

# An Examination of a Jordanian Public Figure's Alleged Defamatory Statement

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**Abstract:** This paper aims at analyzing an accusation of defamation of the Jordanians in a talk show by a public figure. The person accused of defaming the Jordanians is the former head of the Jordanian royal court, Yousef Aldalabeh. The alleged defamatory statement examined in the current study is a description of the relationship between the king of Jordan and his people as a shepherd/sheep relationship. This statement was claimed to be of offensive nature by many Jordanians. To support or refute this accusation, 318 comments on Facebook regarding the use of the phrase 'shepherd and sheep' by Aldalabeh were examined. The comments were divided into two general categories. In the first category of comments, this phrase was viewed as being defamatory, whereas the second encompasses comments in which the phrase was found to carry no defamatory meaning. The analysis revealed that 70.8% of the sample of people who commented on this statement found it to carry a defamatory meaning, whereas 29.2% commented that there is no defamatory element in it. Stating that Aldalabeh was not successful in expressing what he has in mind but meant no offense was the most frequent way for indicating that the statement is not defamatory. On the other hand, insulting Aldalabeh, using sarcasm and arguing that he misinterpreted the metaphorical sense of the disputed statement were associated with the highest frequencies for referring to it as being defamatory.

**Keywords:** Defamation, Forensic Linguistics, Connotation, Shepherd and Sheep, Facebook

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Defamation can be defined as an intentional false communication, either published or publically spoken that injures another's reputation or good names. The defamatory statement might be made by/against a layman, public figure, group of people, political party, business, government, country, etc. The communication of the defamatory statement might harm the plaintiff's reputation, emotional state, character, social relationships, religious beliefs or business.

Based on the form in which the defamatory statement is published, a distinction between two types of defamation is sometimes made. If the defamatory statement is published in the spoken form then it is identified as slander, whereas written defamation is commonly referred to as libel. Written defamatory statements can be found in magazines, newspapers, books and electronic messages, while spoken defamatory expressions can be presented in speeches, TV/radio shows and sermons [6:11].

A claim that defamation took place is to be generally supported by two essential elements. The first is to prove that the problematic statement is capable of being defamatory and the second is that the statement published and exposed to people other than the defendant and the plaintiff. In addition to these two essential elements, other elements are to be considered depending on the laws of defamation in a particular country, the type of defamation that took place, the type and degree of caused harm, the status of the plaintiff and defendant and whether the defamatory statement is of public or private concern.

Assessing defamation cases is largely based on issues of language. This is attributed to the fact that the analysis of such cases involves examining how language is used to defame people and how it is perceived as being defamatory. Due to their specialized knowledge and expertise in language issues, forensic linguists can provide invaluable insights in exploring defamation cases. Examples of the ways forensic linguists can help unveil the truth in defamation cases include evaluating whether a controversial statement is capable of being defamatory, narrowing

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the scope of plausible interpretations of an alleged defamatory statement and exploring the linguistic and paralinguistic contexts in which the statement is used.

The present paper aims at analyzing an incident that might be potentially of a defamatory nature. The incident took place in Jordan where a public figure described the relationship between the King of Jordan and the Jordanians as a 'shepherd/sheep' relationship. Some Jordanians considered referring to them as sheep offensive, while others found the use of this phrase inoffensive. Both supporters and opponents of the use of this phrase provided various reasons to justify their standpoints. This paper examines the standpoints of the two groups in an attempt to investigate whether the use of the shepherd and sheep relationship to refer to the king and his people is of a defamatory nature from the point of view of the Jordanians.

## 2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A number of forensic linguists were able to make substantial contributions to analyzing defamation allegations. For instance, Durant (1996) was consulted on whether the phrase 'economical with the truth' carries a defamatory meaning [5]. This phrase was used in an editorial article to comment on the assumed failure of a well-known businessman to disclose information that the public have the right to know. The businessman claimed that this phrase, in the context where it was used, carried the meaning of "dishonorable concealment and misconduct, and as such conveyed discreditable implications regarding his professional probity" [5:3]. On the other hand, the publisher argued that this phrase conveyed an element of praise rather than a derogatory meaning.

This phrase is originally an allusion to Sir Robert Armstrong and was used in the Spycatcher trial held in 1986 where Armstrong was asked to tell the difference between a misleading impression and a lie. Armstrong stated that a misleading impression "does not contain a lie" but rather denotes being "economical with the truth" [5:5]. Based on two kinds of evidence, namely a survey of native English speakers and a large corpus of published usage, Durant (1996:8) came to the conclusion that "the generally accepted current meaning of the expression is what might be called the 'professional lie' meaning." In other words, the phrase 'economical with the truth' may "have started life as a polite, even subtle, euphemism, but subsequently became a transparent figurative expression meaning to deceive or lie" [5: 6].

Wang (2011) analyzed key linguistic evidence presented in the case of Yang vs. Hu [8]. The summary of the case is that during the time of recruitment of the crew for a TV drama, which was to be directed by Mr. Hu, Miss Yang expressed her intention to play a part in the TV drama. Mr. Hu initially agreed then he decided not to select Miss Yang to play the role. The latter published an article in which she stated that she was not accepted to play the agreed upon role in the TV drama because she did not accept to have sexual relations with the former. Mr. Hu accused Miss Yang of spreading false information that harms his reputation.

The defendant argued that the information that she spread was not false and she presented a number of mobile messages sent to her by the plaintiff to support her argument. The plaintiff ended up winning the case because the messages did not include conclusive evidence that supports the defendant's claim. Wang (2011) analyzed the messages and was able to demonstrate that were "hinting a sexual deal" (63). The defendant appealed and asked Wang to testify as an expert witness before the court. Unfortunately, the court sustained their original decision and did not consider the linguistic evidence presented in this case. Wang (2011: 64) hoped that the judicial system in China would "give the green light to the analysis of the words in linguistic evidence soon and accept the arrival of it, because it is based on a scientific way."

Defamation cases in Jordan are regularly based on language use and perception. Unsurprisingly, these cases might be tackled in a more accurate and comprehensive way if the expertise of linguists is provided. Unfortunately, Similar to China, linguists in Jordan are rarely asked to help legal enforcement authorities solve cases that incorporate linguistic elements. An example of a defamation allegation in Jordan is a case filed against the chairman of the

Jordanian Writers Association, Mawffak Mahadin, and the environmental activist, Suffyan Altal, in 2010 accusing them of disturbing political relationships with a foreign country, publishing false information regraded as damaging to the reputation of the country as well as defaming Jordanian military. The accusation was based on statements made by Mahadin and Altal during interviews with Aljazeera and Normina TV channels. The statements were about Khost bombing perpetrated by the Jordanian doctor Hamam Albalwi at a US military base in Afghanistan. The bombing killed seven US intelligence officers in addition to a Jordanian officer. The defendants were accused of referring to Hamam Albalwi as a martyr as well as defaming the role of the Jordanian armed forces in Afghanistan. Eventually, Mahadin and Altal were acquitted of the charges against them [7].

Another example of defamation accusation in Jordan is a case filed by Alkharabsheh who accused a TV channel, namely DW, of defamation of Jordan in general and Jordanian women in particular. The accusation was based on an interview on DW with a woman talking about her experience of harassment in Jordan. The woman claimed to complain to a security officer about being harassed but instead of helping her, he harassed her as well. Alkharabsheh refused these claims and defended the way the Jordanian security services deal with harassment cases and he left the TV show after being accused of disrespecting the guest. The heated argument between Alkharabsheh, the TV host and guest took place during discussing the transmission of nationality to the children of Jordanian women married to non-Jordanians. A security source stated that the details of the women narrative were vague and that her face was covered in the video which confirms that host knew in advance what she is going to say which indicates an intended diversion in the course of the show from discussing the rights of the children of Jordanian women married to non-Jordanians to harassment [4].

As for the connotation of the animal name sheep when it is used for referring to people, a few studies were conducted on this matter. One of these studies is carried out by Al-Harahsheh and Al-Rousan (2020: 335) who examined the metaphorical uses of 44 animal names in Arabic to describe people. They found out that sheep is usually used to “describe the stupidity of a man, especially one who is easily tricked by women; it also has several other meanings, including henpecked, submissive, a follower, gullible, kind, and naïve” [1]. Al Issawi (2021) investigated the cultural-bound meaning of animal names in Arabic. The meanings of ten animal names were analyzed qualitatively in various sources of Arabic literature such as Quran, dictionaries, idioms, and proverbs [2]. One of the targeted animal names in the study was sheep. Four symbolic meanings of sheep were found in the study and they include symbolizing fat people, luxurious people, cowards and submissive followers. Similarly, Al Salem, Alrashdan and Salem (2021, 38) maintained that the word sheep in Arabic is used “metaphorically on the basis of behavioral characteristics to describe people who blindly accept whatever they are being told to do” [3]. As can be noticed from these studies, the animal name sheep generally has a negative connotative meaning in Arabic when it is used for referring to people.

### 3. THE ANALYZED INCIDENT

On 26th January 2018, one the most famous Jordanian talk shows, namely jisʿid *saba:hak* ‘Have a Nice Day’ hosted a public figure in celebration of the birthday of the King of Jordan. This public figure was Yousef Aldalabeh, the former head of the Jordanian royal court and the private consultant of the king. The interview lasted for around 18 minutes. First Aldalabeh was introduced and he congratulated the king on his birthday. Then, he was asked to talk about the king and to describe how he cares for the welfare of his people at all times.

The last question in the interview was discussing the centrality of the Jordanians in the royal message. Aldalabeh’s answer was as follows: the most difficult task for any person in charge is to please the people and to improve their well-being especially that our natural resources are limited. However, the king gives this issue a great attention exactly the way the shepherd tends his sheep and folks because we all know that the shepherd always takes care of his sheep and finds beautiful pastures and water for them and when the sheep are in bad condition he uses his *jabba:bah* (Bedouin musical instrument) to play music for them. A transcript of the relevant part of the interview is presented below:

المذبة: من خبرتك العسكرية والسياسية والاقتصادية وانت يعني الاقرب الى جلالة الملك كونك كنت رئيس للديوان ومستشار لجلالة الملك مستشار خاص وايضا عين كيف ترى محورية المواطن الاردني في الخطاب الملكي وخصيصا انه في اكثر من خطاب ركز الملك على موضوع المواطن الاردني و المواطنة

الدلابيح: اخت دانا يعني ما في شك وانا اقول انه اصعب مهمة يمكن اليوم ان تواجهه اي مسؤول انه كيف يسعد شعبه

المذبة: تحسين اوضاع المواطن

الدلابيح: تحسين اوضاع الناس وما يعني يزيد الصعوبة عنا في الاردن انه اوضاعنا ال مواردنا الطبيعية محدودة ولكن جلالة الملك يولي هذا الجانب كل اهتمام تماما كما يولي الراعي الغنم وراعته فحنا كلنا نعرف انه الراعي دائما يدير باله على اغنامه اه يوردها اه يبنيجدها لها المراعي الجميلة وفي عندما يوردها الى المياه حتى تشرب وعندما يكون وضعها سيئ اه جيد كان يطول شبابه ويشيب لها وتصوري جديش هذا مهم جدا ال ال مسؤول هو راعي لشعبه لامته فحقيقة المسؤولية كبيرة جدا في بلدنا وجلالة الملك وفي الصدفة يعني البارحة عاد جلالة الملك من مؤتمر دافوس وهو يستقطب الاستثمارات ويهتم كل اهتمام بايجاد المشاريع التي تخلق فرص عمل للمواطن

The interviewer (Dana): From your military, political and economic experience, you are the closest to His Majesty the King, since you were head of the court and an advisor to His Majesty the King, a special advisor and a member of parliament. How do you see the centrality of the Jordanian citizen in the royal speech? Especially that in more than one speech the King focused on the issue of the Jordanian citizen and citizenship?

Al-Dalabih: Sister Dana, I mean, there is no doubt, and I say that the most difficult task that any official can face today is how to make his people happy.

The interviewer (Dana): Improving the conditions of citizens.

Al-Dalabih: Improving the conditions of the people, and what makes it more difficult for us in Jordan is that our conditions and our natural resources are limited, **but His Majesty the King pays every attention to this aspect, just as a shepherd pays attention to his sheep and his flock because we all know that the shepherd always takes care of his sheep, oh, he takes them, oh, he finds beautiful pastures for them and when he takes them to the water so that they could drink, and when they are in bad condition, oh, right, he would take out his shepherd's musical instrument and play music for them and imagine how much this is very important.** The person in charge is a shepherd [or it can be translated as responsible] of his people and his nation. The truth is that responsibility is very important in our country and His Majesty the King by coincidence, I mean yesterday, His Majesty the King returned from the Davos conference and he attracts investments and pays every attention to finding projects that create job opportunities for citizens.

Describing the relationship between the king and the people of Jordan as shepherd and sheep relationship triggered a verbal battle between Aldalabeh's supporters and opponents on the social networks. Aldalabeh commented on accusing him of defaming the king and the people by saying that all the profits tended sheep and that he employed the metaphorical rather than literal sense of the disputed phrase.

To explore the reactions of the Jordanian people towards the use of this phrase by Aldalabeh, 318 relevant comments and posts on Facebook (used by the subjects who are 318 speakers of Jordanian Spoken Arabic) are analyzed and categorized into two groups, namely those who found the use of shepherd and sheep phrase offensive and inoffensive<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, the reasons that subjects employed to support their arguments are also categorized and examined.

2 IPA symbols are used for providing Arabic transcription.  
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#### 4. AIMS OF THE STUDY

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1- To what extent do the subjects view the shepherd and sheep phrase used by Aldalabeh as being defamatory?
- 2- How do the subjects present and support their points of view of this matter?

#### 5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results show that 70.8% of the subjects found that the use of the shepherd and sheep phrase in the described context carries a defamatory meaning, whereas 29.2% commented that there is no defamatory element in the use of this phrase by Aldalabeh. Clearly, the majority of the subjects regarded the description of the relationship between the king and the people of Jordan as being offensive and derogatory. Table 1 shows how the subjects who viewed the use of the phrase by Aldalabeh as being inoffensive expressed their opinions.

**Table 1. How the subjects who viewed the use of the phrase as being inoffensive expressed their opinions**

The way	Frequency	The way	Frequency
Metaphorical rather than literal meaning	5.92%	Praising his accomplishments	14.07%
Explaining the use of the word shepherd	2.22%	Criticizing who found the phrase offensive	5.92%
Not successful in expressing his idea but meant no offense	32.58%	Did not make any mistake	5.18%
Allusions	13.06%	We all make mistakes	2.22%
Spontaneous expression	4.44%	It is not worth it	0.74%
Reflecting his Bedouin background	3.70%	He was successful in expressing his idea	2.22%
Profits tended sheep	2.22%	He is an old man	1.48%
You did not understand him	0.74%	Good intention	0.74%
Not offensive	3.70%	Be lenient	1.48%

As can be noticed from the table above, stating that Aldalabeh was not successful in expressing what he has in mind but meant no offense was the most frequent way for indicating that the phrase is not offensive (32.58%). This is followed by praising his accomplishments and listing all the high positions and ranks he occupied as a military member and as a politician (14.07%). Making allusions to people (Prophet Muhammad, Christ, Omar bin Abd Alaziz and Abdallah bin Jaham) who used this phrase in an innocuous way is the third highest method for supporting that the phrase does not carry a defamatory meaning (13.06%). Examples of other ways employed for demonstrating and convincing people to consider the use of the phrase as being inoffensive include: stressing the effect of the Bedouin background of Aldalabeh on his use of language (3.70%), criticizing the bad intention of the people who found the phrase to be offensive (5.92%), explaining that the metaphorical rather than the literal meaning of the phrase is meant (5.92%) and maintaining that he did not make any mistake (5.18%) and that what he said is not offensive (3.70%). Table 2 presents how the subjects who considered the use of the phrase an instance of defamation expressed their opinions.

**Table 2. How the subjects who considered the use of the phrase an instance of defamation expressed their opinions**

The way	Frequency	The way	Frequency
Sarcasm	13.15%	Corrupt government	0.75%
He offended the people	3.00%	Misunderstanding the allusions	12.02%
He offended the king	1.12%	His fault not the host's	0.75%
He cannot make this mistake because of his position	6.01%	He made a huge mistake	2.25%
Insulting him	14.66%	Criticizing who found the phrase inoffensive	6.38%
It is the host's fault for not interrupting him	2.25%	It is a shame that he is public figure	3.38%
Condensing way of viewing the people, like all politicians	2.25%	It reflects reality	6.01%
We deserve	6.39%	He elaborated on the description	7.88%
He must apologize	1.87%	We are not sheep	3.00%
He must be sued	4.13%	The king is not a shepherd	0.75%
He exposed us	0.75%	He cannot speak properly	1.12%

As the table demonstrates, the highest frequency (14.66%) is associated with insulting Aldalabeh in various ways. The highest next frequency (13.15%) is correlated with using sarcasm. This was done by writing the sound of the sheep, asking others about the type of sheep they belong to, declaring that sheep are expensive at the present time and hence it is good to be compared to them, etc. The third highest frequency of opponents' comments (12.02%) refers to attempts to explain that Aldalabeh and the people who supported him intentionally misinterpreted the allusions that they used to justify their opinions. For instance, it was argued that Prophet Muhammad's saying 'kullukum ra'iqin wa kullukum mas'uun ħan ra'ijjateh' literary means 'all of you are shepherds and each of you is responsible for his flock' but its intended meaning is 'every one of you is a guardian and is responsible for his charges'. Elaborating on the description of the alleged metaphor occupies the highest fourth frequency (7.88%) and it involves arguing that adding various details to the shepherd and sheep imagery (e.g. using alġabba:bah to play music for the sheep when they are happy) leaves no room for its metaphorical sense.

Other examples of categories that have relatively high frequency include: criticizing who found the phrase inoffensive (6.38%), stating that the people deserve being described as sheep because they did not object to being constantly offended and manipulated by the government (6.39%), admitting that the literal meaning of this phrase reflects the sad reality (6.01%) and asserting that Aldalabeh cannot make this mistake because of his position (6.01%). Examples of other categories of opponents' comments which are associated with relatively low frequencies include: affirming that Aldalabeh offended the people (3.00%) and the king (1.12%), claiming that he must be sued (4.13%), declaring that it is a shame he is a public figure (3.00%), objecting to being described as sheep (3.00%), referring to the way he views people as being condensing (2.25%), arguing that he made a huge mistake (2.25%) and indicating that it is the host's fault for not interrupting him.

## CONCLUSION

This study presented an analysis of a supposedly defamatory statement published by the former head of the Jordanian royal court. The statement involves describing the relationship between the king and the people of Jordan as a shepherd and sheep relationship. The comments of 318 subjects on Facebook regarding this issue are gathered, categorized and analyzed. It was concluded that this statement is mainly considered defamatory by the subjects for various reasons.

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