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The Future of the Iranian Labour Market: Demography and Education

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This working paper was produced for the Legatum Institute's workshop on Economic Reform in October 2013. The workshop was part of 'The Future of Iran' project, which is designed to encourage Iranians to begin thinking about the challenges they will face if, or when, they suddenly find themselves in a position to carry out major political, social and economic reforms.

There is some truth in the saying that demography is destiny because demographic variables move slowly and in a determined way compared to economic variables, which are difficult to predict with any accuracy beyond a year or two. This is more true in the case of Iran than most other countries, because its economy has been highly unpredictable, swayed by domestic and international politics, while its demography, despite large twists and turns, offers a remarkably reliable picture of a few things, such as the coming changes in the labour market and in youth employment. In this paper I mainly focus on what is likely to happen by the end of this decade, by 2020. Something can be said with some confidence for the following decade and I will allude to those as well.

The most important demographic variable that bears heavily on Iran's labour market outcomes of the next twenty years is the growth of the labour force, especially of workers in their twenties and thirties; it was until recently one of the highest in the world, about 3.5% per year, but has slowed down considerably in recent years and will remain low for the foreseeable future. The reason why we can make such a prediction with some confidence is that the most important determinants of labour force growth—fertility and infant mortality that determine cohort size—have already taken place, some twenty years ago. The generation that is entering the labour market today is the product of decisions made by families in the 1990s, when the modern period of low fertility and high expectations of child education began in Iran. Beyond cohort size, the propensity of its members to participate in the labour force determines the growth rate of the labour force, which introduces some indeterminacy into the prediction of the longer run, beyond 2020, because the decision to participate in the labour force depends on a host of complex issues including the ability of the economy to create jobs.

The hardest variable to predict is the labour force participation of women. It has been on a slow rise for the past decade but it is still low by international standards. For example, it has about half the female labour force participation rate of Malaysia, a country with comparable fertility and education. Its growth depends on changes in social norms

(husbands more willing to allow their wives to work outside the home), government actions (labour laws that discourage women from working) and the economy's ability to create jobs suitable for women (mostly skilled white collar jobs). The participation rates of men have been generally high, around 90%, and this pattern is likely to continue in the future.

Moving beyond participation, the employment outcomes that are most interesting and important in affecting individual welfare and economic growth, such as unemployment and earning, are also much less predictable. Iran's high rates of unemployment are well known. The general rate of unemployment is around 15% but it is twice as high for youth, and for young women it is three times as high. The future is likely to be better, not just because things cannot get worse, but because the cohorts of young workers that will be entering the labour market for the first time by the end of this decade will be about 40% smaller than recent cohorts. The new government of Mr. Rouhani has some breathing space to fix a few things in Iran's international and domestic policies before even the smaller cohorts find that Iran's labour markets are not able to accommodate many of them.

The employment prospects of these new cohorts will depend heavily on two factors. The more predictable factor is the skill set that new cohorts will bring to the labour market. Judging by the high unemployment rates of the current educated youth, Iran's education system is not geared to produce the type of skills that employers are looking for. Solutions to the problem of mismatch of skills will have to wait another decade. The less predictable factor is government behaviour in implementing policies that affect the competitiveness of Iran's tradable sectors, agriculture and industry, from where most of the future jobs will come. The last ten years saw a squandering of time and oil money into binge consuming that gave the country several years of jobless growth. The election of Rouhani is considered a turnaround from the free imports policies of Ahmadinejad, but contrary to popular perceptions, the problem was not just the president. There are strong lobbies for cheap foreign exchange and low interest rates that favour consumption over production. Iran's economy is not a ship that a good captain can turn around by sheer will. Better policies require some reconfiguration of the country's political forces in the direction of production and employment. The entry of the large cohorts of youth into positions of power in the economy and government may be just what the country needs.

Demography

During 1996-2006, the growth of Iran's labour force and working age population aged 15-64 accelerated, reaching the historically record high levels of 4.19% and 3.85% per year, respectively (Table 1). At this rate each year about 1.82 million people reached working age and 0.75 million of them joined the labour force. Schools absorbed the bulk of the increase in the working age population, which explains the difference between these two numbers. The number of workers entering the labour force in this period was

three times the number entering during 1991-1996, delivering a shock to Iran's economy and catching its political leadership, occupied by very different issues, completely unawares.

But the next five years saw a dramatic change as the growth rates of the labour force and the working age population tumbled to below 1%, all thanks to the sharp fertility decline of the 1990s. The working age population grew by about 0.82 million each year while 0.14 were added to the labour force. The decrease in the growth of the working age population was a golden opportunity to reduce unemployment, but instead, the economy reduced the number of jobs it added, to about 70,000 each year, thus causing unemployment to actually increase.

TABLE 1: WORKING-AGE AND ECONOMICALLY ACTIVE POPULATION (15-64)

Source: Statistical Center of Iran, The National Census of Population, various years.

	LABOUR FORCE	WORKING AGE POPULATION (15-64 YEARS)
1991-1996	1.84	3.06
1996-2006	4.19	3.85
2006-2011	0.62	0.52

Looking into the future, we have to switch from the reliable census figures used above to estimates of the growth of the working age population provided by the United Nations. The UN predictions show that the rate of growth of the working age population will remain below 1% for the foreseeable future. So, on account of demography alone, calmer days are ahead for the labour market.

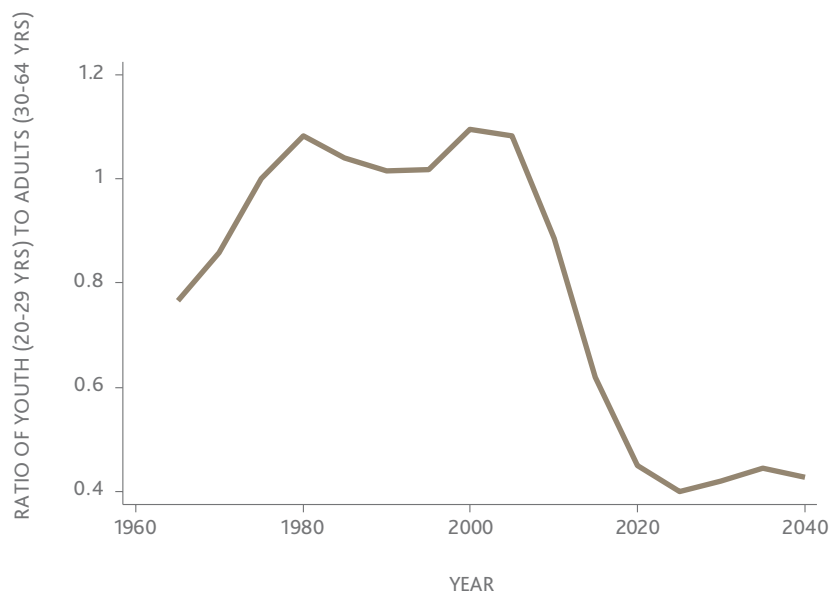
Another way to capture the dramatic shifts of in Iran's labour market since the turn of the century and into the next decade is to look at the ratio of youth (15-29) to adults (30-64) in recent history and in the coming decades.

For the last three decades, since the mid 1970s, Iran's young population (ages 15-29) has outnumbered its adult population, which spans more than twice as many years (30-64). Youth are now about 80% of the adult population in size and in 2020 will be even smaller. Figure 1 demonstrates the rapid pace at which the youth to adult ratio will decline in the coming decade, reaching 0.4 after 2020.

A similar trend is forecast for the ratio of workers entering to exiting the labour force (Salehi-Isfahani 2011). Figure 2 depicts the ratio of workers entering the labour market year (proxied here by the size of the 20-24 year old age group) to those who retire (60-64). Two remarkable facts are apparent from this graph. First, Iran's labour markets have been under unprecedented stress, with nearly 6 workers entering the labour market for each one exiting. In South Korea, depicted in the same figure for comparison, this ratio never increased above 4 and, when it reached that level, the Korean economy was

FIGURE 1: HOW YOUNG PEOPLE WILL COMPARE IN NUMBER TO ADULTS

Source: United Nations World Population Prospects, 2012 Revision.

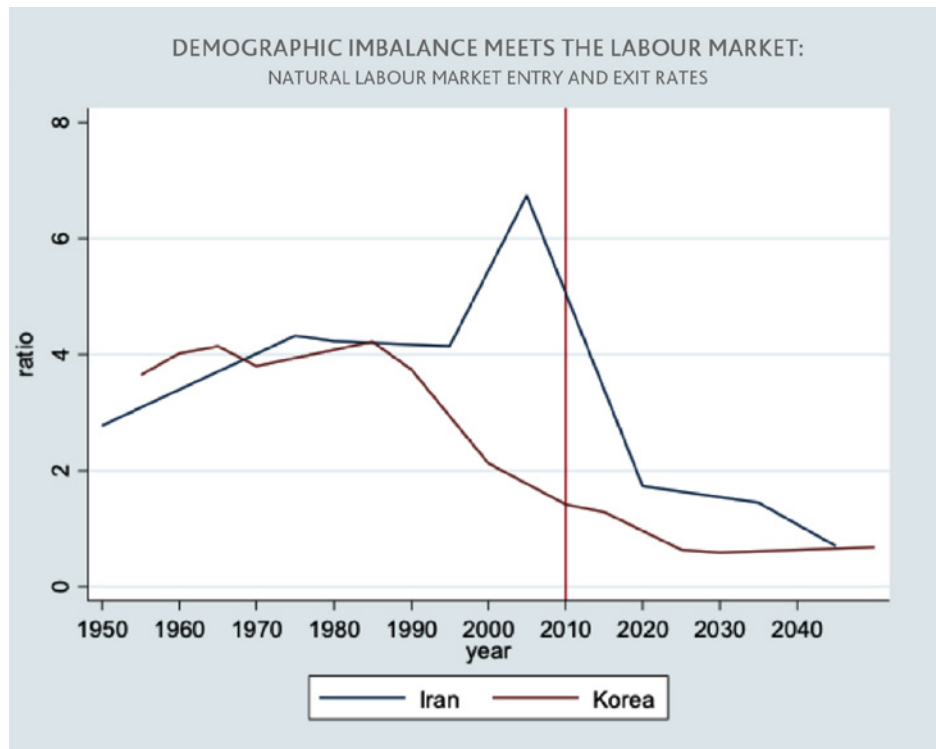


turning into an export powerhouse and was able to accommodate the imbalance. In contrast, Iran's highest peak for this ratio was achieved at a time when the economy was hardly creating any jobs. As I noted above, the census of 2001 revealed, shockingly, that during the previous five years Iran's economy had added only half a million net new jobs, a rate six times slower than its performance during the previous decade (see Figure 5 below). The second remarkable fact is that the entry to exit ratio has been on the decline for the last few years and will reach the much more manageable level of two by the end of this decade.

These predictions implicitly assume that fertility will not increase very much. The Ahmadinejad government was very concerned about falling fertility, its implications for aging and the shrinking of the population decades from now. His government succeeded in initiating policies to promote higher fertility, including stopping the subsidies to family planning, but these policies are unlikely to reverse the course of Iran's demographic transition. Nearly three decades ago the government played a positive role in lowering fertility to its current replacement level by implementing rigorous family planning in rural areas, but more than 80% of the decrease in fertility had other socio-economic reasons (Salehi-Isfahani et al 2010). The demographic predictions I use, which are based on the United Nations medium fertility scenario, assume no significant reversal in fertility.

FIGURE 2: THE RATIO OF WORKERS ENTERING TO EXITING THE LABOUR MARKET

Source: United Nations World Population Prospects, 2012 Revision.



Labour force participation

One reason why the growth of labour supply might exceed population growth is that the rate at which younger age groups participate in market work will increase as they get older.

Women of all ages are much less likely to participate in market work than men, less than one-fifth (see Figure 3 and Table 2 below). However, there are indications that they may enter the labour force at greater numbers in the future. During 2006-2011, as labour market conditions deteriorated and men reduced their labour force participation rates, women maintained or increased theirs. Never-married women, who participate at more than twice the rate of married women, actually increased their participation rates during 2006-2011, when the economy was declining and never-married men slightly reduced their participation (Figure 3). Divorced women behaved similarly to never-married women by increasing their labour force participation during this period. Younger women show greater willingness to work outside the home, whether by staying in school longer or working more, so the likelihood of an increase in women's participation in the future

is high. Older men and women will continue to behave as they have in the past, that is those who have been out of the labour force until middle age are unlikely to seek market work as they get older.

It is difficult to gauge the labour market behaviour of Iranian women entirely from survey data for several reasons. One reason is that for most women the alternative to market work is housework, while for men it can be leisure. Another reason has to do with data collection. Married women from traditional families who are willing to work may be loathe to admit it for fear of being seen as disloyal to their husbands and their families, especially if they are not presented with a suitable offer but are simply being asked. If their job prospects improve, they may be more willing to declare their status as “searching for a job”, and thus be counted as such in labour surveys. Finally, for married women, labour force participation is closely linked to how female-friendly the labour market is, both in terms of the type of jobs available—white-collar in a safe environment—as well as the availability of affordable childcare. All these reasons imply that in the future, and with economic growth, women will want to work more rather than less.

FIGURE 3: LOW RATES OF LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN COMPARED TO MEN

Note: Excludes those in school

Source: Author’s calculations from the 2% samples of the censuses of population, 2006 and 2011, Statistical Center of Iran.



FIGURE 4: SINGLE WOMEN OPPOSITE LABOUR FORCE BEHAVIOUR OF NEVER-MARRIED MEN AND WOMEN

Note: Not in school

Source: Author's calculations from the 2% samples of the censuses of population, 2006 and 2011, Statistical Center of Iran.

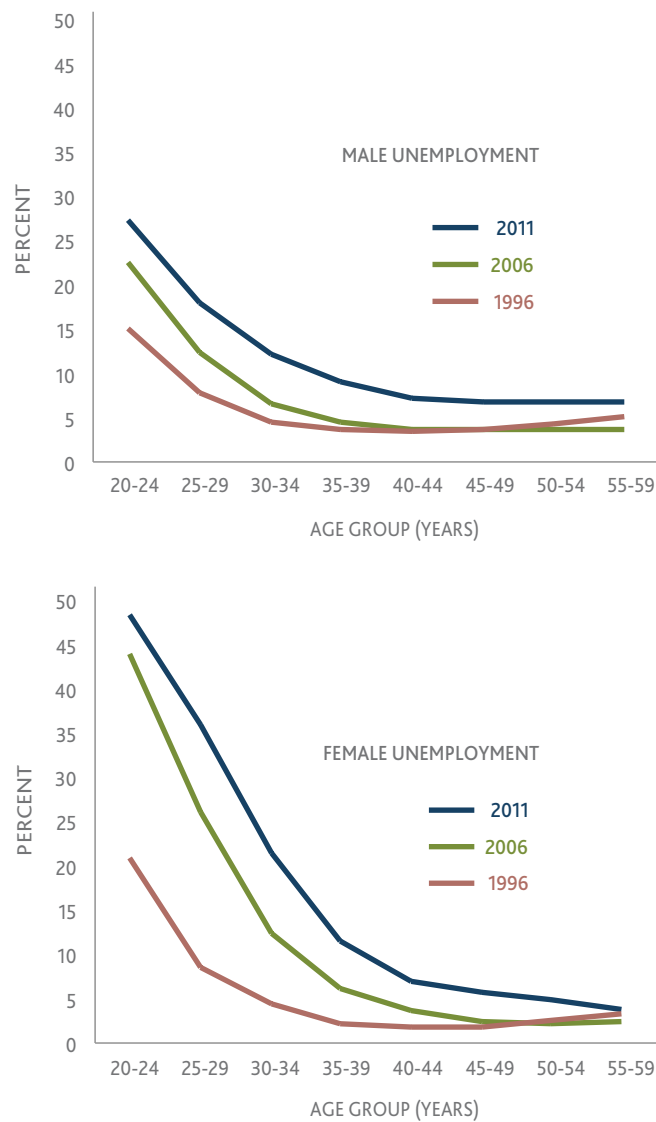


Unemployment

The most striking aspect of unemployment in Iran is its disproportionate impact on youth. Between 1996-2006, the economy created about 6 million jobs but youth unemployment rates increased. Figure 4 shows how older age groups were protected during this period while young men and women experienced increased unemployment. The situation deteriorated after 2006, even for older workers, when for the first time they experienced higher rates of unemployment. In 2011, according to the census figures depicted in these graphs, the unemployment curves for men and women shifted up in their entirety. For men in younger age groups, this meant that their hope of waiting to find a job when they entered their thirties was dashed because unemployment rates for the 30-39 age group doubled in five years, from around 5% in 2006 to 10% in 2011.

The asymmetric experience of young and older workers is a product of the rigidity of Iran's labour market, which nearly guarantees lifetime jobs for older workers while younger workers wait long periods for stable and formal jobs or switch rapidly between short-term jobs (Egel and Salehi-Isfahani 2010).

FIGURE 5: UNEMPLOYMENT RATES FOR MEN AND WOMEN BY AGE, 1996-2011



Education

Labour market outcomes—likelihood of participation, employment and earnings—depend heavily on education. In Iran, while participation rates and wages rise consistently with education, the probability of being employed does not. In 2011, monthly wages of university graduates compared to high school graduates were 55% higher for men and 48% for women.¹ Participation rates were also much higher for educated workers (see Table 2, p9).

TABLE 2: LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES BY EDUCATION LEVEL

Source: Author's calculations from the 2% samples of the censuses of population, 2006 and 2011, Statistical Center of Iran.

EDUCATION LEVEL	MEN		WOMEN	
	2006	2011	2006	2011
Less than primary	83.0	74.8	10.1	6.1
Primary	88.8	85	10.3	6.7
High school	88.2	86.6	19.2	16.9
Some College	76.7	82.5	38.9	17.7
University	89.7	84.5	66.4	56.6
Graduate school	89.8	84.2	77.4	68.8
TOTAL	87.3	83.9	17.9	16.3

The unemployment profile by education is entirely different, as shown in Table 3. The probability of unemployment rises by education up to high school and then declines somewhat. Having attended university increases the chance of being employed, but completing it does not. Panel A of this table, which includes all workers, also shows the negative impact of the economic recession of the last few years on educated workers. Between 2006 and 2011 the unemployment rate for men with university education nearly doubled, from 7.5% to 14.5% and for women increased by 10 percentage points, from 19.4% to 29.1%, while the overall unemployment rate increased up by 3.6 percentage points for men and 2 percentage points for women.

A grimmer picture of the labour market emerges in panel B of Table 3, which limits the age to under 30 years old. Unemployment rates have shot up for workers who have at least a college education, the lowest rate being for men with graduate school education (29.5%).

**TABLE 3: UNEMPLOYMENT RATES BY EDUCATION
PANEL A—ALL AGES**

Source: Author's calculations from the 2% samples of the censuses of population, 2006 and 2011, Statistical Center of Iran.

EDUCATION LEVEL	MEN		WOMEN	
	2006	2011	2006	2011
Less than primary	7.6	11.6	17.0	13.6
Primary	10.8	14.4	24.5	24.0
High school	15.1	20.4	40.0	41.6
Some College	11.9	14.3	26.2	31.3
University	7.5	14.5	19.4	29.1
Graduate school	3.2	8.9	9.0	23.5
TOTAL PRIMARY	11.4	15	27.2	29.2

**TABLE 3: UNEMPLOYMENT RATES BY EDUCATION
PANEL B—WORKERS UNDER 30 YEARS OLD**

EDUCATION LEVEL	MEN		WOMEN	
	2006	2011	2006	2011
Less than primary	19.0	20.6	29.9	25.8
Primary	18.3	21.6	32.3	31.7
High school	23.7	28.7	51.4	50.9
Some College	27.2	25.7	46.6	48.0
University	22.3	34.7	36.1	49.4
Graduate school	16.0	29.5	22.1	44.5
TOTAL	20.7	24.9	41	45.4

The future is not likely to be a whole lot better for the university-educated. If the current economic slump ends, we could go back to the unemployment rates of 2006, but at the rate at which post secondary education has been expanding in Iran, I would expect that educated youth unemployment will continue to be a serious problem at least until 2020. During 2006-2011, the fastest growing category of workers was that of the university-educated. The share of those with some post-secondary education increased from 16.8% to 38.1% in five years. That phenomenal increase was the result of the opening up of the university system to all types of instruction—part-time and long-distance—rather than greater investment in higher education. The rapid expansion of higher education in Iran has come at the cost of much lower quality and a greater gap between formal credentials and skills.

The problem of high educated-youth unemployment rates is not specific to Iran; it is a region-wide phenomenon in the Middle East and North Africa (Salehi-Isfahani 2011, 2012a, 2013). In a well-functioning economy, individuals seek education to increase their chances of employment, whereas in Iran and the wider region those more highly educated are sometimes less likely to be employed. Much is wrong with the demand side of the labour market—unattractive business climate, government heavy-handedness, international sanctions, etc.—but the supply side also shares the blame for high-educated youth unemployment. Until something is done about the low productivity of the education system, more education will not bring relief to young people's lives.

Like the rest of the Middle East, Iran has a test-based education system, which limits the set of skills that individuals are encouraged to learn (Salehi-Isfahani 2012a). Iran's system is a bit extreme as it disproportionately rewards the ability to absorb and retain a lot of information at the expense of creativity. A huge amount of study material acquired over the years is computer tested in two 4-hour sessions, leaving little room for personal characteristics that employers associate with productivity. Closer integration with the

global economy that the current Rouhani government is actively pursuing will not help young Iranians with university credentials, much as private employers will have a hard time using their skills in the increasingly competitive global economy.

The sad thing about this education system is that it has failed to provide either quality or equity. In the most recent TIMSS (Trends in Mathematics and Science Studies) in 2011, Iranian fourth and eighth graders scored well below the world average. Only 1% of 4th graders and 2% of 8th graders scored in math above the “high international benchmark for mathematics” (a score of 625), compared to 39% and 37% for South Korea; and 33% and 26% above the “intermediate benchmark” of 475, which is below the world average, compared to 97% and 93% for South Korea. A recent study of the inequality of opportunity for the MENA region found that about one-third of the inequality in math and science scores of Iranians 8th graders was explained by their family background and where they were raised, which is high even by Latin American standards (Salehi-Isfahani et al, 2012). Evidently, Iran’s all-free and meritocratic public education system fails to provide a level playing field for its youth.

There are ways to move away from a memory-based testing regime to one that evaluates a wider set of skills, which is the norm in the more successful education systems, such as in the United States. But there is a disturbing possibility that problems run deeper than bad teaching and testing, which elsewhere I have described as a “credentialist equilibrium” (Salehi-Isfahani 2012a). Equilibria are by definition hard to dislodge. Were it not so, why would students and their families not walk away from a system that fails to train them for the labour market? Seeking higher education diplomas is actually rewarded. There are two types of rewards. First, the public sector, which in the past employed the bulk of these graduates, does not value the same skills that private employers do. This is a well-known phenomenon that has been recognised across the world and in particular in the Middle East (Assaad 2013). Another type of reward to university education is the escape low-wage work that it affords. Globalisation has decreased rewards for high school education, encouraging youth to stay in school longer and seek higher credentials with the hope of being eligible for jobs that are safe from competition from lower wage and more productive Chinese workers. Unfortunately, because of the low quality of higher education, more education will not mean greater productivity for most youth, but simply an escape from working at a lower wage than they are comfortable with. This is the well-known phenomenon of the high reservation wage that afflicts oil-rich countries; the downside of a rent-based economy that supports a high standard of living above what the national productivity can achieve.

The national debate in Iran over employment is far from focused on the issues that I have just raised. For the last two decades, as the demographic window of opportunity has come and gone, the country has been in the grip of political struggles for democracy, for redistribution, and for regional power. The collective sense for the Iranian youth is that none of these aims have been achieved, or if they have, the cost has been too

high and mostly borne by them. As employment challenges have increased, various governments have offered Band-Aid solutions, some actually worsening the problem. In 2003, Khatami's government launched a \$1.2 billion emergency jobs program that subsidised youth employment but gave priority to university graduates. By doing so, it sent the wrong signals to young workers, that the government is ready to step in to raise the rewards to credentials where the private sector is looking for skilled workers. This is a familiar problem that plagues richer Persian Gulf countries that are flush with money but whose private sector employers are seeking productive individuals abroad rather than credentialed citizens at home (Salehi-Isfahani 2012b). In 2005, not having learned the lesson from the previous program (which, incidentally, was never evaluated), Ahmadinejad's government launched a similar program in support of youth employment using subsidised credit. The banking system had to choose from a flood of poorly conceived investment proposals, inevitably giving priority to projects involving university-educated applicants. Again, the signal was loud and clear, university education with few practical skills continues to pay.

The new technocratic, pro-business administration that has just been installed in Tehran will certainly do better than the one it replaces, but reports of employment programs to help the unemployed youth, especially the university educated, continue to circulate in Iran.

International sanctions

The big unknown on the demand side of the labour market is the economy's ability to resume growth rates of 5-8%, which are necessary to absorb the flows of new workers into the labour market and to chip away at the 4-million strong stock of the unemployed. Any economic growth in excess of 5% over a number of years would require the end of the international sanctions. It is highly unlikely that the reforms currently being discussed in Tehran by the new Rouhani government can raise the growth rate back up to above 5% without sanctions relief. Given the huge excess capacity in industry, a growth rate of around 5% is not at all unlikely for a year or two even with sanctions remaining in full force, but beyond that Iran needs the global economy in order to create jobs. The Iranian government has been sounding positive notes about resolving the decade-long nuclear dispute with the US and even reaching accommodation (taamol) with the West on a wider set of issues, but little can be said with certainty at this point, except that with sanctions in place the economy will move slowly and double digit unemployment rates will continue into the next decade.

Concluding remarks

The good news is that the pressures that put much stress on Iran's labour markets for the last two decades are subsiding. The bad news is that the country missed its demographic window of opportunity, the phenomenon that according to economic historians

propelled East Asian economies into sustained economic growth (Bloom and Williamson 1998). An entire generation of young Iranians has worked hard to make progress in schools, graduating from high school or university, with little to show for its efforts. With youth unemployment rates in excess of 20% and waiting times measured in years instead of months (Salehi-Isfahani and Egel 2009), they are slowly reaching the age when it is their turn to occupy the limited number of jobs that are becoming available through retirement or new job creation. If sanctions are reduced or even eliminated and government policies stay on their present course to keep the three most important prices—energy, interest rates, and foreign exchange—in suitable ranges, there is a strong chance that the economy will rebound and will see growth rates in excess of 5%.

To go beyond reducing unemployment and reaching its full economic potential, Iran needs serious structural and institutional reforms in both its labour market and education system. Iran currently ranks near the bottom of developing countries in terms of business climate, with rigid labour markets that discourage private investment and encourage credentialism. But the country enjoys a good infrastructure (with the notable exception of the internet), which can support private investment activity if the soft infrastructure—laws and regulations—are also right. Chief among these is the incentive system for skill formation—learning skills that the private sector needs—which requires a more flexible education system and a private sector that enjoys enough autonomy to lead the education system into the 21st century.

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