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# Remittances and Political Participation in the Middle East and North Africa

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## *Abstract:*

How does the receipt of remittances affect the likelihood of engaging in civic and political activities in the Middle East and North Africa? Research in Latin America and Africa has found two contradictory effects. Remittances can increase recipients' capacity for political participation by providing them with greater economic resources. But remittances may also reduce the incentive for political participation by lessening the importance of the domestic economy to the livelihood of recipients. Using survey data from Arab Barometer, I show that remittances are associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in non-electoral political activities, including protests, strikes and contacting elected officials, and (to a smaller extent) with electoral participation. To explore the relationship between remittances and political participation in greater depth, I report the results of interviews with 54 remittance-receiving families in Jordan and Tunisia. This qualitative evidence suggests that the greater relative economic security offered by remittances allows recipients to devote more resources, particularly time, to civic and political participation. The interviews also revealed a strong conditioning effect of gender: women are more likely to use remittances to donate time and money to non-political civil society organisations, while men are more likely to use remittances to conduct explicitly political activities.

## *Keywords:*

remittances, political participation, voting, protests, Middle East

Almost \$60bn was sent by migrants working abroad to their families and communities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2020. Remittance flows are not a new phenomenon in the region: the oil boom of the 1970s drew large numbers of Arabs from oil-poor to oil-rich states of the Gulf, and former French colonies in North Africa have a long history of migration to France and southern European countries; both were associated with emigrants sending money back to their country of origin. In recent years, however, there has been a significant expansion in the size of remittance flows to MENA countries, which more than doubled in the fifteen years to 2020. How do these large and increasing micro-level financial flows from those who have left to those who have stayed affect political behaviour in sending countries?

Scholars have recently taken up this question in Latin America and Africa (Germano 2013, Caarls et al 2013, Dionne et al 2014, Fransen 2015, Lopez Garcia 2018a, 2018b, Lopez Garcia and Maydom 2021, Córdova and Hiskey 2021). Their studies have found remittances to have contradictory effects. Remittances can increase recipients' capacity for political participation by providing them with greater economic resources (Easton and Montinola 2017) and lessening their dependence on patronage from authoritarian ruling parties (Escriba-Folch et al 2022). But remittances may also reduce the incentive for political participation by improving individuals' economic outlook (Germano 2013, 2018) and allowing them to substitute poor public services for private alternatives rather than engaging in political action to improve public provision (Lopez Garcia and Maydom 2021). Methodologically, existing research has analysed surveys that ask respondents about their receipt of remittances and their political participation, primarily Afrobarometer (which surveys African countries) and AmericasBarometer (which is fielded in Central and Southern America).

In this paper, I expand the geographical and methodological scope of research on the relationship between the receipt of remittances and political participation by focusing on the MENA region and combining survey analysis of Arab Barometer survey data with a series of qualitative interviews with remittance-receiving families. The quantitative results reveal that remittances are associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in non-electoral political activities, including protests, strikes and contacting elected officials, but are not associated with electoral participation. The qualitative evidence suggests that the greater relative economic security offered by remittances allows recipients to devote more resources, particularly time, to civic and political participation. The interviews also reveal a strong conditioning effect of gender: women are more likely to use remittances to donate more time

and money to non-political civil society organisations, while men are more likely to use remittances to get involved in informal political activities.

Given the importance of remittances to the economies of many MENA countries, it is surprising that recent studies of the political effects of remittances have largely ignored the region. The political institutions in MENA countries are very different from those in Latin America and Africa, where the majority of research has been conducted. Democratic institutions are firmly entrenched in many Latin American countries and most African states are (often unconsolidated) new democracies, both of which contrast with the continued authoritarianism, defective democracy or transitional status that characterise MENA political systems. A key contribution of this paper is therefore to investigate whether our theories of how remittances affect individual political behaviour can be applied across different regional and institutional contexts.

A second contribution of this paper is to examine the lived experience of remittance receipt and how recipients themselves understand the relationship between remittances and political participation. Quantitative research can yield important insights into the average effect of remittances on different types of political participation, but analysis of qualitative interviews in this paper also helps us to understand the ‘how’ and ‘why’ behind these associations.

## **How Remittances Can Affect Political Participation**

Those who receive remittances have access to a source of material support independent from domestic economic conditions. Remittances not only increase the income of recipients but also increase the perceived security of that income and reduce the dependence of recipients on the government for prosperity. There are thus three causal mechanisms through which remittances may affect the propensity to engage in political activities:

1. Remittances increase the resources available to recipients (the income channel)
2. Remittances reduce the dependence of recipients on the government for material prosperity (the independence channel)
3. Remittances increase the security of income of recipients (the insurance channel)

The income channel is the simplest: those with greater resources are able to devote more resources (both in terms of material support and time) to political activities. Since remittances

can be thought of as 'unearned income,' they may free up the time recipients would otherwise spend working for income; this extra time may be used to participate in civic and political activities. We might expect the effect of remittances through this mechanism to be greater on non-electoral participation than voting, especially in less economically developed countries. While income is a key component of 'socio-economic status' which is strongly associated with all kinds of participation in Western democracies (Brady et al 1995, Solt 2008), studies of other regions have found that only the education component of socio-economic status is correlated with electoral participation (Krishna 2002, Bratton 2008, Kuenzi 2010). This may be a result of party strategies of vote- and turnout-buying which tend to focus on less economically-secure individuals (Brusco 2004, Jensen 2014, Carkoglu 2015). Through the income channel, therefore, we would expect remittances to increase the likelihood of recipients engaging in non-electoral political activities but to have a smaller or no effect on the likelihood of voting.

The idea that remittances reduce the dependence of recipients on the government for material prosperity (the independence channel) underpins Ahmed's (2012) argument that governments reduce welfare spending when remittances increase because remittances can be used to buy welfare goods on the private market. While this can benefit incumbent regimes by making it possible for them to divert welfare spending towards the provision of narrower clientelistic goods instead (Abdih et al 2012, Ahmed 2013), it can also prove problematic for incumbents that rely on patronage to shore up their rule. Pfutze (2012) and Escriba-Folch et al (2022) show that greater migration and remittances are associated with reduced vote shares for incumbent parties in authoritarian regimes because they reduce the effectiveness of patronage networks. The implication of these studies is that individuals who receive remittances are emboldened by their exogenous source of income such that they do not fear losing clientelistic benefits if they vote against the incumbent authoritarian regime. The same logic could well apply to other forms of political participation, for example protesting against government policies, corruption or election rigging or attending meetings held by opposition groups. Indeed, Escriba-Folch et al (2022) provide evidence that remittances increase protests in authoritarian regimes, particularly in opposition-supporting regions. The independence channel can also lead to political disengagement, however; if political decisions become less important for an individual's wellbeing, they may become less willing to take part in actions to influence the political process (Germano 2013, 2018). Ley et al (2021) argue that remittances have a macro-level non-linear effect: at low and moderate levels, remittances increase the resources available for collective action, but high levels reduce economic

grievances and therefore the motivation for protest. On an individual level, however, most studies in Africa and Latin America find that the independence channel increases non-electoral participation but decreases voter turnout (Dionne et al 2014, Córdova and Hiskey 2021, Lopez Garcia and Maydom 2021, Escriba-Folch et al 2022). We would therefore expect to find a similar effect in the MENA region.

The final causal mechanism that could link remittances with political participation - the insurance channel - is related to the other two: remittances promote feelings of economic security in recipients that allow them to pay more attention to non-material concerns. Research on both the micro- and macro-economic effects of remittances has stressed the use of remittances as insurance: aggregate remittances tend to increase during economic downturns (Yang and Choi 2007) and individuals' remittances increase when recipients receive a negative shock to their income (Amuedo-Dorantes and Pozo 2006). Recent literature has drawn attention to migration and remittances as a form of 'transnational social protection' (Levitt et al 2023, Ducu et al this issue). Germano (2018) has shown that remittance recipients in Latin America, Africa and the Middle East report higher economic evaluations than non-recipients, suggesting that remittances increase feelings of economic security. In developing country contexts, economic security plays a greater role than resources in allowing individuals to participate politically (Brooks 2015). Remittance recipients may thus feel emboldened to engage in political activities even if they must sacrifice time, money and the potential for government patronage (which links the insurance channel to the other two causal mechanisms). Germano (2013) finds that remittance recipients are more likely to vote for the incumbent party in democratic Mexico because they have fewer economic concerns. Doyle (2015) argues that the economic security provided by remittances leads to lower support for taxation and social insurance amongst recipients in Latin America. Remittances thus appear to make economic matters seem less important to recipients because they are less worried about potential economic shocks, which frees up their time and energy to engage more in civil society and to participate politically beyond the electoral process. While Germano and Doyle show that remittances can affect individuals' vote *choice* through the insurance mechanism, it is not clear whether remittances would affect the *propensity* to vote through this mechanism. Voting is less costly than other forms of political participation (and may even be materially beneficial where vote-buying is common) and is thus less likely to be affected by the insurance function of remittances. Through the insurance channel, therefore, we would expect that remittances to have a positive effect on non-electoral participation but a smaller effect on voting.

Based on the discussion above, we can state two hypotheses to test:

H1: Remittance recipients are more likely to engage in political activities than non-recipients.

H2: The positive effect of remittances on political participation is greater for non-electoral participation than for voting.

These hypotheses will be tested by analysis of Arab Barometer survey data. In order to gain greater insight into possible causal channels, I will turn to qualitative data from interviews to understand how recipients themselves think about the connections between their receipt of remittances and their political participation.

The three channels are also likely to interact with the ‘social remittances’ – ideas and norms – that emigrants transfer back to their families and communities in addition to financial resources (Levitt 1998). Krannich (this issue) shows that political and institutional norms can travel through migration. If social remittances promoting political participation accompany financial remittances, they are likely to reinforce the other mechanisms. Social remittances may also have the opposite effect, however, and mitigate the participation-enhancing effects of financial remittances. Kessler and Rother (2016) show that the context of the emigration destination influences the content of political norms transferred through migration. Social remittances are generated through discussion between those who leave and those who stay and are a good example of the ‘co-agency’ conceptualised by Ducu et al (this issue). The qualitative interviews presented below therefore offer an opportunity to explore the interaction of social with financial remittances and co-agency between emigrants and their families in their homelands in the context of different emigration destinations.

## **How Do Remittances Affect Political Participation in MENA? Evidence from Arab Barometer**

### Data and Methods

I analyse waves IV, V and VII of the Arab Barometer, a regional barometer survey that asks representative samples of the adult populations of various Arab states a series of questions about their social, political and religious values, opinions and behaviours in addition to their socio-demographic characteristics. The waves chosen all include relevant questions about

respondents' receipt of remittances and their participation in a variety of both electoral and non-electoral political and civic activities. A full list of the countries included in each of these waves is available in the Supplementary Material.

The dependent variables of interest are those capturing political participation, both electoral and non-electoral. Questions about attending protests, joining civil society organisations and voting in the most recent parliamentary elections were asked in all three waves, although the voting and remittance questions were mutually exclusive in Wave V so cannot be used together. Other participation questions appeared in one or two of the waves: respondents were asked whether they had voted in the most recent local election (Waves V and VII), engaged in volunteering (V and VII), attended an election rally (V), joined a political party (IV), participated in online community action (VII) or attended a political meeting (IV and V). All of these questions are treated as dichotomous variables coded 1 if the respondent had engaged in these activities.

One worry with survey data on political participation is that social desirability bias leads to overreporting of involvement of political activities. There is, unfortunately, no way of dealing with this issue, although we can find reassurance from an experimental study by Persson and Solevid (2014, p. 104), which found that “overreporting does not affect the correlations with other variables and probably does not bias analyses of causal effects on political participation.” Furthermore, there is no particular reason to expect that any social desirability bias would vary between remittance recipients and non-recipients.

The key independent variable is receipt of remittances, which is treated as a dichotomous variable based on a question asked in each survey: “Does your family receive remittances from someone living abroad?” While it would be interesting to explore how the effect of remittances varies according to frequency of receipt, there are not enough respondents in each category to carry out meaningful statistical analysis. Most other recent studies in the micro-level effects of remittances have also treated remittances as dichotomous, reflecting the limitations of the survey data currently available (Doyle 2015, Fransen 2015, Lopez Garcia and Maydom 2021). Germano's (2013, 2018) research is an exception; his original survey including a variety of questions measuring the amount, reliability and temporal scope of households' remittance receipt. More such surveys including specific questions to capture the relative importance of remittances to individuals and households should be a priority for future data collection on remittances.

Demographic variables can play an important role in influencing decisions to participate politically and also the likelihood of receiving remittances, so it is important to



control for these in the statistical models. There are significant gender gaps in participation in the Middle East (Coffee and Dilli 2015), so gender is included in all models. Age is another potential predictor of both receipt of remittances and political participation Hoffman and Jamal (2012). Both age and a square of age (to capture non-linear effects) are thus included. Rural-urban status is included because rural areas tend to be significantly poorer than urban areas in the MENA region (Hassine 2015). Socio-economic status is an important component of many models of political participation. Income and education are the two main components discussed in the literature (Brady et al 1995), so I include these as control variables. Education is grouped into three categories: those with less than a secondary education, those with a secondary education and those with any post-secondary education. Direct questions about income vary according to country in the surveys, so I include a variable capturing respondents' perception of their household income. Answers are on a four-point scale ranging from "Our household income does not cover our expenses and we face significant difficulties in meeting our needs" to "Our household income covers our expenses well and we are able to save."

Families that receive remittances may be systematically different from non-recipient families in their openness or willingness to push boundaries. In an attempt to account for this potential source of endogeneity, I include a variable capturing migration intentions.

A common problem with analyses of survey data is that of 'selection on observables.' For example, political entrepreneurs might attempt to mobilise individuals on observable characteristics that also correlate with greater likelihood of remittance receipt, such as those with higher education levels. An increasingly popular method to mitigate this problem is the use of matching techniques which match individual respondents on pre-treatment observables so as to compare similar individuals who either do or do not receive remittances. While matching methods reduce the sample sizes used in estimations (as non-matched observations are discarded), they do improve the reliability of causal inferences (Rosenbaum and Rubin 1985).

I use the coarsened exact matching (CEM) technique developed by Iacus et al (2012). CEM is a monotonic matching method which reduces the imbalance of covariances between groups receiving the treatment (in our case, remittances) and non-treated groups (non-recipients). In the estimations using CEM reported below, I generate sample weights by matching on observable characteristics that are likely to have preceded the receipt of remittances (age, gender, rural/urban location and education) and then use these weights to estimate the relationship between remittances and different forms of political participation in

logit models. I use logit models including country and wave fixed effects to account for country- and time-specific differences in political participation.

## Results

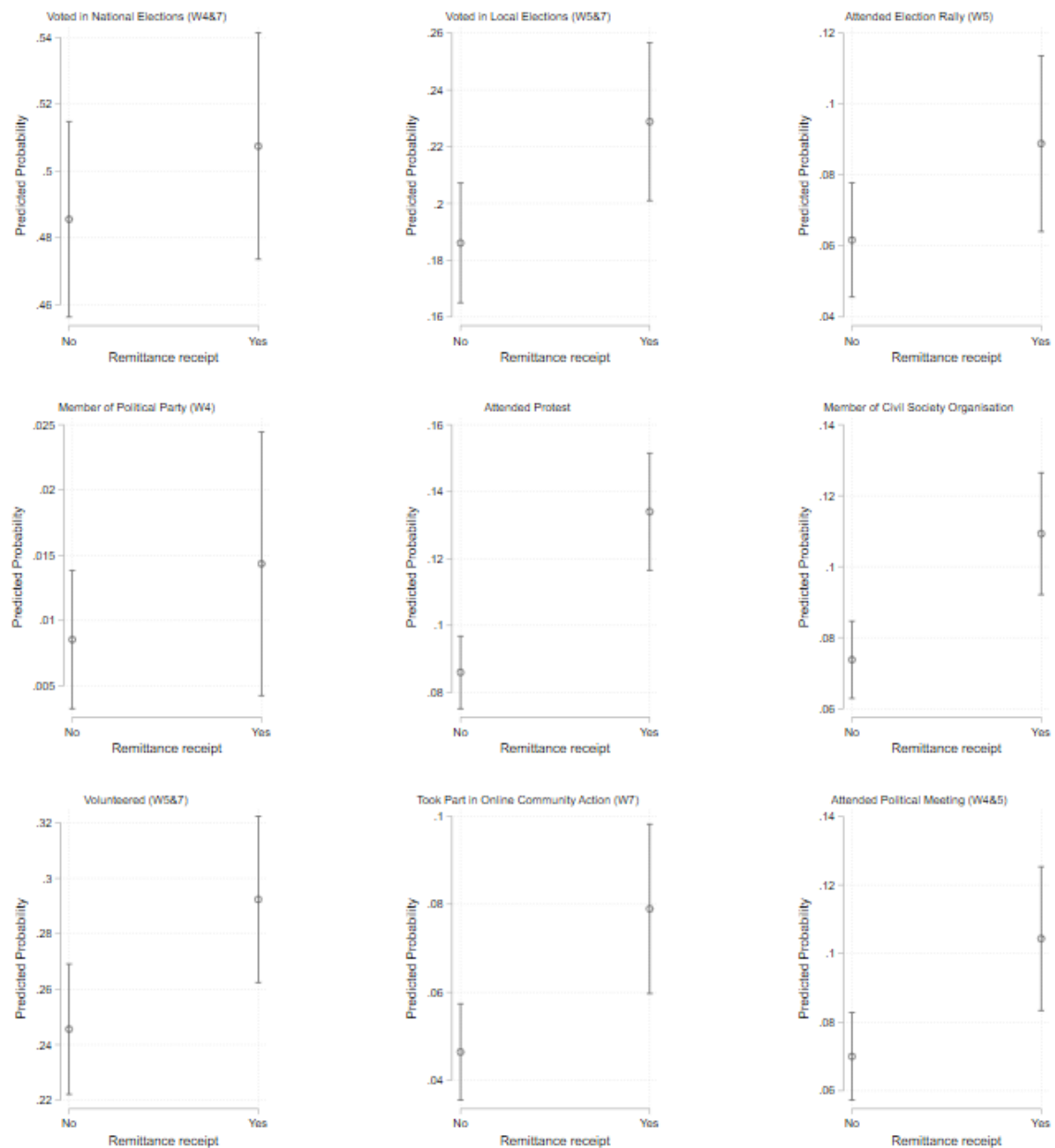
Table 1 reports the results of the logit regressions using matched data. Remittances have a positive and statistically significant (at the 95% level or higher) association with each type of political participation. Figure 1 plots the predicted probability of participating in each type of activity for a set of hypothetical individuals who vary only in their receipt of remittances. These hypothetical individuals are 30-year-old Tunisian women who live in an urban area, have a secondary education, are employed, have no plans to emigrate and have the median income of respondents in the survey.

Table 1. Remittances and Political Participation: Results from Logit Models

	Voted in Last National Election	Voted in Last Local Election	Attended Election Rally	Member of Political Party	Attended Protest	Member of Civil Society Organisation	Volunteered	Participated in Online Community Action	Attended Political Meeting
Waves	IV, VII	V, VII	V	IV	IV, V, VII	IV, V, VII	V, VII	VII	IV, V
Remittance receipt	0.087 (0.036)**	0.261 (0.039)***	0.395 (0.070)***	0.525 (0.187)***	0.498 (0.034)***	0.432 (0.041)***	0.238 (0.038)***	0.566 (0.061)***	0.437 (0.059)***
Age	0.143 (0.005)***	0.125 (0.006)***	0.100 (0.011)***	0.084 (0.033)***	0.018 (0.006)***	0.012 (0.007)*	0.009 (0.006)	0.056 (0.013)***	0.041 (0.009)***
Age <sup>2</sup>	-0.001 (0.000)***	-0.001 (0.000)***	-0.001 (0.000)***	-0.001 (0.000)*	-0.000 (0.000)***	-0.000 (0.000)*	-0.000 (0.000)	-0.001 (0.000)***	-0.000 (0.000)***
Female	-0.221 (0.027)***	-0.304 (0.031)***	-0.735 (0.054)***	-1.242 (0.172)***	-0.747 (0.028)***	-0.460 (0.034)***	-0.346 (0.029)***	-0.315 (0.054)***	-0.644 (0.046)***
Secondary education	0.130 (0.037)***	0.073 (0.043)*	0.337 (0.076)***	0.977 (0.222)***	0.356 (0.041)***	0.517 (0.053)***	0.321 (0.044)***	0.310 (0.089)***	0.372 (0.066)***
Post-secondary education	0.382 (0.037)***	0.372 (0.043)***	0.612 (0.074)***	1.513 (0.206)***	0.616 (0.039)***	1.085 (0.050)***	0.801 (0.041)***	0.785 (0.083)***	0.827 (0.062)***
Urban	-0.230 (0.029)***	-0.133 (0.034)***	-0.099 (0.062)	0.184 (0.158)	0.150 (0.031)***	0.142 (0.037)***	0.062 (0.032)*	0.042 (0.058)	0.071 (0.050)
Income	0.049 (0.015)***	0.098 (0.017)***	0.118 (0.029)***	0.125 (0.076)	0.058 (0.015)***	0.176 (0.018)***	0.136 (0.016)***	0.073 (0.030)**	0.140 (0.024)***
Employed	0.361 (0.034)***	0.259 (0.040)***	0.343 (0.067)***	0.387 (0.172)**	0.200 (0.034)***	0.356 (0.040)***	0.241 (0.037)***	0.271 (0.065)***	0.532 (0.054)***
Migration intention	-0.205 (0.030)***	-0.190 (0.035)***	-0.087 (0.059)	0.163 (0.157)	0.454 (0.029)***	0.319 (0.036)***	0.478 (0.031)***	0.619 (0.057)***	0.300 (0.049)***
<i>N</i>	27,543	21,255	11,819	5,826	41,466	41,561	35,617	23,179	17,698

Logit models with country and wave fixed effects. Standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.1$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ . Differences in sample sizes between models is largely a result of the varied number of waves of Arab Barometer in which each question was asked.

Figure 1. Remittances and Political Participation: Predicted Probabilities Plots



In general, there is a weaker relationship between remittances and voting compared with other forms of political participation. The smallest coefficient is for the model estimating the likelihood of voting in the most recent parliamentary election, but it was nevertheless still positive and statistically significant. Of the four weakest associations, three are between remittances and electoral participation: voting in national elections, voting in local elections and attending election rallies. The strongest association is between remittances and participating in online community action. There are also strong associations between

remittances and attending protests and being a member of a political party or civil society organisation.

One of the channels by which remittances might affect political participation is by increasing household income, and more positive perceptions of household finances are also associated with greater political participation across the models, so the effects of receiving remittances may be underestimated. Overall, the SES model of political participation finds validation in these results: those with high levels of education are also more likely to participate in political life. Given that remittances are associated with greater expenditure on schooling (Askarov and Doucouliagos 2020), they may also drive political participation in the longer term through improving education.

As discussed above, one problem with attributing causal power to remittances based on these models is that remittances and political participation may both be driven by a family's openness or willingness to push boundaries. In order to proxy this, the variable of migration intention was included in all the models. It had a positive and significant association with most of the non-electoral participation variables. Interestingly, migration intentions were negatively associated with voting in both national and local elections. Even with this variable in the models, however, the remittance variables remained significant.

The other control variables' associations with political participation are largely what we might expect. For example, women in the MENA region are significantly less likely to participate in any of the political activities, reflecting the large gender gap in the region (Coffee and Dilli 2015). There is a non-linear effect of age which is statistically significant in most of the models.

The quantitative analysis of Arab Barometer strongly suggests that remittances are associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in myriad forms of political and civic participation and that the relationship is stronger for non-electoral participation than it is for voting. These are only associations, however: the observational nature of the survey data means that we cannot know whether these are causal relationship. In order to explore the lived experience of this relationship and explore the possibility of causality, I now turn to qualitative evidence from interviews with remittance recipients in two of the countries included in Arab Barometer: Tunisia and Jordan.

### **How Do Remittances Affect Political Participation in Jordan and Tunisia? Evidence from Qualitative Interviews**

## Data and Methods

In total, 63 interviews were held with remittance recipients in Jordan and Tunisia during the summer of 2016 as part of a larger project examining the micro-level political effects of remittances in the MENA region. Jordan and Tunisia were chosen as field sites because they exemplify two key migration flows in the region. Jordanians primarily migrate to the rentier states of the Gulf alongside those from other relatively poor Arab states such as Egypt and Sudan. Tunisian emigration is more focussed on southern Europe, particularly France, a trend which is shared by other former French colonies in North Africa. Tunisia and Jordan also have meaningful variation in their political regimes. Jordan remains an authoritarian monarchy while Tunisia during the period of data collection was in the midst of a democratic transition after the fall of the Ben Ali region amidst the Arab Uprisings of the early 2010s. By interviewing recipients in both of these countries, we can begin to examine the extent to which the effect of remittances varies in different contexts.

The interviewees were found using the networks of four key informants (two journalists, a marriage matchmaker and the manager of a branch of a money transfer agency) and additional snowball sampling. The selection criteria were that the participants received remittances on at least an annual basis from family members abroad, and households with members in a variety of different emigration destinations were sought. The majority of interviewees were based in Amman and Tunis. The Supplementary Material includes details about the interviewees and those who send remittances to them: the relationship between remittance sender and recipient, the frequency of remittances, the destination country and work of the migrant remitter and whether the interviewee mentioned any other family members who lived abroad.

The mean age of interviewees was 43, and the majority of interviews were women (57%). For 30 interviewees, remittances were primarily received from other Arab countries, mostly in the Gulf. The other 33 interviewees received remittances from relatives in Europe, North America or Australia. France was the single biggest destination (thirteen remitters), followed by the United Arab Emirates (eleven remitters) and Saudi Arabia (ten remitters).

A third of the interviewees were parents of the migrants who sent them remittances. The second largest relationship category was that of spouses, all of whom were female. Some interviewees (13%) did receive remittances from their parents, but far fewer than received remittances from their children. The majority (83%) of interviewees received remittances from immediate family members; the interviewees who did not fall into this category were

nieces, nephews or cousins of the person who sent them remittances. 26 interviewees (42%) reported having relatives abroad other than the family member who sent them remittances; a few of these received occasional remittances from other family members, but all interviewees had one primary remittance sender.

Just over half of the interviewees received remittances at least monthly, indicating that the transfers from abroad were a major component of their income. Remittances were received every 2 to 6 months by a further 30%; many of these interviewees also indicated that remittances contributed a significant income stream. The remaining 10% of interviewees received remittances only occasionally and these transfers were often sent around festivals such as Eid or for specific purchases.

The interviews lasted between thirty minutes and two hours. Participants were asked broad questions about the history of migration in their family, the role of remittances in their personal finances, comparisons of life, politics and society between the country they lived in and the country their migrant relative(s) lived in, and connections between political and civil participation and family migration (although they were not explicitly asked whether financial remittances increased their political participation to avoid affirmation bias). All interviewees were offered anonymity by default, and their names and any identifying details have been changed. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, French or English according to the preference of the interviewee. They were recorded, hand-transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

### Reflections from Jordan

One of the major themes of the interviews was the greater resources that remittances gave recipients which allowed them to be involved in a variety of activities they would not otherwise be able to do. Samira engaged in volunteering and activism over hunger issues in urban areas outside of Amman. This was a cause she believed in passionately, but she claimed that she had not been able to help before her husband had migrated to Dubai because they had been too poor and had struggled to pay for the basic necessities of accommodation, food and school fees for their son. It was only after she began receiving remittances that she could afford to engage in civil society. Her “life totally changed when we started receiving money from abroad”; she now felt wealthy and therefore had a duty to help those who were less well-off. Samira's idea of having a duty to help others was related to her receipt of

remittances; she had greater wealth and security from remittances that others did not have and so felt that she should help those who had access to fewer and less secure resources.

Tahirah, whose husband supported her by sending her remittances from Saudi Arabia, related similar sentiments of social responsibility. While considering herself poor, she volunteered for a charity that provided support for economically-disadvantaged people. Reflecting on the role of remittances, she reflected that “remittances have helped me to participate in this, because without the money I would not be able to help at all. I would have to work more and would not be able to spend any time on helping others, just helping myself.” Notably she also believed that she should help because there are “many worse off than me.” Fatinah, who received regular remittances from her husband who worked in a factory in the UAE, was another female contributor to charitable organisations. She explained that “if people get extra from remittances, then they can contribute” to civil society organisations, although this was no different from receiving greater income from within Jordan. Thus, in Fatinah's view, remittances were important in promoting civic participation purely through the greater resources available to the recipient rather than there being anything specific to remittance income that made people more likely to participate in civic associations.

While Samira, Tahirah, Fatinah and most other interviewees felt that migration had increased their personal wealth, for Maha migration was associated with a loss of wealth and status. Her husband had previously owned a small chain of clothing shops that had closed down after increasing competition from malls in Amman and the malicious actions of a rival businessman in collusion with a corrupt government official (as Maha described it). He had been forced to move to the United States to provide money for the family to keep their house but found the downgrade in status from business owner to employee difficult. Nevertheless, Maha was still engaged with volunteering for a civil society organisation that provided food and other essential supplies to poor Jordanians during Eid and Ramadan, and noted that “without remittances, I could not afford to help like this.” Again, we have a statement here that links the receipt of remittances to greater resources which in turn increase the ability for civic engagement.

In addition to increasing financial resources, remittances can also free up time for recipients to be politically engaged. Muhammed linked his organising role in an independent day labourers' union to the receipt of remittances from his uncle in Chicago. Jordan has seen a recent rise in the organisational activities of independent trade unions, including those representing day labourers, which formed a new umbrella federation (the Federation of



Independent Trade Unions of Jordan) in 2013 to challenge the General Federation of Jordanian Trade Unions.<sup>1</sup> Muhammed's mother had been sick for an extended period of time, and he had previously spent a significant amount of time caring for her. Since his uncle had begun sending remittances to help pay for her treatment and care, however, he had been freed to contribute to his union including the organisation of protests. This is an interesting case because Muhammed did not receive financial remittances directly; they were sent to his mother but still had the effect of allowing him to participate politically.

Not all the interviewees who engaged in political activities believed there to be a link between their participation and the remittances they received. Wajd, whose brother worked as a teacher in Dubai, was one of two interviewees to have reported taking part in protests and demonstrations as part of the Arab Spring in 2011 (although he emphasised that he had not sought the toppling of the king).<sup>2</sup> He did not see a relationship, however, between his receipt of remittances and his decision to take part in protests. As he stated:

“My family is doing well compared to most other families, and my brother sends money home to us, which helps. I mean, we are not wealthy, but we are not the poorest. But I know many others who are in a worse position, who go to the streets [to protest] because they cannot live any more. I marched because I believe in change, and I believe things should get better, can get better, and in solidarity with those who have nothing.”

In Wajd's conception, it is the poor who should take part in protests because they have the most to gain (or least to lose). Remittances had made Wajd's family relatively wealthy and so should reduce their desire to protest. Despite denying that remittances played any role in his activism, Wajd did note that family migration was nevertheless an important factor; if his brother had still been a teacher in Jordan, Wajd would have been worried that he could have lost his job due to family participation in protests.

Another interviewee whose broader experience of family migration mattered more for their activism than the receipt of remittances was Rasheed, who had taken part in explicitly political protests about corruption in government. While he did not draw a direct association between remittances and his attendance at these protests, he identified corruption as the

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<sup>1</sup> See Adely (2012) for more information about labour activism in Jordan.

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of the limited and largely pro-monarchy Arab spring protests in Jordan, see Tobin (2012).

reason that Jordan could not provide the same level of social welfare benefits as the USA, where he had family. This points to a potential social remittance causal mechanism linking migration with increased political participation in addition to, and interacting with, financial remittances (Levitt 1998, Kessler and Rother 2016).

Musa, whose father worked in the UAE, also participated in the 2011 protests, although he was initially tentative about connecting his political activism in the Islamic Action Front (IAF) to migration and remittances. He had joined the IAF after his experience of protesting (which he described as a “political awakening”) because they appeared to be the most effective opposition force in the country. His initial account of the reasons for his participation focused on the catalyst of his first involvement in political protest and did not afford a role to remittances. When asked to reflect on whether he could be as politically active if his father did not send money home earned in his job as the manager of a clothing shop in Dubai, Musa suggested that he would have to take greater care of his mother. His fathers' remittances allowed his mother to live a comfortable lifestyle, including the employment of a domestic servant from the Philippines. Without this, Musa believed that he would have to spend more time helping his mother and therefore less time on his political activism. He thus concluded:

“It might be fair to say ... that remittances did help me with the IAF, I mean to be involved. But I do not support the IAF because of remittances, I would do so even if my father was still here [in Jordan]. So they help, but they are not the main reason.”

Musa's story shows us that there is no simplistic relationship between remittances and political participation; receiving money from abroad does not instantly create a politically engaged citizen. Rather, remittances can provide the resources which allow recipients to act on pre-existing desires to participate. Remittances are not the primary reason for a recipient to engage in protests, union organising or charity work, but they can make it more likely by providing extra resources, income security and feelings of duty to help those who are worse off.

### Reflections from Tunisia

Abdullah, who received money from his brother in Italy, was clear about the effect of remittances on his capacity for civic participation: “the money I received allowed me to do

more.” He described himself as someone who was very keen to contribute to civil society and discussed his volunteer work in community and sports organisations and a “dialogue organisation” which brought “people together from across political divides, across religious divides.” His participation in the latter organisation began after the 2011 revolution which brought down the long-standing authoritarian ruler Ben Ali and meant that Tunisians “have more ability now to be involved in this kind of civil society, which I think is good even if can be a bit noisy. I mean there are a lot of people with different ideas who want to make themselves heard.” Abdullah's was a clear-cut case of an interviewee who identified remittances as allowing him to be more involved in civic and political life, although it is important to note that he also described an underlying desire to participate.

Abdulwahab similarly expressed that remittances have helped him to be involved with an organisation called Jasmine (named after the ‘Jasmine Revolution’ of 2011) which promotes Tunisians “living in harmony with each other and nature.” He believed that the work of Jasmine was important to combat a problem he perceives of a “lack of communication between the government and people ... We make sure there is a line of communication,” and he regularly attended meetings and did volunteer advocacy work for the organisation. Abdulwahab suggested that “if I did not receive the money from my grandfather, I would have to work more and I would not have the time to be involved, but I think that it is very important.” Remittances thus provided Abdulwahab with the resources (extra time) that he needed to be involved with a political NGO.

Zahir was an active member of Ennahda, joining the party when it held power after the first post-revolution elections. He attributed his political participation both to resources and to the opening up of the political system after the 2011 revolution: “I do well because I work and my wife works and I receive money from my sons, so I have time to be involved with politics. I love politics, especially now we have freedom after the revolution.” In his mind, it is those who have greater resources who can devote themselves more to political activities. Remittances were one of his sources of income, alongside his and his wife's work, and so could be seen as contributing to the resources that allowed him to be active in the political party he supported.

Wasim was not involved in any political organisations, but he did mention that “because (my father) sends money, we have more than we need, so we can use this money to do extra things that other people can’t do.” He gave the example of a sports club that he and his brother would not have been able to participate in if they had not received money from their father who worked in Qatar. Abdullah, Abdulwahab and Zahir clearly had an underlying

desire to be involved in political organisations, while Wasim was much more interested in sport than politics. Remittances had allowed all four of them to devote extra time to their interests; they did not change their willingness to be involved with different organisations but did change their ability to do so.

The four interviewees discussed above conceived of the economic benefits of remittances as increasing their resources of time and money. Farid, whose family received remittances from his uncle who worked as a taxi driver in Birmingham, discussed remittances as a form of insurance:

“It is a comfort to know that there is someone to support you whenever you are in need. You just have this feeling of insurance, it’s like an insurance policy. When you don’t have to worry about some issues, you have free time to think about ... doing things other than ensuring you have enough money to live.”

He gave the example of his mother who had suffered “an accident and we didn’t have enough money to pay the hospital so we were trapped. If we didn’t have him [my uncle, sending remittances from] there, I don’t know how it would go because the surgery fees are so high.” Farid was involved in student politics and had been involved in numerous demonstrations against the influence of salafists in universities.<sup>3</sup> He claimed that remittances had allowed him to both continue his education and to be involved in student political organisations. Without remittances, he would have had to find work in order to support his family and ensure that they could cope financially with future emergencies. He would not have the time or energy to be involved in civic or political life. This is an illustration of how the economic security provided by remittances can help to increase the political participation of recipients.

An interesting example of the effects of changes in the amount of money received through remittances was the story of Jamahl, who wanted to be involved with civic organisations and political activity and had been active in the trade union movement in the past. Jamahl and his family had long received remittances from his brother, a journalist in Italy. A few years previously, however, his brother had lost his job at a newspaper and was now earning significantly less as a freelancer; the amount of money he sent back to his family in Tunisia was correspondingly reduced. Jamahl no longer had time to be involved in his

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<sup>3</sup> For accounts of the rise and fall of the salafist movement in post-revolutionary Tunisia, see Cavatorta (2015) and Merone (2017).

trade union because he had to “make sure my family is provided for” now that they could not rely on remittances for their income. Jamahl's story offers a perspective on how a reduction in remittances can lead to a lower likelihood of being involved in political activities.

The greater income and security provided by remittances can help recipients to be involved in civic and political activities directly by increasing the resources they have available. The greater income can also have an indirect effect by fostering the sense that recipients have gained an advantage and so have a duty to help those less well off. Khalidah, whose son sent regular remittances from Marseille, was involved in a charity that helped the poor during Eid and other festivals. She attributed her involvement in part to a feeling that the remittances had helped her to live “a good life, a better life than many people who are struggling.” Farid made similar remarks, stating that “those who receive remittances are more concerned about improving other people's lives like their life has improved.” Khalidah and Farid both felt comparatively better off than others in society due to their receipt of remittances and so were both more willing and more able to contribute to civic organisations.

While the role of increased resources in linking remittances with political participation was prominent in many of the interviews, other interviewees suggested a social remittance effect. Kamal, whose family received money from his cousin who worked as a hotel manager in London, argued that:

“Having money from abroad doesn't necessarily imply you will be involved in civic organisations or that you are going to be democratic or whatever. But people who have family abroad tend to be more open-minded ... because they are influenced by their lifestyle abroad, and these people are very close to you and they become more open-minded, more European style, you are going to be interested in that and you are going to try to see differently.”

Kamal himself was active in an environmentalist organisation, which he put down to a “personal commitment” to the cause rather than any money received from family abroad.

Omar, whose son and brother were both working in France, was a member of Ennahda's most important political opponent, Nidaa Tounes (Call for Tunisia), a secularist party that won a plurality of seats in the legislature in the 2014 parliamentary elections. While he attributed his political activism primarily to a desire to defend Tunisia's secularist tradition against Ennahda and other Islamist forces, Omar nevertheless saw a role for both social and financial remittances:

“Those who have family in France think more like French people. The Tunisians have a history of being close to the French people. We believe in secularism (*laïcité*), we believe in social progress ... Those who receive money also have the means to make a change in the country. We want to help our country develop.”

In Omar's view, those Tunisians who received financial remittances from France also received a particular political viewpoint, secularist and believing in ‘social progress,’ and were empowered to take action to promote it. Social and economic remittances thus work together to create recipients willing and able to try to bring about political change.

A viewpoint that combined both ideas of social remittances and a civic duty to help those less fortunate was offered by Qaseem, whose father had worked in Saudi Arabia for the past fifteen years:

“People who receive remittances have knowledge of different types of life because their families are abroad. Also, they feel like their life has changed positively and so you want to help other people to achieve this. If I am going to a better way of life, then I should help others who do not have others working abroad. This is not always about money, sometimes information is more important. This is the aim of much activism and organisations, to be open minded and to disseminate information.”

According to Qaseem, those who received money from abroad were more likely to be open-minded because they had more knowledge about the world. They were also likely to feel wealthier than others who did not receive remittances which led, in Qaseem's view, to an increased interest in helping others who had not been as economically lucky through political activism and voluntary work.

Nowa, whose son had worked in Italy for the past 18 years, offered a similar viewpoint. She claimed that Tunisians who had family members abroad had a “different mentality. We are more open and we want to help others ... We have more money, so we are able to help others.” In her view, Tunisians who received remittances had both a greater inclination and a greater ability to contribute to civil society. When asked if this extended to political participation, Nowa said that she did “not like getting involved in politics, but I think others who have family in Italy and in other places might be involved in political parties or in protests or that kind of thing.” The reason she gave for this was similar as for civic

participation: those Tunisians who received remittances had a greater interest in improving conditions for society and could do more about it because they had access to extra resources.

Some of the interviewees thought that a combination of greater resources and changed political outlook could lead remittance recipients to be more engaged in politics and society. Zahra, whose family was supported by her father-in-law's remittances from France, suggested two reasons why remittances increased civic and political participation. Firstly, "those people (who receive remittances) are more open because they have experience, they know what life is like outside Tunisia. This makes you more interested in different people and how they live and makes you want to help other people." Secondly, "people who receive remittances have more access to financial resources. This can allow them to do a lot of activities and to engage more within the civic organisations." She offered both of these reasons while considering how remittances had contributed to her decision to volunteer for charities which supported the poor in Tunisia.

Hasna was not involved in political activities herself but her husband was, and she believed that this was partly due to the remittances sent to her family by her father who lived in France. Hasna's husband had taken part in several protests since the 2011 revolution, firstly against Salafists and later against the Ennahda-led government. She gave two reasons why remittances could be linked to political activism. Firstly, people who receive remittances "have more money, so we are not always worried about working and finding money to pay for our food, our medicine, our living." Secondly, those who receive remittances "want to improve their country. Because we have help from our family in other countries, but most people do not. We feel we need to help our country get better." Similar to many of the other interviewees, Hasna felt that remittance recipients felt an obligation to be involved in political and civic activism because they were relatively well-off.

In Jordan, the majority of interviewees who were involved in political or civil activism or organisations saw remittances as contributing to such engagement through the provision of greater resources. Some also noted that remittance recipients felt a civic duty to help those less fortunate or be more open-minded as a result of the experience of having family members abroad. This suggests that norms promoting political participation are not merely 'remitted' by migrants to their families and communities but are also generated through changes in perceived socio-economic status amongst recipients. The same three narratives were offered by the Tunisian interviewees, but none of them emerged to be as dominant as the resource narrative was in Jordan.

There was a strong gender dimension to the civic and political engagement of the interviewees in both Jordan and Tunisia: the female interviewees who reported participation all discussed volunteering for charitable organisations, while the male interviewees' engagement was more explicitly political, involving trade unions, political parties and protests. This may reflect the barriers to women participating in political life in the MENA region which reflect both cultural norms and socioeconomic differences between men and women (Coffe and Dilli 2015). As we can see in Table 1, women are less likely to vote and to participate in both political and civic activities, but the negative association is greater for political activities - such as attending protests and joining political parties – than for civic activities like volunteering and taking part in online community action. Remittances provide financial resources and time that women can use to overcome the lower barriers they face to civil participation, but not the greater barriers that make it more difficult for them to participate in explicitly political activities.

## Conclusion

Before considering the implications of the quantitative and qualitative findings, a number of caveats should be acknowledged. Limitations with the survey data mean that we cannot attribute a causal relationship between remittances and political participation. The surveys analysed are cross-sectional, so we cannot observe the same respondents before and after they begin receiving remittances. Panel data would more successfully isolate the causal effect of remittances, but there is a lack of panel surveys that include questions on both remittances and political beliefs and activities. We could well imagine that those families who send members overseas to work possess certain unmeasured attributes (for example, open-mindedness or a willingness to push boundaries) that also affect their likelihood to engage in political activities. Furthermore, we cannot isolate the effect of migration from that of financial remittances. The evidence from interviewees in Jordan and Tunisia provides greater confidence in a causal effect of remittances on political participation, but we cannot know the extent to which these findings might apply to the population at large or provide an estimate of the magnitude of the effect.

These caveats notwithstanding, an interesting pattern has been found: remittance recipients are more likely to engage in political activities including protesting, attending political meetings and joining civic organisations. The association with remittances is stronger for non-electoral forms of participation, although recipients are nevertheless more



likely to vote in local and national elections than non-recipients. This finding suggests that remittances may have important political effects not only through their impact on government decision-making and the wider economy, but also through their influence on individual decisions about whether to participate politically. This influence works through a number of channels, the most important being resources: remittances provide recipients with the time and money to be able to contribute to the political process. The qualitative evidence also provided some support for the insurance channel (though not the independence channel) and also suggested a social remittance channel. Many recipients reported that their feelings of civic responsibility were heightened as a result of feeling relatively privileged by their receipt of remittances. For the women interviewed, this led most often to engagement in civic activism, particularly contributing towards charity work. For men, this engagement was more explicitly political and involved attending protests and joining political parties.

The greater willingness to protest on the part of remittance recipients may offer a new causal mechanism by which remittances could affect authoritarian regime stability. This issue has recently received attention in the democratisation literature, with Ahmed (2012) finding that remittances can bolster authoritarian regimes by allowing them to cut back on public welfare spending and increase clientelistic spending and Escriba-Folch et al (2022) demonstrating that remittances can undermine the patronage networks that underpin many single-party authoritarian regimes. The findings in this paper support the ideas that authoritarian regimes may also face greater levels of protest when remittances increase.

The findings on remittances and political participation presented here also have implications for the gender gap in political participation. Such gender gaps have recently been examined in the Middle East (Coffee and Dilli 2015). As remittances are more likely to accrue to women and appear to promote greater participation, an increase in remittance recipients may have the potential to reduce the gender participation gap. This insight was gained from the interview research, demonstrating the importance of future work on the political effects of remittances engaging with qualitative methods in addition to the traditional reliance on quantitative analyses of survey and macro-economic data. As Artan (this issue) shows elsewhere in this issue, emigration can also lead to a reinforcing of patriarchal controls, so close attention needs to be paid to the circumstances under which emigration can lead to either positive or negative effects on women's agency.

Research on Africa and Latin America has often found remittances to be associated with lower levels of voter turnout (Dionne et al 2014, López García 2018a, López García 2018b, Maydom and López García 2021). In the MENA region, the opposite is true. While

the effect of remittances on electoral participation is smaller than that on non-electoral participation, it is nevertheless positive. There are a number of potential explanations. Córdova and Hiskey (2021) find that developmental context is vital to understanding the role of remittances, which have a positive effect on voter turnout in poorer countries but a negative effect in rich countries in Latin America. The relative lack of economic development in many MENA countries examined in this paper may therefore account for the difference in the results compared with other regions, although many countries in Africa are less developed, so this cannot account for all the cross-regional difference. Another potential explanation is the greater authoritarianism in political institutions in MENA compared with Latin America and Africa, giving greater importance to the independence channel by which remittances affect political participation. These regional differences highlight the benefit of examining the effects of remittances and other variables on political participation across different regions to discover the extent to which our theories can travel and what tweaks we might need to make when we do so.

The results in this paper also speak to the concept of ‘co-agency’ highlighted in this volume (Ducu et al this issue). Financial remittances can increase the autonomy – and thus capacity for agency - of transnational families by providing them with greater resources of money and time. But this heightened agentic potential is socially embedded; it is conditioned by the social remittances – ideas and norms – which accompany the money sent by relatives abroad. As we have seen, the social context of gender also conditions how remittances can influence political participation. Financial remittances should therefore be seen not only as another form of income available to families but rather as a facet of the relationship between members of transnational households which have complex effects on the transnational households’ ability and willingness to engage in different types of political participation.

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