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Arab Trade Unions and American Labor

Past, Present, and Possibilities

Independent Arab labor unions espousing a constructive social agenda have emerged as a potential bulwark against tyranny and extremism. Their counterparts in the United States can help them — if the American labor movement recovers its global interventionist spirit.

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Executive Summary

Arab liberals who drive some of the region's more independent labor unions aspire to advance economic justice and equal treatment of all citizens regardless of gender or sect. In 2018 and 2019, hundreds of them emerged to lead mass demonstrations in Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan. Their movements received considerably less attention in the West than the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011-'12, yet delivered more positive outcomes. In Algeria and Sudan, for example, labor protestors not only forced the resignation of long-reigning autocrats but also espoused an inclusive, liberal vision for the future, in marked contrast to the Islamist groups that dominated the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Among the demonstrators in Iraq and Lebanon, unionists denounced economic inequality and corruption on the one hand and Iranian proxy domination of their countries on the other, drawing an explicit link between the two. Adopting reasonable economic goals, a constructive social agenda, and a political outlook that overlaps considerably with consensus U.S. foreign policy goals, these figures present an excellent opportunity for Arab-American partnership.

American labor, for its part, boasts a distinguished history of support for trade unions, their ideals, and their political struggles overseas — including in Arab countries, notably during the struggle against European colonialism by the peoples of the Maghreb. Over the past 25 years, however, this commitment has atrophied. The Left flank of the American labor movement disparages foreign interventionism, and unions no longer invest their own resources in foreign engagement to any substantial degree. The remnants of the movement's overseas activity, now housed in a Washington nonprofit funded mainly by the U.S. government, avoid political action, adopting a primary focus on countering "the unchecked power of multinational corporations." This shift notwithstanding, the willingness

on the part of Arab liberal unionists to partner with outsiders in campaigns of political action continues to grow. This writer experienced their enthusiasm firsthand in 2020, when working with young veterans of the 2018 anti-Bashir demonstrations to build grassroots civil support for a Sudanese-Israeli peace accord.

Rejuvenated American labor support for its Arab counterparts' political struggles would entail the reversal of a decades-old trend. American labor would need to recover its interventionist spirit, reimagine its own foreign policy toward the region, and vigorously pursue the new approach.



Independent trade unions have a vital role to play in safeguarding any society. As agents of collective bargaining and a voice in public discussions of economic policy, they can help grow and sustain a viable middle class. As civic institutions with a large member base, they can help acculturate the population to the principles of equal opportunity and equal treatment of all citizens regardless of gender or sect. Their advancement of these principles, in turn, can provide a check on corrupt government practices and illiberal social movements. For these reasons, independent unions have been described as “schools for democracy.”¹

As the treatment to follow will show, the Arab region features numerous examples of viable, autonomous labor movements with reasonable economic goals and a constructive social agenda — and in Arab countries where such a movement is lacking, one finds credible efforts to build one. Consider the implications: whereas Islamist movements won loyalty with the poor by providing a social safety net backed by oil wealth, independent

¹ Richard D. Kahlenberg, “Strong Unions, Strong Democracy”, *New York Times*, January 12, 2016, accessed online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/12/opinion/strong-unions-strong-democracy.html>

unions offer their own way of winning economic advantages for their members. As such, they pose an implicit political challenge to Islamism. They also pose a challenge to certain autocrats, who have long sought to exercise authority over the national work force through government-dominated labor syndicates. These syndicates are themselves mired in nepotism and corruption, and have served as a conduit for ideologies of scapegoating and blame deflection. Thus both the syndicates and the rulers behind them tend, like Islamists, to view independent unions and their ideals as a problem to be contained or defeated. In the confrontation between these forces on the one hand and the spirit of free labor on the other lies the possibility of progress toward a more egalitarian and stable Arab society.

This overall gloss is challenged, to be sure, by the details of every country and case. Some nongovernment unions in the region are dominated by Islamists, or harbor Islamist elements. Others with a storied history of liberalism and independence have gone astray, in the sense that a ruler has coopted them. By contrast, on the government side, some state-controlled labor syndicates may harbor reformist elements that seek greater autonomy so as to truly represent workers' needs and rights. Unions' underpinning egalitarian principles meanwhile face an especially severe test in several Gulf states where guest workers make up the majority of the labor force and, for that matter, the population. But all these distinctions merely nuance the larger opportunity: myriad Arab labor unions want to serve as a force for positive change in the region — and they welcome American assistance.

The Arab Spring's Aborted Sequel: Labor-Driven Protests in Arab Lands

A worthy point of departure is the Arab Maghreb, where, over the first half of the twentieth century, labor movements provided a working-class base for the struggle against colonial authorities.² The Tunisian General Labor Union (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail, commonly referred to as the UGTT), for example, formed a key part of the coalition to resist French rule. Between the founding of independent Tunisia in 1956 and the overthrow of Tunisian strongman Zein el-Abidine Ben Ali in 2011, the UGTT saw some periods of state domination, others of relative autonomy, and a long-running pattern of tension within the organization between state-coopted senior executives and maverick mid-level and regional leaders. Memorably, in 2008, regional UGTT figures in the southwestern mining hub of Gafsa backed a mass uprising against the Ben Ali government's nepotism and corruption, against the directives of their senior leadership in Tunis.³ Similarly, at the beginning of the 2010-'11 revolution, the organization's senior leadership at first declined to support the protests — but second-tier regional leaders and thousands more rank-and-file members crucially lent their expertise and capacities to the demonstrators.⁴

In 2011, with over half a million members in a country of 11.5 million — and substantial popularity among Tunisians generally — the UGTT was the only force capable of challenging the Islamist Ennahda party in the country's first post-revolutionary elections.

² Solidarity Center, "Where We Work: Middle East & North Africa", accessed online:

<https://www.solidaritycenter.org/where-we-work/middle-east-north-africa/>

³ Tarek Amara, "Big strike paralyzes Tunisia, thousands protest over pay row", *Reuters*, January 16, 2019, accessed online: <https://reut.rs/2B737m9>

⁴ Monica Marks, "Tunisia's Unwritten Story: The Complicated Lessons of a Peaceful Transition", *The Century Foundation*, March 14, 2017, accessed online: <https://tcf.org/content/report/tunisias-unwritten-story/?agreed=1>, cf. Chris Toensing, "Tunisian Labor Leaders Reflect Upon Revolt," *Middle East Report* (Issue 258: Spring 2011), accessed online: <https://bit.ly/2B76Ekp>

But the group made the fateful decision not to create its own party; prominent UGTT members, acting as individuals, formed dozens of small ones instead. "The population was confused," explained Hatem al-Ouaini, a senior official at the country's teachers' union. "They knew only the UGTT and Ennahda." Even so, labor candidates collectively won more seats than Ennahda, albeit not enough to block its governing coalition. "Our decision not to participate was a big mistake," Ouaini said.⁵

In the post-revolutionary period, the UGTT organized worker opposition to state austerity measures, as well as resistance to Islamist social policies, such as Ennahda-led efforts to weaken the legal status of women. A range of Islamists responded to union activity with violence. On August 28, 2012, Islamist militants attacked a peaceful union demonstration in the restive Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid, wounding seven, while police stood on the sidelines. The incident capped a summer of similar violence, including fire-bombings of three UGTT regional offices by Salafi groups; and calls by several mosque preachers to kill union activists.⁶ "The Salafis use violence," said UGTT legal counsel Muhammad Amdouni, "while Ennahda tries to penetrate our ranks with its followers and subvert us from within."⁷ These provocations did not stop the UGTT from joining hands with the Tunisian Human Rights League, the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade, and Handicrafts, and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers, to form a "National Dialogue Quartet," which helped safeguard the country's democratic transition. The quartet won the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize "for its decisive contribution to the building of a pluralistic democracy in Tunisia."⁸

In neighboring Algeria, the General Union of Algerian Workers (UGTA) dates back to the same period of anti-colonial struggle, when it provided an equivalent bulwark for the

⁵ Interview with Tunisian Teacher's Union official Hatem al-Ouaini, June 5, 2013

⁶ "Tunisian Salafists Firebomb Union Offices Across the Country", *ITUC*, June 12, 2012, accessed online: <https://bit.ly/2Yyrt03>

⁷ Interview with Muhammad Amdouni, June 5, 2014

⁸ "The Nobel Peace Prize for 2015", *NobelPrize.org*. Nobel Media AB 2020, June 14, 2020, accessed online: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2015/press-release/>

National Salvation Front's resistance to French rule. For most of four decades, the UGTA ceded its autonomy to the Algerian state. It made an uncharacteristic show of independence in 1991: amid a national experiment of political liberalization, oil and coal workers struck, and the UGTA negotiated meaningful concessions from the government on their behalf.⁹ But in 1992, the UGTA and the state closed ranks again — after the failure of the same political experiment. Islamists won an election, and when the military moved to abort it, triggering a civil war, the union sided staunchly with the army.¹⁰ Over the 11-year conflict that followed, which claimed over 100,000 lives, the fault line between Islamists on the one hand and statist UGTA supporters espousing socialism on the other grew ever deeper. Among the fatalities was a UGTA Secretary-General, Abdelhak Benhamouda, slain by Islamists. Independent labor unions, while legally green-lighted to operate in 1990, were repressed by the government, with UGTA complicity.¹¹ Nor did the many anti-government demonstrations seen in Algeria over the 2011-'12 Arab Spring period substantially alter the staunch alignment between the UGTA and the state.

But 2019 witnessed a new and positive departure for independent unions in Algeria, alongside a larger auspicious trend for Arab labor across the region. The context was dual economic pressures brought to bear on Arab economies: on the one hand, austerity demands by international lenders; on the other, the plummeting value of hydrocarbons. Consider that during the 2011-'12 Arab Spring period, Algerian oil wealth had helped the government quell revolutionary energies by restoring food subsidies and creating new jobs.¹² Seven years later, after another sham presidential election triggered new mass protests across the country, the state could no longer buy off the unrest, due to the

⁹ U.S. Department of State, "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1991", Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, February 1992, pps. 1342-1343, accessed online: <https://bit.ly/2YwoS6V>

¹⁰ Amar Benamrouche, "Etats, conflits sociaux et mouvement syndical en Algérie (1962-1995)", *Maghreb-Machrek*, no, 113, 1986, pps. 102-119

¹¹ Roger Cohen, "A Chance to Try to End an Agony", *The New York Times*, February 2, 1997, accessed online: <https://nyti.ms/2YFcmlI>

¹² Patrick Markey and Lamine Chikhi, "Algeria's bloody past, energy wealth keep status quo for now", *Reuters*, April 16, 2014, accessed online: <https://reut.rs/2UKCTwu>

plummeting price of oil. With youth unemployment in excess of 25 percent, Algerians under 30 swelled the protest movement's ranks.¹³ The state-coopted UGTA provided neither encouragement nor support. But nascent independent unions, including the Trade Union Confederation of Productive Workers (COSYFOP) and the Autonomous Union of Workers in the Public Gas and Electric Company (SNATEG), called a general strike.¹⁴ They provided a platform to convey and amplify Algerian workers' demand for a credible transitional government. The state bowed to some of the movement's demands, arresting dozens of senior officials, army officers, and businesspeople who had been accused of corruption. Amid the caretaker government that followed, however, security forces cracked down on the movement's leaders, in particular its labor organizers. In response, the protest movement's size and scope grew further. On November 1, 2019, hundreds of thousands protested in Algiers to reject a new military-dominated election and demand a civilian-led constituent assembly.¹⁵ Now the unions were joined by a coalition of socialist parties, Amazigh (Berber) parties, and even the Islamist Justice and Development Front, long since atrophied from its civil war heights.¹⁶

These strides did not upend the system of military rule that has governed Algeria since 1962. Nonetheless, in addition to registering significant gains toward a hoped-for, eventual civilian leadership, the 2019-'20 protest movement served to pilot a new alliance of social forces. Independent labor movements lay at the heart of the alliance, with a greater proportion of white-collar workers and university graduates on the front lines than ever before. A substantially larger proportion of women participated than in any of the Arab Spring revolutions. And whereas most of the 2011-'12 demonstrations brought Islamist

¹³ "Thousands of Algerians protest against Bouteflika's re-election bid", *Reuters*, February 22, 2019, accessed online: <https://reut.rs/3fn4tb3>

¹⁴ "Population out in force for general strike in Algeria", *IndustriALL Global Union*, November 7, 2019, accessed online: <https://bit.ly/3d5qwBr>

¹⁵ Farouk Djouadi, "Marche du 1er novembre à Alger : l'incroyable force de la révolution pacifique", *El-Watan*, November 1, 2019, accessed online: <https://bit.ly/2Ullrch>

¹⁶ Joel Beinin, "Arab Workers and the Struggle for Democracy", *Jacobin*, October 5, 2020, accessed online: <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/05/arab-spring-workers-struggle-democracy-unions>

gains or sectarian strife, the Algerian movement forthrightly rejected sectarianism, embraced the country's marginalized Amazigh population, and incorporated moderate Islamists as passengers but not as drivers. The leadership shown by independent union organizers and the egalitarian values which the protest movement as a whole espoused were no coincidence.

Over roughly the same period, sustained demonstrations with similar qualities emerged in Sudan, Iraq, Lebanon, and to a lesser extent Tunisia and Egypt. Each featured high white-collar and university graduate representation; a substantial female presence; affirmation of equality among genders, ethnicities, and sects; and an overarching economic agenda of opportunity. In Sudan, 2018 anti-austerity demonstrations began in response to fuel subsidy cuts and bread cost spikes in the south-central railway hub of Atbara, formerly a stronghold of the Sudanese communist party.¹⁷ The Sudanese Professionals Association — a coalition of 17 autonomous white collar unions — provided the organizational backbone, together with Women of Sudanese Civic and Political Groups. The coalition's "[Declaration of Freedom and Change](#)" adopted a focus on ending the oppression of women and ongoing civil wars among rival ethnicities and sects.¹⁸ The pressure which these protesters brought to bear prompted a decision by the Sudanese military to oust and arrest long-serving strongman Omar al-Bashir and replace him with a Transitional Military Council — a dramatic step, though hardly a victory for Sudanese civic actors.¹⁹ Concurrent uprisings in Iraq and Lebanon, similarly launched in response to economic failure and government malfeasance, adopted the same repudiation of sectarian politics. In these two countries, where Iran exercises heavy influence via Shi'ite militias and the political system, the protest movements shocked Tehran's local proxies. At the same time, they also

¹⁷ Aya Elmileik, "What prompted the protests in Sudan?", *Al-Jazeera*, December 26, 2018, accessed online: <https://bit.ly/2MUhRaw>

¹⁸ "Declaration of Freedom and Change", *Sudanese Professionals Association*, January 1, 2019, accessed online: <https://bit.ly/2AgnkDy>

¹⁹ Joseph Goldstein and Declan Walsh, "Sudan General Steps Down as Transitional Leader a Day After al-Bashir's Ouster", *The New York Times*, April 12, 2019, accessed online: <https://nyti.ms/2B2wlm1>

repudiated Sunni sectarianism by Iran's local adversaries: parties and factions backed by U.S.-allied Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.²⁰

So this historic reassertion of Arab labor as a political force posed a serious challenge to Iranian expansionism, sectarian extremism, and Arab government malfeasance all at once. At the same time, it also fortified the U.S.-backed effort to roll back these trends with a vision of a more just, egalitarian society, and a new set of actors to help pursue it.

Within the territory of America's closest Arab allies, autonomous Arab labor unions have striven to advance the same egalitarian ideals. In Bahrain, where a Sunni king rules a Shi'ite-majority population, the General Federation of Bahraini Trade Unions (GFBTU) offers an organized, non-sectarian public platform to challenge inequality. During Bahrain's Arab Spring uprisings, GFBTU provided a framework for protestors to convey their demands for greater political and economic rights in terms of a rectifiable injustice rather than an existential struggle. The group also calls for the unionization of Bahrain's 100,000 migrant domestic workers, most of whom are women, and has itself been led by women, including four of the 15 members elected to its national secretariat in 2016.²¹ For that matter, the movement has adopted a progressive outlook on regional politics as well. By the mid-1990s, Bahraini labor activists had already engaged their Israeli counterparts, the Histadrut, and endorsed a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.²² In 2020,

²⁰ Yasmien Serhan, "The Nationalist Movements Against Sectarian Politics", *The Atlantic*, October 30, 2019, accessed online: <https://bit.ly/2Yy3f6f>

²¹ Iman al-Humud (Broadcaster, Radio Monte Carlo) in discussion with the author in Paris, June 13, 2014.

²² Joseph Braude, "Workers of the (Arab) World, Unite!", *Foreign Policy*, September 12, 2012, accessed online: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/12/workers-of-the-arab-world-unite/>

prominent trade unionists emerged among the champions of the newly signed Bahrain-Israel peace accords.²³

Whereas North African labor movements draw legitimacy and prestige from their historic contribution to the struggle against French colonialism, unionism in the Kingdom of Jordan emerged from a more fraught constellation of internal and external pressures. Successive waves of Palestinian refugees sought to mold Jordanian unionism to advance their struggle against Israel. Egyptian president Nasser, together with the pan-Arabist coalition of states and movements he led, sought to fold Jordanian unionism into a politically subservient International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions that also included Egyptian, Lebanese, and Syrian analogues. Jordanian King Hussein, for his part, sought to consolidate authority and weaken domestic opposition, which regarded organized labor as a crucial wedge in the campaign to unseat him. The king gradually established dominance over the General Federation of Jordanian Trade Unions (GFJTU), which featured ideological elements ranging from Soviet communism to Islamism, and bequeathed this work in progress to his son, the present King Abdullah. Under the latter's reign, the GFJTU's extremist ideological elements have tapered, and the group has played a largely establishment-supportive role in addressing the pressures of globalization, privatization, and a shrinking public sector.²⁴ Meanwhile, new liberal elements have been agitating to form independent unions in the country. In 2012, an organization of teachers won a years-long battle for legal status as an independent union, following suppression by the kingdom and an all-out ban on collective bargaining. 2013 saw the establishment of the first independent worker federation in the

²³ Prominent among these was Betsy Mathieson, a Scottish national granted Bahraini citizenship, who served as secretary-general of the Bahrain Federation of Expatriate Associations, an organization representing the country's guest workers to the government. In 2018, she helped organized a controversial non-government religious delegation from Bahrain to Israel. (Jon Gambrel, "Bahrain faith group visits Israel amid Jerusalem tensions," *Associated Press*, December 10, 2017, accessed online: <http://bit.ly/2Xqd4D5>) After the 2020 accords, she reemerged as a broker of nascent Bahraini-Israeli nongovernment partnerships.

²⁴ Tula Connell, "The Struggle for Worker Rights in Jordan", *American Center for International Labor Solidarity*, December 2, 2005, accessed online: <https://www.solidaritycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Jordan-IFA.pdf>

country — the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Jordan — representing 7,000 workers in phosphates, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, and other realms.²⁵

The same Nasserist pressures that affected the trajectory of unionism in Jordan played out differently in Egypt. Since 1957, blue collar workers in the country have been managed by a monopoly state apparatus, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF).²⁶ Member dues have served largely to enrich a small, tightly knit cadre of labor elites. (It is well known, for example, that several hundred of them occupy a private luxury resort on the Mediterranean.) White collar workers have meanwhile been governed by nominally independent labor syndicates, similarly dating back to the mid-twentieth century.²⁷ Over the decades following the 1978 Egyptian-Israeli peace accords, the white collar syndicates came to be dominated by a combination of Muslim Brotherhood figures and Nasserist elements opposed to peace with Israel.²⁸ It was they who pioneered the pan-Arab practice of enforcing social and professional ostracism on members of any profession who meet or partner with an Israeli citizen.²⁹ But neither the white-collar syndicates nor the blue-collar ETUF delivered what their members most urgently needed: genuine advocacy to help working families survive the consequences of rampant, grand-scale elite corruption amid the privatization of a rentier economy.

Thus for two generations, all major organized economic protests by Egyptian workers have emanated from the ground up. The six years before the Arab Spring in Egypt saw 2,716

²⁵ Tula Connell, "Jordanian Unions Establish Independent Federation", *Solidarity Center*, May 15, 2013, accessed online: <https://www.solidaritycenter.org/jordanian-unions-establish-independent-federation/>

²⁶ Interview with Heba F. El-Shazli, adjunct professor at Georgetown University Department of Government, July 22, 2015.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Among the most notorious examples was the blacklisting of Ali Salem by Egypt's literary establishment. See Avi Steinberg, "Blessed Are the Comedians", *The New York Times*, January. 18, 2016, accessed online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/18/magazine/blessed-are-the-comedians.html>

strikes and other collective actions, involving more than 2.2 million workers.³⁰ A prime mover in these efforts, independent labor activist Kamal Abbas, had first emerged publicly in 1989 by co-organizing a strike in the town of Helwan. Nineteen thousand employees of the Iron and Steel Company sought a modest wage increase and a lunch break. Abbas faced prison and torture for his role in the effort. Beginning in the 1990s, Abbas and a small group of colleagues began trying to form independent blue collar unions so as to break the ETUF monopoly. Their umbrella NGO, the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services (CTUWS), survived to join the Arab Spring protests in 2011-'12.³¹ Following Mubarak's ouster, Abbas's group joined a handful of nascent independent unions to form the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) as a rival to ETUF. Conveying the spirit of his aspirations during a 2015 appearance on the pro-government ONTV, he called for a "new social contract" between the government and independent labor based on precedents in other countries. He optimistically compared the state of unionism in Egypt with the gradual liberation of unions under Spanish dictator Francisco Franco. He faulted Gamal Abdel Nasser for failing to follow the Franco model, and expressed hopes that Sisi would choose Franco over Nasser.³² Instead, the new Egyptian leader waged a brutal crackdown on unionists, and EFITU's tiny leadership splintered.³³

The behavior of the ETUF state juggernaut over the same period bears observing. The group stood by President Mubarak throughout the Arab Spring protests. After Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated President Mohamed Morsi took the helm, he sought to forcibly retire all ETUF managers over the age of 60 by executive order, in order to install stalwarts of his own movement in their place. He encountered fierce resistance within the

³⁰ Joel Beinin, "Workers and Thieves: Labor Movements and Popular Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt", (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015)

³¹ Jailan Zayan, "Strikes Swell Egypt Protests", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 10, 2011, accessed online: <https://bit.ly/2YyniRT>

³² ON, "Sabah ON: Hal al-'Ummal fi Misr -- Kamal Abbas." YouTube video, 43:16, May 20, 2015, accessed online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVoYvj_-Jhc

³³ "Biggest wave of arrests since Sisi took office: 1909 people detained", *Mada Masr*, September 26, 2019, accessed online: <https://bit.ly/3fpOM32>

federation, which refused to follow his orders.³⁴ “There still is a strong Nasserist current within the organization,” observed Heba Shazli, a specialist on Arab labor at Georgetown University. “It is deeply opposed to Islamism and quite comfortable with secular authoritarianism.” The group naturally welcomed the army-led overthrow of Morsi in 2014, and stood squarely in Sisi’s corner during the crackdowns on Islamists and unionists alike that followed.³⁵

Despite Sisi’s brutal repression of free unions, the 2018-’20 wave of protests in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon inspired some action in Egypt too — but the nature of the activity was telling. To begin with, the man who catalyzed the activity resided outside Egypt: Mohamed Ali, a former construction contractor turned actor who had departed his native Egypt for Spain, used Facebook to spread purported evidence that Sisi and his stalwarts had misappropriated public funds for personal gain. The videos inspired spontaneous protests of thousands of teens and twenty-somethings in Cairo, Alexandria, and six other cities on September 20-21, 2019. Few of the demonstrators were employed workers, however, and no organizational leadership joined or emerged. The state crushed the gatherings, arresting thousands, and later mollified the unrest by restoring rice and pasta subsidies for 1.8 million people who had been disqualified from receiving them by a change in the income level for eligibility.³⁶

³⁴ Interview with Heba F. El-Shazli, July 2015

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ “Egypt says restored food subsidies to nearly 2 million after Sisi tweets”, *Reuters*, October 1, 2019, accessed online: <https://reut.rs/2B7Sv6x>

The Rise and Decline of American Labor Interventionism Overseas

The above survey speaks to the potential for a viable Arab labor movement to help stabilize the region's politics and strengthen civil society. While admittedly fractious, diffuse, and full of missing pieces, this constellation of actors critiques autocracy, upholds egalitarian principles, and favors a moderate vision of economic development over the gamut of extremist ideologies that have plagued the region. Most of the free labor activists and organizations described above seek assistance from foreign counterparts, including Americans. Through private discussions as well as public statements, they have expressed a desire for education and capacity building. They have asked for advice on how to grow their member base, bargain collectively, use media more effectively, and hone their advocacy. They have asked for political assistance in countering their domestic opponents, as well as international lobbying assistance to address threats posed by their governments and trans-state actors.³⁷

The United States is not green to the practice of assisting labor movements overseas. American trade union support for foreign counterparts dates back nine decades. It includes a distinguished record of assistance to North African unions at a pivotal moment in their history. Such practices eventually fell out of use, however, and were subsequently resurrected in a more limited form that is inadequate to meet the present-day opportunities for union engagement in Arab lands.

By way of context, as noted in the introductory chapter, the American labor movement had been active in fighting totalitarianism overseas since the 1930s. Motivated by the principle

³⁷ Interview with Heba F. El-Shazli, July 2015

of solidarity for all workers, unions had raised their own money to assist victims of Nazi and Soviet oppression, and during the Second World War, put their international networks at the disposal of the U.S. government to help gather intelligence and sabotage Nazi installations. After the war, the government went on to supplement unions financially so they could help protect the machinery of the Marshall Plan from Communist attacks. The American Federation of Labor, for example, partnered with anti-Stalinist European union leaders to prevent the Soviets from blocking docks, railroads, and barges in France, Italy, and Germany that were used to unload cargo vital for reconstruction from American ships.³⁸

From a U.S. government perspective, this partnership reflected a larger foreign policy in which support for organized labor played a vital role. When General Douglas MacArthur drew up plans to rebuild Japan after World War II, he made the establishment of trade unions a strategic priority, dubbing them "schoolhouses of democracy." Nearly five million Japanese had joined a union by late 1946 — an achievement widely credited with granting working class people a role in the country's politics.³⁹ Around the same time, West Germany's Confederation of German Trade Unions cooperated with the United States in stabilizing the post-Nazi economy, as well as re-socializing a generation of German workers.⁴⁰ Throughout the Cold War, moreover, American policymakers also saw unions as a way to combat communist influence in Eastern Europe — as the labor principle of solidarity led prominent union leaders, notably AFL-CIO chief George Meany, to advocate globally on behalf of human rights denied to workers in Soviet bloc states.⁴¹ Notable among the recipients of U.S. support was Polish activist Lech Walesa, co-founder of the Solidarity

³⁸ Roy Godson (former Director, National Strategy Information Center) in discussion with the author in Washington, June 13, 2013.

³⁹ Craig Phelan, *Trade Unionism Since 1945: Towards a Global History, Volume 2: The Americas, Asia, and Australia*, (Bern: International Academic Publishers, 2009), pp.130

⁴⁰ Clark Kerr, "Collective Bargaining in Postwar Germany", *ILR Review*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Apr., 1952), pps. 323-342

⁴¹ Glenn Fowler, "Irving Brown, 77, U.S. Specialist On International Labor Movement", *The New York Times*, Feb. 11, 1989, accessed online: <https://nyti.ms/2Y1MDET>

trade union, who eventually helped liberate the country. The U.S. government granted support and expertise to these endeavors, but American unions also invested considerable resources of their own. Recognizing the value of such efforts, the Reagan administration cooperated with the AFL-CIO in creating the National Endowment for Democracy in 1983.⁴²

The framework in which American labor began to engage some of its Arab counterparts dates to the founding of the Free Trade Union Committee (FTUC) by the American Federation of Labor in 1944. The Committee aimed to support foreign trade unions in general and protect them from Soviet domination in particular. Over its decades of activity, FTUC waged some efforts independently and others in consort with U.S. government actors, including the CIA.⁴³ The latter partnership would eventually face sharp criticism from elements in the American labor movement that harbored strong reservations about U.S. government policy, particularly in Southeast Asia and Central America.⁴⁴ But this criticism, which went on to dominate historical portrayals of the group, tends to minimize and obscure the FTUC's strong independent streak. The group's work in consort with the government was not an indication of subservience — as evidenced by the fact that FTUC also pursued goals overseas which ran counter to U.S. government policy.

The storied career of American trade unionist Irving Brown, which spanned from the Great Depression to the 1980s, provides a case in point — and a prime example of American support for organized labor in Arab countries. Over the decade following World War II, the U.S. government acquiesced to British and French efforts to maintain their colonies in Africa. Brown, for his part, opposed this policy. “We liberated Europe from Nazism,” he later remarked, “and the process of liberation should have continued in Africa. ... By the 1950s

⁴² Ben A. Franklin, “Democracy Project Facing New Criticisms”, *The New York Times*, December 4, 1985, accessed online: <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/12/04/us/democracy-project-facing-new-criticisms.html>

⁴³ Ted Morgan, *A Covert Life: Jay Lovestone, Communist, Anti-communist, and Spymaster*, (New York: Random House, 1999), pp. 144, 151

⁴⁴ Harry Kelber, “U.S. Labor Secretly Intervened in Europe, Funded to Fight Pro-Communist Unions”, *The Labor Educator*, November 22, 2004, accessed online: <http://www.laboreducator.org/darkpast3.htm>

the U.S. should have told the Europeans that their African policies were wrong and would be counterproductive for everybody.” Acting on this view over the 1950s on behalf of FTUC, Brown lent considerable energy to strengthening African labor on both sides of the Sahara — including and especially French-occupied Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. In Algeria, he helped organize and grow a faction of local labor opposed to French rule and communism alike, which proceeded to play a critical role in the revolution against French rule. The Algerian UGTA, described above, evolved to a considerable degree out of those efforts. In Tunisia, Brown championed liberal revolutionary leader El-Habib Bourguiba, who would become the country’s first president; as well as the nascent UGTT — organizing training and \$350,000 in financial assistance for these elements.⁴⁵ During a fiery speech at a union congress in French-occupied Morocco, Brown explained that labor unions should grow strong and stay free, both for the sake of ending foreign occupation and building a viable country in its wake. “Independence is only a ticket to the arena,” he said. “To move from independence to democracy is the toughest job in the world.”⁴⁶

Brown’s assistance to Maghrebi unions entailed sustained, intense engagement with their chief actors. A former American diplomat observed, “Irving was famous in Africa for his 18-to-20-hour-a-day style of attacking these African union congresses. It was a personal failure to him if he didn’t have a face-to-face session with practically everybody in sight.” Of the reports Brown filed from North Africa for his boss, AFL-CIO chief George Meany, a longtime Meany assistant recalled, “Those weren’t reports; they were books; they covered the economy, the political scene, the delegates’ strengths, weaknesses, and political tendencies; and the special problems posed for the AFL-CIO.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ben Rathbun, *The Point Man: Irving Brown and the Deadly Post-1945 Struggle for Europe and Africa*, (New York: Minerva Press, 1996), pp. 306

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 284

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, pps. 284-285

Brown's work, in other words, amounted to a model of expeditionary diplomacy on behalf of American labor overseas. Reared in his movement's domestic efforts — he began his career as an organizer for the United Automobile Workers at Ford and General Motors plants in the 1930s — he migrated his expertise to foreign labor environments, first in Europe under the Marshall Plan and later in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.⁴⁸ A quick study and a consummate networker, he could almost as easily inspire an audience in Detroit or Berlin as in Rabat or Dakar. He knew how to apply and adapt his American expertise to suit diverse cultures and economies, and how to cajole and persuade government actors at home and abroad.

Brown's core conviction — that empowering workers and fighting Soviet communism went hand in hand — could not always be reconciled with U.S. government policy or his movement's left flank. On the one hand, Brown quit his position as A.F.L. and C.I.O. representative to the Marshall Plan's Foreign Economic Administration when he came to feel that U.S. occupying authorities sought to prevent trade unionists in Germany from becoming an effective national force.⁴⁹ On the other, he and his A.F.L. colleagues refused to go along with the C.I.O. in joining the nascent World Federation of Trade Unions in 1945: out of concern that it would serve Soviet Communism as a tool for domination, Brown actively undermined the Federation instead.⁵⁰ As Brown worked relentlessly to fight Soviet influence over five decades, often in cooperation with the U.S. government, Moscow's formidable propaganda operations worked to tar him as an agent of "American imperialism" — and sometimes succeeded at turning trade unionists against him, both within the U.S. and overseas.⁵¹ Prominent American conservative voices, for their part, distrusted Brown as they distrusted labor in general. American newspaper columnist

⁴⁸ Glenn Fowler, "Irving Brown, 77, U.S. Specialist On International Labor Movement", *The New York Times*, Feb. 11, 1989, accessed online: <https://nyti.ms/2Y1MDET>

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ "The Most Dangerous Man", *Time Magazine*, Mar. 17, 1952, accessed online: <https://bit.ly/3fpH49a>

⁵¹ Interview with Roy Godson, June 2013

Westbrook Pegler, for example, tried to label him a Communist “stooge” — to which Brown replied, “I fought against Communists long before you ever decided that it was good business to fight them.”⁵²

In 1988, a year before Brown’s death, President Ronald Reagan decorated him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.⁵³ But the controversies associated with American labor interventionism overseas ultimately weakened the capacity for Brown’s proteges to sustain his endeavors. During the Reagan years, as criticisms mounted of clandestine U.S. government support for brutal anti-Soviet elements in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, a dominant narrative of “CIA shenanigans” emerged in American public discussions. Witness Wall Street Journal reporter Jonathan Kwitny’s book *Endless Enemies* (“How America’s Worldwide Interventions Destroy Democracy and Free Enterprise and Defeat Our Own Best Interests”), which singled out Brown for assault.⁵⁴ Such journalism blurred the distinction between intelligence operations and foreign development assistance, to the detriment of the latter.⁵⁵

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, as indicated previously, the “End of History” doctrine compounded the stigma of labor interventionism with a further objection: the defeat of the Soviet Union had made the worldwide march toward democracy inevitable and political action overseas unnecessary.⁵⁶ This viewpoint, which developed over the 1990s, effectively dislodged the American ideal of free labor from the American discussion of foreign policy.

⁵² Glenn Fowler, “Irving Brown, 77, U.S. Specialist On International Labor Movement”, *The New York Times*, Feb. 11, 1989, accessed online: <https://nyti.ms/2Y1MDET>

⁵³ “Irving Brown; Longtime AFL-CIO Representative”, *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 1989, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70C4pMBAVtc>:
<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-02-13-mn-1426-story.html>

⁵⁴ Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, “Books of the Times: Endless Enemies”, *The New York Times*, July 17, 1984, accessed online: <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/07/17/books/books-of-the-times-068978.html>

⁵⁵ Charles D. Gray, “Guilt By Innuendo”, *The New Republic*, October 28, 1985, accessed online: <https://bit.ly/2Ulblmc>

⁵⁶ Francis Fukuyama. “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, Summer 1989

With the globalization of the U.S. economy, moreover, unionists' prior concerns about foreign political threats to workers' rights gave way to a new focus on the abuse of workers by multinational corporations.⁵⁷ A further blow to American labor's capacity to wage political action overseas came in 2005, when several large unions split off from the AFL-CIO and formed the rival Change to Win Federation. This separation, rooted in a furious debate over the causes and remedies of dwindling American union membership, necessitated sharp reductions in spending.⁵⁸ The AFL-CIO liquidated property and assets in Europe and Asia which had formed its base for foreign operations.⁵⁹ Thus the case for foreign political action, as far as mainstream American labor was concerned, went from taboo to obsolete to unaffordable.

These constraints did not stop a handful of American unionists, steeped in the Meany-Brown tradition, from striving to apply their mentors' approaches in an Arab society. One was David Dorn, who retired as Director of International Affairs for the American Federation of Teachers in 2013. "The U.S. focus in the [Arab] 'democracy industry' has been in political party building — which is legitimate — as well as a cottage industry of NGOs," Dorn observed. "But I think in the Mideast, a large part of the civil society that represents more of the values we want as Americans is located in the labor movement." Shortly after the Tunisian revolution of 2010-'11, Dorn applied for funding from the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), a program run by the State Department, for teacher training in the country's smaller cities and towns. Noting that voter support for the Islamist Ennahda party had been stronger in those areas than in the big cities of Tunis and Sfax, he judged that focusing his group's support on union activities there might be helpful to labor in the next elections. After two iterations of the proposal were submitted, MEPI rejected it. Among the reasons cited in an initial MEPI review, Dorn says, was that "one panel member was

⁵⁷ Interview with Molly McCoy, Policy Director of the Solidarity Center, June 11, 2020

⁵⁸ Gary Fields, Kris Maher and Ann Zimmerman, "Two Unions Quit AFL-CIO, Casting Cloud on Labor", *Wall Street Journal*, July 26, 2005, accessed online: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB112230998269095033>

⁵⁹ Interview with Molly McCoy, June 11, 2020

inclined not to support the American Federation of Teachers politically.” Dorn also described being struck, on a visit to the U.S. embassy in Tunis, by the naiveté of a young official serving as the MEPI officer. Asked why the State Department had funded programs for political parties but not labor unions in the run-up to the prior year’s Tunisian elections, the diplomat told Dorn, “Elections are political. Unions are only interested in wages and money.” The year of Dorn’s visit, the “Highlights & News” page on MEPI’s website listed 173 projects and achievements, only two of which concerned support for organized labor.⁶⁰

As one of the more financially sturdy unions that did not split from the AFL-CIO in 2005, the AFT had maintained a modest international affairs division over the years leading up to the Arab Spring. Between 2006 and 2009, under Dorn’s leadership, the division carried out a half dozen overseas projects aimed at supporting independent teachers unions by teaching them how to advocate for “teachers’ rights, teachers’ union rights, independence, and democracy.”⁶¹ AFT also offered education aimed at growing union membership. The underlying premise of AFT’s dual approach of organizing and educating was a belief that “teachers are a force for democracy; unions are a force for democracy; civil society organizations are key to democracy;” and that making “democratic unions stronger in Yemen can help” in that effort. The practical application of this premise, according to Larry Specht, a former Senior Associate in AFT’s International Affairs Department, was based on the view that in order “to make the unions strong, you increase membership, you increase its ability to service its members, and also increase its usefulness to the society in producing better education. That will hopefully increase community support and maybe even lead to less hostility from the government.”⁶²

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Interview with David Dorn, former Director of International Affairs for the American Federation of Teachers, April 8, 2014

⁶² Interview with Larry Specht, former Senior Associate in the American Federation of Teachers’ International Affairs Department, April 11, 2014

The implementation of these projects, however, spoke to the difficulty of waging an effective union venture overseas without skilled expeditionary diplomacy and a sustained presence on the ground. Tasked to identify independent teachers unions in the region for AFT to train, Dorn found the Yemeni Teachers Syndicate (YTS). Indeed a non-government body, it was led by stalwarts of Al-Islah — an Islamist party founded by members of the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood, some with ties to Al-Qaeda. “There was always a question of what the relationship was to the [Islah] party,” Dorn recalled. “And the Islah party, as we found out, is a pretty broad party, including some pretty unsavory types to some pretty moderate types.”⁶³ A Yemeni advisor to the project advocated strongly for the alliance with YTS, “as he saw democratic forces within that Union,” recalls Specht. The same local advisor argued for excluding the government-affiliated union because it was “corrupt.” The U.S. embassy, for its part, advised Specht that other than “the hideous right-wing faction, there was a faction of small democrats” within the Islah party. “[But] you can’t romanticize something,” Specht added, “[YTS’s leaders] were under the [Islah] party control.”

What should be made of this advice? On the one hand, there was every reason to validate the local Yemeni advisor’s assessment that the government-affiliated Yemeni teachers union was corrupt, and no reason to preclude his belief that the Islamist-led YTS harbored “democratic elements.” At the same time, the binary choice he presented to AFT was both limiting and suspicious. Why rule out the possibility of “democratic elements” within the government union as well? Why advise the AFT that it had to choose between one group and the other, rather than, say, recruit the most promising elements of both for an independent educational initiative? Had AFT enjoyed the mandate and resources to sustain a proper intervention in Yemen, the local advisor’s recommendations would have provided a useful touchstone for further inquiry, but not the last word.

⁶³ Interview with David Dorn, April 8, 2014

American Labor Interventionism's Remnants: An Apolitical Mission

One nonprofit organization with institutional ties to the American labor movement formed in 1997 to support trade unionism overseas and has maintained operations ever since. The American Center for International Labor Solidarity (“the Solidarity Center”), a “community affiliate of the AFL-CIO,” aims to “empower workers to raise their voice for dignity on the job, justice in their communities, and greater equality in the global economy.” Through educational and exchange programs, publications, and legal advocacy, the group strives to help union activists “take on societal ills such as child labor, human trafficking, unfair labor laws, infringement of women’s rights, dangerous workplaces, and the exploitation of the vulnerable.” The group’s Director of Policy, Molly McCoy, says its work reflects a new generation of American labor leaders’ outlook on the world: “[Prior generations] saw the biggest threat to unions as authoritarian and communist governments, and now we see it as the unchecked power of multinational corporations.”⁶⁴

The Solidarity Center represents the consolidation of four Cold War-era labor institutes — the American Institute for Free Labor Development, the Asian-American Free Labor Institute, the African-American Labor Institute, and the Free Trade Union Institute — a decision by AFL-CIO chief John Sweeney shortly after he took the helm. More than 95 percent of the group’s \$34.4 million in support for 2018 came from U.S. government foreign assistance, primarily via USAID and NED. If a single theme animates the group’s activity around the world, it is the protection of workers in developing countries from the negative effects of globalization. “The global economy is not working for women and marginalized workers,” explains the most recent annual report. “In partnership with

⁶⁴ Interview with Molly McCoy, June 11, 2020

workers, women, and human rights advocates around the world, the Solidarity Center is working to right the scales and mitigate structural oppression, building solidarity and supporting worker efforts to change attitudes, working conditions and laws, with particular emphasis on eradicating gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work.”⁶⁵ In 2019, for example, the Solidarity Center helped negotiate pacts to protect women garment workers in Lesotho from unsafe and undignified workplaces in factories owned by Kontoor Brands, Levi Strauss & Co., and Nien Hsing Textiles. The group helped union activists across Central America and the Caribbean press for ratification of International Labour Organization Convention 190, to end violence and harassment in the workplace. Standing with Zimbabwean union leaders who faced summary arrest and beatings by their government, the Solidarity Center raised awareness of the human rights abuses, raised money to bail union leaders out of prison, and staged protests at Zimbabwe embassies around the world.⁶⁶

Of the Solidarity Center’s five regional divisions (Africa, Americas, Asia, Europe and Central Asia, Middle East and North Africa), the MENA group is the least funded. As of 2020, it consisted of 22 full-time staff, with the largest office in Morocco followed by presences in Tunisia, the Palestinian territories, and Iraq. Their strategy calls for “strengthen[ing] workers’ political and economic rights by promoting rule of law, defending freedom of association, building capacity and internal union democracy, and encouraging trade union organizing.” In practice, this means primarily education and training in consort with local trade unions and labor NGOs. Asked to provide an example, MENA director Hind Cherrouk described her work engaging low-wage women agricultural workers in Morocco. “It’s a very conservative society. Women were raised in an environment and culture where you have to lower your gaze, you don’t have a voice. We wanted to show them that you do have a voice

⁶⁵ Carolyn Butler, Tula Connell, Kate Conradt, “2018-19 Annual Report”, *Solidarity Center*, February 2020, accessed online: <https://bit.ly/2MZsDMM>

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

and can make the transformational change that you seek and have a voice to generate progress.”⁶⁷

Thus the MENA office seeks to apply the theme of an international struggle against unchecked globalization to labor problems in a given Arab country, in consort with local partners whom Center staff assess as committed to the same set of values and goals. This mandate has led to relationships with many of the liberal union actors identified earlier, including the Tunisian UGTT, Egyptian unionist Kamal Abbas, and the nascent Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Jordan (FITU-J). The latter’s 2013 founding congress was in fact co-sponsored by the Solidarity Center.⁶⁸ The same egalitarian principles have led the group to reject cooperation with state labor monopolies such as the Egyptian ETUF and Algerian UGTA, but not to reject partnership with Islamist-leaning unions -- notably the National Labor Union of Morocco, an affiliate of the Islamist Justice and Development Party. Some of the organization’s most effective interventions involved coordinated effort between its staffers in the region and the government affairs division in Washington. Notably, as the Gulf states of Bahrain, Oman, and the UAE moved to sign free trade agreements with the United States, the group partnered with labor actors in those three countries, including the Bahraini GFBTU, to organize Congressional stipulations protecting workers’ rights.⁶⁹

These important contributions to the welfare of Arab labor notwithstanding, the Solidarity Center’s approach does not amount to a holistic, locally-tailored political strategy to strengthen independent labor actors vis a vis their illiberal opponents. It is a far cry, moreover, from the work of Cold War-era American labor overseas, in which unions “invested their own money in foreign engagement and trained their own regional experts

⁶⁷ Interview with Hind Cherrouk, Middle East North Africa director for the Solidarity Center, June 8, 2020

⁶⁸ Tula Connell, “Jordanian Unions Establish Independent Federation”, *Solidarity Center*, May 15, 2013, accessed online: <https://www.solidaritycenter.org/jordanian-unions-establish-independent-federation/>

⁶⁹ Interview with Heba F. El-Shazli, July 2015

to develop policies independent of the U.S. government.”⁷⁰ The absence of such a commitment mattered, for example, when President Sisi cracked down on Egyptian labor activists in 2017-’18 without incurring consequences from the Trump Administration. It mattered as well amid the lethal Tunisian Salafi attacks on UGTT personnel and installations in 2012-’13, which the Obama Administration declined to address. In 2018-’20, as Arab liberal egalitarian protest movements led by labor activists registered a seismic pulse in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon, the Solidarity Center was not structurally organized or equipped to substantively strengthen these forces on the ground or lobby for them in Washington.

Waging such a transnational endeavor would not have been easy, to be sure. Molly McCoy, the Solidarity Center’s Policy Director, notes that in her outreach to Congress on behalf of the MENA division, “it’s actually been fairly hard outside of a small number of people. There isn’t a big intersection of [members] who care about the region and care about labor. The members most interested in the region are interested in security, terrorism, ISIS, and energy. It hasn’t been as easy to make the case [for supporting Arab organized labor] outside of Tunisia, where everybody’s interested because of the UGTT’s winning of the Nobel Peace Prize.”⁷¹

McCoy’s observation, informed by years of regular encounters with Senators and Congresspeople who collectively determine the nature of U.S. foreign assistance, suggests a further problem: if the Solidarity Center chose to wage political action in Arab lands, it would likely find U.S. government funding difficult to come by. This problem relates to the conceptual division noted earlier, dating back to the 1990s, between the American ideal of free labor and the American discussion of foreign policy. Like the young American diplomat whom AFT official David Dorn encountered in Tunisia, many American lawmakers appear to

⁷⁰ Interview with Roy Godson, June 2013

⁷¹ Interview with Molly McCoy, June 11, 2020

share the view that in foreign environments, “elections are political, while unions are only interested in wages and money.” To be sure, as McCoy noted, the role of the UGTT in stabilizing democratic tradition in Tunisia, a country of 11 million people, did not pass without notice in Congress. But the massive 2018-’20 labor-led protests in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon — a movement affecting 128 million people, in countries of vital strategic significance for the United States and its allies — appears to have left a comparatively modest impression with the same members. This distinction likely relates to the gap in media attention: the 2015 Tunisian Nobel Prize crowned a 2011-’12 protest movement that had dominated American headlines for months. The more recent demonstrations made no mark on the mainstream American public discussion. They lacked the luster of a movement targeting pro-American autocrats, as the Arab Spring demonstrations had, and they transpired at a time when Americans’ focus had turned sharply inward.

In my own experience of liberal trade unions in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon, prospects abound to engage their members not only to strengthen their advocacy of labor rights and ideals, but also to help them apply those ideals to their country’s political affairs. By way of context, in October 2020, efforts to forge a Sudanese-Israeli peace accord appeared to stall. Among the reasons, rejectionist forces were working to intimidate and stigmatize the local peace camp. The nonprofit organization I lead, the Center for Peace Communications, lent its capacities to rectifying the situation by mobilizing Sudanese religious, civic, and cultural leaders in Khartoum to rally behind the idea of a treaty. In seeking out partners, the most enthusiastic actors we found were young people, identifying as “labor rights activists,” who had joined the mass demonstrations against the government of Omar El-Bashir in 2018. As journalist Safaa al-Fahal told me, “The three ideals we

protested for were justice, equality, and peace. By 'peace,' we meant reconciliation within Sudan, as well as peaceful relations with all our neighbors, including Israel."⁷²

Some Western critics of the Sudanese-Israeli diplomatic process had claimed that Sudanese public opinion resoundingly opposed the move toward peace. Fahal and other thought partners of hers whom we engaged believed that, to the contrary, a massive number of young Sudanese welcomed a new relationship with Israel, but due to a history of repression under Islamist dictatorship, lacked the organizational capacity to press their case. In response, we helped five veterans of the 2018 demonstrations to help establish the Sudanese-Israeli Friendship Association in Khartoum, hone their arguments, and promote their message, both domestically and internationally. At a critical moment, the activism they went on to lead emboldened advocates of a peace agreement within Sudan, rallied progressive elements within the government, and challenged foreign misperceptions of the process. In sum, they substantially improved the cultural and informational conditions for an agreement. Several of them went on to jump-start civil engagement between the two countries after the the normalization process officially commenced.⁷³

It is not difficult to imagine how further expeditionary diplomacy for the sake of making common cause with Arab trade unionists can strengthen the egalitarian fiber of their societies on the one hand, and facilitate political action to counter extremism and promote peace on the other.

⁷² Safaa al-Fahal (co-founder, Sudanese-Israeli Friendship Association), in discussion with the author, Khartoum, October 3, 2020.

⁷³ Al-Majlis al-Arabi, "Sudanese Activists Announce Founding of Sudanese-Israeli Friendship Association." *YouTube*, September 29, 2020, accessed online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70C4pMBAVtc>

A Bleak Landscape

If the American labor movement does not adopt a more targeted, aggressive stance in support of its counterparts in Arab lands, the latter will have to wage their campaigns largely alone. Earlier in this century, a number of European labor institutions did provide assistance to their Arab, particularly North African, counterparts. European states, more directly affected by unrest in Arab countries due to their geographic proximity and deeper commercial ties, appreciated the need to foster and shore up civil institutions in the region. French, Belgian, Italian, Norwegian, and Dutch trade unions provided direct support to Arab counterparts with funding from their respective governments. In Germany, where each major political party also enjoys a state budget allocation, several provided capacity building assistance to Arab unions.⁷⁴ But these monies dried up during the 2008 global financial crisis and were not subsequently restored to pre-2008 levels.⁷⁵

Writing in 2013, Heba Shazli, the American scholar of Arab labor, saw hope in each of these bodies -- as well as the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), which represents unions in 28 EU member states, and the UN's International Labour Organization (ILO). She envisioned a concerted, perhaps coordinated effort among these groups "to develop and implement an intensive organizing and political education training and leadership program" for labor activists in the Maghreb and beyond.⁷⁶ Seven years later, her vision had not come to pass.

⁷⁴ Ed. Roy Godson, *Democratic Transitions: The Case of North Africa*, (Washington, D.C.: National Strategy Information Center, 2013), pps.130-134

⁷⁵ Interview with Molly McCoy, June 11, 2020

⁷⁶ Godson, *Democratic Political Transitions*, pps. 129-131

As the democracies of the Far East grow their own, predominantly mercantile presence in Arab lands, one might hope to see their formidable labour movements — particularly that of Japan — build new ties to Arab unionists. But their governments have not supported such an effort. The unions themselves, which lack any history of foreign engagement, have in any case seen a considerable decline in membership as their national economies moved away from heavy industries and more people entered the workforce through smaller companies in the services sector.⁷⁷

Meanwhile, the Arab unionists who helped steer the 2018-'20 demonstrations suffered a major setback in spring and summer 2020 as the coronavirus took its global toll. The architects of protest movements in Algeria, Iraq, and Tunisia called for a suspension of demonstrations for the sake of public health. A nascent independent news channel in Lebanon, created to lend a voice to protesters, suspended operations over the spring. Security sectors in Algeria and Sudan proceeded to exploit the panic and self-isolation to round up labor leaders and force them to disavow continued action.

The underlying causes of these uprisings, only exacerbated by COVID-19's economic devastation, will surely continue to drive social ferment.⁷⁸ But at a moment of great potential for the protesters to channel public enthusiasm into the development of civil institutions — and in particular, to grow and consolidate free unions — a pandemic and state security effectively conspired to arrest their progress. A powerful injection of outside assistance would be necessary to recover the lost momentum.

⁷⁷ "Japanese Working Life Profile: 2009/2010 — Labor Statistics", *The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training*, <https://bit.ly/3hzhf7xB>, July 2010 (accessed June 12, 2020)

⁷⁸ Joel Beinin, "Arab Workers and the Struggle for Democracy", *Jacobin*, October 5, 2020, accessed online: <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/05/arab-spring-workers-struggle-democracy-unions>, (accessed June 12, 2020)

Toward an American Labor Interventionist Revival

So what is to be done? In her 2013 paper on the role of labor in North African democratic transitions, Heba Shazli opined that whereas “[Arab] trade unions traditionally make economic and social demands, they are recognizing that these reforms cannot take place without serious longterm political change.” Though many of the unions lack sufficient “political will and organizational capacity, ... with the proper timely support, trade unions can exert enough political pressure, where conditions permit, on political parties, policymakers, and government leaders to support democratic practices and adherence to the rule of law.”⁷⁹ Her proposed plan called for a substantial injection of capital into Global Union Federations such as France-based Public Services International, to build “an intensive organizing and political education training and leadership program for [Arab] labor leaders and activists.” She identified specific labor sectors to focus on, from oil and chemicals to media, and tasked the leading international engagement NGOs in those fields to serve as conduits for the requisite support and expertise. She also called for Arab labor to draw a working model from post-Soviet transitioning democracies in eastern Europe, comparing the political situation in Libya, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt to that of Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Romania in the 1990s.⁸⁰

The regional climate for labor since Shazli issued these wise prescriptions has shifted, however. On the one hand, as shown above, the 2018-'20 protest movements displayed a young labor leadership — liberal, university-educated, and gender-balanced — that is stronger and more principled than their counterparts in the 2011-'12 demonstrations whom Islamists managed so easily to commandeer. On the other, the post-Arab Spring

⁷⁹ Godson, *Democratic Political Transitions*, pp. 134

⁸⁰ Godson, *Democratic Political Transitions*, pps.130-134

descent into praetorian authoritarianism in some countries and warlordism and chaos in others has brought more brutal and pervasive pressure on civic actors than even pre-Arab Spring autocrats did. On balance, the optimistic view that the unions of post-Soviet democracies in eastern Europe could provide a working model for Arab labor appears less plausible. Shazli published her paper amid a temporary political free-for-all in Egypt that may have looked like an incubation phase for civil society but proved, in retrospect, to be a preparatory phase for counter-revolutionary coup. The same pattern has since repeated twice: the 2019 departure of an aging president in Algeria brought only a new crown to an old junta.

To be sure, some recent trends run in Arab labor's favor. Their Islamist nemeses are weakened and scattered, due to violent authoritarian crackdowns. As the previous chapter showed, moreover, the same autocrats have also launched constructive interventions to begin to roll back Islamists' influence on the religious fabric of society. But where unionists take a stand against economic injustice — and confront the political structures that perpetuate it — they meet the sword of tyranny, now newly sharpened. The United States and its European allies, consumed with political and economic turmoil at home, manifest less of an appetite to confront these powers on their shameful human rights record.

The American labor movement can meaningfully address these problems. To do so, however, it must undertake the difficult process of recovering its interventionist spirit, developing an independent foreign policy toward the region, and vigorously pursuing the latter, both at home and abroad. Labor leaders can begin by instilling greater awareness of the immense contribution to global peace and security which their twentieth century forbears made through concerted overseas engagement. Holding up these precedents as models for the future, they can challenge younger unionists to innovate a twenty-first century strategy to advance the cause of labor in the Middle East and North Africa. They

can provide a framework and career path for these young people to hone their vision by expanding unions' international affairs divisions, incorporating Arabic language skills and area expertise, and launching exchange programs to bring American unionists to the region. The latter's findings, in turn, can inform outreach to American journalists who cover labor issues and briefings to sympathetic elected officials. As American unions chart new partnerships with Arab counterparts, Heba Shazli's proposed education and leadership program offers an excellent blueprint to adopt. The web of international labor organizations she traced, moreover, provides a suitable network of Western democratic allies beyond the United States, each with a knowledge base and track record of their own.

Some of the building blocks for a labor interventionist revival already stand at the unions' disposal. Though the Solidarity Center in Washington has primarily applied a general take on "globalization" to Arab societies, it has in doing so built a spread of relationships with Arab actors who harbor more locally grounded aspirations. As the American labor movement develops a tailored approach to Arab union engagement, the Solidarity Center can provide crucial knowledge and expertise. Though in Congress, as Molly McCoy observed, few members with a foreign policy focus appreciate the importance of unionism to the future of the Middle East, some do, and others can learn. As greater outreach to American media spawns more public attention to Arab unions, this enriched public discussion, combined with more extensive Congressional outreach, can increase members' interest and commitment. Finally, though funding for American labor interventionism in the region has not been forthcoming from the unions themselves, a new commitment to engage Arab unionists can attract new forms of support. These include private philanthropy with an Arab development focus, as well as greater U.S. government assistance. As the example of Irving Brown shows, government support and an independent policy outlook are not mutually exclusive.

Should American labor pursue a unique approach to the Middle East and North Africa, it can use its formidable lobbying capacities in Washington to pressure autocrats who persecute Arab unionists, and demand greater space for the latter to organize freely. While protecting and empowering these actors, it can also adopt the principle that no Arab government is a monolith, and engage reformist elements in state-controlled labor syndicates. The expeditionary diplomats whom American unions equip to study, befriend, and assist Arab labor can map a granular approach to every city and town, and make a distinguished contribution to the region's welfare.