: "They are keeping the little bit of public space left alive." Many commentators have expressed similar sentiments. In a constrained political environment, *Thabahtoon*a has kept a public and critical eye on policies and practices affecting the cost of higher education (with an emphasis on what they have characterized as privatization) and student freedoms. Not a decision passes about tuition and fees that escapes their public scrutiny. Nor do blatant violations of student rights pass unheralded in media outlets. In this respect, the campaign is a regular and public critique of official policies on economic and

political issues, practices of the security apparatus, and human rights violations more broadly. This public accounting and sustained critique has indeed preserved a space for political activism.

In some respects, the extent of media coverage that *Thabahtoon*a has enjoyed in some media outlets is a surprise given the limits on press freedoms and the red lines that are unofficially understood to limit journalists. In addition to regular reporting on the activities of *Thabahtoon*a in the print media, especially in *al-Ghad*, a number of analysis pieces have appeared in other outlets quite critical of the political situation in university and college campuses in Jordan (for example, see al-Ersan 2009a). These newer, mostly online, media have already distinguished themselves somewhat from the mainstream line of reporting. It appears as if *Thabahtoon*a—its strategies, popularity, and staying power—have provided them with content that has helped them test some of the boundaries of free speech in the country.

The staying power of the campaign is perhaps best explained by the connection between its issues, particularly the cost of higher education, and more general grievances about the cost of living and income inequality in Jordan. *Thabahtoon*a's framing of cost issues as related to unspoken moves to privatize public universities also fits within broader concerns about the privatization of utilities in Jordan and the removal of government subsidies from basic foodstuffs and household necessities, particularly fuel. The high cost of living in the country has been in part a function of such economic policies, and as such the concerns about cost and privatization of education resonate more broadly with Jordanians. Furthermore, by framing their agenda more narrowly in terms of access to higher education, *Thabahtoon*a has deflected some of the more negative official response to other initiatives organized around economic grievances, such as those by workers.

### **The NGO-ization of student activism?**

Although most observers sympathetic to *Thabahtoon*a's campaign acknowledge that it has been successful in maintaining a public presence via the media and the internet, some believe that its effectiveness as a student movement is limited by the political situation in the country, which restricts its constituency and pushes it to resort to safer methods. One activist stated, "Because they are not actually allowed to organize on campuses or to hold events there, they end up relying heavily on press releases and reports . . . almost like an NGO."

At the same time, it is distinct from official attempts at “NGO-ization” of student activism and civic participation more broadly. It has maintained a critical stand vis-à-vis government and university policies, has remained financially independent from foreign donors or government sponsorship, and has refrained from participating in state-sanctioned events, such as the conference for student councils organized by the Ministry of Higher Education, discussed above.

A significant body of literature argues that foreign aid and the proliferation of aid-funded NGOs have weakened social movements and genuine efforts at grassroots mobilization.<sup>33</sup> While this is not a study of this phenomenon in Jordan, we can make interesting observations in this regard, particularly with respect to student movements in the country. Specifically, a number of prominent youth or civic organizations enjoy official sponsorship and support on Jordanian university campuses, among them—the We Are All Jordan Youth Commission established in October 2006<sup>34</sup> and Project Citizen, an initiative at the Jordan and Mu’tah universities “to support youth activism” funded by the National Endowment for Democracy.<sup>35</sup>

The goals of Project Citizen are “to develop student commitment to active citizenship, to enhance skills and to deepen understanding of how people can work together to improve their communities” (Obeidat 2009). As this is a US-funded and government-approved initiative, the activities of students under the umbrella of Project Citizen are officially sanctioned. However, despite this status, the project still ran into some barriers according to an evaluation conducted in the summer of 2009. Most notably, at the University of Jordan, where the program had been in place longer, Project Citizen met with resistance from university administrators, some of whom seemed to think that it worked against the principles and philosophy of Jordan’s education system. Furthermore, when students raised issues deemed too controversial, they were not allowed to pursue them as a project. Finally, university bureaucracy also acted as barrier to the implementation of student-designed civic projects (Obeidat 2009). Thus, even NGOs have met restrictions in their attempts to promote civic engagement.

Enjoying greater legitimacy, the We Are All Jordan Youth Commission is explicitly a government initiative, which was established by royal decree in 2006 “to provide institutional platform for the young people in universities and in the homeland in general, to interact with policies and programs addressing them in the areas of economic, social, and political

development” (“About the Commission” n.d.). It has offices on many university campuses and as a government initiative has full support for its activities.

Although *Thabahtoon*a may resort to NGO-like methods, they are still quite distinct from these examples of bureaucratizing student activism. It is also clearly an opposition movement, framing its mandate as critical of official higher education policies and with strong links to a leftist opposition party. *Thabahtoon*a’s methods also reflect the possibilities that new communication technologies afford. Although its work is constrained by the political context, it has been skillful at taking advantage of available, albeit new, strategies.

## **Conclusion**

The persistence of *Thabahtoon*a as a public organization working on behalf of students is a significant accomplishment in light of official restrictions and the harassment of students directly involved in the campaign. Furthermore, as outlined above, the campaign appears to have had some impact on decisions directly affecting higher education. At the very least, university and related public officials know that they are now under a spotlight as a result of *Thabahtoon*a’s monitoring and public reporting activities.

The campaign’s agenda and some of the literature that it has produced point to areas for further research in Jordan, namely the cost of higher education, privatization of public universities, academic freedom, and student rights. The campaign both outlines an agenda and provides some information on how to fill these gaps. Although the suppression of student activism and the interference of security forces in university governance and student life should come as no surprise to those familiar with the Jordanian political context, *Thabahtoon*a has regularly monitored and reported on new incidents of such violations, providing a roadmap for an academic and human rights agenda for higher education in Jordan. Finally, as argued throughout this paper, *Thabahtoon*a’s greatest significance, perhaps, is as an example of a new form of activism in institutions of higher education, enabled by technology and new forms of media and growing out of a struggle against the persistent limitations of spaces for political action.

## **Notes**

1. The research for this study was completed in 2010 and the paper was drafted in early 2011; it does not account for developments after that time.

2. See the party's website for more information: <http://wihda.org/> (accessed Jan. 15, 2015).

3. I analyzed all media coverage in the daily *al-Ghad* and reviewed coverage on *Amman Net* and a number of Jordanian weeklies. The coverage in the semi-official newspaper *al-Rai* was much less extensive than that in *al-Ghad*; however, *al-Rai*'s archives were much less accessible, which also made it difficult to access existing media coverage. Sam Dolbee, my research assistant, deserves much of the credit for gathering the newspaper sources as well as other relevant material.

4. I also interviewed journalists, social scientists, and university officials. The latter were generally reluctant to discuss *Thabahtona*. In addition, when asked about the campaign, officials at the Ministry of Higher Education referred these questions to university administrators, arguing that this was a student group and outside the Ministry's purview. These avoidance tactics were in keeping with the position of the majority of university officials vis-à-vis *Thabahtona*, namely to minimize, discredit, or completely ignore the group.

5. The political and ideological nature of student movements in Jordan is in keeping with the experience of student movements in other places and eras (see Anderson 2008; Altbach 1970, 1989).

6. *Kutle* literally means group or political bloc. In the Jordanian context, given that students are not allowed to officially organize political groups or events on campus and that student organizations generally are restricted and closely monitored, a system of loosely grouped students who come together because of shared political leanings and/or issues of concern exists unofficially. These groups are called *kutle*. Typically the students in these groups or political blocs are affiliated with or are members of a formal political party outside of the university.

7. Specifically, the then-Minister of Education and Higher Education, Khalid Tuqan, publicly raised the alarm about the declining quality of higher education and pointed to the *mawazi* (parallel system) as one of the primary reasons for this. The *mawazi* at Jordanian public universities is a system by which students who do not qualify academically for entry into a particular discipline can still be admitted into that discipline by paying a higher tuition. Many

Jordanians, including those affiliated with *Thabahtoon*, have raised serious concerns about the *mawazi* system, arguing that it exacerbates inequality in access to education and particular fields of study. But specifically, the concern of the campaign organizers in 2006 was prompted by statements from the minister that higher tuition rates would be necessary to compensate for the funds currently generated by the *mawazi* system if it were to be minimized and/or eventually eliminated.

8. Women have also participated in the campaign although in fewer numbers. One student interviewed claimed that females comprised close to 30% of the participants, but both interviewees with whom I discussed this subject admitted that women were not part of the main leadership and coordination since limits on their mobility prevented them to participate fully.

9. Philip Altbach has argued that the leadership of student movements historically has been closely linked to “ideological doctrine . . . political in nature” (1970, 59).

10. This is a common criticism of Jordanian election procedures more broadly. Given the strength of kin ties, critics argue that in a “one person one vote” system Jordanians will vote based on kin connections.

11. In 2010, *Thabahtoon* focused on a new issue: the increase of tuition in private schools (K-12) (see Kheetan 2010).

12. Based on information from an interview conducted by F. Adely.

13. In the summer of 2008, the media reported on two relatively large protests against increases in university fees with close to 1,000 students participating at Irbid al-Ahliyye University and 500 students at Petra University (see al-Tamimi 2008; al-Nimri 2008c).

14. For example, *Thabahtoon*'s press releases and activities are regularly posted on the website of the Arab Network for Human Rights Information, <http://www.anhri.net/jordan/>.

15. Both university and ministry officials have accused *Thabahtoon* of exaggerating and using false information. Since its beginning, *Thabahtoon* has had to respond to such accusations (see “The Thabahtoon Movement” 2007).

16. At the seminar held on the second anniversary of the establishment of *Thabahtoon*, the issue of data and its accuracy was debated (see JordanDays.tv, n.d. and *Thabahtoon*'s coverage of this event at [http://www.thab7toona.org/news\\_view\\_144.html](http://www.thab7toona.org/news_view_144.html)).

17. Since the research for this paper was completed in early 2010, *Thabahtoon*a has continued to publish reports on topics related to higher education as well as private schooling.

18. The first report, *Regarding the situation of student rights in Jordanian universities and community colleges*, covers the period March 2007–2008 and the second, the period March 2008–June 2009. Since then, the reports began covering the span of one full year starting in June to better reflect university and community college schedules. Both reports are available on *Thabahtoon*a’s website.

19. Here *Thabahtoon*a emphasizes that they have only included individual cases that had been corroborated by deans of student affairs.

20. Among the presenters were a current and a former parliamentarians, a journalist, and the coordinator of *Thabahtoon*a’s steering committee, Dr. Fakhher Daas. The entire seminar was also recorded and broadcast on Jordan Days web TV (see [JordanDays.tv](http://JordanDays.tv), n.d.).

21. In a public statement, *Thabahtoon*a explained that the students collected the signatures outside the university gates and not on campus as they were aware that this was not permissible (“Arrest of two students” 2007).

22. *Thabahtoon*a organizers acknowledge that some universities have been more willing than others to allow some space on campus for its activities. However, any cooperation is within the limits of a significantly constrained field of possibilities shaped by the overall political climate in the country.

23. Interviews conducted by F. Adely.

24. Commenting on the 2010 parliamentary elections in Jordan, Ziad Abu-Rish (2010) discusses this same disconnect.

25. Based on information from a personal communication with an active member of *Thabahtoon*a.

26. The full translation of the text: [Panel #1] “Participate in elections. Partake in political activities. Get involved in any issue. [Panel #2] And if you want also, join a party!! Anyway, the state is inviting people to join parties! [Panel #3] Criticize the government. Do whatever comes to your mind . . . You are a young man after all and you have the enthusiasm. [Panel #4] But if you tell anyone that I am your father and I know you . . . I swear to God . . . I will inform on you. Understand!?”

27. *Thabahtoon*a organizers and student leaders were reluctant to talk in terms of specific numbers.

28. The picture of *Thabahtoon*a's accomplishments presented here draws on interviews with its members as well as the campaign's own accounts of its accomplishments in some of its materials; interviews with independent observers of *Thabahtoon*a's campaign; and analysis of media reporting about it. In some instances, *Thabahtoon*a is not singularly responsible for a particular outcome, but has been a vital player in a broader arena of actors working for policy change. Also, given official positions vis-à-vis *Thabahtoon*a, university and ministry officials are unlikely to credit it with precipitating any change in policy.

29. Interview conducted by F. Adely.

30. In March 2010, *Thabahtoon*a mobilized against a similar policy at Amman Popular University. In this case, campaign representatives argued that the lack of a student council enabled the university to act with impunity (see al-Nimri 2010). Later that month, *Thabahtoon*a organizers reported that the university had rescinded this policy.

31. This quote was culled from a video tape of a *Thabahtoon*a workshop, previously available on the JordanDays online news channel (<http://jordandays.net/?p=1774>). The video recording is no longer available.

32. The media coverage on this change of policy was extensive (see, for example, al-Nimri 2008d, 2008e).

33. For example, extensive research exists on the impact of NGOs and foreign aid on social movements in the Palestinian Territories (see Hammami 2000; Hammami and Tamari 2001; Jad 2007).

34. See their website at: <http://www.ajyc.jo/> (accessed January 15, 2015).

35. See their website at <http://www.ned.org/> (accessed January 15, 2015).

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