

Mohamed Saleh (Toulouse School of Economics) & Cihan Artunç (Middlebury College)

‘Protégés’ in nineteenth-century Egypt: Superiority of European laws or forum shopping and social networks?

While capitulations in the Ottoman Empire were originally meant to provide extraterritoriality to European consulate missions and their staff, they were later extended to Ottoman non-Muslim subjects who were not employed by the consulate missions, and who thus became “protégés” of European polities. Protégés had to purchase the protégé deed from a European consulate, and these deeds were typically expensive.

This paper sheds new light on the protégés population in the Ottoman Empire by drawing on a novel data source: Egypt’s individual-level population census samples of 1848 and 1868. The paper will first investigate the evolution of the proportion of protégés, both overall and by religious group, in 1848–1868. It will then explore the evolution of the selection of European polity among protégés. The objective is to test a number of hypotheses for explaining (1) why local non-Muslims became protégés, (2) what determined the choice of European polity among protégés, and (3) what explains the changes (if any) in the proportion of protégés and in their European polity distribution in 1848–1868.

Preliminary findings suggest that the proportion of protégés increased between 1848 and 1868. The vast majority of protégés were non-Coptic Christians and Jews. The proportion of Copts among protégés was negligible, although they constituted 96% of non-Muslims. The polity distribution of protégés shifted in 1848–1868: The share of Spain increased, followed by France, while the share of Tuscany (Italy) declined. Greece attracted a significant proportion of protégés, but its share remained stable.

We will test the following hypotheses to explain these trends. First, Kuran (2011) suggests that protégés emerged because of the superiority of the European laws. A corollary of this hypothesis is that protégés may have preferred European polities with better legal systems. Second, social networks might have been instrumental in the dissemination of information about availability of protection, and protégés selected into different polities based on the adoption rates in their cliques. Third, protégés might have demanded legal protection to reduce legal uncertainty in the contractual environment. The legal multiplicity in the Ottoman Empire created considerable uncertainty about which law would apply to any contract (Artunç 2015). One way to grapple with this uncertainty was to become a protégé: if two parties to the same contract were under the legal protection of the same European polity, they could more credibly commit to that country’s legal rules and enforcement. Fourth, legal protection might have shielded a protégé from expropriation by the state. While we do not view these explanations as mutually exclusive, we will take advantage of the detailed census data to show whether protections provided by any one polity were concentrated in certain neighborhoods or demographic groups, and whether there was correlation between a country’s volume of trade and the composition of people under the legal protection of that power.