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Public Sector Strikes: Causes and Treatment



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Critical Policy Brief

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Walid Ladadweh

The year 2022-2023 witnessed successive strikes by professional unions, teachers, lawyers, physicians, and engineers, while other sectors, such as the nursing syndicate and those of other health professions, threatened to do the same. These strikes led to paralysis in some public sectors, especially education, and included street protests and sit-ins in front of government offices. It has become a serious crisis. The drivers of these strikes are still in place, threatening to lead to greater and more frequent escalation in the future. What are the motives for the strikes and how can this crisis be stopped or contained by the government? This Brief aims to shed light on the motives behind the crisis, or the waves of strikes, and how to reduce their intensity or perhaps avoid them altogether.

How it began

Needless to say, the financial crisis of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the resulting financial measures taken toward the public sector employees and the rest of the public, the cuts in salaries, the imposition of additional taxes, and the rise in the cost of living, have all been significant drivers for the widespread turn to public sector strikes. However, these were not the only reasons. In fact, broadly speaking, professional unions have traditionally been the most sympathetic, understanding and cooperative with the Palestine Liberation Organization and the PA throughout the years of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and since the formation of the PA. The belief of the public that the prevailing financial difficulties are the result of mismanagement of public funds and the perception that the government is insensitive to the needs of the public sector and unwilling to implement obligations it took upon itself have contributed to an erosion in trust in the PA leading to greater determination on the part of unions to rely on strikes as the preferred method of protest.

But there is a third dimension to the declining trust in the relationship between the PA and the public sector unions. This one is directly attributed to Israel and its policy toward the PA. The Israeli government seems intent on keeping the PA weak and highly dependent on it for its mere financial survival. A weak and utterly dependent PA is one that Israel hopes can be easily controlled. In other words, Israel has no interest in strengthening the Palestinian public institutions or the PA leadership. But it also has no interest in bringing it to collapse. On the back drop of mounting evidence of PA weakness and concerns about potential collapse, the Israeli prime minister outlined his policy in a recent closed meeting of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Security Committee. Based on a report by the Israeli public radio "Kan", Netanyahu indicated that "we have an interest in the PA continuing to operate. In the areas

where it succeeds, it does the work for our benefit. We have no interest in its collapse.”¹ This statement is consistent with a policy that requires nurturing the PA's sense of need for Israel; the belief that its survival depends on Israeli protection. But the damage such policy inflicts on the PA can only weaken it further. The Israeli government seems to deliberately sow suspicion between the public and the PA.

The result is greater loss of public confidence in the PA and its leadership. As people become the “enemy” of the PA, Israel emerges as the player that provides for its survival and protection. This seems to be reflected in the PA behavior as it becomes obsessed with protecting its own existence even at the cost of losing public confidence: it does not hold parliamentary or presidential elections; its executive unilaterally decrees laws that lack legal or constitutional basis or public support; and it often deals violently with mass movements and reduce the space available to civil society. In turn, it receives public discontent and distrust. Take for example the PA declaration in January 2023 that it ended security coordination with Israel.² When asked, the vast majority of the Palestinian public believed otherwise. A poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PCSR) in March 2023 found 79% of the public dismissing the PA claim and insisting that the PA has not stopped security coordination.³ What the public saw was the continued PA efforts to arrest members of armed groups,⁴ an act it interpreted as part and parcel of PA-Israeli coordination in the security sector.

This is clearly reflected in the current public perception of the PA and its relations with Israel. PSR polls indicate that the largest percentage of the public (43%) believes that Israel's punitive measures against the PA are aimed at weakening it and only 25% believe that these measures are aimed at pushing the PA to collapse. A majority of 63% believes that Israel's interest lies in the survival of the PA while 46% believe that the PA continued existence serves the interest of the Palestinian people.⁵ Unless reversed, they impressions can only produce greater waves of union strikes and mass protest movements. The public will most likely provide the necessary support and reject government claims, even if these claims are justified.

Forces pushing for public sector strikes

Three reasons drive the push for strikes in the public sector, foremost of which is the current PA financial crisis which is exacerbated by unfulfilled promises and a continuous decline in the level of public trust in the PA government.

1) The PA Financial crisis and management of public funds

Since its inception, the PA has relied on support from various donors, such as the European Union, the United States and Arab countries. These funds have diminished over the years leading to the current financial difficulties.⁶ Over the years, the PA has not been successful in building self-reliance or an autonomous economic structure to effectively fill this funding shortfall. On the other hand, the absence

¹ نتنياهو: لدينا مصلحة باستمرار عمل السلطة الفلسطينية ولن نسمح بانتهيارها ونستعد للفترة التي تلي رحيل عباس.. وفلسطين تعتبر رفضه إقامة دولتنا اعتراف (raialyoum.com) | رأي اليوم

² DW | عربية | أخبار عاجلة ووجهات نظر من جميع أنحاء العالم DW - السلطة الفلسطينية توقف التنسيق الأمني مع إسرائيل | أخبار "تأسف" واشنطن 26.01.2023

³ <https://pcpsr.org/en/node/938>

⁴ aljazeera.net | السلطة تعتقل كوادير بحركة الجهاد في جنين والاحتلال يعتقل 25 فلسطينيا في الضفة | أخبار الجزيرة نت

⁵ Public Opinion Poll No (88) | PCPSR

⁶ felesteen.news | حراك المعلمين في الضفة.. محاولات حكومية لزعة الإضراب الشامل | فلسطين أون لاين

of the Palestinian Legislative Council led to the absence of transparency and participation in government policy formulation, as indicated by a recent report by a civil society team that supports the transparency of the public budget⁷.

The effects of the financial crisis were directly reflected on the performance of the PA in its obligations towards public sector employees in different areas. Public sector employees are, of course, the category that depends directly and mainly on the income available to them from their public employment, which is mostly insufficient to meet the basic needs of the employees and their families. While employees are demanding that their salaries be improved to match rising prices and the cost of living, over the past two years salaries have not been fully paid and at least 20% of salaries have been cut. The PA also raised taxes and imposed new ones on citizens, which increased their suffering and consequently provoked their discontent and resentment. In a report on popular discontent, published on "*Palestine*" online on February 11, 2023,⁸ a man by the name of Abu Fares explained in simple language that the Shtayyeh government is failing to protect Palestinians in the face of the escalating high prices, as people do not know if the reason for the high prices is the lack of available quantities and the high prices of international shipping, or perhaps because of the monopoly of merchants and fees and taxes imposed by the government. Abu Fares complained that the Shtayyeh government has for about a year been paying partial salaries despite the rising cost of living conditions, and that it has delayed the disbursement of social affairs allocations thereby increasing the magnitude of the challenges confronting Palestinians in the West Bank.

The deteriorating economic conditions created the seeds of discontent and the desire to protest against the government. Dr. Ammar Dweik, director of the Independent Commission for Human Rights, said in an interview with the author that most of the union strikes were purely union-motivated and mainly related to the financial issue and the payment of salaries and bonuses.⁹ Omar Assaf, a former teacher and trade union activist among teachers, says that living and working conditions were a key factor in the strikes. Employees became more curious about the PA financial dealings and its management of public funds. As a result, concerns grew about corruption and mismanagement leading to greater public discontent.¹⁰

2) Unfulfilled promises

The financial conditions of the PA were not the only reason for the unions to go on strikes; the promises that were often not kept, created a strong feeling by the public sector employees that the government is manipulating their feelings and has no real intention of improving their living condition and that it is being evasive to order to disavow giving them their legitimate rights. In a report titled "The Teachers' Movement in the West Bank... Government Attempts to Undermine the Comprehensive Strike" issued on March 15, 2023, teacher Murad Al-Talahmeh says that "the government is responsible for disrupting the educational process, and we are continuing the strike" in protest against the failure of the

⁷ <https://www.aman-palestine.org/activities/20510.html>

⁸ [تدّمر شعبي بالضفة من ارتفاع الأسعار وانخفاض الرواتب | فلسطين أون لاين \(felesteen.news\)](https://felesteen.news/)

⁹ Interview with Dr. Ammar Duaik, director of the Palestinian Independent Human Rights Commission.

¹⁰ Interview with Omar Assaf

government of to disburse an increase of 15% in accordance with the agreement with teachers in 2022; an agreement that was co-signed by various human rights institutions and academic figures¹¹.

The spokesman for the teachers' movement, Essam Dababseh, confirmed to Naba news agency on February 22, 2023, that the teachers' strike comes a year after the agreement with the government and its pledge to pay a 15% salary raise, and after the prime minister's announcement at a press conference of a target date of 1/1/2023, to disburse this increase. He pointed out that the Hirak knows that the government is living in a difficult financial situation due to the Israeli occupation and its piracy of funds, but the problem lies in the fact that there is no trust in the government and there is a lack of transparency in the government in dealing with the public; some say that the government does have the needed funds but does not want to give teachers their rights¹².

Omar Assaf says that "the promises made by the PA were marred by procrastination and lies. The government signed an agreement with the teachers and then repudiated it, so the promises remain hollow, and that's what makes the crisis continue."¹³ He says that the performance of the government in solving the crisis of strikes is miserable, a mere postponement of the crises. With teachers, the PA faces a strike on an annual basis because it does not address the root cause of the issue. To buy time, he argues, it relies on administrative sanctions and other threats in the hope of breaking the will of teachers.¹⁴ Dweik also believes that the PA disavowed the implementation of agreements reached. He believes that there is a discrepancy in the positions of the main PA actors on these agreements, which hinders their implementation. For example, while there is a desire on the part of the Prime Minister and the ministers concerned, such as health and education, to implement the agreement, the Minister of Finance disavows implementation. Thus, the government defaults on its promises.¹⁵ Commenting on the recent strikes in the unions, activist Issa Amr told Naba News agency that there is a clear failure in the performance of the political leadership and the Palestinian government: "Since the beginning of this year [2022], the government has postponed and lied to the unions and citizens, without giving them their basic rights that guarantee them a life in dignity, and almost most segments of the Palestinian people are on strike, and reject economic, political and security policies and the attacks on the judiciary."¹⁶ Although the government, through its prime minister, has repeatedly clarified its financial difficulties and reiterated its commitment to implement the agreements with the unions when funds are available,¹⁷ these statements were not well received by the unions because of their conviction that the PA will not fulfill its promises, as it always does.

3) Loss of confidence in the government:

It seems that the failures of the PA in various political, legal and economic fields have led to a loss of public confidence in it. Opinion polls published by PSR since 2019, when Shtayyeh's government first took office, indicate a significant decline in the public's perceptions of the PA. Optimism about the ability of the Shtayyeh government to improve the economic situation dropped from 34% in 2020 to 16% in 2023, and optimism about its ability to hold elections or unify the West Bank and the Gaza Strip

¹¹ [حراك المعلمين في الضفة.. محاولات حكومية لزعزعة الإضراب الشامل | فلسطين أون لاين](https://felesteen.news/حراك المعلمين في الضفة.. محاولات حكومية لزعزعة الإضراب الشامل | فلسطين أون لاين) (felesteen.news)

¹² [حراك المعلمين في الضفة.. محاولات حكومية لزعزعة الإضراب الشامل | فلسطين أون لاين](https://felesteen.news/حراك المعلمين في الضفة.. محاولات حكومية لزعزعة الإضراب الشامل | فلسطين أون لاين) (felesteen.news)

¹³ Interview with Assaf

¹⁴ Interview with Assaf

¹⁵ Interview with Duwaik

¹⁶ [ت رصد حركات النقابات بالضفة منذ بداية 2022.. الأسباب والتداعيات! | نأب- وكالة الصحافة الوطنية "نأب"](https://npa.ps/ت رصد حركات النقابات بالضفة منذ بداية 2022.. الأسباب والتداعيات! | نأب- وكالة الصحافة الوطنية) (npa.ps)

¹⁷ [اشتية: ملتزمون تمام الالتزام بجميع الاتفاقات الموقعة مع النقابات](https://wafa.ps/اشتية: ملتزمون تمام الالتزام بجميع الاتفاقات الموقعة مع النقابات) (wafa.ps)

dropped in similar proportions.¹⁸ Another poll indicated that the majority believes that this PA has become a burden on the Palestinian people. Indeed, the majority says that it wants to dissolve the PA, and sees its collapse as an interest of the Palestinian people, as mentioned earlier.

The decline in the PA's status is also evident when looking at public support for the teachers' strike in the West Bank, standing at 70%. It can also be seen in the fact that about 80% or more believe that the current government will fail to hold elections, achieve reconciliation, or improve economic conditions. The loss of trust in the government is also reflected in the overwhelming majority's refusal to accept the imposition of a one-shekel tax on the telecommunications bill to support East Jerusalemites¹⁹, with about 80% saying that this money will not actually go to Jerusalem's residents."

Ammar Dweik says that the loss of confidence in the government is an obstacle to any agreement to resolve or limit the occurrence of strikes, as the PA pays the price for its poor management and the lack of transparency in the management of public funds. At the height of the teachers' strike crisis, for example, a majority of the public saw the declared financial crisis as fabricated. As Duwaik stated, "while the PA claims that it has no funds, it pays one ambassador to cover all the expenses of her children in private schools, and the president appoints senior officials, ambassadors and others. If the PA was completely honest about its financial difficulties, the unions will not believe it in that, and this is what exacerbates the crisis."²⁰

Together, these factors led to a wave of strikes that almost paralyzed life in various educational, health, legal and other aspects, as the Bar Association, the Engineers Syndicate, the Ambulance and Emergency Syndicate, the Transport Syndicate, the Doctors Syndicate, the Unified Teachers' Movement and the Nursing Syndicate all engaged in strikes.²¹

Ways out of the crisis

The PA can mitigate the crisis of strikes and their negative impact on Palestinian society and economy by addressing the three main causes we have just reviewed.

1) The PA financial crisis:

There is no doubt that the financial crisis of the PA, its inability to pay the full salaries of employees, and the fulfillment of the demands of the unions to improve their working conditions, is one of the main causes of the crisis. The PA, represented by the Ministry of Finance, the Prime Minister and others, have repeatedly stated the existence of this inability. Yet, these statements have not been believed by the public sector employees and the unions for various reasons that we have previously outlined. The PA should take several measures in order to build credibility and create acceptance in the public sector of its statements about the financial deficit. These should include the areas described below.

Transparency in the management of public funds: It seems clear that there is a consensus among citizens, unions, and civil society organizations that there is a weakness in the transparency of the PA in terms of informing the various civil society actors about the way it manages public funds. This lack of transparency raises doubts and suspicion among citizens, unions and others about PA behavior rendering

¹⁸ [Public Opinion Poll No \(88\) | PCPSR](#)

¹⁹ [Public Opinion Poll No \(87\) | PCPSR](#)

²⁰ Interview with Duwaik

²¹ [\(npa.ps\) ترصد حركات النقابات بالضفة منذ بداية 2022.. الأسباب والتداعيات! | نباء وكالة الصحافة الوطنية "نبا"](#)

unbelievable its claims regarding the financial deficit. Therefore, the PA must show seriousness in its efforts to ensure transparency in the management of public funds and inform the public by all possible means. Ammar Dweik recommends that the PA “must show the people more transparency in the management of public funds, as it is not transparent in its financial figures, and it pays the price for its poor management and lack of transparency. Therefore, money must be managed fairly, professionally and transparently²²”.

Reallocation of budget resources: The interviews conducted for this Brief, which have already been described when discussing the causes of the current crisis, show that there is a conviction among the experts and the activists that there is an imbalance in the PA's budget in terms of allocation. The budget allocated to the security services, for example, drains the largest share at a time when there is no need for such a large security sector, especially since evidence amounts that the security forces fail in their efforts to deliver safety and security to the public in the West Bank. This is particularly true when it comes to protection in Area B against settlers' terrorism. Therefore, the PA must reconsider the distribution of the budget, so that it spends more on vital sectors that directly affect citizens, such as education and health. Omar Assaf says: "it is necessary to rearrange the priorities of the budget, as most of it is now spent on security, and we all know the nature of the problem we face with security provision; the security forces are not the protector of the people, but rather intervene to limit and suppress freedoms. If the budget priorities are reordered so that education and health are given the largest share of the budget, I think these problems can be overcome and solved²³".

Combating corruption and its manifestations: Public perception of corruption in the PA has not changed for several years; the vast majority continues to think that corruption in public institutions is real, as we have mentioned earlier. This perception is reinforced by PA behavior or those affiliated with it. This perception strengthens people's belief that the PA's financial crisis is contrived and not real. Assaf believes that "fighting corruption, holding the corrupt accountable and rationalizing spending will save enough money for the demands of teachers and other sectors."²⁴ Therefore, the PA must strengthen the means of oversight, activate accountability in which transparency is central, and clarify, when needed, those procedures that might create confusion in the public mind.

(2) Gaining credibility with unions by keeping promises

One of the most important issues that hinder the resolution of the crisis is the experience of the unions with the promises made to them by the PA, which have remained largely unfulfilled, or partially fulfilled. Given the past history of the relationship between the two sides, it is evident that reaching permanent solutions to the crisis will remain beyond reach. The unions feel that the PA does not really want to resolve the crisis and that it only wants to postpone it. The PA must show seriousness towards the unions' demands and in fulfilling promises it made. It should only make promises it can implement. As indicated earlier, Assaf went further by saying that the PA promises remained hollow thereby forcing the crisis to continue."²⁵

²² Interview with Duwaik

²³ Interview with Assaf

²⁴ Interview with Assaf

²⁵ Interview with Assaf

(3) Strengthening trust with unions and the public

In order for the PA to move forward with the above two measures, it must restore trust with its citizens, unions and various civil institutions. Clear evidence indicates that there is a loss of trust between the public and the PA, as we have shown in our explanation of the causes of the crisis. Therefore, the PA must set its sights on working seriously to strengthen this trust through several steps, perhaps the most useful of which are the following:

- ✓ Stop political detention, strengthen the judiciary, and fight corruption
- ✓ Stop security coordination, or cease those practices that indicate its continuation, such as pursuing or arresting members of armed groups
- ✓ Show seriousness in pursuing reconciliation and the holding of elections
- ✓ Examine the results of opinion polls, which indicate dissatisfaction with the performance of the PA, with the aim of identifying and addressing the sources of public discontent

Summary of recommendations:

Needless to say, the PA must improve its financial and administrative performance and create conditions that allow the restoration of public and unions' confidence. To do this, the PA can take steps in the following directions:

1. Show determination to combat corruption by holding corrupt officials accountable and ensuring full transparency in the management of public funds.
2. Similarly, show determination to hold legislative and presidential elections; a popular demand currently supported by 70% of Palestinian public. Only an elected government enjoys legitimacy. It is therefore more able to avoid public sector strikes and more successful in managing them if the need arises.
3. Keep the security services away from interfering in mass protests; when the need arises, deal with the protests in a professional and legal manner that respects their fundamental human rights manner.
4. Prioritize the budget so that spending on security is reduced and spending on education, health and social services are increased.
5. Assist in the democratic restructuring of unions so that those who represent the public sector employees are truly representative through elections, especially the unions affiliated with the PLO that have so far been appointed by quotas or sham elections.
6. Declare commitment to agreements signed with unions; alternatively, renegotiate in case of inability to comply.
7. After taking the above steps or at least some of them, it is proposed to hold a serious and genuine national dialogue with the various unions, one that is characterized by full transparency in order to reach acceptable formula for resolving crises while ensuring the right to strikes and protests as well as the right to organize and hold internal elections.

For the *trade unions*, steps are required to strengthen their representative capacity and their ability to win over the masses to their side. These could include the following:

1. The internal reorganization and democratization of the unions is most critical to ensure full representation and greater credibility, with the public and the government, when making demands.
2. The unions should unify their ranks and coordinate their efforts so that the impact would be greater.
3. They should make sure that the public is fully convinced of the *legitimacy* of the strikes and other protest measures. The public must see, as legitimate, the use of strikes to achieve unions' demands even if such strikes might have some harmful side effects.
4. They should also clarify to the public their positions and why it is *reasonable* for them to strike and seek to minimize any possible damage from these measures while coordinating the steps they take with steps that other union actors might be taking.
5. They should conduct a serious review of their demands so that they are consistent with the actual capabilities of the PA, as that will have an impact on the *feasibility* of achieving them. Infeasible demands, those that the PA cannot afford to meet, will only damage domestic Palestinian conditions particularly in such critical service delivery areas of education and health. It goes without saying that unreasonable demands can only lead to failure.
6. Unions should make the demand for holding general elections an integral part of their campaigns; such elections could be one of the best means of meeting their needs and solving their current problems with the PA.

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