From unity to crisis: The International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU) and the decline of Pan-Arabism, 1963–1979

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Abstract

Established in 1956 by trade union organisations in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU) constituted the first pan-Arab labour organisation. The ICATU aimed to develop a transnational network of labour cooperation among Arab states while supporting Nasserist pan-Arab ambitions in North Africa and the Middle East. Drawing on archival sources and trade union periodicals, this article provides an analysis of the activities of the ICATU from the early 1960s and discusses the development of pan-Arab trade unionism in the light of the evolution of Nasser's regional leadership. The article argues that the expansion of its membership to Maghreb trade unions — in particular, in Morocco and Algeria — laid the foundations for a change in the organisation's internal balance. This trend, fuelled by the 1967 war and Nasser's death, led to the complete decline of Egyptian predominance in the organisation by the end of the 1970s.

Keywords

* Both authors contributed equally to all the sections.

Introduction

Founded in March 1956 by trade unions in Egypt, Syria, Libya, Lebanon, and Jordan, al-Ittihad al-duwali li-niqabat al-ʿummal al-ʿarab (the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions, ICATU) aimed to gather different Arab trade unions in a shared pan-Arab framework (Beling 1961). The ICATU emerged at a time when pan-Arabism was gaining momentum, with Egypt pursuing a leading foreign policy in the Arab region (Dawisha 2016: 135–213). The unification of Egypt and Syria in the United Arab Republic (UAR) in 1958 — strongly associated with the leadership of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser[1] — was part of Egypt's pan-Arab politics (Dawisha 2016: 166; Podeh 1999: 6).

Arab trade unions came together to cooperate within the ICATU, merging traditional labour questions with political issues tied to Egypt's regional agenda. The ideological orientation and broader objectives of the ICATU mirrored the priorities of the Egyptian government, most notably its support for anti-colonial movements, its rejection of Cold War binarism, and the fight against political and economic imperialism. Thus, the ICATU was conceived as an instrument of the Nasserist regime to enhance pan-Arab sentiment and to cement the legitimacy of Egypt as the leader of a unified Arab nation (Beling 1961: 19). By holding together local unions in regional networks in North Africa and the Middle East, the ICATU proved that "labor activism and anti-imperialist politics were intricately intertwined" (Stolte 2019: 344). Despite this, the transnational dimension of Arab trade unions has not received in-depth attention from the historiography on trade unionism in the region. Williard A. Beling's book *Pan-Arabism and Labor*, published in 1961, was the first study to address the relationships among Arab trade unions and the emergence of the ICATU within the broader context of decolonisation and the evolving Cold War order. More recently, the transnational relations between different Arab trade unions have attracted renewed scholarly interest, with the publication of new studies in the Arabic language (Bouyahiya 2002; al-Hani 2015; Zehani 2021).

Drawing on ICATU periodicals and internal publications, documentation of the International Labour Organization (ILO), and archival materials from other international trade union confederations,[2] this article examines the history of the ICATU from its phase of rapid expansion in the early 1960s to the advent of a protracted internal crisis that reached its peak in the late 1970s. Firstly, the article examines the period following the formal affiliations of the Union Marocaine du Travail (UMT) and the Union Générale des Travailleurs Al-

gériens (UGTA) after their respective national congresses in 1963. In doing so, it attempts to understand the impact of these developments in the advancement of pan-Arab trade unionism. The article then explores how the ICATU reacted to the 1967 war and the implications of the conflict on the redefinition of the confederation's agenda. Finally, the discussion shifts to the post-Nasser era, addressing how his death, Anwar Sadat's foreign policy towards Israel, and the rise of competing leaderships in the region reshaped the landscape of pan-Arab politics. Through this analysis, the article critically examines the trajectory of Egypt's influence within the ICATU from two decades of dominance to a gradual decline, culminating in 1979 with the suspension of Egypt's national union, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF).

An Expanding Network of Pan-Arab Trade Unionism

In 1956, only seven trade unions in five countries participated at the founding congress of the ICATU, which was held in Damascus on 24 March. The statute signed by the founding members, however, pledged to complete labour unity among Arab countries and welcomed the affiliation of trade unions from all over the region (al-Ittihad al-duwali 1959: 11). With its expansion, the ICATU sought to gather Arab trade unions in an umbrella organisation that could consolidate Egypt's reputation as the leader of the Arab nation. In 1958, the Sudanese Workers' Trade Union Federation (SWTUF) was the first national union to join the ICATU (al-Ittihad al-duwali 1959: 55–56).

Strongly linked with Egypt's regional agenda, the expansion of the ICATU depended on the influence that pan-Arab politics exerted on national trade unions in North Africa and the Middle East. Pan-Arabism had developed primarily in the Mashreq, whereas in the Maghreb it was not yet entrenched (Tibi 1997: 210–11). Consequently, the ICATU saw in Maghreb trade unions a significant target for its expansion plans. The Maghreb countries had powerful confederations with wide memberships and strong relations with national governments. However, with the only exception of the Libyan General Workers Union (LGWU), the national confederations in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia did not join the ICATU at the time of its foundation. Different decolonisation pathways affected the development of national labour movements and their international positioning. The UMT, the UGTA, and the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT) were powerful components of the national liberation movements for independence, but they embodied local nationalist orientations rather than the ideological principles of pan-Arabism (Ayache 1993; Kraïem

1980; Bouchama 2014). Until the early 1960s, these organisations sought to preserve strong relations with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), which was founded in 1949 after a split from the communist World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). ICFTU's support for the anticolonial struggle had provided the Maghreb unions with an important network of transnational solidarity (Carew 2000: 226–27; Von Bülow 2019: 454–86). Their pre-existing relationships with the ICFTU represented the main obstacle to their affiliation with the ICATU, which sponsored the idea of a regional trade union movement independent of international confederations directly involved in Cold War confrontations (Beling 1961: 72).

Algeria's independence in 1962 arguably represented a major watershed, which allowed the ICATU to strengthen its presence in the Maghreb. With the end of colonial rule, the UGTA became the face and voice of official government politics in the labour field (Zobiri 2015: 274–94). As such, it reproduced its positions on domestic and international issues relating to anti-imperialist solidarity, particularly against US and European interests in Africa and the Middle East. Most importantly, its support for pan-Arabism reflected the alliance of the National Liberation Front with Egypt, which was forged during the war of independence (Byrne 2016: 33, 180).

Adhesion to official government orientations was formalised at the first national congress of the UGTA, which was held in Algiers in January 1963. After a sudden change in leadership, the UGTA decided to sever its ties with the ICFTU, accusing it of being an instrument of former colonial powers meddling in trade union affairs in the newly independent states (Von Bülow 2019: 473). In response, a delegation of the ICFTU participating in the congress accused "elements alien to the Algerian trade union movement" of seizing control of the UGTA undemocratically.[3] The UGTT also criticised the UGTA for its subordination to government politics.[4]

In the same period, the UMT was undergoing a similar shift in its international orientation, which aimed at fostering cooperation with African and Arab trade unions. In 1961, it hosted in Casablanca the founding congress of the very first pan-African trade union organisation, the All-African Trade Union Federation (AATUF), and had its General Secretary, Mahjoub Ben Seddik, elected as the first President (Busch 1983: 95). At its third congress held in January 1963 the UMT decided to provisionally suspend its relations with the ICFTU and committed itself to strengthening ties with other Maghreb, Arab, and African confederations.[5] On this occasion, the UAR Federation of Labour,

which was established with the merging of the Egyptian and Syrian national trade unions (Podeh 1999: 135), sent a message to the UMT "on behalf of all Arab workers," praising it for the vanguard role it played "not only in the Arab Maghreb and in all Arab countries but also on the African continent."[6]

The UGTT represented an exception in the Maghreb, as it maintained tense relations with the ICATU until the 1970s. A secure ally of the ICFTU, the UGTT emphasised independence from government politics as a fundamental principle in establishing transnational alliances (Tlili 2018: 68–69). Accordingly, the strong politicisation of the ICATU in support of Nasser's regime and its pan-Arab vision was negatively perceived by the UGTT. In fact, the mistrust of the organisation was entrenched with the divergences that emerged on multiple occasions between Egypt, which advocated Arab unity with strong anti-Western rhetoric, and Tunisia, which aimed at consolidating national unity and positive relations with the US and European countries (Ben Ahmed 2019: 26; Masri 2018: 200–1).

Despite some signs of opening at the ninth UGTT congress in March 1963, which recognised the UGTT's "natural" (Bouyahiya 2002: 70–71) ties with the Arab labour movement, its relationship with the pan-Arab union was not formalised. Not only did the UGTT not participate in the ICATU third congress in 1965, but a period of open hostility between the two organisations began. At that time the positions expressed by President Habib Bourguiba on the Palestinian question exacerbated Tunisia's isolation from the other Arab countries, which considered the Tunisian leader too moderate.[7] Therefore, the ICATU became overtly critical of the Tunisian government, accused it of thwarting the pan-Arab ambitions of Tunisian workers and blamed the UGTT for being completely submissive to its government (Bouyahiya 2002: 71).

On the one hand, the missed affiliation of the UGTT was a sign of the existence of multiple orientations among Arab trade unions that often mirrored the international allegiances and positions of their governments. On the other hand, the successful inclusion of the UGTA and the UMT in the ICATU was considered an important step forward towards achieving unity among Arab trade unions. However, the affiliation of Maghreb trade unions challenged the ideological hegemony that the Egyptians had pursued in the organisation. Indeed, the UMT and the UGTA were strong and well-established confederations that formulated their alliances to pursue their specific regional agendas rather than merely serve Egyptian interests. This should not be surprising, since Nasser's success as the leader of the Arab world "had been built not on political pluralism, but on an authoritarianism centred on one man" (Dawisha

2016: 225–26). Less inclined to uncritically accept Egypt's predominance over ICATU affairs, the UMT and the UGTA were aware of Egyptian ambitions and considered them a potential divisive factor in fostering fruitful cooperation among Arab states. The affiliation of the UMT and UGTA, along with Syria's less subordinate posture towards Egypt following the dissolution of the UAR in 1961, arguably contributed to the establishment of a new front within the ICATU that decisively rejected Egypt's hegemonic role.[8]

In addition, the increased presence of delegates from the UMT and UGTA in the ICATU contributed to the internal diversification of its leadership. At the third ICATU congress in 1965, the General Secretary of the UGTA, Mauloud Omzian, was appointed vice-president of the organisation (Gallissot 2006: 497). In 1969, Muhammad Fasthali, former information and propaganda secretary of the UMT, became a member of the central council while occupying the position of assistant General Secretary in charge of foreign relations.[9] In the same period, Fasthali was also nominated national Secretary of the UMT and President of the AATUF and so enjoyed a unique role in the promotion of "an Afro-Arab trade union network" (Menouni 1979: 458).

Shifting Balances: the 1967 War

In the first half of the 1960s, Nasser's regime reached a serious stalemate caught in a "web of domestic and international crises" (Gerges 2012: 287). Iraq's refusal to join the UAR and Syria's secession in 1961 represented a major blow to Nasser's personal prestige as the unchallenged leader of the Arab nation (Dawisha 2016: 232; Jankowski 2002: 161–78; Podeh 1999: 145–73). Internally, the Egyptian state was highly vulnerable due to a severe economic crisis caused by inefficiency of the public sector and weak agricultural production (Waterbury 1983: 83–100). Moreover, the Egyptian state was bearing the financial burden of a prolonged military intervention in Yemen, part of its regional rivalry with Saudi Arabia during the so-called Arab Cold War (Ferris 2012: 2). Nasser was confronted with a growing regional challenge by Arab radicals in Syria, Iraq, and Palestine, who doubted his revolutionary credibility and accused him of abandoning the fight to free Palestine (Gerges 2012: 287). In response to escalating tensions between Israel and Syria — and due to the pressing need to prove his anti-imperialist and pan-Arab prestige — Nasser decided to move the Egyptian army in the Sinai Peninsula on 14 May 1967, triggering new territorial and border tensions and foreshadowing a new war in the region (Laron 2017: 61–62).

As on other occasions, the ICATU reacted by declaring its support for the Egyptian military campaign. On 22 May, the ICATU central council convened an extraordinary session in Damascus. The meeting took a rather radical with-us-or-against-us line aimed at mobilising the trade union movement to pressure the other Arab states into taking a stance in favour of Egypt. In particular, the council criticised the "treacherous attitude" of King Hussein of Jordan, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, and the Lebanese and Tunisian governments, which it accused of being too subservient to the interests of foreign powers.[10]

In the meantime, Israel sought to secure the full support of the US and the European powers (Shlaim 2012: 30). In addition to government diplomacy, an active role was played by Israel's dominant trade union confederation, the Histadrut, which "embarked on a worldwide information campaign to explain Israel's case to the labour movements in order to retain their support for Israel's cause" (Fraser 2022: 142). In particular, the Histadrut started intense lobbying to win the support of the ICFTU and the British Trade Union Congress, which — after some hesitation due to its strong relations with several Arab trade unions — eventually sided with Israel (Fraser 2022: 141–52).

Military tensions became more acute, culminating in the Six Day War fought between 5 and 10 June, which notably resulted in Israel's occupation of the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, the Old City of Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights (Laron 2017). The outbreak of this new regional war had the effect of polarising international trade unionism. The ICATU was prompted to get closer to the WFTU, which took a proactive approach and tried to use the conflict to its own advantage in order to expand its influence in the Middle East. On 6 June, the WFTU sent a letter to the ICATU pledging the loyalty and support of the communist countries for the Arab liberation cause.[11] Prompted by the need to ensure international support, an ICATU delegation went to Moscow in November 1967 to meet representatives of the WFTU. The two confederations signed a joint declaration aimed at fostering labour cooperation and support between Arab trade unions and the communist world.[12]

On this occasion, the ICATU and the WFTU decided to convene a larger meeting, which eventually took place on 29–30 March 1968 in Sofia. The event gathered thirteen national confederations from Arab countries and eleven European trade unions affiliated with the WFTU.[13] Communist representatives engaged in intense discussions with representatives of the ICATU about how they could provide moral support and material assistance to defend and promote the interests of the Arab working class. For his part, the General

Secretary of the ICATU, the Egyptian Fawzy El-Sayed, attempted to use the conference to enhance the international profile of the pan-Arab trade union movement. Condemning the imperialist character of the European powers, he asserted that the Israeli aggression against Egypt and Syria had heralded the beginning of a new era in which the struggle of the Arab people had become part and parcel of the universal struggle of the socialist world against Western colonialism. Moreover, El-Sayed proposed the constitution of an "international commission of solidarity with the Palestinian workers and people" aimed at supporting the Arab cause with armament supplies, military training, labour education, and any other means necessary in the struggle against colonialism.[14]

The diplomatic turn that followed the events of 1967 led the ICATU to establish new means to consolidate international solidarity with Palestine. It is no coincidence that in 1968 the ICATU started production of two periodicals, the *ICATU Review* in English and the *Nouvelles de la CISA* in French. The periodicals disseminated the same information and came in addition to the already existing magazine in Arabic, *al-ʿUmmal al-ʿarab*, which had been published since the aftermath of its foundation.[15] El-Sayed served as the first editor-in-chief of the periodicals, a role that continued to be entrusted to the General Secretary of the ICATU.[16] The *ICATU Review* and the *Nouvelles de la CISA* regularly informed regional and international audiences of ICATU activities, issuing detailed accounts of the resolutions adopted by its central council and meetings of the congress.[17] Among other things, the periodicals strongly advocated solidarity with Palestine and condemnation of Israeli policies.[18] More broadly, the new publications called for unity in the struggles among Arab workers and covered current trade union and political affairs in the Middle East and North Africa. Other issues frequently addressed by the magazine included trade union rights and labour legislation, as well as comparisons of workers' living and working conditions in different Arab countries.[19] Frequently reporting Nasser's messages and speeches, the periodicals amplified his role as a revolutionary anti-colonial leader and acted as a sounding board for Nasserism.[20]

Despite the rhetoric of strengthened cooperation that followed the war, the stance adopted by the ICATU members after 1967 indisputably proved that the unions did not operate independently but mirrored the positions of their own governments. In May 1968, urged by the Arab League, the ICATU organised a conference to discuss the repercussions of the conflict. Because of pressure from the monarchy, the Libyan delegation was compelled to withdraw and

disregard the resolutions that resulted from the meeting (Karfaʿ 2000: 304–5). Moreover, the military defeat of Nasser and the ensuing "end of the pan-Arab honeymoon" had significant implications for the hegemonic role of Egypt within the ICATU (Ferris 2012: 262). The end of the neutralism that had characterised the foreign policy of the ICATU — with a marked shift towards the communist bloc — was at odds with the coexistence of multiple political and ideological lines among the affiliated organisations.

Compelled to face the reality of political and ideological pluralism, in its fourth congress in 1969, the ICATU approved an amendment to its statute that formally recognised the existence of political differences among Arab states.[21] Most importantly, the ICATU shifted its focus from advocating labour movement unity to considering its specific role in accordance with the unique situation in each country. In territories still subject to foreign domination, trade unionism had to act as the vanguard for national liberation. In countries that had not yet achieved "socialism and democracy" trade unions had to oppose foreign exploitation of national resources and push for the participation of workers in the political life of the country.[22] Finally, in countries that "opted for democracy," the ICATU aimed to oppose conservative trade union bureaucracies that no longer acted in support of the majority of the working class.[23] The constitutional reform did not only represent a formal change in the status and objectives of the ICATU. In fact, in a context marked by the weakening of pan-Arabism as the common ground for action of virtually all Arab states, the ICATU formally recognised the existence of multiple realities in the region, thus putting into question the idea of a single Arab nation with a shared fate and interests.

The ICATU at a Crossroads: the Twilight of Nasserism

In 1969, further changes at the national and regional levels seemed to encourage a revival of pan-Arabism. In Sudan (May) and Libya (September), military coups overthrew the regimes, overtly adopting a pan-Arab and Nasserist rhetoric. The central council of the ICATU, convened in Cairo on 10–12 October 1969, sent a message of endorsement to both the Sudanese and Libyan revolutionary councils, acknowledging them as the legitimate representatives of their nations (al-Ittihad al-duwali 1972: 10). In December 1969, Nasser's attempt to foster cooperation with the new governments led to the signing of the Tripoli Charter between Egypt, Libya, and Sudan. The charter sought to "create a series of ministerial commissions to coordinate activities in a number

of fields" (Deeb 2018: 75), including a proposal to harmonise labour legislation in the three countries, a project that was praised by the ICATU.[24]

The ICATU monitored with interest the evolution of labour-state relations in Libya led by the new government of Muammar Qaddafi. The new Libyan regime sought to strengthen its control over the country and ensure a tight grip on the labour movement. In Libya, "workers were no longer qualified as wage-earners, but as citizens-producers" (Gallico 1982: 212) organised in small unions on a territorial basis. This reorganisation entailed the dissolution of the previous national trade union federation, the LGWU. In his attempt to control the national trade union movement, Qaddafi promoted consultations with worker representatives, claiming that the revolution was primarily carried out in the name of the working class and peasants.[25] For this purpose, the government established a committee to examine all the issues confronting Libyan trade unionism and advocated the unification of trade unions in one single confederation (al-Barbar, Ibrahim, and Madi 1991: 106–7). The efforts of this committee resulted in the enactment of a new labour code in May 1970, which also addressed the organisation of trade unions. The ICATU welcomed Qaddafi's promises in favour of Libyan workers and applauded the adoption of the new labour code.[26]

Although these regional developments seemed to enhance pan-Arab sentiment, 1970 constituted a major backlash in the pursuit of Arab unity. The situation deteriorated in September, when fights between the Jordanian army and Palestinian militants escalated into unprecedented violence (Sinai and Pollack 1977: 32–34). The mediation of the Arab League between King Hussein and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat — the very last act of Nasser's foreign policy — only came after months of tension and a looming threat of an intra-Arab war (Rubin 2017: 248–75). The conflict, known as Black September, contributed to disrupting the idea of Arab unity by showing the existence of opposing orientations among Arab governments.

The ICATU framed Black September as an expression of external interference aimed at sowing discord among a previously united Arab front. In light of further Jordanian military action against Palestinian fighters, an extraordinary meeting of the ICATU central council held in Cairo in March 1971 called on Arab governments to take diplomatic measures aimed at isolating the Hashemite kingdom (al-Ittihad al-duwali 1972: 19–21). The council framed the current situation as a clash between a revolutionary anticolonial faction, which remained faithful to the pan-Arab principles and supported the Palestinian

cause, and "reactionary forces" that served the interests of foreign imperialist powers (*ibid*.: 19). The council addressed a letter to the Jordanian sovereign, condemning the behaviour of his army as an act against the interests of the Arab homeland (*ibid*.: 21–23).

In this already strained context, the death of Nasser on 28 September 1970 profoundly shocked the Arab world and had direct implications for the trajectory of the ICATU. The event was marked by the release of an *ICATU Review* special issue, which collected the condolences of trade union officials, national chiefs, and other government representatives.[27] Nasser was remembered as an unmatched political personality who reinforced the unity of Arab workers and, more broadly, of the Arab people. Mentioning his commitment to the policies of Afro-Asian solidarity and non-alignment,[28] he was described as "a true father of the working class" who had introduced substantial social reform to ameliorate people's working conditions.[29]

Initially, the new President Sadat was keen on emphasising continuity with the path established by his predecessor. In October 1970, Sadat met the members of the ICATU central council and promised that Cairo would remain "the threshold of Arab struggle."[30] Remarking how Nasser would often attend the meetings of the central council, the ICATU General Secretary El-Sayed expressed confidence that the incoming President would "complete what Nasser struggled not only for Egypt but for the Arab Nation at large."[31] Institutional continuity thus characterised the first years of Sadat's rule, with a prominent influence of the Egyptian government on the ICATU. At the fifth ICATU congress held in Cairo in May 1972, Abdel Latif Bolteya was appointed General Secretary. At the time of his election, Bolteya was Minister of Labour, President of the ETUF, and vice-chairman of the Egyptian National Assembly.[32]

However, Nasser's death intensified an already ongoing process of regional fragmentation. Further attempts to reach Arab political unity, which the ICATU continued to support, turned out to be short-lived experiences. A conference of the ministries of labour of the Tripoli Charter countries, which was to be held in Khartoum in January 1971, failed after the withdrawal of Sudan from the integration process. Subsequently, in September 1971, Egypt, Syria and Libya proclaimed the creation of the Federation of Arab Republics (Bechtold 1973). The ICATU welcomed the birth of the federation by sending a message greeting Sadat, Qaddafi, and Hafez al-Assad, which stressed the importance of involving "popular organisations, primarily the working class, within a sound democratic atmosphere" (al-Ittihad al-duwali 1972: 29). How-

ever, the federation did not last due to internal disagreements. Beyond the common pan-Arab rhetoric, each country followed its own national agenda and, with the only exception of Libya, none of them aimed at real political unification (Mufti 1996: 233). Several other unification projects were announced by Qaddafi during the decade, but none of them were eventually implemented (Mohamedou 2018: 174–75). Strengthened by Libya's growing economic importance and its pan-Arab orientation, Qaddafi believed that he deserved greater recognition than Sadat as "the leading candidate to assume Nasser's mantle" (Little 2013: 78).

Given his regional ambitions, Qaddafi was keen to affirm his control over the ICATU. However, the ICATU central council urged the establishment of a national trade union in Libya that could allow the country to "assume its vanguard role in the ranks of the Arab workers."[33] Shortly after this call, a new national organisation was formed with the name the National Trade Union Federation (NTUF), which held its first congress in 1972 (al-Barbar, Ibrahim, and Madi 1991: 106–7). The NTUF was nonetheless considered an instrument of the regime to control trade unionism (Van der Velden 2021: 218).

Unlike Qaddafi, General Gaafar Nimeiry's government in Sudan did not live up to its pan-Arab expectations. Internal repression of the workers' movement soon led to the deterioration of the relationship between the ICATU and the Sudanese government. In October 1972, the ICATU Central Council condemned the dissolution of the SWTUF and the arrest of its leaders.[34]

A Changed Leadership in a Changed Landscape

The evolution of Egyptian policies after Nasser's death was the most important driver of change in the ICATU in the 1970s. The wide popularity enjoyed by Nasser represented a challenging political legacy for Sadat. While presenting himself as a continuer of Nasser's pan-Arabism, the new president was also keen on building his legitimacy by promoting an image of himself as a reformist. Together with introducing economic liberalisation measures, known as *infitah*, Sadat aimed to introduce a controlled multipartyism by dismantling the structure of the Arab Socialist Union party (Baker 1990: 79–117). Nonetheless, he was unable to build a "hegemonic project" like his predecessor (Salem 2020: 160–61).

The new political and economic turn caused increased unrest among the Egyptian working class and the peasantry, which feared losing the "benefits of the revolution" such as institutional representation, agrarian reform, and

social security (Waterbury 1983: 357–58). The rise of social conflict led to a separation between the demands of the masses and Egypt's trade union leadership, which failed to support popular protests against the negative effects of the *infitah* (De Smet 2015: 182; Waterbury 1983: 358). Similar effects were experienced by workers in other Arab countries that embraced liberalisation policies. They often caused deterioration of working-class conditions, exacerbation of social inequalities, and a rise of popular protests in the region (Matar 2012). The authoritarian implementation of liberal reforms increasingly marginalised trade unions in favour of private economic interests (Abdallah 2016; Bellin 2002; King 2009).

The economic liberalisation inevitably affected the ICATU. In this phase, the ICATU endorsed a new narrative largely centred on the need for workers to "increase productivity and ameliorate technical competence to achieve economic independence" of Arab countries (al-Ittihad al-duwali 1972: 11). Trade unions were encouraged to actively support development policies at a time when workers showed the first signs of opposition. This was fostered by increased engagement in initiatives sponsored by international organisations, especially the ILO, which was expanding its assistance programmes in the field of workers' education (Bellucci 2019: 351–82; Guigui 1972: 93). During a meeting with the ICATU in 1972, ILO Director-General Wilfred Jenks emphasised that trade unionism should play a vital role in connecting the developmental aspirations of allegedly "progressive" elite with the working class (Jenks 1972: 2). Acting coherently with this prospect, the ICATU envisioned a new role for trade unions in development planning aimed at guaranteeing that workers received their equitable portion of the increased national wealth. To achieve this aim, trade union leadership should be "technically prepared to make a constructive contribution."[35]

Such a technocratic view of trade unionism resulted in a wide range of activities in the field of workers' education, particularly with the formation of trade union leadership. The ICATU organised two seminars on worker education, in Baghdad in 1972 and in Beirut in 1973.[36] After the second of these events, the ICATU approved a resolution recommending the creation of the Arab Office for Workers' Education (AOWE). The AOWE was located in Cairo and Fathi Kamil, former General Secretary of the ICATU, was nominated as its first director.[37] Moreover, the ICATU presented the United Nations Development Programme with a request to finance a Regional Arab Institute for Workers' Education with the support of the ILO and the Egyptian Ministry of Manpower. The Institute, which was responsible for organising training courses, was

inaugurated in December 1974 and it was also located in Cairo.[38]

In this framework, new leaders claimed greater autonomy in the organisation. Some countries and their trade unions tried to patronise the ICATU, which led to a progressive detachment of the organisation's interests from the Egyptian government. This process primarily involved leaders who were claiming pan-Arab credentials and who were seeking to emerge as alternatives to the Egyptian government. Other Arab governments turned to worker education as a tool to enlarge their leverage in the trade union camp. For this reason, the activities organised by the AOWE took place in different capitals, although the office remained in Cairo. On 1 September 1974, Tripoli hosted the first ICATU conference on workers' education in the Arab world.[39] Qaddafi ascribed great importance to worker education. In the framework of the first national plans (1971–75) to eliminate illiteracy and promote adult learning, an Institute for Workers' Education (Maʿhad al-thaqafa al-ʿummaliyya) was established in Tripoli in 1971, and the following year a branch was opened in Benghazi (al-Barbar, Ibrahim and Madi 1991: 107–8, 123–25). The following conferences took place in Damascus (1975) and Baghdad (1977), as the Syrian and Iraqi Baathist parties were claiming greater roles in the ICATU.[40]

Moreover, meetings of the central council began to take place in different Arab cities in the second half of the 1970s. Between 1976 and 1979, the central council met in Khartoum, Aden, Tunis, Damascus, Kuwait, and twice in Tripoli (CISA 1980: 28). This dislocation of meetings further confirms the ongoing decentralisation of ICATU activities beyond Cairo. A rising importance of Libya in the ICATU was evident in this process. Libya accredited itself as one of the main promoters of pan-Arab trade unionism. Besides the above-mentioned conference on workers' education in 1974 and the two central council meetings, other important events took place in the Libyan capital. The most important of these meetings was that of the Arab Confederation of Oil, Mining, and Chemical Workers (1975), a professional organisation that sought to mobilise the energy question as leverage for Palestinian liberation.[41] Other meetings in Tripoli included debates on the role of trade unions in socio-economic development (1976), on information and media (1977–78), and on worker security (1978) (CISA 1980: 35–36). In addition, Qaddafi's ambition to control pan-Arab trade unionism was exemplified by his proposal to cover the expenses of the general secretariat (al-Hani 2015: 169).

While Libya aimed to affirm its pan-Arab leadership, the other trade unions from Maghreb countries conceived their membership in the ICATU as an

important instrument of their bridging role between Arab and African labour networks. In 1974, the UGTA and the UMT were invited to draw up a joint plan to coordinate the positions of Arab-African unions in the AATUF.[42] The most important initiative in this regard took place in October 1977, when the UGTA hosted the Arab-African trade union congress in Algiers, crediting itself as an important interlocutor between the Arab and African trade union movements (CISA 1980: 32).

In the second half of the 1970s, the ICATU membership reached an unprecedented size, which further enhanced decentralisation. At its sixth congress held in Alexandria in March 1976, fourteen countries were represented by their national trade unions.[43] Affiliations of the Tunisian, Mauritanian, and Somalian trade union federations were officially accepted.[44] The affiliation of the UGTT with the ICATU demonstrates how shifting political dynamics favoured the inclusion of a union that previously opposed pan-Arab politics. Sadat, who did not attend in person, sent a message to honour the twenty-year commitment of the ICATU to Arab solidarity and support for Palestine in the struggle against Israel.[45] Bolteya, who was still in charge of the Egyptian Ministry of Labour, was reappointed as General Secretary of the confederation.[46]

Although Egypt succeeded in affirming its leadership once more, the ICATU congress agreed on the incompatibility of government office and the position of General Secretary. This decision was arguably aimed at limiting excessive Egyptian control of the organisation. Bolteya was invited to communicate within eighteen months which role he wished to retain.[47] He eventually resigned from the ICATU in a meeting of the central council in Tunis on 12–13 October 1977. The council therefore nominated a provisional General Secretary, the Iraqi Ali Hussein al-Mawla, and decided to temporarily move the general secretariat to Baghdad.[48] Moreover, it convened an extraordinary congress to be held in January 1978 to elect a new General Secretary (CISA 1980: 25–29).

A rupture between the ICATU and the Egyptian government eventually occurred in November 1977, when Sadat paid a historical official visit to Israel. The steps towards appeasement between Egypt and Israel, which were mediated by the US, were widely regarded in the Arab world as a betrayal of support for Palestinian independence (Anziska 2018: 9–14). The visit opened a phase of unrest in the ICATU, which immediately issued a statement condemning Sadat's visit (CISA 1980: 25–26). As a consequence, a meeting of the central council, which was planned to be held in Cairo at the end of the month, was cancelled. Instead, an extraordinary meeting was convened in

Tripoli between 29 November and 5 December 1977 (CISA 1980: 28). The extraordinary council was intended to put pressure on the Egyptian government and, most importantly, on its national trade union leadership, which was considered complicit in the policy of reconciliation with Israel. For this reason, the council voted to expel ETUF General Secretary Saʿad Muhammad Ahmad from the ICATU and declared its intention to establish a "workers' tribunal" to hold him accountable for having betrayed the Arab labour cause (al-Hani 2015: 167–68). Moreover, the council confirmed that the General Secretary's headquarters would be permanently moved from Cairo. Although ties with the government were strained, the AOWE continued to be based in Cairo, with Kamil still figuring as its president at the end of 1978.[49]

The extraordinary congress of the ICATU, which was eventually held in Kuwait on 13–16 February 1978, appointed the President of the Libyan NTUF, Hamid Abu Bakr Jalloud, as its new General Secretary.[50] The meeting was marked by heated discussion, and the Egyptian delegation left during the opening session, an act that was followed by the suspension of the ETUF from the ICATU. The exact dynamics behind the exclusion of the Egyptian federation are unclear. On the one hand, ICATU official sources suggest that the measure was voted for by the extraordinary congress due to the open support of the ETUF for its government's policies. On the other hand, the ETUF declared to the Egyptian press that it decided to leave the ICATU as a consequence of the hostile and politicised position taken by some Arab delegations at the congress.[51]

The ICATU seventh congress, which was held in Damascus in September 1979, definitely acknowledged the end of Egyptian hegemony over the organisation. The position of Egypt was worsened by the signing in September 1978 of the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel, which was followed by the peace treaty of March 1979 (Anziska 2018: 124). The ICATU congress harshly attacked the new orientation of the Egyptian government, denouncing a "Camp David conspiracy" and adopting a resolution against it (CISA 1980: 95–98). The ETUF leadership was accused not only because of its support of the Camp David Accords but also of not having opposed anti-popular *infitah* measures. For the first time, the ICATU officially expressed its position against economic liberalisation, blaming it for damaging the well-being of the working classes and allowing foreign monopolies to penetrate the Egyptian economy (*ibid.*: 90). To replace the ETUF, a delegation of expatriate Egyptian trade unionists who had opposed the political turn of their government was invited as observers (*ibid.*: 13).

In addition to the unanimous condemnation of Egypt, the seventh congress also witnessed the emergence of discord between the Iraqi and Syrian trade unions. This was due to the decision to move the general secretariat from Baghdad to Damascus, which led to the Iraqi delegation withdrawing from the congress.[52] This contention should be understood in the broader context of hostility between the Baathist leaderships in Iraq and Syria during the 1970s (Bengio 1998: 60; Kabalan 2020: 107–25). After timid attempts to improve their relationships and forge a unification, Saddam Hussein's ascent to power in Iraq in July 1979 and his desire to extend his regional influence fuelled further friction with Syria (Bengio 1998: 106–8). Before withdrawing from the congress, the Iraqi delegation protested against the inclusion of Iraq in a list made by the general secretariat identifying repressive government policies in Arab countries. The Iraqi delegates accused other Arab governments of not being transparent about the labour rights in their countries.[53] Eventually, the delegation obtained the removal of Iraq from the list (CISA 1980: 13). However, the Iraqi candidate for the role of General Secretary decided to step aside, and Jalloud was re-elected for a second term.[54]

Conclusion

In the 1960s, the ICATU functioned primarily as a tool of Nasser's Egypt, aimed at fostering pan-Arab unity among labour organisations. The enlargement of the number of its affiliated members allowed the ICATU to assert its legitimacy as the main representative of Arab workers. However, this expansion was the basis for a gradual fragmentation in its leadership, started with the affiliation of the UMT and the UGTA in the mid-1960s. While this was a huge step forward for pan-Arab trade unionism, the ICATU's expansion into Morocco and Algeria called into question the organisation's Egypt-centric leadership. In parallel, the growth of the Palestinian question drove further changes in the ICATU, with the 1967 war hastening Egypt's collapse as the focal point of pan-Arabism. Events such as Black September, Nasser's death, and a series of unsuccessful attempts at political unification in the region further undermined the idea of pan-Arab unity.

In the first half of the 1970s, Egyptian predominance in the ICATU remained apparently unchallenged, with the general secretariat continually in the hands of Egyptian trade union leaders. However, the arrival of Sadat in power determined a weakening of the traditional Egyptian role in the region and a subsequent competition for pan-Arab leadership. Egypt's *infitah* policy was not

openly contested by the trade union leadership, which fuelled the discontent of the working class. The ICATU assimilated some traits of the ideological framework behind the *infitah* and invited trade unions to fit in with the logic of increased productivity and improved technical competences.

The changes affecting both pan-Arabism and the role of trade unionism in the region determined a decline in Egyptian hegemony in the ICATU, with some countries and their trade unions trying to assert their prominence. Qaddafi's Libya, in particular, tended to patronise the organisation to strengthen its regional leverage, presenting itself as the true continuer of Nasser's legacy. However, the event that eventually triggered a major change in the ICATU was the appeasement of Israel by Sadat's government. This caused a crisis in the ICATU which culminated in the suspension of the ETUF in 1979 and the permanent relocation of the headquarters from Cairo to Damascus. The Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement had long-term implications for the ICATU in the subsequent decade. With the controversy over Egyptian politics, the ICATU entered a phase of crisis, which was recognised as such in the final resolution of the seventh congress of 1979. Indeed, the eighth congress was convened only ten years later, being held in Algiers on 15–18 May 1989.

Libya continued to exert a significant influence on the organisation. Jalloud maintained the position of General Secretary from 1978 until 1989. During this period, the Libyan government strongly participated in ICATU activities with economic and material support. Meanwhile, a revival of sub-regional solidarity in the Maghreb culminated in the establishment in 1989 of the Union Syndicale des Travailleurs du Maghreb Arabe, which gathered representatives from Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania. This development coincided with a renewed sense of cooperation at the government level, which was embodied by the concurrent establishment, in the same year, of the Union du Maghreb Arabe. This suggests a shift towards sub-regional cooperation, with a diminishing emphasis on the broader pan-Arab framework.

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Notes

1 - For transliterations of Arabic terms, this article follows the guidelines of the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (IJMES). Arabic proper names with a standardised spelling in English or French (such as Gamal Abdel Nasser) are maintained as such.

2 - The International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam provided ICATU reviews, while ICATU official documentation was supplied by the libraries of Utrecht University and Cornell University. Archival documentation was consulted at the International Labour Organization (ILO) archives in Geneva and the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL) archives in Rome.

3 - *La CISL et le congrès de l'UGTA*, "L'Action", 23 January 1963, p. 1.

4 - *Tlili au 17 anniversaire de la fondation de l'UGTT: "Il nous faut bien défendre ce régime dont le but est d'assurer le bien-être de la classe ouvrière"*, "L'Action", 22 January 1963, p. 1.

5 - *Rapport sur les relations internationales*, "L'Avant Garde", 12 January 1963, p. 4.

6 - *RAU (U.G.S.). Nous admirons le rôle d'Avant-Garde joué par l'U.M.T. dans le monde arabe*, "L'Avant Garde", 19 January 1963, p. 8.

7 - During his 1965 visit to the Middle East, Bourguiba emphasised the need for Palestinian and broader Arab leadership to embrace a more pragmatic approach to the liberation struggle. He suggested that negotiations with Israel might be necessary, arguing that the uncompromising stance maintained thus far had resulted only in repeated military setbacks (Chneguir 2004: 101–3).

8 - Archivio della Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro, Rome (hereafter CGIL), Rapporti con i paesi del continente africano B17/153, Nota su Egitto, Rome, 10 April 1967, p. 9.

9 - *Around the Fourth Congress of the ICATU*, "ICATU Review", n. 6, 1969, pp. 8–10.

10 - CGIL B17/153, Testo integrale delle risoluzioni del consiglio centrale della Confederazione internazionale dei sindacati dei lavoratori arabi, Damascus, 24 May 1967, pp. 3–4.

11 - CGIL Federazione sindacale mondiale (1967–68) B14/139, Press release of the WFTU - La FSM se solidarise avec les syndicats et les travailleurs des pays Arabes, Prague, 6 June 1967.

12 - CGIL B14/139, Déclaration, WFTU-ICATU joint declaration, Moscow, 8 November 1967.

13 - CGIL B14/139, Communication from Pierre Gensous, WFTU joint General Secretary, to all affiliate organisations in Europe (translated in Italian), Prague, 26 January 1968.

14 - CGIL Sindacati Egiziani (1968) B20/166, Discours du Dr. Fawzi El-Sayed, Secrétaire Général de la Fédération des Ouvrieres Arabes Au Congrès de Sofia, 29 March–1 April 1968, n.p., n.d.

15 - Information on the publication of *al-ʿUmmal al-ʿarab* was obtained by consulting international library catalogues, in particular that of the library of the University of Stanford.

16 - El-Sayed F., *The Decisive Confrontation*, "ICATU Review", n. 1, 1968, p. 3.

17 - El-Sayed F., *Pourquoi cette réunion extraordinaire?*, "Revue de la CISA", n. 16, 1970, p. 3; *Résolutions et recommandations adoptée par les travailleurs arabes en leurs réunion extraordinaire*, "Revue de la CISA", n. 16, 1970, pp. 4–7; *Resolutions of the Central Council at its Emergency Meeting in Cairo,* "ICATU Review", n. 24, 1970, pp. 14–16.

18 - Abu Bakr Y., *Why do Arabs refuse negotiations with Israel?*, "ICATU Review", n. 1, 1968, p. 12; *Une consolidation plus puissante à la révolution et aux travailleurs de Palestine*, "Revue de la CISA", n. 14, 1969, pp. 3–6; *Examples de la violation des droits de travailleurs arabes par les autorités israéliennes*, "Revue de la CISA", n. 12, 1969, pp. 14–17; Boueisseir S. M., *La lutte du peuple de Palestine au cours d'une demi-siècle*, "Revue de la CISA", n. 18, 1970, pp. 22–27.

19 - *La loi du travail en Jordanie*, "Revue de la CISA", n. 12, 1969, pp. 24–26; *La loi du travail au Liban*, "Revue de la CISA", n. 14, 1969, pp. 23–25; *La loi de retraite et de l'assurance sociale en Irak*, "Revue de la CISA", n. 15, 1970, pp. 20–24.

20 - *Abdel Nasser déclare: Le mouvement ouvrier est maintenant l'un de plus puissants courants pionniers du progrès scientifique*, "Revue de la CISA", n. 6, 1968, pp. 3–6; *Gamal Abdel Nasser annonce devant la conférence des parlementaires 'Nous n'avons autre issues que le combat'*, "Revue de la CISA", n. 15, 1970, pp. 6–11; *Nasser and Palestine*, "ICATU Review", n. 23, 1970, p. 9.

21 - *Recommendations adopted by the Committee for Amendment of the Constitution of the ICATU*, "ICATU Review", n. 6, 1969, pp. 42–44.

22 - *La Confédération Internationale des Syndicats Arabes, mythes et réalités du panarabism syndical*, "CFDT Nouvelles", n. 38/90, 1990, p. 6.

23 - *La Confédération Internationale des Syndicats Arabes, mythes et réalités du panarabism syndical*, "CFDT Nouvelles", n. 38/90, 1990, p. 7.

24 - *Labour Unity in the States of the Tripoli Agreement,* "ICATU Review", n. 24, 1970, pp. 10–12.

25 - *Dialogue ouvert en Libye entre les travailleurs et le leader de la révolution*, "Revue de la CISA", n. 14, 1969, p. 14.

26 - *Libya*, "ICATU Review", n. 20, 1970, p. 21.

27 - *World Workers Condolences to Arab workers for the Death of Nasser,* "ICATU Review", n. 23, 1970, pp. 26–29; *Nasser, by Prominent World Personalities*, "ICATU Review", n. 23, 1970, pp. 30–32.

28 - *Nasser and the Policy of Non-Alignment*, "ICATU Review", n. 23, 1970, pp. 12–13; *Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Liberation Movements in Africa*, "ICATU Review", n. 23, 1970, pp. 14–17.

29 - *Nasser and his Impact on Arab Labour Legislation*, "ICATU Review"*, n. 23, 1970, p. 10.

30 - *President Sadat Talks about the Stand of Arab Workers*, "ICATU Review", n. 24, 1970, p. 4.

31 - *Ibid.*

32 - Abdel Latif Bolteya, *A Greeting and a Meeting*, "ICATU Review", n. 34, 1972, p. 3.

33 - *Important Resolutions and Recommendations of the ICATU Central Council*, "ICATU

Review", n. 32, 1972, p. 9.

34 - *Ibid.*, p. 7.

35 - *Trade Unions Participation in Development Planning*, "ICATU Review", n. 6, 1975, p. 17.

36 - Abdel Latif Bolteya, *Labour Education… The Responsibility of Workers*, "ICATU Review", n. 3, 1974, p. 1.

37 - International Labour Organization Archives (hereafter ILOA), Workers Education Division (hereafter WED) 1-288-2, Briefing on meeting with Mr. Peter Prins, Subregional coordinator BEMME, UNDP, New York, n.p., 27 May 1974.

38 - ILOA: WED 1-288-2, Resolutions and Recommendations adopted by the ICATU central board at its fifth ordinary session, Cairo, 30 December 1974.

39 - ILOA: WED 1-288-2, Cable from Mohamed Aziz El Maraghi, Director ILO area office in Cairo, to John Whitehouse, Chief of ILO Workers Education Division, Cairo, 29 August 1974.

40 - ILOA: WED 1-288-2, The 3rd Conference on Workers' Education in the Arab Homeland, Baghdad, 3-6 December 1977, final report (translation from Arabic), n.p., n.d.

41 - *A New Move for the Arab Oil Workers*, "ICATU Review", n. 7, 1975, p. 9.

42 - *ICATU Panorama*, "ICATU Review", n. 5, 1974, p. 25.

43 - The countries represented were Jordan, Tunisia, Algeria, Syria, Somalia, Iraq, Palestine, Kuwait, Libya, Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania, Yemen Arab Republic, and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. *Resolutions and Recommendations*, "The ICATU Review", n. 1, 1976, p. 32.

44 - *Ibid.*, p. 33.

45 - University of Maryland (hereafter UMD), Anwar Sadat Archives, President Anwar El Sadat on the General conference of the international confederation of the Arab Trade Unions on its 20th anniversary, 24 March 1976, https://tinyurl.com/52s2n6mp (last accessed on 16 June 2024).

46 - *The Confederation will Spare no Effort in Providing Support Until Unity is Achieved*, "ICATU Review" n. 1, 1976, p. 6.

47 - ILOA: WED 1-288-2, Report n. 79 on the sixth Congress of the ICATU, Alexandria, 24–28 March 1976.

48 - ILOA: WED 1-288-2, Letter from A. Abualam, Regional Adviser in Cairo, to J. R. W. Whitehouse, Chief EDUC, Geneva, 26 October 1977.

49 - ILOA: WED 1-288-2, Receipt from Fathi Kamil to ILO Office in Cairo, 15 October 1978.

50 - ILOA: WED 1-288-2, Letter from the General Secretariat of the ICATU to All Trade Union Organisations, n.p., n.d., received by the ILO Registry on 6 March 1978.

51 - ILOA: WED, 1-288-2, *Trade Union Federation Quits the ICATU*, "The Egyptian Gazette", 1978, p. 3.

52 - ILOA: WED, 1-288-2, *Ba'th conflict over ICATU's headquarter*, paper cut from "Al-Gomhoriya", 17 February 1978.

53 - ILOA: WED 1-288-2-FS-1, Report on the 7th Congress of the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions held in Damascus from 24-27 September 1979, n.p., 22 October 1979, pp. 3–4.

54 - *Ibid*., p. 7.

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