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THE STRUGGLES OF LABOUR MOBILISATION IN LEBANON AND IRAQ

Anne Kirstine Rønn

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About the Author

Anne Kirstine Rønn is a Visiting Fellow at the LSE Middle East Centre. She holds a PhD in Political Science from Aarhus University and has been awarded a two-year Postdoctoral Fellowship by the Carlsberg Foundation.

Her research explores opposition movements in ethno-religiously divided societies with a particular focus on Lebanon and Iraq. In her PhD, she investigated the challenges protesters in Lebanon's 2019 October Uprising faced when seeking to build solidarity between citizens across sects, class and geographical divides. Her postdoctoral research focuses on the Lebanese and Iraqi labour movements and examines their potential as oppositional forces against the ruling elites of the two countries. Specifically, she investigates the dynamics of trade unions and other alternative forms of labour mobilisation in the aftermath of the 2019 uprisings.

Abstract

This paper offers an analysis of contemporary Lebanese and Iraqi labour movements, aiming to explain their hitherto modest role as oppositional forces, and discuss their future potentials. Adopting a wide understanding of labour movements as encompassing both trade unions and professional syndicates, the paper traces the battle between ruling sectarian elites and opposition actors who seek to reduce elite dominance over organised labour. Instead, these movements promote class- or labour-based communities that transcend sect divisions. Drawing on data from interviews with Lebanese and Iraqi activists and members of the labour movement, as well as secondary sources, the paper uncovers differences in the strategies elites have used to thwart oppositional agency within these two types of organisations and across contexts. Moreover, it analyses how opposition groups in turn have sought to exploit narrow opportunities to exercise resistance. Finally, it reflects on the potential for strengthening these movements and explores the trade-offs between different opposition strategies.

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Executive Summary

While organised labour has been a key driver of resistance to authoritarian rule in countries such as Sudan and Egypt, it has played a more marginal role in opposition to the ruling elites in Lebanon and Iraq. This paper offers an analysis of the barriers and opportunities facing contemporary Lebanese and Iraqi labour movements, contributing towards explaining their modest role as an oppositional force, and their future potentials. Adopting a wide understanding of organised labour as encompassing both trade unions and professional syndicates, this research provides an overview of the struggles of each of these two categories of organisations. First, it provides an overview of the strategies elites have employed to control and repress oppositional agency. Secondly, it shows how activists and groups have sought to reclaim independence and challenge the status quo within the realm of both trade unions and professional syndicates. The analysis shows that elites have used different strategies to thwart oppositional agency within trade unions and professional syndicates. In the case of trade unions, the common elite strategy has been to take control of key coordinating bodies, leaving workers without effective, formal nationwide organisations. In response to this, trade union activists and workers' groups have responded by organising self-directed strikes and creating alternative union-like organisations at the sectoral and workplace levels. In the case of syndicates, elites have used elections for leadership positions to exert control. In turn, elections have become central battlegrounds between candidates backed by the elites and those backed by opposition groups with roots in popular protest movements. Additionally, the paper discusses the internal debates within these organisations, where the tension between idealism and pragmatic goals often influences their strategies. By drawing on interviews with labour activists and secondary sources, the paper reflects on the potential for strengthening these movements and explores the trade-offs between strategies that seek to reclaim the existing formal trade unions and professional syndicates on the one hand, and alternative modes of campaigning, which take place outside the realm of formal organisations. It concludes by calling for further research to identify the conditions under which labour mobilisation can be effective in similar political contexts with institutionalised political sectarianism.

Introduction and Context

In October 2019, large numbers of Iraqis and Lebanese took to the streets, protesting against their countries' sectarian political systems and corrupt ruling elites. Among the various social and political issues raised in these uprisings, socio-economic justice emerged as a central theme, with analysts emphasising the unseen levels of class-based solidarity and the active participation of workers. While socio-economic demands were often framed in broad terms, some demonstrators also called for specific reforms, including greater employment opportunities, labour rights and improved working conditions. In the Iraqi uprising, for instance, long-standing demands from public sector employees and industrial workers for better pay and fairer working conditions were echoed in the streets.[1] In the Lebanese uprising, workers from across various professions voiced their grievances, with fishermen staging sit-ins on their boats[2] and retired soldiers reiterating calls against pension cuts.[3]

Given the emphasis on socio-economic issues and class, an outsider might have expected Lebanese and Iraqi trade unions, workers' groups, and syndicates to have played a key role in the two uprisings, much like their counterparts did in the 2011 Egyptian and Tunisian revolts and the 2018–19 popular movements against authoritarian rule in Algeria and Sudan.[4] However, the role of labour in the Lebanese and Iraqi cases was marginal. In Lebanon, for instance, the General Confederation of Labour (GCL), which is the main body coordinating industrial unions, did not call a strike. Instead, it issued a statement three weeks into the uprising, which protesters met with dismay.[5] In Iraq, student unions emerged as the most vocal and important organising groups, and student leaders were sceptical about the ability of trade unions and professional syndicates to act as representatives of the uprising's demands.[6] This, however, did not mean that Lebanese and Iraqi labour movements were completely absent from the streets. In fact, many labour activists in Iraq supported popular demands and had a visible presence in the protest encampments that emerged across the country.[7] Moreover, the uprising brought about new communities

[1] Janan Aljabiri, 'Everything You Need to Know About the Protests in Iraq', *Jacobin*, 6 December 2019. Available at: https://jacobin.com/2019/12/iraq-protests-baghdad-tahrir-square (accessed 4 February 2025).

[2] 'Fishermen in Tyre Demonstrate on Board of their Boats' [Video], *LBC*, 2019. Available at: https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/d/breaking-news/477786/fishermen-in-tyre-demonstrate-on-board-of-their-bo/en (accessed 7 February 2025).

[3] Jadaliyya Co-Editors in Beirut, 'Ongoing Post on Protests in Beirut/Lebanon', *Jadaliyya*, 18 October 2019. Available at: https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/40115 (accessed 4 February 2025).

[4] Gianni Del Panta, 'Defeating Autocrats from Below: Insights from the 2019 Algerian Uprising', *Contemporary Politics* 28, no. 5 (2022): 539–57.

[5] Deen Shariff Sharp, 'Lebanon Unsettled: The Spatialities of the October 2019 Uprising', *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series* 73 (October 2023), p. 18.

[6] Observations from fieldwork and interviews in Baghdad

[7] The roles of syndicates and unions have been elaborated in the author's fieldwork interviews in Iraq. For the role of labour movements in the protest squares, see also Zahra Ali, 'The 2019 Iraqi Uprising and the Feminist Imagination', *Centre Tricontinental*, 27 October 2021. Available at: https://www.tni.org/en/article/the-2019-iraqi-uprising-and-the-feminist-imagination (accessed 4 February 2025).

and initiatives addressing issues of labour and employment.[8] In Lebanon, activists from various professional backgrounds, including university professors, artists and journalists, established an alternative syndicate at the peak of the mobilisation.[9] The uprising gave momentum to campaigns seeking to replace party backed figures within the leaderships of the most powerful professional associations. In sum, the two October uprisings illustrated both the limitations and the potential of labour mobilisation as a vehicle of political change in Lebanon and Iraq. This, in turn, has prompted scholars to ask how and under which conditions opposition forces can gain more traction within the Lebanese and Iraqi labour movements and thus contribute to promote democratic life, push for social protection, and uproot the incumbent sectarian regimes.[10]

Lebanon and Iraq are both divided societies with institutionalised power sharing systems. In Lebanon, formal power sharing is stipulated in two main agreements, the first of which is the unwritten National Pact. Negotiated at the country's independence in 1943, the pact introduced a sect-based division of seats in Lebanon's parliament. It implied that the country's president must be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni, and the speaker of parliament a Shiʿa.[11] The second agreement, the Taʾif Accord, was adopted in 1989 at the end of the Lebanese Civil War and introduced the current 50/50 division of seats in parliament between Christians and Muslims.[12] Iraq's power-sharing framework, the *muhasasa* system, was implemented after 2003 to allocate government positions among Shiʿa, Sunni, and Kurdish groups in the country. Following this framework, the presidency is traditionally held by a Kurd, the prime minister post by a Shiʿa Arab, and the role of speaker of parliament by a Sunni Arab. Ministerial and senior bureaucratic positions are also distributed proportionally among political factions representing these groups.

In both Lebanon and Iraq, power sharing is seen as contributing to freezing sect-based and ethnic cleavages and concentrating power in the hands of a narrow elite, who present themselves as patrons and protectors of their respective communities.[13] As Toby Dodge argues with reference to Iraq, sectarianism can be understood as a dominant principle of how society is structured, which contributes to upholding the elites' symbolic power and dominance.[14] The emergence of trans-sectarian political communities is a threat to this principle vision, and the elites therefore do what they can to prevent it. This is evident within the realm of labour, where a battle plays out between the ruling sectarian elites and various groups, individuals and organisations which seek to reduce elite dominance over organised labour and instead promote class- or labour-based communities that tran-

[8] See e.g. Workers Against Sectarianism.

[9] Jamil Mouawad, 'Lebanese Trade Unions and Independent Professional Associations: A Review in Light of the Popular Movement', *Arab Reform Initiative*, 2021.

[10] See Rima Majed and Janan Aljabiri, 'Contemporary Social Movements in Iraq: Mapping the Labor Movement and the 2015 Mobilizations', 2020; Mouawad, 'Lebanese Trade Unions and Independent Professional Associations'.

[11] This division of power was never formally stated or spelled out but has remained an entrenched norm.

[12] This was a change in the distribution from the National Pact, which had a 6:5 distribution of seats between Christians and Muslims.

[13] See Bassel F Salloukh, Rabie Barakat, Jinan S Al-Habbal, Lara. W Khattab and Shoghig Mikaelian, *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2015).

[14] Toby Dodge, 'Beyond Structure and Agency: Rethinking Political Identities in Iraq after 2003', *Nations and Nationalism* 26, no. 1 (2020), pp. 108–22.

scend sect-based divisions. These actors, who can overall be referred to as oppositional forces, are genuinely opposed to political sectarianism, and many of them are connected to popular movements like the 2019 October uprisings. However, they are also internally diverse and reflect the vast differences that exist within the realm of Lebanese and Iraqi grassroots politics and civil society. Groups that challenge sectarian politics within the two countries' labour movements therefore include both traditional leftist actors like communist parties and new groups which were formed during the recent decade's popular mobilisations. They also span from secular and vocally anti-sectarian grassroots to more reformist actors with ties to traditional parties and elites.[15]

To understand the battles over labour mobilisation in postwar Lebanon and Iraq, it is necessary to take a step back and examine the legacy of the two countries' labour movements. Each have a long history of organised labour, and bodies representing workers and employees' rights were not always as weak as they are today. Lebanon witnessed the emergence of a range of labour organisations in the first half of the twentieth century and in the decades before the 1975–1990 civil war, trade unions had become significant political agents, representing workers and professionals collectively.[16] Despite being constrained by government intervention and divisions between federations of different political and ideological affiliations, the Lebanese labour movement managed to hold major strikes and push for improvement of workers' rights and conditions.[17] Even in the first years after the civil war, unions continued to challenge the post-war elite and their neoliberal economic policies.[18] However, as I will elaborate below, unions became severely weakened after the mid-1990s, where many of them were successfully co-opted by the elites. In Iraq, various trade unions and syndicates emerged after the state's establishment in the early 1920s. Following the overthrow of the British-backed monarchy in 1958, labour organisations, many of which were affiliated with the Iraqi Communist Party, gained influence and could rally large crowds. However, when the Ba'ath Party came to power in 1968, organised labour faced increased constraints, and under Saddam Hussein's rule, unions and syndicates became mere instruments of regime-led repression.[19]

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[15] For conceptual debates on what it means to counter or oppose sectarianism, see Simon Mabon, 'Four Questions about De-Sectarianization', *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 18, no. 1 (2020), pp. 1–11; John Nagle, *Social Movements in Violently Divided Societies: Constructing Conflict and Peacebuilding* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

[16] See Lea Bou Khater, *The Labour Movement in Lebanon: Power on Hold* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022).

[17] For a historical overview of Lebanon's labour movement, see Rossana Tufaro, 'A Historical Mapping of Lebanese Organized Labor: Tracing Trends, Actors, and Dynamics', *Civil Society Knowledge Centre*, 2021; Bou Khater, *The Labour Movement in Lebanon*.

[18] The extent to which trade unions were opposing the elite can be debated. Some authors portray trade unions as the most organised political force against the post-war sectarian elite and their economic policies. See Hannes Baumann, 'Social Protest and the Political Economy of Sectarianism in Lebanon', *Global Discourse* 6, no. 4 (2016): pp. 634–49. Others authors point out a need to nuance this perception. Notably, while some unions were leftist, others were right-wing and collaborated with right-leaning political parties that represented the leading economic and political forces in Lebanon. Moreover, the CGL challenged ruling elite coalitions by allying with rival political leaders and elite figures. See Bou Khater, *The Labour Movement in Lebanon*.

[19] Ali Taher Alhammood, 'Union Action and Protests in Iraq: A Problematic Relationship - Case Study on the National Union of Journalists', *Arab Reform Initiative*, 2021.

Although post-war Lebanon and post-invasion Iraq have seen a rise in opposition against political sectarianism, including mass popular protests, the labour movements have not managed to regain their former strength or become significant forces within this popular opposition.[20] The goal of this paper is to explain the current weakness of these movements and discuss their future potentials. Firstly, it offers an introduction to the battles between elites and opposition forces within the realm of labour mobilisation, useful in informing practitioners and academic readers less familiar with the subject. Secondly, it brings new original data in dialogue with existing findings on labour mobilisation and opposition movements in Lebanon and Iraq. Thirdly, it provides comparative insights concerning the barriers and opportunities for labour mobilisation in contemporary Lebanon and Iraq, which have so far mainly been analysed separately.[21]

The paper draws on secondary sources and original anonymised interviews with Lebanese and Iraqi labour activists, members of labour organisations, and the countries' wider opposition movements. Most interviews about labour mobilisation in Lebanon were collected through field work trips between 2021 and 2023. During these trips, the author conducted interviews with over 50 activists engaged in mobilising and organising around issues of labour and socio-economic justice. Interviews address a variety of topics, ranging from specific campaigns waged by activists to challenge elites through professional syndicates and trade unions, to more general topics such as the struggles of raising class awareness or the interactions between labour organisations and political grassroots. Primary interview data on Iraqi labour organisations were collected during two fieldwork trips to Baghdad in October 2023 and February 2024, during which the author interviewed over 30 individuals, representing a cross-section of members of trade unions, union federations, professional syndicates and other groups, such as student organisations and grassroots political formations which participated in the 2019 Tishreen Uprising and other oppositional activities. Interview questions covered the struggle to empower labour organisations in postwar Iraq, as well as the participation of trade unions and syndicates in popular mobilisations against the ruling elites. While labour movements face several interlinked barriers, a primary focus of this paper is on the direct strategies elites use to disempower and control various labour organisations. The paper thus highlights the similarities and differences in these counter-strategies between Lebanon and Iraq, identifying how labour activists have sought to exercise oppositional agency amidst these challenges.

The analysis is divided into four main sections, the first of which provides an overview of the Lebanese and Iraqi labour movements, emphasising the differences between trade unions and professional syndicates. The second and third sections explore, respectively,

[20] For more details about these movements, see Zahra Ali, 'From Recognition to Redistribution? Protest Movements in Iraq in the Age of "New Civil Society"', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 15, no. 4 (2021): pp. 528–42; Stephanie Daher, 'Unpacking the Dynamics of Contentious Mobilisations in Lebanon: Between Continuity and Evolution', *Civil Society Knowledge Centre, Lebanon Support* (August 2021). Available at: https://civilsociety-centre.org/paper/unpacking-dynamics-contentious-mobilisations-lebanon-between-continuity-and-evolution (accessed 7 February 2025).

[21] Notable publications on Lebanon include Bou Khater, *The Labour Movement in Lebanon*; on Iraq, see: Alhammood, 'Union Action and Protests in Iraq'; Majed and Aljabiri, 'Contemporary Social Movements in Iraq'.

the barriers and opportunities for each of these two types of organisations. The final section concludes the paper and discusses the potential for Lebanese and Iraqi labour mobilisation. It explores avenues to become more effective vehicles of resistance against political sectarianism, promoting alternative political communities based on interests that cut across sect.

Overview of the Lebanese and Iraqi Labour Movements

Lebanon and Iraq's labour movements comprise two main types of organisations, regulated by different sets of laws. The first type is trade unions, which organise workers in various industries and are grouped into union federations. The second type is professional syndicates, which organise high-skilled labour such as lawyers and doctors. Due to their membership framework and the fact that they organise skilled professionals rather than workers, these organisations are not always considered as labour organisations. However, in line with several previous analyses, I include professional syndicates as components within the two countries' labour movements.[22] I do so because they constitute platforms that, at least in principle, can unite citizens across sect, around common interests related to their profession and work. Moreover, professional syndicates have in several instances collaborated with workers to advance independent trade union activism and empower labour mobilisation across sectors. Below, I elaborate on the structure, purpose and membership of unions and professional syndicates.

When discussing the role of trade unions in Lebanon and Iraq, it is firstly important to note that these organisations represent only a small fraction of the workforce. For instance, only 5–7% of the Lebanese workforce were members of trade unions in 2020, compared to 22.3% in 1965.[23] The low degree of unionisation is not unique to Lebanon and Iraq and mirrors a global decline in labour union membership. Moreover, it can partly be explained by the structure of the Lebanese and Iraqi labour markets, where large segments of the workforce are difficult to organise within the existing formal trade unions, being employed in informal sectors or without a job.[24] Low union membership is also a result of a set of specific legal restrictions, which prevent various groups and sectors from organising formally in the two countries. In Lebanon, public sector workers (except for army employees) can organise,[25] but civil servants are more restricted than private sector workers.[26] Notably, they cannot legally form a union, but can instead be part of public sector

[22] See Nadim El Kak, 'Lebanon's Alternative Labor Movement: In Between Collapse and Revolutionary Imaginaries', in Jeffrey G. Karam & Rima Majed, eds, *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019: Voices from the Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2022), pp. 130–9.

[23] Lea Bou Khater, 'Public Sector Mobilisation Despite a Dormant Workers' Movement', *Confluences Méditerranée*, no. 1 (2015): pp. 125–42.

[24] Although unemployed and informal sector workers can still technically be members of unions, they have less incentives to be. The authors' interviews suggest that it is more difficult for labour activists to mobilise and organise these segments.

[25] 10–12 percent of employment was in the public sector or defence in 2022. ILO, 'Lebanon Follow-Up Labour Force Survey January 2022', *International Labour Organization*, 14 June 2022. Available at: https://www.ilo.org/publications/lebanon-follow-labour-force-survey-january-2022 (accessed 12 February 2025).

[26] Bou Khater, 'Public Sector Mobilisation Despite a Dormant Workers' Movement'.

'leagues', which have become de facto representatives of public workers, even though they are not legally considered trade unions.[27] Finally, Lebanon's hundreds of thousands of migrant domestic workers are excluded from labour organising.[28] In Iraq, parts of the labour legislation adopted under Saddam Hussein in 1987 remain in effect, including Decree 150, which forbids the unionisation of public sector employees.[29] As public sector employees constitute a significant share of the country's workforce,[30] the lack of organising rights for these groups is seen by union members as a major obstacle to a strong workers' movement.[31] Finally, Lebanese and Iraqi workers also refrain from joining unions because these organisations are seen as instruments of the ruling elites. For instance, a 2023 report by the Iraqi Observatory for Workers and Employees' Rights shows that while fewer than 4% of surveyed young Iraqi workers were union members, 55% expressed a desire to join trade unions if they were independent, democratic and effective in representing their members.[32] A central aim of the paper is to explain the factors that hinder independent trade unionism and shed light on the attempts to reclaim it.

In contrast to trade unions, professional syndicates have mandatory membership in both Lebanon and Iraq. Hence, one must be a member of a professional syndicate to practise professions like medicine and law.[33] The primary purpose of professional syndicates is to protect members' interests and set membership terms to safeguard the profession. However, they also offer social support, pensions and health coverage for members and their families, and sometimes play a role in broader political campaigns and mobilisations. In Lebanon, for instance, syndicates are intended to work as providers of social protection. That means each syndicate has its own social trust fund, which in exchange of a regular fee, provides members, and often also their dependent family, with health coverage and a regular pension payment following retirement.[34] Similarly, in Iraq, professional syndicates such as the Lawyers Association, the Accountants Association and the Pharmacists Syndicate offer their members pension schemes and other social benefits. Finally, professional syndicates also conduct reports and engage in debates about policies and reforms related to the profession they work in.

Moreover, besides the struggles that take place around trade unions and professional syndicates, Lebanon and Iraq have also experienced strikes, protests and other initia-

[27] Ibid.

[28] Lea Bou Khater, 'Did Someone Say Workers? (Part 1 of 2)', *The Public Source*, 2020.

[29] Majed and Aljabiri, 'Contemporary Social Movements in Iraq', p. 29.

[30] Successive governments have used the creation of public sector jobs as a form of patronage. By the end of 2020, 55 percent of the total working population were receiving a government salary (civil servants, military personnel, retirees, and people receiving social benefits) and in June 2023 the parliament approved a $153bn budget aimed at creating hundreds of thousands of new public sector jobs.

[31] Interview with trade unionist, Baghdad, 2024.

[32] Iraqi Observatory for Workers and Employees' Rights, 'The Reality of Workers and Employees in Iraq', *Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative,* 1 May 2023. Available at: https://www.iraqicivilsociety.org/archives/13945 (accessed 6 February 2025).

[33] Mouawad, 'Lebanese Trade Unions and Independent Professional Associations'.

[34] Shaya Laughlin, Guy Saad & David Wood, 'Risky Business: How Syndicates Exposed Pensions to Lebanon's Banking Crisis', *Triangle*, 2021. Available at: https://thebadil.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Syndicates_finalF.pdf

tives outside the realm of these two forms of organisations. Moreover, there have been attempts to establish alternatives trade unions and professional syndicates, which have operated without formal government recognition. The final section will examine the trade-off between these different strategies of labour mobilisation.

The Struggles of Trade Unionism

As explained earlier, trade unionism in Lebanon and Iraq has been weakened and marred by political co-option. However, as I will show in this section, elites have employed a range of strategies to enhance their control over trade unions, and differences prevail between Lebanon and Iraq. Moreover, despite their limited success, labour activists have still sought to battle co-option and continue to exploit narrow windows of opportunity and explore ways to promote workers' rights.

In Lebanon, there are numerous smaller trade unions that organise workers at the sectoral and even company level. For instance, the workers and employees of state-owned power provider Electricité du Liban have their own syndicate. These trade unions are grouped into federations, many of which are members of the General Confederation of Labour (GCL). While the GCL was meant to be the main body representing and coordinating the interests of Lebanon's various industrial unions, it is often cited as a textbook example of elite co-option. The GCL allows several competing trade union federations to exist within the same sector, granting each, regardless of size, the same number of representatives and votes in internal elections. This has meant that by creating new unions with few members, elites can elect party loyalists to the GCL leadership. In the late 1990s, this led to the establishment of a cascade of new unions and federations, and by 2010 the GCL comprised 580 unions and 51 federations, most of which were controlled by competing sectarian and political factions, fighting for influence within the organisation.[35] The co-option, however, also served the collective benefit of these rival parties, as it prevented workers from forming an opposition to the neoliberal policies that were (and still are) a key pillar of the sectarian political system in Lebanon.

While the co-option of the GCL severely hampered private sector trade unionism, independent workers' action continued among teachers and public sector workers, who are organised into three separate leagues. Since creating new leagues is legally prohibited, the elites could not repeat the strategy they had used to weaken the GCL. Instead, they had to find other ways to undermine these groups when they organised around a joint initiative in 2011. The initiative, called the Union Coordination Committee (UCC), represented more than 200,000 employees and sought better wages through strikes, boycotts and a series of demonstrations. While the government initially agreed to the UCC's proposal for a new salary scale, it resigned before implementation. Consequently, the law was renegotiated by the new cabinet and amended to the disadvantage of teachers and public workers. This led the UCC to call for new strikes and demonstrations, and the teachers decided to boycott exam grading. Although they withstood political pressure to end the

[35] Janine A. Clark and Bassel F. Salloukh, 'Elite Strategies, Civil Society, and Sectarian Identities in Postwar Lebanon', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 04 (2013): pp. 731–49.

boycott, the Minister of Education obtained the cabinet's approval to issue grades and exam certificates without public teachers' participation. Moreover, in 2015, the traditional political elites united in a coalition to topple Hanna Gharib, head of the League of Secondary Public School Teachers, who was widely recognised as the leader of the UCC.[36]

With the defeat of one of the UCC's most prominent voices, public sector workers and teachers were – like private sector workers – left without an independent, overarching trade union body. However, the elite strategies described above did not render it impossible to use trade unionism as a strategy to push for workers' rights and conditions in Lebanon. In fact, the past 15 years have seen several attempts to unite workers around new alternative unions and other contentious activities. While these attempts have been at a minor scale, they have nevertheless provided crucial strategic and organisational experience for activists within the realm of labour organising. In 2012, workers at the Spinney's supermarket chain mobilised against poor wages and labour rights and sought to establish a union to push for these demands.[37] The workers faced forced transfers, threats and other forms of pressure from politically affiliated owners of the Spinneys branches. However, they also received support from former Minister of Labour Charbel Nahas,[38] as well as from the NGOs Lebanese Labour Watch and Legal Agenda, which advised the Spinneys employees on how to organise a union and supported their legal cases against the supermarket chain.[39] In 2015, another alternative union was launched for migrant domestic workers, who suffer from a lack of protection and poor working conditions under the *kafala* (sponsorship) system.[40] Despite not gaining official recognition from the Ministry of Labour, the union became affiliated with the National Federation of Workers' and Employees' Unions in Lebanon (FENASOL), a union federation with ties to the Lebanese Communist Party, which in 2012 had decided to withdraw its membership from the GCL.[41] Moreover, it was supported by the ILO Bureau of Workers' Activities in Beirut and several local NGOs, including the Anti-Racism Movement in Lebanon and KAFA, a secular NGO combating gender-based violence and exploitation. In the following years, the issue of migrant workers' rights remained on the agenda of grassroots activists, alongside initiatives to improve the conditions of other vulnerable groups in the labour market, such as food delivery workers.[42] Despite their limited success, these cases illustrate how workers,

[36] Bou Khater, 'Public Sector Mobilisation Despite a Dormant Workers' Movement'.

[37] Michele Scala, 'Clientelism and Contention: The Example of the Mobilization of Spinneys Workers in Lebanon', *Confluences Méditerranée* 92, no. 1 (2015): pp. 113–23.

[38] Charbel Nahas resigned from his position in February 2012, and in 2016, he established the Citizens Within a State party, which is commonly described as left-leaning and in opposition to Lebanon's traditional sect-based political elites and their party apparatuses.

[39] Alexi Touma, 'Breaking the Mold: Arab Civil Society Actors and Their Quest to Influence Policy-Making', *Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy*, 2019. Available at: https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Documents/publications/conference_reports/2019-2020/2019_ifi_breaking_the_mold_conference_report.pdf (accessed 6 February 2025).

[40] For more information about the *Kafala* system, see Amrita Pande, '"The Paper that you Have in your Hand is my Freedom": Migrant Domestic Work and the Sponsorship (Kafala) System in Lebanon', *International Migration Review* 47, no. 2 (2013): pp. 414–41.

[41] For more about FENASOL's involvement, see Farah Kobaissy, 'Organizing the Unorganized: Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon', *Cairo Papers in Social Science* 34, No. 3, American University in Cairo Press, 2017.

[42] Efforts to support and organise delivery workers were discussed during the author's fieldwork in

NGOs and political activists have continued to form alliances to create alternative structures to the co-opted trade unions. However, as the above examples illustrate, forming alternative trade unions is a difficult strategy, which – given the legal barriers – has so far had limited success in organising workers on a larger scale. This begs the question of to what extent can formal trade unions serve to push for changes despite elite co-option.

The past decades of mobilisation and oppositional campaigning reveal that there remain some ways in which traditional trade unions can play a role in challenging elite co-optation. Firstly, opposition activists have, in some instances, used traditional trade unions as sources of information about workers' conditions, despite their political dependence. This is exemplified in the words of an organiser of an independent electoral campaign in Lebanon in 2012:

> You know, in Lebanon we don't have actual unions. Most of the unions are controlled by the political parties. [...] but we understood this, and we were trying just to ask for more information to get more educated about the situation, to have a picture of the problems and to find a solution.[43]

In later electoral campaigns, smaller collaborations also occurred between political activists and smaller, sector-specific unions. For instance, the head of the Fishermen's Cooperative in one of Beirut's districts was on the candidate list for the Beirut Madinati Campaign, which competed against the traditional elites in the 2016 municipal elections in the Lebanese capital.[44] Secondly, the elites' grip on trade unions has not hindered the staging of strikes. In fact, numerous workers' protests and strikes have taken place amidst the economic crisis, and some groups have been particularly active in mobilising.[45] These include private and public teachers, who have staged numerous strikes during recent years, as well as the workers and employees of Electricité du Liban.[46] To an outside observer, these developments might appear to indicate that the economic crisis could help revive traditional trade unionism. However, one needs to be aware that the crisis – coupled with the pandemic, the Beirut Port explosion and devastating Israeli bombardments – has also left many Lebanese increasingly economically insecure and dependent on the clientelist services provided by the sectarian parties.[47]

Like in Lebanon, Iraqi elites have managed to overtake major trade union bodies, impeding their ability to independently represent workers' interests. However, Iraqi trade unions

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Beirut in October 2023 and are still at a more nascent stage. For more information on the issue of delivery workers in Lebanon, see Maya Gebeily & Timour Azhari '"Like Slaves": Lebanon's Delivery Riders Struggle as Crisis Bites', *Reuters*, 22 October 2021. Available at: https://news.trust.org/item/20211022090230-us99t (accessed 6 February 2025).

[43] Author's interview with Lebanese activist, May 2018.

[44] Mona Fawaz, 'Beirut Madinati and the Prospects of Urban Citizenship', *The Century Foundation*, 2019. Available at: https://tcf.org/content/report/beirut-madinati-prospects-urban-citizenship/ (accessed 6 February 2025).

[45] See Daher, 'Unpacking the Dynamics of Contentious Mobilisations in Lebanon'.

[46] See Kareem Chehayeb, 'Lebanon Teachers Strike over Conditions as Education Crisis Grows', *Al Jazeera*, 2022; 'EDL workers announce three-day strike', *Orient Today*, 2024.

[47] See Anne Kirstine Rønn, 'Poverty or Virus? Lebanon's Uprising Continues Despite the Pandemic', *openDemocracy*, 2020; for literature on clientelism in Lebanon, see Melani Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

and their members have faced more violent repression than their Lebanese counterparts. A substantial number of Iraqi union activists, many of whom returned from exile after 2003 to revive the labour movement, have been assassinated, abducted or forcibly transferred to remote workplaces.[48] Moreover, violent strategies were employed by elites to shut down or take control of trade union organisations. The case of the General Federation of Iraqi Workers (GFIW) exemplifies the counter-strategies used by Iraq's political elites and affiliated militias against trade unions. Established in 2005, the GFIW merged remnants of old trade union federations with newer labour organisations linked to the Communist Party. Led by former exiled union activists, it was the only union federation in Iraq granted formal recognition by the state. However, in the following years, it became perceived – especially by Shiʿa factions – as increasingly dangerous for the ruling elites, and in April 2011, the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs announced his rejection of the organisation. Following this announcement, the GFIW headquarters were raided by armed militia members, their assets and equipment confiscated, and their members forced to leave the offices. This act of repression paved the way for the Iraqi cabinet to take control of the organisation by replacing its executive board with a so-called 'Ministerial Preparatory Committee,' consisting mostly of officials affiliated with the Sadrist Party.[49] A former member of the GWIF recalls what happened after the incident:

> Two days later, there was a demonstration in front of the office, and I managed to enter the office. And when I entered, they received me with a 'welcome! we are here, come join us', and then later, the minister sent out a message to us and said, 'yes, this is the union. We took it. Whether you like it or not, we are dominating this union.' But of course, we refused to join.[50]

As this shows, GFIW members were willing to withstand political pressure to rejoin their union, after it had been taken over by the ruling political elites. Moreover, as the interviewee later explained, it was still possible for the old GFIW unionists to create a new federation, GFITU, which managed to continue some of their collaboration with the regional and international trade union organisations they had partnered with before the GFIW was taken over. They continued working to improve labour rights, and in 2018, they joined a coalition with five other non-sanctioned workers' federations to push for the ratification of the law allowing freedom of association.[51] While some of the non-sanctioned workers' federations in Iraq are small and fragmented, others, like the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions (IFOU), are more significant. Despite being officially illegal, IFOU had organised 26,000 oil sector workers in the southern regions by 2006, launched mass strikes that

[48] In several cases, elites and militias targeted trade unionists who had been leading strike actions or advocating for legal reforms, such as abolishing the law that forbids public sector workers' unionisation. See The International Trade Union Confederation's 'Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights – Iraq'. Surveys from 2007–13 are available at www.refworld.org (accessed 6 February 2025).

[49] 'Repression Continues on Iraqi Trade Unions', *IndustryAll*, 2011. Available at: https://www.industriall-union.org/archive/icem/repression-continues-on-iraqi-trade-unions (accessed 6 February 2025).

[50] Interview with labour activist, Baghdad, February 2024.

[51] Majed and Aljabiri, 'Contemporary Social Movements in Iraq', p. 31.

brought oil production to a halt for several days, and contributed to coordinating rallies demanding the rights of public sector workers to unionise.[52]

However, interviews with protesters in Iraq suggest that Iraqi union federations are still not widely perceived as independent representatives of the interests of workers. Even if they are seen to resist some pressure from the current elites, they are still considered by younger activists to represent the same autocratic mindset that dominates politics in Iraq and has done so since the Baʿath era. As one interviewee explained:

> The majority of the unionists are the old generation, and they still don't have open minds. They think if they are on a TV channel, they are something, if they say something on social media, they think they are influential. They talk a lot, but they don't have any impact. They are similar to a person who sings in the shower and thinks he's a great singer. […] Unionists are of old age. Whenever the youth comes with suggestions, they feel threatened. This mentality comes from the dictatorship.[53]

Reflecting on the problem described above, some activists argue that the best way to revive and empower trade unionism in Iraq is through the establishment of alternative organisations that can embody new political cultures and provide a vehicle for young voices within the labour movement. In Iraq's postwar era, there have been several attempts to create alternative modes of labour organisation, and worker-led strikes and protests have occurred across sectors, from leather manufacturers to electricity company employees.[54] In the 2019 Tishreen Uprising, several new initiatives emerged. For instance, tuk-tuk (rickshaw) drivers, known for transporting wounded protesters, created a network called the 'Tuk-Tuk Iraq Union' to coordinate actions.[55] Meanwhile, the NGO Workers Against Sectarianism (WAS) sought to initiate conversations on how to organise unemployed and precarious workers in Iraq.[56] WAS is a small leftist initiative with limited influence on the labour movement at large. However, their method of working and strategy can be seen as an example of the visions of alternative forms of labour activism that have thrived among some of the young progressive grassroots organisers that formed the backbone of the uprising. The founder of WAS, when interviewed, described the group's purpose as to dismantle sectarianism in Iraqi society by working within residential neighbourhoods, and to expose, analyse and provide information on various issues in Iraqi society.[57] Their work

[52] Benjamin Isakhan, 'Protests and Public Power in Post-Saddam Iraq: The Case of the Iraqi Federation of Oil Unions', in Luca Anceschi, Gennaro Gervasio, and Andrea Teti, eds, *Informal Power in the Greater Middle East: Hidden Geographies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 117–28; Benjamin Isakhan, 'Civil Society in Hybrid Regimes? The Case of Iraq', *Melbourne Asia Review*, 2023.

[53] Interview with young activist, Baghdad, October 2023.

[54] Workers' Liberty, 'Strikes and Demonstrations in Iraq, 2011', *Alliance for Workers' Liberty*, 18 February 2011. Available at: https://www.workersliberty.org/story/2011/02/18/strikes-and-demonstrations-iraq (accessed 6 February 2025).

[55] Deutsche Welle, 'باتمان العراق.. "التك تك": مغردون!', 31 October 2019. Available at: https://www.dw.com/ar/نودرغم-قارعلا-نامتاب-كت-كتلا/a-51067050 (accessed 6 February 2025).

[56] Sami Adnan, 'Iraq's Tahrir: Finishing What We Started', *Rampant*, 2020. Available at: https://rampant-mag.com/2020/04/iraqs-tahrir-finishing-what-we-started/ (accessed 6 February 2025).

[57] Brian Bean, 'The Legacy of Occupation and the Fight for a Democratic Iraq: Interview with the

includes reports and information campaigns concerning a number of workers' issues, including the safety of women in the workplace.[58] While WAS is focusing on documentation, some young leftists have also been seeking to gain influence within the realm of organised labour. However, my interviews with different Iraqi civil society members and grassroots organisers suggest that younger labour activists experience resistance from the older generation when seeking to establish themselves.

In summary, while recent decades have seen a weakening of trade unionism in Lebanon and Iraq, my analysis also highlights how workers and activists have continued to seek influence and exercise oppositional agency. Moreover, it also demonstrates how the co-option and low trust in traditional trade unionism has driven activists to pursue more informal and unsanctioned forms of labour organisation.

Professional Syndicates: Between Idealism and Pragmatism

Unlike trade unions, professional syndicates organise large segments of middle-class citizens, such as doctors and lawyers, due to membership being mandatory for these professions. While this could have made these organisations strong voices within the realm of organised labour, professional syndicates have also suffered structural weaknesses. Overall, elites have used two main strategies to undermine oppositional forces within professional syndicates: 1) allying against independent candidates in syndicate council elections, and 2) discouraging syndicate members from taking on broader political roles.

Lebanese professional syndicate elections have long been a battleground between oppositional forces and the political establishment, and in the past decade, opposition campaigns have secured significant victories. The victories of opposition forces within two of the largest professional syndicates, the Order of Engineers and Architects (OEA) and the Beirut Bar Association, have attracted particular attention. The first of these victories was in 2017, when a campaigner rooted in recent protests and political grassroots won the position as head of the OEA. This victory demonstrated how contentious episodes against Lebanon's elites can be leveraged by opposition forces seeking to gain momentum within the syndicates. In November 2019, another opposition candidate, Melhem Khalaf, was elected president of the Beirut Bar Association, riding the wave of the October Uprising that had erupted a month earlier. Finally, in 2021, a list called 'The Syndicates Rises,' also rooted in the October Uprising, secured a landslide victory in the OEA elections.[59] It is important to note that these are not the only examples of opposition forces winning power in professional syndicates. Lesser known examples include the list 'Independent Universitarians for the Nation', which won 40 percent of the seats in the Association of Full-Time Professors at the state-run Lebanese University, competing against lists by

Workers Against Sectarianism (Iraq)', *Tempest*, 12 January 2023.

[58] 'Working Women in Iraq: The Way to Work is Not Safe', *Workers Against Sectarianism*, 2022. Available at: https://was-iraq.org/working-women-in-iraq-the-way-to-work-is-not-safe/ (accessed 7 February 2025); 'Street Life Campaign: Workers' Conditions in the Brick Factories in the City of Nahrawan – Baghdad' [video], *Workers Against Sectarianism*, 2021. Available at: https://was-iraq.org/street-life-campaign-workers-conditions-in-the-brick-factories-in-the-city-of-nahrawan-baghdad/ (accessed 7 February 2025).

[59] Mouawad, 'Lebanese Trade Unions and Independent Professional Associations', p. 41.

established sectarian parties.[60] Another point that is important to note is that the opposition forces have not been able to sustain their momentum, and the most recent elections in the OAE and the Beirut Bar Association have seen a comeback of forces backed by sect-based parties. In the OAE, 'The Order Revolts' coalition became fragmented after its landslide victory, and the elections two years later saw internal competition between its former members. The main opposition campaign that year, Musammimoon,[61] won only a single seat out of the five they contested. The other four seats were won by a coalition of candidates linked to the traditional parties Amal Movement, Hezbollah, the Future Movement and the Free Patriotic Movement, which are part of the sectarian establishment.[62]

Despite setbacks, opposition activists have continued to campaign for influence within the syndicates, adapting their tactics to address Lebanon's evolving socio-economic and political realities. One example of such innovation is the so-called Wen Sandouak ('where is your trust fund') campaign which, between 2021 and 2022, sought to unite members of the five largest syndicates to demand access to the savings they had accumulated through the syndicates' social funds, which became inaccessible following the collapse of the financial sector.[63] Wen Sandouak launched a series of actions to pressure elites and affiliated bank owners to recover some of these losses. While the campaign was endorsed by thousands of syndicate members, mobilising them to vote for opposition candidates critical of the banks proved to be a more challenging task. As a leading member of the campaign explained in an interview, syndicate members were influenced by a culture of fear:

> This fear culture is more about going against the word of my sectarian party. Even if I don't benefit directly from them. Just being seen as someone, who is opposed to my ecosystem, my sectarian ecosystem, this by itself creates a barrier. [...] If there is a chance for a settlement with a bank, I don't want to be on the bank's bad side.[64]

However, campaigns like Wen Sandouak have also sparked debates among Lebanese labour activists about how syndicates can most effectively promote change and the scope of the professional syndicates' struggles. The Wen Sandouak campaign was among the most radical syndicate-campaigns when it came to the scope of political intentions. It framed the syndicate action as a first step towards guaranteeing social security rights for all workers and people residing in Lebanon. Not all syndicate members saw this goal as a realistic or desirable path to pursue for their associations. Furthermore, some activists also disagreed with Wen Sandouak's goal of uniting syndicates around political visions, arguing instead that syndicates should focus on addressing the immediate needs of their

[60] Rim Zrein, 'Independent Professors Won 40% Of Seats at Lebanese University Council Elections', *The 961*, 11 December 2020. Available at: https://www.the961.com/independents-lu-professor-council-elections/ (accessed 7 February 2025).

[61] The term *Musammimoon* means both 'determined' and 'designers'.

[62] Anne Kirstine Rønn, 'Dynamics of Power in Lebanon's Labour Movement: The Order of Engineers and Architects' Elections', *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, 25 April 2024. Available at: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2024/04/25/dynamics-of-power-in-lebanons-labour-movement-the-order-of-engineers-and-architects-elections/ (accessed 6 February 2025).

[63] Laughlin, Saad & Wood, 'Risky Business'.

[64] Interview with Wen Sandouak organiser, online, September 2024.

own members and achieving small victories. As I discuss below, similar debates have arisen within the realm of Iraqi professional syndicates.

Like their Lebanese counterparts, oppositional voices within Iraq's professional syndicates have sought to leverage popular protests as a means of resisting the ruling elites. During the 2019 Tishreen Movement, professional syndicates had a visible presence in Baghdad's Tahrir Square and other key centres of the movement. The syndicates of pharmacists and doctors, for instance, set up tents and venues around Tahrir Square, where health professionals and students distributed medicine and treated wounded protesters. Meanwhile, the lawyers' syndicate provided legal assistance to protesters who had been injured or detained, with some cases continuing years after the protests subsided.[65] While not all leaders of professional syndicates were prominent voices in the streets, figures like Diyaa Al-Saadi, the leader of the Iraqi Bar Association, publicly supported the movement and was highlighted as a particularly vocal figure.[66] In several statements, Al-Saadi echoed protesters' demands, including calls to abolish political sectarianism and hold political leaders accountable for corruption and violent crimes.[67] According to labour activists interviewed by the author, Al-Saadi's clear rhetoric and his involvement in initiatives to unite syndicates around shared political visions posed a threat to the political elites, who consequently sought to block his re-election in March 2022. As one interviewee explained:

> The Tishreen was a good example of how the parties tried to co-opt the syndicates [...] there was a lot of infighting inside the lawyers' syndicate, and they [the politicians] were trying to push out the patriotic members. They used the interior system of the syndicates, and they would plant bad stories about the head of the syndicate [Al-Saadi].[68]

As this shows, the interviewee saw Al-Saadi's defeat as part of a larger effort to replace and silence syndicate leaders with oppositional ambitions and replace them with more moderate figures. According to the same interviewee, another part of this strategy was to quell political visions that has emerged within the sphere of syndicates during the Tishreen Movement. As the interviewee elaborates:

> Tishreen ended, and the political parties understood that they wanted more control with the syndicates. They didn't want them to take part in political life. They wanted them to care only for their inner issues, their professional issues, their salaries, their pensions, their rights.

When discussing 'participation in political life,' the interviewee refers to a specific political initiative launched by members of syndicates and other workers' groups during the

[65] Author's interview with syndicate members and activists, Baghdad, February 2024.

[66] Author's interviews with protesters and grassroots activists in Baghdad, October 2023 and February 2024.

[67] Almada, 'دور المحامي العراقي من خلال نقابة المحامين في دعم انتفاضة تشرين'; 2019. Available at: https://almadapaper.net/223355/ (accessed 6 February 2025).

[68] Author's interview with syndicate members and activists, Baghdad, October 2023.

early months of the 2019 Tishreen Movement. Through a series of meetings, these actors sought to unite syndicates around common goals and produced a set of statements and visions intended to lay the groundwork for a lasting coalition. According to the interviewee, the political establishment in Iraq managed to co-opt the initiative by inviting syndicates to hold regular meetings monitored by the Iraqi cabinet, which later evolved into a formalised organisation named the Syndicate Council. While the interviewee saw this as a clear instance of co-option, other labour activists, including members of the teachers' syndicate, viewed the council as an opportunity to exert greater influence at the highest political levels. As in Lebanon, syndicate members in Iraq strive to balance idealism and pragmatism and often disagree on where that balance should lie. The teachers' union and its actions during and after the Tishreen Movement illustrate this tension well. During the uprising, teachers initially adopted an idealistic approach. The syndicate joined the demonstrations, and teachers went on strike in solidarity with the protesters' demands. However, after seven days, the syndicate decided to end the strike and increasingly engaged in dialogue with the political establishment. A syndicate member described the decision to end the strike as follows:

> Interviewee: 'After this [strike] period, we think that we have conveyed our demands in a precise way to the decision makers through our meetings with them, and there have been promises to improve the reality of education, so we decide to end the strike. We didn't want to have any political colouring (*sabgha*) to our movement.'
>
> Author: what do you mean by political colouring?
>
> Interviewee: political colouring refers to the fact that there have been some parties that associated our demands with external agendas. Yellow media would say that this syndicate is affiliated with a certain external agenda and that they are imposing their own visions on the syndicate. When we decided to stop the strike, it was to clarify that our decisions are national and made by the leaders of the syndicates and for the benefits of our members.[69]

The interview excerpt illustrates how the teachers' syndicate in Iraq weighed the costs and benefits of resistance and dialogue with decision-makers, but it also highlights a broader concern among syndicate members in both Lebanon and Iraq about the risks of political confrontation.[70] If radical political agency results in reputational damage, hinders syndicates' abilities to negotiate on behalf of their members, and fails to gain sufficient support from syndicate members, then what significance does it hold?

Discussion and Conclusion

[69] Interview with members of the teachers' syndicate, Baghdad, 21 February 2024.

[70] Besides the reasons mentioned by the interviewee, it is important to note that authorities also threatened to lay off teachers who insisted on continuing the strike. See Omar al-Jaffal, 'Unions of Iraq: Burdens of the Past and Crises of the Present', in Dario Azzellini, ed., *If Not Us, Who? Global Workers against Authoritarianism, Fascism, and Dictatorships* (Hamburg: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2021), pp. 143–49.

The labour movements in Lebanon and Iraq have been severely weakened by co-option and repression. At the same time, however, a battle has been playing out between the ruling sectarian elites and various groups, individuals and organisations, which seek to reduce the elites' dominance over the labour movement and empower class- or labour-based mobilisation that transcends sect-based divides. Iraq and Lebanon present different conditions for such modes of oppositional labour mobilisation that can challenge political sectarianism. First, Iraqi labour activists have faced more violent repression than their Lebanese counterparts. Moreover, the fact that parts of the labour legislation adopted under Saddam Hussein in 1987 remain in effect, means that a first step towards organising the country's large number of public workers is to gain the mere right to unionise. However, as this paper has shown, several similarities persist between Lebanon and Iraq. In both countries, elites have taken control of the main bodies that coordinate trade unions, leaving workers without formally recognised nationwide organisations to protect their interests. This has pushed Lebanese and Iraqi workers to demand their rights through self-organised strikes and alternative trade union-like organisations at both the sector level and individual workplaces, such as the Spinneys supermarket chain in Lebanon. The analysis also highlights significant similarities in the struggle for independence within professional syndicates in Lebanon and Iraq. Notably, the paper shows how elections to syndicate councils and leadership positions have become a central battleground between elites, who run affiliated candidates, and opposition forces, who seek to empower independent candidates and lists. Moreover, independent and oppositional forces within syndicates in both Lebanon and Iraq face pressure to pursue more narrow goals that focus on membership demands rather than broader political agendas. However, in both countries, the goals of syndicate action have also been the subject of internal debate between idealist and pragmatic forces.

These findings raise questions concerning the potential of labour mobilisation as a means to challenge the entrenched sectarian neoliberal systems in Lebanon and Iraq. Clearly, in order to become vehicles of change, the labour movements face both structural and strategic challenges. This paper shows that both trade unions and professional syndicates face trade-offs in this regard. For trade unions, the main trade-off concerns the question of formality. While it may be difficult to achieve impact and exercise independent agency through the structures of traditional labour organisations, the lack of formal recognition exposes labour activists to increased risks of repression and safety issues. For professional syndicates, the most salient trade-off revolves around the balance between radical political opposition and more moderate, issue-based visions. As the experience of Lebanese professional syndicates illustrates, the empowerment of labour organisations is not a linear process. Activists may lose what they have gained if elites manage to develop new and more efficient counter-revolutionary strategies or if the socio-political context changes. Because of this, I argue that we must be careful not to assume that certain strategies are universally more efficient. Rather, a task for future research on labour movements in Lebanon, Iraq, and other similar societies will be to determine the scope conditions under which strategies of labour mobilisation yield positive results.

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