From Authoritarianism to People Power in the Middle East and North Africa: Implications for Economic Inclusion and Equity

Eva Bellin

The developing world faces many challenges. These include the need to carry out substantial structural transformation, generate growth that is environmentally sustainable, and foster development that is economically inclusive. To balance the trade-offs inevitably generated by the simultaneous pursuit of these goals, many stakeholders have emphasized the importance of expanding the role of popular voice in the policy-making process. Augmenting the scope of *political* inclusion is considered pivotal especially with regard to advancing the goal of *economic* inclusion. By giving the (poor) majority greater political voice, it is argued, greater economic equity can be achieved.

If only it were so simple. As the experience of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) suggests, political inclusion and economic inclusion may be less closely paired than many might think. Since the momentous events of the "Arab Spring" of 2011, this region, long an epicenter of authoritarianism, has begun a process of significant political opening. As such it presents a "natural experiment" for exploring the impact that expanded political inclusion may have on improving economic inclusion and equity.

Unfortunately, early observation of the region suggests that while democratic reform may deliver some measure of political empowerment to the people of the MENA, it may not necessarily have a positive impact in terms of delivering a better distribution of *economic* benefits to the demos. This is attributable to three factors. First, many regimes in the MENA had already established relatively commendable records in terms of economic inclusion, while still thoroughly authoritarian. Consequently, there are few "low-hanging fruit" for newly democratizing regimes to pick in terms of advancing economic inclusion. This weakens the linkage drawn between democratic advance and distributional gains. Second, the most pressing source of economic exclusion in the MENA today derives from the region's high level of unemployment. But it is not clear that augmenting the level of political inclusion will necessarily assist in delivering the most widely hailed remedy for unemployment—economic growth. Finally, to expand economic inclusion, regimes in the region must embrace public policies that are expressly redistributive as well as growth-oriented. Such policy initiatives require effective political mobilization of committed constituencies and policy makers. Unfortunately, effective mobilization is a political good that is not automatically guaranteed by political opening alone.

To clarify these points, this chapter explores the relationship between political inclusion and economic inclusion in the context of the MENA. First, the chapter will highlight the region's surprisingly strong past performance in terms of economic equity and distribution. The goal here is to show that political exclusion and economic exclusion are not necessarily a "matched pair" and to spotlight the comparatively high bar that democratizing regimes in the region must clear in order to register progress on economic inclusion. This high bar makes the linkage between economic and political inclusion less than automatic. Second, the chapter will identify the causal mechanisms that lead us to link political opening to economic inclusion (at least theoretically) and then present the mechanisms that thwart the pairing of these two goals in reality. Specifically, mobilizational failures by constituencies committed to distributive agendas prevent political opening from necessarily delivering on inclusionary goals. Third, the chapter will explore one of the most central development challenges faced by the region—unemployment—and consider the contribution political opening may make to meeting this challenge. The ambiguous role political opening plays in eliminating the key obstacles to job growth in the region (e.g., limited foreign investment, low integration into international trade) suggests the tenuousness of pairing political and economic inclusion in the MENA. Fourth, and more optimistically, the chapter will reflect on some of the positive models of paired political and economic inclusion that can be found among some key political and cultural referents for the region. Specifically, it will consider how success in Turkey, Indonesia, and Malaysia may gird the Arab world with the political inspiration and will to embrace the policies necessary to achieve dual inclusion simultaneously.

Political and Economic Inclusion/Exclusion—A Matched Pair?

Analysts who are philosophically committed to the goals of both political inclusion and economic equity have long been susceptible to the persuasion that "all good things go together." That is, they have long been inclined to believe that the extension of political rights to ever-larger segments of society will result in a fairer sharing of society's bounty. Conversely, they tend to believe that *political* exclusion of major segments of society will also spell *economic* exclusion of the majority. Although there are valid analytic grounds for the pairing of political and economic inclusion (as will be explored below), the reality on the ground is often quite different.

Observers from the United States know this only too well. In terms of its formal political institutions, the United States is one of the most politically inclusive democracies in the world. And yet, the United States ranks as one of the least economically inclusive countries among its industrialized peers. Its performance on social indicators such as infant mortality and economic inequality place it in the company of countries that are much poorer and significantly less well endowed with democratic heritages (Bakalar 2011). Clearly, the provision of (formally) equal opportunities for political inclusion does not guarantee commensurate access to society's wealth.

The fact that political and economic inclusion and exclusion are not a matched pair is nowhere more evident than in the case of the Arab world. This is a region that has long been renowned for authoritarianism, exceptional in both its scope and endurance. Freedom House and the Polity Project have routinely ranked the Arab world as the world region that is the least free and the least politically inclusive. And yet the region's performance in terms of economic inclusion (i.e., sharing society's wealth among all segments of society) has been surprisingly strong. This is evident in terms of a number of indicators.

Most impressive is the Arab world's performance in terms of limiting levels of absolute poverty. The Arab world has long had the lowest level of absolute poverty of all developing regions in the world. That is, a smaller percentage of people live on less than $1 a day or even $2 a day in the Arab world than in Latin America, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, or East Asia (see table 7.1 and figure 7.1). In this regard, the Arab world is "comparable to the super successful Asian countries" (Noland and Pack 2011:66). Among all Arab countries, only Yemen and Egypt have poverty levels that approach Third World levels (Noland and Pack 2011).

The Arab world's impressive performance in terms of economic inclusion is also evident in its performance on numerous human development / social welfare indicators. Between 1960 and 2000, the region registered considerable gains in terms of life expectancy, infant mortality, child immunization rates, child nutrition, and education rates. For example, by the early 2000s, life expectancy in most Arab countries had risen by 44 percent, nearly equaling that of the United States and surpassing the performance of comparably developed countries in East Asia and South Asia. Infant mortality rates had fallen dramatically, decreasing more than that of any other region. Child immunization rates had risen impressively, to the point that immunization became nearly universal. Educational opportunities increased dramatically with primary school education nearly universal in most Arab countries.[1] By some lights educational expansion had even gone too far, overproducing some tertiary education, if judged by the limited employment opportunities

Table 7.1 Population below the poverty line (%)

Country	*Year*	*$1/day*	*$2/day*
Middle East			
Algeria	1995	2.0	15.1
Egypt	2000	3.1	43.9
Jordan	2003	2.0	7.0
Morocco	1999	2.0	14.3
Tunisia	2000	2.0	6.6
Yemen	1998	15.7	45.2
Resource rich comparators			
Botswana	1993	23.5	50.1
Indonesia	2002	7.5	52.4
Nigeria	2003	70.8	92.4
Venezuela	2000	8.3	23.6
By region			
Middle East	2002	1.6	19.8
East Asia	2003	11.6	40.8
Latin America	2002	8.9	23.4
South Asia	2002	31.1	77.8
Sub-Saharan Africa	2002	44.0	74.9

Source: World Bank, cited in Noland and Pack (2011:68).

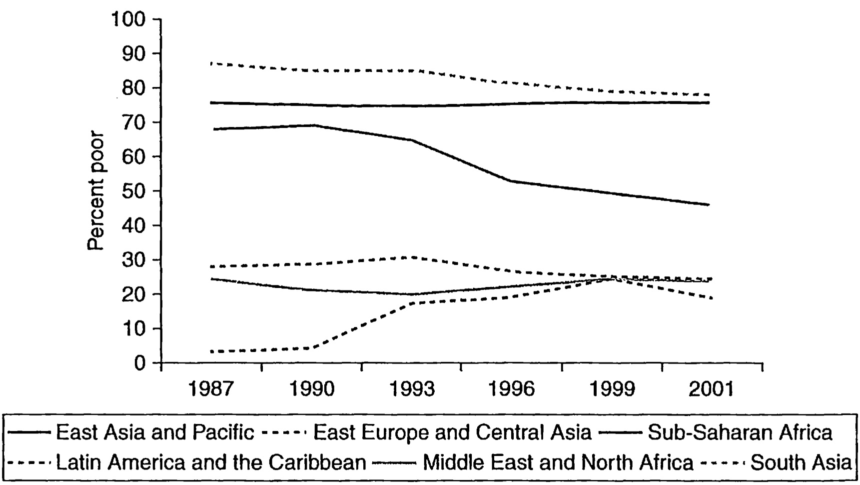

Figure 7.1 Comparative trends in regional poverty at $2/day line, 1987–2001.
Source: World Bank, cited in Iqbal (2006:8).

available to many university graduates (Iqbal 2006:21–22, Noland and Pack 2011:62–64). Table 7.2 illustrates these accomplishments.

Perhaps most surprisingly, the region's achievement in terms of economic inclusion is evidenced by its relatively strong performance in terms

Table 7.2 Human development in the Middle East and North Africa (1960–2000)

	1960	*1980*	*2000*
Years of education (average per person over 15)	0.9	2.6	5.5
Years of education (average per female over 15)	0.5	1.8	4.6
Child mortality (deaths per 1,000 births)	262	138	47
Life expectancy (years at birth)	47	58	68

Source: World Bank, cited in Iqbal (2006:22).

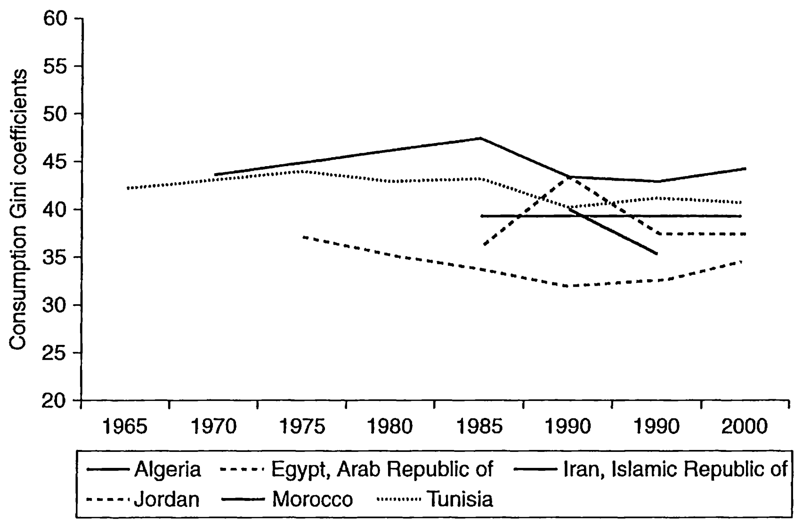

Figure 7.2 Trends in inequaltiy, 1965–2000.
Source: World Bank, cited in Iqbal (2006:8).

of income distribution. Looking at the ratio of the top fifth of the population versus the bottom fifth, income inequality in the Arab world is comparable to that of East Asia and South Asia, but well below inequality in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America (Noland and Pack 2011:64–68). And most Arab countries have seen an overall decline in income inequality since 1960, as illustrated in figure 7.2. This is most surprising given the fact that a sense of grievance over income inequality is widespread in many Arab countries.

How can this strong performance on "economic inclusion" be explained? At work are two elements: the combination of express public policy on the part of many Arab states and serendipitous economic and sociocultural factors in the region. Many states in the Arab world are the stewards of significant rent (oil, gas, transit, geo-strategic). Access to such rent has enabled them to carry out a variety of redistributive projects, including the provision of various public goods (immunization, education), the subsidization of basic consumer goods, and the expansion of the public sector. Growth of the public sector has proven especially important in terms of delivering employment to a significant segment of society and thereby providing many with a floor of subsistence (Adams and Page 2003).

But perhaps surprisingly, even states *without* large endowments of rent have often followed a distributive path. In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, an ideological wave of "Arab Socialism" spread throughout the region and inspired many countries to embrace ambitious projects of inclusion. For the rent-poor states, these were often funded through debt, foreign aid, and the drawing down of currency surpluses accumulated during WWII. The appeal of Arab Socialism has certainly faded with time, but in many Arab countries, the institutional legacy of this ideology lives on in entrenched public sectors and social policies.

Besides these expressly redistributive policies on the part of the state, poverty in the region has also been reduced by access to employment opportunities in the oil-rich countries of the region. This has resulted in significant remittance earnings that buoy many poor families across the Arab world (Adams and Page 2003, Iqbal 2006:11). Finally, the region is endowed with strong sociocultural networks, some religiously based, some family based. These provide important safety nets to the poor and assist in alleviating some of the worst poverty in the region.

But whatever the explanation, the fact is that the Arab world has performed better in terms of economic inclusion than most other parts of the developing world. This in not to say that all is well in terms of economic equity. Serious levels of poverty persist in several Arab countries (e.g., in Egypt, 43% of the population still lives below $2 a day; and in Yemen, the level of absolute poverty is even worse; Noland and Pack 2011:68). Altogether, one out of every four or five people in the region still lives in poverty (Iqbal 2006:5). Moreover, there are significant disparities in development and wealth across the region, with pockets of severe regional poverty present even in relatively developed countries such as Tunisia or quite wealthy countries such as Saudi Arabia (Anon/IFAD 2003). Income distribution remains highly unequal in the MENA (Anon/IFAD 2003) and even if the region performs better than many other developing parts of the world in this regard (as measured by comparative Gini coefficients), there is a popular perception that, *within the region*, inequality has been increasing *over time*. Finally, the problem of unemployment has clearly gotten worse, especially among young people, a consequence of the demographic "youth bulge" experienced by the region during the past decade (Dhillon 2008). In short, there is significant basis for economic grievance in Arab society.

It is thus no surprise that "aish"—bread—was the first word of the three-term rallying cry that mobilized the crowds protesting during the Arab uprising of 2011.[2] Anger over economic grievances proved crucial to building up the popular steam that was decisive in overturning dictators during the Arab Spring. Failure in the domain of economic inclusion was, without question, an important factor in fueling the drive for regime change in the region.

Nevertheless, the relatively strong performance of the MENA region, at least compared to other developing parts of the world, provides compelling evidence that a region's level of authoritarianism does not covary with its level of economic exclusion. In short, political and economic exclusion (and inclusion) are not a matched pair. Consequently, the move toward political opening in the region may not necessarily result in immediate gains in economic inclusion. The low-hanging fruit of economic inclusion have already been picked (and to some degree over-picked). The relatively strong performance of the region's authoritarian regimes in terms of social welfare creates a high bar for newly liberalizing regimes to clear and surpass. This amplifies the political challenges these new regimes face and makes it that much harder for them to register gains in economic inclusion.

Analytic Linkage between Political and Economic Inclusion

Still, there are commonsensical reasons to assume that democracies will outperform authoritarian regimes in terms of economic inclusion and hence that democratization in the region will yield gains in this area. After all, the cardinal utility of bestowing people with the power of the vote is to force political regimes to be accountable to the popular will. Presumably, under these conditions, ruling elites will be obliged to direct resources toward constructive ends that benefit the commonweal rather than squandering scarce assets on vanity projects, corruption, and endeavors that benefit only the very few. In addition, freer political systems mean more space for the fourth estate (the media) and more space for civil society organizations to act as watchdogs. These institutions force the government to be more transparent and accountable in its use of public resources. Presumably this results in less waste and corruption as well as more focus on benefiting the commonweal. Finally, the wider distribution of political power across society should theoretically empower the poorer strata to impose a more distributive economic agenda on the state. This too should spell improved regime performance in terms of economic inclusion.

But reality is often quite different from plausible analysis. Even established democracies are routinely captured by special interests that siphon off resources for use in economically irrational ways. To push through a policy agenda that is economically distributive, the poorer strata must be politically well organized. Unfortunately, this is not a given in most democracies. To the contrary, privileged segments are often better positioned to dominate the political helm and its agenda. In addition, the less privileged are often effectively distracted from progressive economic agendas by countervailing appeals to identity politics. Think of the failure of progressive candidates to win the working-class vote in the United States (Haidt 2012). Add to this the myopia and short-term horizons that the electoral cycle imposes on political leaders and it is clear why democracies fail to outperform dictatorships in any consistent way, either in terms of economic growth or in terms of the distribution of material well-being (Bellin 2005:139–140; Clark et al. 2009:328; Przeworski and Limongi 1993).

This is not to say that democracy is bad for economic inclusion. Rather, democracy is neither necessary nor sufficient to deliver this outcome. Regime type is simply too blunt a variable to determine these results. Political variables such as leadership, party strength, organization of special interests, and the quality of the state bureaucracy, among others, often prove as important as regime type in determining economic outcomes—distributive or otherwise (Beinin and Herbst 1996, Haggard and Kaufmann 1992, Nelson 1994).

In short, one should not be overly optimistic about the distributive payoff from the Arab world's move toward greater political inclusion, at least not in the short term. Of course, transitioning out of authoritarianism should be valued in its own right, for the potential benefit it confers on society in terms of guaranteeing basic freedoms and human rights. But its impact on economic inclusion is indeterminate and wholly subject to effective political mobilization by the disadvantaged in society, among other factors.

The hope of such mobilization does not look terribly promising in the region today. As it stands, nowhere in the Arab world today has a party of popular consequence emerged that is devoted primarily to a progressive economic agenda. Even the leading Islamist parties, whether the Ennahda Party of Tunisia or the Muslim Brothers' Justice and Development Party in Egypt, have only vaguely defined economic agendas. Despite their broadly popular base, they have not made economic redistribution the centerpiece of their ambitions (Saif and Rumman 2012)

Major Development Challenges in the MENA: How to Advance Economic Inclusion

Given the region's relatively strong starting point in terms of economic inclusion (at least by standards of the developing world), making progress in this area means focusing less on guaranteeing a subsistence floor to most and more on lifting ever-larger numbers of people out of poverty. The most promising route to achieving this goal is to sop up the high levels of unemployment and underemployment that plague the region and consign so many to hopelessness. The level of unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa is one of the highest in the world; at nearly 14 percent, it is surpassed only by one other developing region (Sub-Saharan Africa—14.9%), and it is more than double that of East Asia and nearly double that of Latin America (World Bank 2006). But these numbers understate the incidence of unemployment borne by specific pockets of the population. For example, young people suffer unemployment rates that are more than double the general rate (clocking in at about 30%, but reaching levels as high as 40% for university graduates in some countries). Similarly, there are regional pockets in nearly every country that suffer from much higher unemployment rates than those captured by national averages. For example, central Tunisia suffers much higher rates of unemployment than those of the country's major cities or coastal areas. It is not surprising that Mohamed Bouazizi, the young fruit vendor whose self-immolation sparked the beginning of the Arab spring protests, hailed from Sidi Bouzid, a town in the central part of the country (30 percent unemployment). Finally, women are significantly underemployed in the region; with only 30 percent of Arab women employed outside the home, their level of employment is lower than that found in any other developing region in the world (UNDP 2006), though it is hard to parse the degree to which this is a consequence of cultural preference as opposed to limited opportunity. By any standard, unemployment levels in the region are intolerably high, and the lack of jobs constitutes a significant obstacle to effective economic inclusion.

To tackle the problem of unemployment, the region is obliged to focus on generating economic growth. As a leading Egyptian economist has said, without economic growth a politics of distribution simply means the distribution of poverty (Brookings Economic Forum, March 2011). In fact, the growth performance of the MENA region has been disappointing for the past two decades. Coming in at under 2 percent, the region registered the weakest real per capita growth of all regions in the world, with the possible exception of Sub-Saharan Africa (Bhattacharya and Wolde 2010:1–3). This growth problem needs to be tackled head on and to have the most distributive impact the region needs to focus especially on developing labor-intensive industries that will create jobs.

What are the obstacles to developing such industries? Economists identify a host of relevant factors but all agree that deficiencies in two areas are especially damning: (a) deficiencies in capital investment, both *foreign* (Foreign Direct Investment [FDI]) as well as investment by the *domestic* private sector; and (b) deficiencies in integration into the international economy, especially trade levels with the rest of the world. FDI in the region is extremely low by world standards, excluding natural resource–based sectors such as oil and gas (Noland and Pack 2011:111). The volume of trade (excluding fuels) is quite low as well (Noland and Pack 2011:103). These deficiencies are deleterious not only because they deny the MENA the necessary start-up capital for new industrial ventures, but also because lack of integration with foreign companies (i.e., low levels of intra-industry trade agreements) shut the region out of major sources of technology transfer and innovation as well as cost discipline (Henry and Springborg 2001:42–46, Page 1998:153). The latter is especially crucial to developing globally competitive (and hence sustainable) export industries.[3]

The MENA region has been unable to make progress in attracting FDI, local capital, and expanding intra-industry trade due to structural weaknesses such as inadequate infrastructure (especially underdeveloped transport and telecommunications) and the low level of labor skills and human capital compared to other countries with similar levels of per capita income (Bhattacharya and Wolde 2010). But another major reason why the MENA fails to attract investment and intra-industry trade is that the region's business environment is made unattractive by political factors. These include political instability ("capital is a coward"), dodgy political institutions (are property rights upheld in a timely fashion by the judiciary?), bureaucratic constraints (how difficult is it to get permits to start a business?), and corruption (how many officials must one pay off to get licenses and permits?). The World Bank's Business Enterprise Survey found that more than a quarter of all businesses polled identified licensing and customs as a major constraint on doing business in the MENA region and 54 percent identified corruption as a major constraint (Bhattacharya and Wolde 2010:20). Governance issues such as these constitute a major obstacle to economic progress in the region.

Of course other regions, notably China, have proven weak in some of these areas as well and yet these weaknesses have not proven to be a deterrent to investment. But unlike China, MENA countries do not offer the compensating benefits of a huge consumer market and extremely low wages. If anything, wage levels in the region are relatively high (in comparison to other developing areas) due to the impact of "Dutch disease" and the legacy of "Arab Socialism." Consequently, FDI and international integration of the Arab economies remains relatively low.

Is Political Inclusion the Remedy?

The question is whether progress on the political front, and specifically, progress toward political opening, is likely to improve the prospects for economic growth in the region. In the most optimistic of scenarios, it is plausible to see a link. Political liberalization could mean unseating the old political machines that long fueled corruption and maintained rent-creating distortions in the economy. Political opening might also mean an empowered fourth estate and civil society that might sustain a watchdog function, impose more political transparency, and reduce governmental corruption. Both factors would make the region a more attractive investment environment. In addition, greater freedom and reform might unleash new energy and optimism, reverse brain drain, and attract foreign investment and technology (Noland and Pack 2011:xiii).[4]

But just as political opening creates growth-enhancing opportunities, it also creates potential hazards. Perhaps the biggest hazard lies in the region's susceptibility to demagogues and populists. After years of political exclusion and pent-up demand for economic advance, the newly empowered demos may be ill-prepared for the material restraint necessary to truly spur growth. The temptation among inexperienced voters to elect politicians who promise them the moon may set off spending sprees that would only worsen the region's macroeconomic condition, not to mention its exchange rates. This prospect, along with the possibility of political instability, would only further discourage investment, growth, and job creation. Clearly this would not advance the cause of economic inclusion in any sustainable way.

Ray of Hope

There are, however, some reasons to be hopeful. And this is because there are a number of countries that, for reasons of cultural proximity, constitute important referents for the Arab world. And among those countries are several that have embraced both political opening as well as "globalization" and integration into the international economy, with significant success. Here I am referring to countries such as Turkey, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Each is a Muslim-majority country. Each has Islamist parties that have been central to political life. In Turkey, the Islamist-inspired Justice and Development Party (AKP) has led the government for over a decade. Each has pursued a strategy of export-oriented manufacturing as a crucial component of its growth plan. And each has experienced robust growth rates. These countries constitute an important model for the Arab world of a possible way forward. The importance of the demonstration effect should not be underestimated as it is one of the most important factors shaping a country's likelihood to embrace protest, democracy, or any number of other trends. Already, leaders of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt have conducted consultations with colleagues in these three countries to learn the "secrets" of their success. With the proven successes of these countries as a lure, the newly opening regimes of the Arab world may find the inspiration necessary to mobilize around policies (and discipline) necessary to fuel real growth.

Conclusion

Parts of the Arab world are on the threshold of a new era of political openness and inclusion. But whether this will spark greater equity and economic inclusion remains much more tentative. To advance this agenda requires, first and foremost, the creation of jobs. This, in turn, requires an increase in FDI, local capital mobilization, and greater integration of the region into the international economy. Political opening may create some of the conditions necessary to improve the attractiveness of the business environment in the Arab world. But this will require mobilization and self-discipline among both voters and politicians. With luck, the positive model of other Muslim-majority countries like Turkey and Indonesia will prove sufficiently compelling to direct the newly opening Arab countries on this track to growth, and ultimately, to the goal of greater economic inclusion.

Notes

1. Literacy rates for adult populations, however, continued to lag and a gender gap in educational attainment remained significant in many Arab countries (Noland and Pack 2011: 64).

2. The slogan repeated by protesters across the region (but most consistently in Egypt) was "Aish, Hurriyah, Karama Insaniyya," that is, "Bread, Freedom, Human Dignity."
3. My colleagues in this volume, including Dani Rodrik, Mario Cimoli, and Jose Ocampo, also point to the importance of adopting expressly proactive policies (e.g., industrial policies and countercyclical policies) to fuel growth effectively. The absence of these has also contributed to low growth rates in many MENA countries.
4. In fact, the region witnessed such a surge of investment and reverse brain drain in the case of the Palestine Authority when a brief moment of optimism reigned in the late 1990s at the start of the "new regime" there. But as that case showed clearly, the window of opportunity is very short and such optimism can quickly be snuffed out.

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