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Forward Thinking for the EuroMediterranean region

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Emigration and culture in the MENA: Implications for Sending and Receiving Countries*
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1. Summary

Emigrants from the MENA region self-select on cultural traits. Those who intend to emigrate to OECD, high-income countries exhibit significantly lower levels of religiosity than the rest of the population. They also share more gender-egalitarian views, although this effect only holds for the young (aged 15 to 30), for single women, and in countries with a Sunni minority. On the aggregate, the effects of cultural selection should not be overestimated. First, emigration hardly affects the distribution of cultural traits in the MENA countries. Second, it has a limited (albeit non negligible) effect on the cultural distance between natives and immigrants in the OECD countries. For countries mostly affected by Arab Spring, the degree of cultural selection has decreased since 2011, with potential implications for the integration at destination.

2. Introduction

Modern growth theories consider human capital and cultural traits are proximate drivers of modernization, economic growth, and democracy. Without making any value judgement about specific cultural traits, it has been demonstrated that culture is a key determinant of individual effort and of the overall quality of the institutions that support market friendly exchange. Recent works have produced sound econometric tests of these relationships, often using opinion survey data as a means of measuring cultural elements such as economic beliefs or trust [1]. In particular, gender-egalitarian attitudes play a key role in explaining effective discriminations; and the resulting inequalities in health, education, political empowerment and employment have long been seen as major barriers to human and economic development [2]. Other recent studies have identified a negative association between the level of religiosity and economic growth, individual openness to innovation or effective patents per capita [3]. International migration is one of the main factors affecting the distribution of cultural traits in the source country. Surprisingly, however, migrants' selection by cultural traits, beliefs and practices has been largely understudied in the literature. This policy brief investigates whether emigrants from the MENA region self-select on cultural traits. It focuses on religiosity and attitudes towards women's rights, two traits that are correlated with economic outcomes and for which MENA countries exhibit distinctive distributions [4].

3. Approaches and Results

Migration Aspirations and Cultural traits in the MENA Region - To study whether emigration decisions are influenced by cultural traits in the MENA region, we use micro data from the Gallup World Poll (GWP) surveys. The GWP data are representative of the entire population aged 15 and over in about 150 countries. Our sample is restricted to the 17 MENA countries where Gallup conducted at least one wave of its survey between the years 2007 and 2016, and to the native population aged 15 to 64. The GWP includes several questions capturing migration aspirations, preferred destination choices and whether individuals have concrete plans to migrate in the next 12 months. The average share of aspiring migrants in our sample is around 24%. Syria exhibits the largest shares with over 35%; Jordan and Algeria come next at about 30%; Niger, Azerbaijan and Chad exhibit the smallest shares at about 20%. Through cultural proximity and network effects, historical ties are still affecting the preferred destinations of aspiring migrants. On average, 52.3% of the aspiring migrants from the MENA would like to move to an OECD member state. This share amounts to 90% in Morocco and Algeria, while it is around 10% in Yemen and Niger.

In addition, the GWP includes several questions on cultural norms, beliefs, values and attitudes. We select 12 questions which cover different aspects of the respondent's cultural spectrum in the MENA region. We identify three questions to measure the generosity of the individual; two questions to measure religiosity; three questions to measure gender-egalitarian views; two questions to measure attitudes towards violence against civilians; and finally, two questions on moral justification of sacrificing one's life for what one believes in, and on using non peaceful means to improve one's situation in case of oppression. We first conduct a two-stage Principal Component Analysis in order to extract synthetic information on cultural traits. We find that Lebanon and Azerbaijan are the most progressive in terms of gender-egalitarian attitudes. Iran and Azerbaijan are the less religious countries; on the contrary, sub-Saharan African countries (i.e., Chad, Mauritania, Mali and Niger) exhibit the highest levels of religiosity. Iran, Afghanistan and Syria exhibit the highest levels of generosity. Four countries that experienced turmoil and riots during the Arab Spring (i.e., Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen) hardly justify the use of violence. We refer to these countries, with Syria, as the *Main Insurgents.* In these countries, a large share of the population finds it unjustifiable to use any kind of violence against civilians.

We investigate whether our proxies for cultural traits are correlated with some country characteristics. These characteristics include the branches of Islam (Sunni or Shia) that is prevalent in the origin country, the level of economic development, the quality of institutions, and past migration flows. We find that the countries with a greater share of Shiites are less religious than Sunni countries. The level of development is highly correlated with religiosity and gender-egalitarian attitudes, in line with the empirical literature on culture and economic growth. In contrast, the level of development is not significantly correlated with generosity and with attitudes towards violence. None of our cultural proxies is significantly correlated with the quality of institutions or with the size of the migration network. In the rest of our analysis we focus on the role of gender-egalitarian attitudes and religiosity in shaping migration behaviors.

Migrants' selection along cultural traits - We use empirical regressions to investigate the effect of cultural traits on migration aspirations. Our specification is a logit model including a set of controls as well as spatial and year fixed-effects. The intention to migrate is the dependent variable. We also distinguish between OECD and non-OECD destinations, and check the robustness of our results when considering short-run migration plans instead of migration aspirations. We control for a set of factors which affect the size of migration costs as well as the expected gains from migration. The determinants of migration aspirations that vary across households or individuals include: age, gender, marital status, the presence of children in the household, the level of income per household member and its squared, the education level (a dummy

variable equal to one if the respondent has least 9 years of education), and the presence of a friend or a relative abroad.

We first discuss the results of the fixed-effect logit regressions for the full sample of MENA countries and by type of destination. Control variables are usually significant and have intuitive signs. In line with the literature, aspirations are higher for young, single men, with higher education, with lower level of income per household member, and who have friends or relatives abroad. More importantly, migration aspirations to all destinations are negatively affected by religiosity, but not by gender-egalitarian views. When we distinguish between OECD and non-OECD destinations, the results reveal that cultural traits have insignificant impact on migration aspirations to non-OECD countries. In contrast, migration aspirations to OECD destinations decrease with religiosity. Hence, aspiring migrants from MENA countries self-select along cultural traits, but only when they intend to migrate to an OECD destination.

As a robustness check, we also carry out estimation using individuals who have concrete migration plans to leave their country. The effect of religiosity is highly significant and larger than for migration aspirations (the effect of gender-egalitarian views remains insignificant). As a further check, we split the set of OECD destinations into three subsets of countries that are frequently reported as preferred destinations in the data, namely the European Union, North America and Turkey. The results confirm that the effect of religiosity is highly significant when considering OECD, high-income destinations but not when considering Turkey. We next perform several robustness checks by splitting the sample across skill and age groups (respondents with less than 9 years of education or more, and individuals aged 15-30, 31-45, or 45-64). The results reveal that cultural selection does not vary with education, and that religiosity is significant for all age groups. However, for gender-egalitarian views, cultural selection becomes significant for individuals aged 15 to 30. This is the age group in which aspiring migrants are the most likely to realize their migration aspirations. Other robustness checks show that single women share more gender-egalitarian attitudes, while the results on religiosity are even stronger for men and are driven by the Muslim community. Methodologically speaking, we also explore whether our results are driven by differences in the composition of the samples of aspiring migrants and non-migrants. We use the *Mahalanobis Metric Matching technique* to identify samples of aspiring migrants and non-migrants that are balanced in terms of observable covariates. We then conduct our regressions on the balanced sample. All conclusions of the benchmark regressions hold when using the matched samples.

Heterogeneous intensity of cultural selection - We explore whether cultural selection vary with macroeconomic and socio-economic characteristics to test for heterogeneity across countries of origin. The set of country characteristics includes the shares of Sunnis and Shiites among the Muslim population, the log-GDP per capita, two indicators of institutional quality, and the share of past migrants to an OECD country member state (a proxy for migration networks). Our conclusion that aspiring migrants from all MENA countries self-select on religiosity is reinforced. Further, the aspiring migrants from countries with a Sunni minority have more progressive gender-egalitarian views. Selection on gender-egalitarian views also becomes significant when controlling for migrant networks.

We also explore whether the link between cultural traits and migration has been affected by the Arab Spring after 2011. The political instability and the rise of authoritarianism that characterize the post-Arab Spring period (sometimes referred to as the Arab Winter) may have affected the process of cultural selection of aspiring migrants We distinguish between the full sample of MENA countries, the *five Main Insurgents* and the other countries. In all specifications, selection by religiosity is always positive and significant. Although the Arab Spring has not affected the intensity of cultural selection in the less affected countries, it has drastically reduced it in the Main Insurgent countries. Overall, the Arab Spring has decreased the relative liberal views of aspiring migrants.

4.   Conclusions and recommendations

Our empirical results indicate that individuals who intend to emigrate from MENA to OECD, high-income countries exhibit significantly lower levels of religiosity than the rest of the population. They also share more gender-egalitarian views, although this effect only holds among the young. Potentially, these results have implications from the point of view of both origin and destination countries.

From the point of view of destination countries, selection on religiosity and gender-egalitarian attitudes implies that the cultural distance between migrants and host country citizens is smaller than between the country populations. This implies easier integration to the host country labor market and social norms. Selective migration from MENA to high-income OECD countries should be less of a concern from the point of view of the OECD member states. **On the one hand, informing public opinion in this regard might influence attitudes towards immigration and discrimination practices**; this seems a relevant policy recommendation. On the other hand, the effect of cultural selection should not be overestimated. Hence, self-selection along religiosity levels reduces the gap between MENA and OECD countries by 9% only. Similar findings are found when comparing young intended migrants and non-migrants. The Gallup data also enable us to compare actual migrants from MENA countries (those who have already migrated) with OECD native citizens. The religiosity index of actual migrants is much closer to that of natives, and this is especially true for older migrants and for the highly educated. The gap between actual and intended migrants can be due to several reasons: (i) cultural selection in the realization of migration aspirations, (ii) a gradual decline in cultural selection over time (in line with our findings about the Arab Spring), (iii) a sign of cultural assimilation abroad, (iv) estimation biases due to the underrepresentation of the foreign-born population in the survey. Selection on gender-egalitarian views is smaller. In sum, despite cultural selection, immigrants from the MENA countries exhibit markedly different cultural traits compared to OECD natives.

From the point of view of the home country, the distribution of cultural traits in the population left behind tends to be skewed towards more religiosity and less gender-egalitarian attitudes. Emigration to OECD countries impacts the distribution of cultural traits among those left behind, with potential implications for modernization, growth and democracy. **On this basis, it could be argued that emigration should be combated if the home-country government targets to achieve a higher level of economic development**. Our results do not support this view. Religiosity and gender-egalitarian attitudes are correlated with other observed and unobserved characteristics that affect migration aspirations. Given the proportion of intended migrants towards OECD countries (12% on average) and the small cultural differences between groups, the average cultural traits of the population left behind hardly changes under these two counterfactuals. In addition, emigration towards OECD countries could even reverse the selection effect if migrants abroad transfer more progressive norms and beliefs to their home country, an issue that is clearly on our research agenda. In sum, despite cultural selection, emigration from the MENA countries is unlikely to induce negative effects on modernization, growth and democracy.

[1] See Piketty (1995), Knack and Keefer (1997), Spolaore and Wacziarg (2012), Di Tella and MacCulloch (2014).
[2] See Baxter and Kane (1995), Bergh (2007), Duflo (2012).
[3] See Benabou (2015), Chase (2014).
[4] More results and details can be found in Docquier, Tansel and Turati (2017).

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Its main objectives are:
- *to contribute to the reinforcement of dialogue on economic and financial issues in the Euro- Mediterranean partnership, within the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Union for the Mediterranean,*
- *to improve the understanding of priority stakes in the economic and social spheres, and their repercussions on Mediterranean partners in the framework of implementation of EU Association Agreements and Action Plans,*
- *to consolidate the partners of the network of research institutes capable of North-South and South-South interactions, while it sets into motion a transfer of know-how and knowledge between members.*