Foreword

The Middle East and North Africa (or MENA) is the increasingly popular and widely used World Bank term for the predominantly Muslim West Asian and North African region. While mainly Arabic-speaking, it also includes Turkey, Iran and sometimes Afghanistan. The predominantly Muslim countries of South Asia, Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa are not considered part of the region while Sudan and some of its Arabic-speaking neighbours in sub-Saharan Africa are treated more ambiguously.

The MENA region, with about 6% of the world’s population, is nonetheless quite diverse in other respects. It has urbanized rapidly, with the urban share of its population rising from a third over half a century ago to over two-thirds today. Over half its population, around 400 million, live in coastal areas vulnerable to rising sea levels due to climate change.

Containing much of the world’s known petroleum oil and gas resources, it has all but two of the world’s remaining absolute monarchies, all strongly supported by the major Western democracies. As in the 1970s, petroleum prices have continued to influence other mineral and primary commodity prices. After oil prices fell in the second half of 2014, the other prices soon followed.

Most major wars started in the last dozen years have been in the region. The politics of the region, however defined, have captured world attention for many decades, and not only due to continuing interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the short-lived Arab Spring.

While the Gulf and other oil-rich economies have attracted many immigrant workers, MENA is now also seen as the major source of many refugees as well as migrants; Libya and some other countries are also seen as major transit channels for migrants and refugees from elsewhere. But migration and seeking refuge abroad are only the international manifestations of internal displacement, which may never involve international migration or refugee displacement. Such emergency situations have not attracted commensurate humanitarian assistance.

This volume on Comparative Political and Economic Perspectives on the MENA Region, edited by M. Mustafa Erdoğan and Bryan Christiansen, covers various different subjects from this very diverse region of broad interest.

Does decentralization hurt or help national unity in ‘countries at risk’? The first chapter argues that the impact of decentralization on national unity is complex and context-sensitive. Chapter 2 analyzes the internal conditions, causes and some consequences of the Arab Spring in terms of periodic ‘catch-up’ episodes from a world systems perspective. It argues that the current catch-up phase started in the MENA region.

Chapter 3 discusses Israel, the Arab Spring and the summer 2011 ‘Israeli Spring’. It argues that events in Syria and Iraq, which led to the ascendance of the Islamic State, constitute a serious challenge to the political order fashioned following the post-First World War Sykes-Picot Agreement.
Chapter 4 compares how globalization has affected women’s labour market participation in the MENA region compared to Europe. Economic globalization weakened conservative secular values affecting female employment, while the MENA region today resembles pre-Cold War Western Europe as women respond to globalization with deeper religiosity, possibly for self-protection.

Chapter 5 investigates the relationship between economic growth and happiness in 14 MENA countries during 2007-2013, arguing that happier people tend to invest more in physical and human capital and increase ‘social capital’ through positive relationships with others, thus influencing economic performance.

Chapter 6 argues that Universal Health Coverage is key to equitable and inclusive development while MENA health systems remain fragmented and inefficient, mainly delivering mediocre, urban-centred tertiary care, often excluding much of the population, particularly the poor. Privatization, neglect of public health, and poor social protection in recent years have only made things worse.

Chapter 7 suggests high enrollment rates and public expenditures on education, but poor quality, reflected in terms of low efficiency, illiteracy and gender inequality.

Chapter 8 on the impacts of financial liberalization and globalization focuses on recent developments, including financial market regulation, debates over the main problems, and reforms to strengthen financial systems in the region.

Chapter 9’s overview of science, technology and industrial policies in the region considers the role of national systems of innovation in facilitating knowledge, skills and innovation processes, stressing the importance of innovation infrastructure and the role of institutions in pursuing policies.

Chapter 10 examines variables believed to affect foreign direct investment (FDI) in MENA, including trade, growth, trade credit risk and political stability during 1981-2012, finding trade volume to be the most important, with economic factors generally more influential than political factors.

Chapter 11 addresses the Chinese approach to aid and investment in Africa. China’s engagement in Africa has increased significantly, not only because of African mineral resource extraction for China’s own rapid growth as global manufacturer, but also its different political priorities. It argues that the Chinese have dramatically expanded their investments in Africa following their unconditional aid to the region.

Looking at 100 countries from 1984 to 2012, chapter 12 finds that the demographic transition may lead to demographic dividends only if the country has good quality economic and political institutions, a diversified economy and stable consumer prices. These results have troubling sequencing policy implications for Iran which has been experiencing a significant age structure transition since the 1990s.

Chapter 13 suggests that focusing on the empowerment and employment of Emirati talent is important, but insufficient without measures to consider talent in relation to future needs. Such ‘future proofing’ can help public and private organizations prepare for future talent challenges.

Chapter 14 reviews entrepreneurial education in Europe, MENA, North America and India, offering an alternative view of variation across national contexts.

Chapter 15 discusses creative cultural industries and the role of the contemporary art market in urban transformation, focusing on Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). It discusses different kinds of cultural planning comparing major cultural cities including Istanbul, Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

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