

Jordanian Teachers... The Issue Remains Open

By: Ahmad Abu-Khalil

In the past weeks since the end of July, the issue of teachers was one of the most widely discussed topics in the national public debate in Jordan. Perhaps this debate is an important indicator of a main aspect of the social conflict in the country.

In fact, this is considered a new round of the conflict, which comes after less than a year from the previous "round" that was more intense and holistic. The latter included the teachers' popular strike in the beginning of the past academic year, which lasted throughout the month of September 2019, making it the longest strike by a syndicate or association in the history of Jordan.

For those who are following this matter closely - and especially the teachers themselves - this debate is still not over since the end of last September's strike due to the numerous and diverse issues that were raised by the strike but were not tackled or followed up by the official bodies. It is true that the main demand of the strike was to receive a 50% addition/allowance to the base salary, which was agreed upon and implemented at the beginning of 2020. However, there is still a long list of issues that were included in the end-of-strike agreement, and which included different aspects related to teachers and the educational process in general.

The aim of this article is to provide an analysis of the recent developments starting from the July 25 decision of Amman's Attorney-General to discontinue the work of the Jordanian Teachers Syndicate (JTS) Council and close down their offices. This was followed by arresting all the members of the JTS Council and a number of leaders of its branches in various governorates, as well as arresting hundreds of other related persons for limited periods of time (ranging from hours to days). The article also seeks to view this event in light of its general context, i.e. the current state of conflict and social movement in Jordan. It may be useful to point out that this article is based on a relatively vigorous follow-up of the teachers' movement in the field since its launching in 2010 and establishment of the JTS, as well as the "ebb and flow" within this syndicate and its relation with the authority, all the way to last year's events.

In the beginning, it is worth pointing out – in a brief and remindful manner – the special status of teachers in the Jordanian society in terms of this category's size, influence and role within a network of social relations that affects the majority of the country's population. Moreover, the members of this category have a special harmony regardless of their social class, which led many people to call them "the Jordanian Proletariat". It is also worth pointing out that the matters of disagreement are limited to the teachers of the public sector (i.e. governmental schools) because private schools are governed by their own regulations led by a special culture and perceptions formed within their society (both in the affluent and poor areas). This made private schools outside the realm of the Jordanian teachers' movement and struggle in the current period. It is also worth mentioning that the number of teachers in public schools is 106,000, whereas there are 40,000 teachers in private schools.

What brought us back to the crisis?

After ending the September strike and resuming studies in October 2019, the two parties (JTS and the government) sought to send a message of mutual agreement and positivity, whereas the Jordanian Prime Minister received the JTS Council in a friendly meeting and atmosphere and quoted the President's affirmation of the participatory spirit between the government (i.e. Ministry of Education) and the JTS. During this meeting, the Prime Minister stated that "the Ministry cannot play the role of the association and the association cannot play the role of the Ministry". Afterwards, there was the formation of the joint JTS-Ministry of Education committee. This committee has a vital role in the daily life of teachers and the educational process, and it has the duty of discussing important matters from the field which concern teachers and education on the level of schools and individuals.

In the words of teacher Ghaleb Abu-Qdeis, who is a JTS Council member and was leading the delegation that was negotiating with the government: "After meeting the Prime Minister, we thought that we have started a new phase by moving from the

demand-based mobilization to professional syndicate work and action”.

However, the committee only held three meetings and was disrupted for six months during the current Minister of Education’s term in office, whereas the Ministry did not call for a new meeting except in a rather ironic and provocative time. The invitation for a meeting was sent on Thursday, 23 July, and it was set to be held on the next business day, i.e. on Sunday, 26 July. However, in the morning of Saturday, 25 July, a decision was issued and implemented regarding the arrest of JTS Council members, which came to be called “Black Saturday” by the teachers.

In order to understand the scene, we need to go back a little..

At the end of last March, schools were closed down as part of the general closure measures within the plan for combating the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. There was also the announcing of the Defense Law’s applicability, which led to the successive issuance of defense orders on the basis of the Defense Law. These measures were imposed on various social and economic sectors and had a negative impact on teachers because they led to halting the communication between the JTS and the government. Meanwhile, the latter chose to unilaterally lead the fight against the pandemic and was unwilling to involve the associations (including the JTS) in any joint activities.

In one of the Defense Law orders, the government announced the formation of a fund for collecting financial donations to support the governmental efforts to combat COVID-19. This fund was called “Himmat Watan” (“Nation’s Effort”) Fund, which receives donations starting from 100,000 Jordanian Dinars. Soon afterwards, the JTS announced its donation of half a million Jordanian Dinars to the fund. Through this step, they aimed to send a friendly message to the society and the state to prove that the “material goal” is not their point of focus as claimed by some parties. However, this act turned out to be counter-productive after some JTS members filed a lawsuit against the JTS Council because they considered this act to be illegal.

In another matter related to the Defense Law, the government decided to suspend the validity of all the approved allowances in the public sector both on the civil and military level, which means stopping the applicability of the above-mentioned teachers’ allowance (which was the main demand of the previous teachers’ strike), whereas the governmental decision stipulated the resumption of the allowance’s validity starting from the beginning of 2021.

Conflict through the Media

According to the teachers, the atmosphere which

preceded and accompanied the COVID-19 crisis witnessed a tense relationship between the JTS and the Ministry, whereas the communication between the two parties was halted, and especially when it comes to the above-mentioned joint committee. So the teachers started announcing that the Ministry of Education does not respond to them and does not want any dialogue, which gradually prompted action through the media, and particularly through the social media pages belonging to the JTS and its bodies and those belonging to its members, not to mention the use of different videos. Moreover, the JTS held a general meeting in front of its headquarters and sharp words were expressed during this meeting. The JTS also accused the government of withdrawing from the previous agreement and refusing to communicate, and they threatened to escalate the situation and announced their rejection of the government’s decision to stop the validity of the financial allowance and demanded that it gets paid in full. At a later date, these videos were added to the list of evidenced charges against the JTS Council.

The government responded by more than one means, and several articles appeared in newspapers and online news sites (including prominent sites), and they collectively took a position that opposed the syndicate’s positions. According to the unwritten traditions of crisis management, this means that the government aimed to launch a counter-campaign. The opponents of JTS chose to attack the syndicate’s aim of “differentiating” themselves regarding the decision to stop the financial allowances even though this decision included all the categories of civil and military public sector employees. Additionally, the adversaries of JTS accused them of politicizing the syndicate’s actions by claiming that the syndicate’s decisions are controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood. The conflict culminated on Saturday, July 25, with the issuance of a decision by Amman’s Attorney-General against the JTS Council members, Central Commission members and the various branches and departments of the JTS, as well as discontinuing the syndicate’s operations and closing down its offices for two years. Moreover, subpoenas were issued against the defendants (members of JTS Council) to bring them before the specialized public prosecutor to interrogate with them about the crimes that they are charged with, namely:

- Investigative case related to the purported “financial abuses” examined by the public prosecutor of the Jordanian Integrity and Anti-corruption Commission (JIACC).
- Investigative case examined by Amman’s Attorney-General regarding the decisions/resolutions of the JTS Council which were circulated on social media and included “incitement

and inflammatory actions”.

- Investigative case related to the videos issued by JTS Vice President, which were circulated on social media and are examined by Amman’s Attorney-General.

The decision of the Attorney-General included a gag order (also called a “suppression order”) to prevent the passing of any information related to this case to the media (including social media).

These governmental procedures came as a surprise, and especially since they were exaggeratingly expanded. Also, the government quickly formed a managerial committee for JTS, headed by a senior employee from the Ministry, and they announced that the case is now being heard before the court and that this should be respected by all.

Alternative Leadership of the Syndicate

The second line of JTS leaders from the Syndicate’s Central Council and leaders of its governorate branches worked tirelessly and formed a new leadership for organizing protest-related activities. Firstly, they called for a sit-in in the Jordanian capital Amman in front of the Prime Minister’s headquarters, and approximately 3,000 teachers were able to reach areas that were close to that location. However, in order to disperse this gathering, the government confronted them with a crackdown, and several hundreds of teachers were arrested for different durations. This JTS action was followed by holding marches and public protests in governorate centers and some cities. The protests of Irbid, Mafraq, Karak and Jarash witnessed a relatively large presence but were also confronted by new, sporadic arrests that were judicially and administrative-ly separate from the arrest of JTS Council members. In light of that, a wide-scale media silence prevailed in written, audible, visual and online media (with a few exceptions regarding the latter). The teachers and their supporters used social media but were very careful - and especially in the first days - because the gag order included social media platforms as well. What was strange is that the silence went beyond the case presented before the court and it pervaded the different developments in the field that were not related to the case per se. Therefore, big news such as the sit-ins of thousands of teachers and the arrest of tens of them (including female teachers) – not to mention the open hunger strike of the arrested JTS Council members – did not make it to the media and was not covered by the official and private satellite channels. However, this news was covered by some local and foreign unofficial media outlets. The “undeclared” Jordanian traditions of media work show that there was an official directive to ban the publication or broadcasting of everything related to the issue of teachers and not just the case that was presented before the court.

It is also worth noting that the Jordanian Press Association and other media parties did not initiate a discussion of the legal significance of gag orders. Other professional syndicates and associations also remained silent, including the Jordanian Bar Association that usually expresses its opinions about such legal matters. Furthermore, the large associations – which usually express their opinion about important matters of this sort – remained silent as well. Moreover, the political forces expressed a “minimalist” stance and did not speak out loudly, whereas some of them made statements in an unusually quiet language and others sufficed by merely having posts written by their activists in their personal social media pages. Additionally, the voice of Jordanian parliamentarians and House of Representatives was largely absent.

Nevertheless, there was one article of its kind written by the former President of the Legislation Bureau Nofan Al-Ajarmeh. In this article, Al-Ajarmeh carefully explained the legal meaning of gag order decisions, where he stated that the Public Prosecution has the right to issue gag orders in accordance with the law. He added that gag orders aim to achieve one of two things: First: Respecting the right of privacy, and Second: Preserving the confidentiality of an investigation. Al-Ajarmeh concluded his article by highlighting that the interest of the society is the main point of consideration in the subject of gag orders, and that if the publishing of information is for the benefit of society, the publication should be made for the protection and care for the society. He then added that if the prevention of publication and protection of privacy do not conflict with the interest of the society, the prevention of publication (i.e. gag order) should be made for the protection and care for the society. Al-Ajarmeh also noted that this matter falls within the discretionary authority of the source of this decision, regardless of whether it is the Public Prosecution or the subject matter court.

On the official level, the government stopped communicating with the detained JTS Council members, who were not subjected to additional investigations during their time in prison. It is also worth noting that some unofficial channels were opened but they did not attain any significant outcomes. The most important thing, however, is that this issue was not absent from the public debate. The circle of discussion started expanding after the public found out that a gag order does not mean that it is prohibited to discuss the matters that are beyond the court case events.

On the day before the new academic year, the public waited apprehensively for the official decision. Some of them expected that the JTS Council members’

detention would be extended, whereas others expected or preferred the decision to release them. The latter scenario took place, and this was considered a positive message. Also, the official news showed that the release of the teachers was made without bail. The first session of the court was set to be held on the 9th of September and it was designated for the presentation of evidence by both parties. The Jordanian Teachers Syndicate (JTS) is armed with legal evidence which clearly shows that the decision to dissolve the JTS Council and form a managerial committee for JTS requires a set of procedures which were not fulfilled and can be easily appealed. At about this point in time, new unofficial channels started being launched and some security summons were made (which were more like discussions and an exchange of opinions). Meanwhile, the JTS Council members held on to their legitimacy and refused to acknowledge the dissolution of their council, and they waited for proposed solutions that avoid potential escalation. However, the Council does not completely exclude the option of resorting back to mobilization activities if the government pursues the implementation of hostile procedures.

Even though the JTS experience does not exceed ten years, the teachers within and outside the JTS Council [and especially those in leading JTS positions] are aware of their strengths and weaknesses

It is worth pointing out that many community actors and activists view the Teachers' movement (and especially after the successful strike) as a model for their desired social movement. This led to assigning the Teachers' movement a greater role in directing, specifying, and formulating the different subjects of the social struggle.

In dealing with such issues, no one in Jordan can provide a clear picture of the potential developments. This is because simple events – and perhaps even side statements – can take things to different directions. In Jordan, an element such as “preserving one’s dignity” can play an important role because it means winning the public image in light of certain events. The government expressed in more than one stance that it is dissatisfied from the teachers’ strike, considering it an impermissible method and they declared that they will not allow it to be repeated. On the other hand, the teachers accuse the current Minister of being hostile to the Syndicate and remind him that, although he held the same position before, he does not know and did not witness the developments that took place in the Syndicate and the rising level of awareness among teachers.

The teachers keep pointing out that they now constitute a “national case”, meaning that their cause has gone beyond the category of teachers and was elevated to a higher level in the hierarchy of national

issues. Moreover, the teachers’ mobilization became more powerful through their increased presence in governorates outside the Jordanian capital and also in the central area whose role in the social movement was previously declining on the national level.

The government’s attempt to pressure and bring a lawsuit and accusations against an “uncooperative” JTS Council did not succeed. Also, the events of combating the COVID-19 pandemic and its negative effect on school attendance might have played a role in dispersing the debates and discussions. Nonetheless, the coming weeks might witness a decisive settlement and each party is working to achieve a favorable outcome. Meanwhile, it is clear that this issue remains open.

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