Project Summary

My research agenda aims at introducing new data sources, combined with economic theory and quantitative analysis, in order to answer longstanding questions in the economic history of the Middle East at large, and Egypt in particular. I plan to spend spring 2016 at Stanford where I will work on several research questions that attempt to understand the historical formation and long-term effects of specific institutions that are arguably crucial in order to understand the current economic and political development of the region. These questions include (a) the impact of the Lancashire cotton famine that resulted from the American Civil War in 1861-1865 on the emergence of agricultural slavery and increased land inequality in cotton plantations in rural Egypt, (b) the co-evolution of Islamic taxation and Egypt’s conversion from Coptic Christianity to Islam in 641-969 CE (joint with Jean Tirole, TSE and IAST), and (iii) the causes behind the lack of an Islamic welfare state in medieval Egypt (joint with Avner Greif, Stanford). The three projects employ new datasets constructed from primary archival sources, including Greek and Arabic papyri from early Islamic Egypt, Cairo Geniza documents, medieval agricultural cadasters, and the nineteenth-century individual-level population censuses.