

Ella Fratantuono and Lucia Carminati

INTRODUCTION: CHILDREN AND YOUTH ON THE MOVE
IN MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICAN HISTORY



Children and young people on the move found us. They spoke to us through our sources, at times in their own voices, and at times demanding our attention by claiming that of the adults whose words we read. In introducing this special issue, we are humbled by two realizations. First, that we approached this endeavor as scholars of migration, rather than historians of children, childhood, and youth. Our interest in the topic stemmed from our growing grasp that young people were crucial participants in the migration histories we explored, and yet our existing approaches had not fully integrated those young people into our understanding of mobility nor into the narratives we wrote.¹ When we convened a workshop for contributors in May of 2023, we found our lopsided experiences reflected back upon us. Participants, rather than journeying to the archives to “find the children,” had found themselves tugged by the sleeve, nearly stumbling on the archive’s younger inhabitants while pursuing other matters. More than just the happenstance of archival finds, however, the overall make-up of contributors—predominantly female and junior—raises questions of whom tends to be drawn into inquires on children’s and youth’s histories.²

A second realization, and a far more devastating reality, is the current intensity of child and youth displacement globally and in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. As we write these words in April 2024, Israel’s war on Gaza is entering its seventh month. Half of the 1.7 million displaced in Gaza are children.³ Similarly, UNICEF has identified the year-long conflict in Sudan as “the largest child displacement crisis in the world.”⁴ Globally, children are represented disproportionately in displaced populations. Individuals under the age of 18 comprise 41 percent of the global refugee

Ella Fratantuono is Associate Professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Email: efratant@charlotte.edu

Lucia Carminati is Professor of History at the University of Oslo. Email: lucia.carminati@iakh.uio.no

population, and one in three children living outside their country of birth are refugees.⁵ The intensity of this displacement, though not a focus of this issue nor this introduction, is never far from our minds. Young people's displacement figures in how the public determines the significance of current conflicts. While crucial, such a focus reduces the mobility of young people in MENA to experiences of displacement, exception, and suffering. After all, a simple internet search for "children, migration, and Middle East" yields results almost exclusively associated with forced displacement. The modern Middle East has been, after all, both the destination and the departure point of "some of the largest forcibly displaced populations in the world."⁶

Thus, this special issue brings together accounts of the many roles and experiences of children and youth as mobile subjects in the MENA region from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. It proposes ways to integrate, center, or elevate young people in our approaches to migration. At the same time, this issue interrogates expectations of who a child and youth migrant might be. What do mobile children have in common? Given that childhood is defined differently across space and time, is it possible to group these individuals all together? How do they experience relocation differently? Do they face common challenges and constraints? Are they necessarily all "by definition human beings with very limited contact to the state apparatus"?⁷ Is it the case that "children never do have control of their lives"?⁸ On the one hand, forced migration is a daily and painful reality. On the other, exclusive focus on forced displacement flattens the diversity of young migrants' experiences, casts young MENA migrants primarily as victims, and contributes to the racialization of families and children journeying within and outside the MENA region. After all, scholars have shown that the multiple motivations to move emerge as a continuum: they do not fall into the two formally distinct fields of voluntary economic migration and involuntary politically motivated displacement.⁹

Contributions to this issue rest on thriving research yet address enduring blind spots. Neither the historiography of children and childhood nor that of migration seems to suffer from the chronic Eurocentrism of times prior. While earlier chronologically sweeping history-of-childhood surveys reflected outdated narratives of Western modernity, the study of children and childhood is today a vibrant field that has embraced non-Western perspectives.¹⁰ As Heidi Morrison writes, historians today have indeed, after discovering that Western children had a history in the 1960s and 1970s and grasping that this was far from monolithic in the 1990s, begun to acknowledge the diversity

in childhoods worldwide.¹¹ Relatively recent volumes edited by Benjamin Fortna and Gülay Yilmaz with Fruma Zachs push the boundaries of this scholarship beyond Western Europe by addressing, respectively, the mounting pressures experienced by Ottoman children between the 1880s and 1930s and children's growing presence in local and internal processes of Ottoman modernization in the early modern and modern periods.¹²

As for the history of migration from non-Eurocentric perspectives, it has, in no small part thanks to *Mashriq & Mahjar* itself, grown in size and status. Yet mobile children often remain fleeting presences, mere spectators in adult lives. In a sweeping survey on "world migrations in the second millennium," for example, Dirk Hoerder acknowledges the presence of children but approaches them as pawns in migrant family decisions.¹³ An opportunity is lost when Betty Anderson, author of a seminal textbook in the history of the modern Middle East, identifies "women" but neglects to acknowledge the young girls who were employed in Mount Lebanon's silk industries, key nodes in the region's migration history.¹⁴

Within the modern MENA context, particular attention has been paid to young ones in crises and politics. Nazan Maksudyan has pioneered the field with her research on destitute and orphaned children in the late Ottoman period and the First World War, followed by the recent elaboration on wartime famine by Tylor Brand.¹⁵ Anderson notably tackles students' political activism, a topic recently taken up among others by Dylan Baun and Mayssoun Sukarieh.¹⁶ There are only scattered treatments, however, of those children and youth in and around the MENA who were also migrating or otherwise moving. Matthew Hopper, for example, touches on the forced relocation of the young, enslaved boys from East Africa to the Gulf, where the changing nature of their employment weaved together date plantations and pearl diving spots at the turn of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Yahya Araz harnesses the mobility of Anatolian girls to show that their often one-way migration and participation in the domestic service sector of the late Ottoman context firmly connected the provinces to Istanbul.¹⁸ Research on MENA that probes both the history of childhood-children-youth and that of migration beyond violent displacements and political upheavals remains rare. Yet, as brilliantly formulated by Maksudyan, children and youth wield the power to open new horizons in the study of several processes, including state-formation and – we would add – those of migration.¹⁹ They contribute perspectives that would not be achievable otherwise.

In consciously putting the fields of migration history and children, childhood, and youth histories in conversation with one another, the articles and research notes in this special issue chart new territories in multiple directions, nod favorably to interdisciplinary dialogue, and highlight challenges and directions for future research. The chronological, thematic, and geographical breadth of contributions to this issue provide standpoints to observe the early modern and modern MENA as a space of movement, rather than stasis. Moreover, conventionally separate geographies are treated together, with the Ottoman, the Ottoman-Egyptian, and *mahjari* spaces sitting next to one another. Thus, the issue addresses one of the pleas that animated the launch of *Mashriq & Mahjar* ten years ago: overcoming the conventional confines erected by “Middle Eastern studies” and framing the Middle East not as a bounded space but rather as part of the globe-wide skein of migrant trajectories.²⁰ Contributions to this issue also embrace an interdisciplinary toolkit and a disparate set of sources. Rather than championing or refuting the idea that children and youth have voices and that certain sources convey them better than others, they highlight the ambiguities within the available evidence. What matters most is that the child and the young individuals of the past should not be represented as helpless and speechless. Yet these historical actors do not speak to us in a clear and unmediated way either.²¹ We need to tune into the cacophony they produced.

The contributors’ expansive approach to migration and their prioritization of experiences and responses to the mobility of young people creates a productive challenge: To what extent should researchers anticipate fundamental similarities or differences between adult and non-adult migration experiences and trajectories? And to what extent—and with what implications—does the “figure of the migrant” remain normatively adult (and male)? And how can, at the same time, boys and girls on the move complicate the apparently gender-neutral category of “child”?²² When and why do some migrant children garner more sympathy than others?²³ To that end, we have invited contributions that describe not only movements we might easily recognize as “migration” but also mundane and unexpected forms of mobility and displacement. The contributions to this issue demonstrate that children and young people—identified in terms of socially inscribed positions within their respective societies—engaged in internal, international, transimperial, and long-distance migrations crucial to changing their life trajectories and fashioning diasporic communities. But they also engaged in short-distance and even household-to-household migrations that were likewise key to their lives, to modes of governance, and to the making of modern states.

Children moved differently but not necessarily passively and in unfailingly dependent positions. That children at times had little say in their trajectories brings forward a long-running concern regarding the distinction between “free” and “coerced” migration. The forms of their agency were wedged in between constraints and autonomy²⁴—like that of other historical subjects. As Lauren Banko notes in regard to young migrants in mandatory Palestine, for instance, they “understood the new borders and state-imposed restrictions on mobility” and tried to inventively overcome such restrictions by using “possibly embellished claims to avoid the consequences of those restrictions.”²⁵

The contributions to this issue encourage consideration of how definitions and connotations of childhood and youth changed for various actors and in specific places and times. They highlight how episodes of movement reflect, reinforce, and reveal contradictions in meanings and experiences of childhood and youth. In locations where young people were understood as a population of concern, at what moments were they excepted from politics of “care”? Reda Rafei’s analysis of eighteenth-century *iltizam* contracts in the province of Tripoli describes one such exception: *multazim*’s practice of surrendering young males to guarantee their rendering of tax revenues to the state. This court-sanctioned “temporary displacement” reveals that the legal dependency and social significance ascribed to young males could be traded upon for the financial gain of *multazims* and the economic stability of the Ottoman state. Ashley Bavery’s examination of early twentieth-century Syrian migration to North America reveals that Progressive-Era approaches to protecting children, coupled with racist and gendered views of MENA migrants, figured in officials’ denial of entry to unaccompanied Syrian boys at the US-Mexico border. The boys’ subsequent unauthorized entrance into the United States and the laws and institutions governing nationality and deportation meant their initial encounters with immigration inspectors’ evolving understanding of migrant childhood had lasting repercussions in each of their lives.

Intriguingly, an emphasis on young people’s mobility draws attention not only to migrants’ movement through space but also to their movement through time. As they age, young people move through categories (e.g., childhood, adolescence, minority, majority) that hold legal, social, and economic significance. Young people’s mobility brings them into contact with varying understandings of the relationships among age, productivity, childhood, and family. Physical movement can prompt and raise the stakes of such categorical

change,²⁶ and young people's movement through categories can render visible the status of diaspora and minority groups to which they belong. The experiences of young Syrian boys at the US-Mexico border, as Bavery argues, complicate a narrative of the easy integration and overall success of the Syrian migrant community in the twentieth-century United States. Similarly, Eftychia Mylona traces Ottoman and Egyptian documentation practices vis-à-vis Greek children in the Suez Canal region to show how members of the Greek community navigated changing legal and economic realities within postcolonial Egypt. Documents such as birth certificates and school IDs showcase young people's – and their families' – changing status.

We are committed to exploring children's and young people's lives on their own terms, not for the sake of those who pontificate on them or of that of the adults they may become.²⁷ Yet, within the societies discussed in this issue, the categories of child and youth did hold specific resonance in terms of anticipated futures – for individuals, families, communities, and states. Mylona demonstrates that citizenship status and ethnicity influenced the educational and labor paths taken by young Greeks. In turn, the labor needs of the Egyptian state and international companies within the Suez zone led to changes in the citizenship of the children of Greek workers. Schools were crucial sites in shaping the potential of “youth.” Olga Verlato's discussion of young individuals' participation in transnational and internal migration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century emerges from her close analysis of archival material related to education. The futurity embedded in “child” and “youth” framed young people's geographic and social mobility, whether as members of the Italian community in Alexandria or as young Egyptians who traveled to attend one of the many state schools that appeared by the turn of the century. A sense of potential lends particular meaning to young people's status within the societies discussed in this issue, to their interactions with institutions, and thus to how they appear within our sources.

That migration is a temporal experience is evident in the various ways children and young people discussed in this issue conjure – and employ – individual and collective expectations of their future, actualized, adult selves. Highlighting young people's double movement through space and time serves as a productive route to explore children's agency and self-conceptions. Crucial to Verlato's engagement with education materials is her assertion of how young people engaged with authority; in written exams as well as petitions, young people deployed hegemonic narratives of dependency and

potential to seek geographic and social mobility and to assert political, economic, and social claims. Such leveraging of temporal meanings of childhood and youth emerges as well in Ivana Cosmano's exploration of how young Jordanian women use education in framing their desires to emigrate. As Cosmano shows, young women's desire to leave Jordan stems in part from dissatisfaction with gendered familial and social expectations, yet they are also able to leverage those expectations to justify journeying for education abroad.

Temporality also emerges in how adults reflect on the mobilities that shaped their childhoods. Julia Clancy-Smith's reading of the memoirs of four famous Tunisians demonstrates the imbrications of educational aspirations, family strategies, and the structures and gatekeepers that influence mobility, and she calls for researchers to be attuned to how happenstance emerges in even the most polished of ego-documents. Bavery and Mylona's use of oral histories bring to the fore children's keen awareness of the implications of legal and social belonging; such sources also highlight how migration experiences at a young age can factor in the later self-fashioning of adult interlocutors. A side by side reading of oral histories, memoirs, and state-generated documents may allow researchers to not only consider the long-term repercussions of migration but also to avoid attributing significance to journeys undertaken early in life simply because that is what catches the eye of an historian of migration.²⁸ Here, once more, emerges the utility of considering a range of movements within the broader study of child and youth migration. By considering commonalities and distinctions among episodes of child and youth movement, varying in length, duration, motivation, and location, we may better understand why certain migration experiences hold significance for individuals and communities both as they unfold and long after the fact.

Finally, while temporality features in the meanings of child and youth, our contributors also remind us that the categories through which young people pass are not neatly attached to chronological age. As Rafei notes, in the early modern Ottoman Empire, an individual's access to legal majority was assured not by age but rather by physical signs of puberty (*bulugh*). Mario Ruiz further draws our attention to the importance of reading gender and class alongside adolescence or "puberty": in the investigation and punishment of crimes related to sex, the mid-nineteenth-century Cairene criminal justice system was less likely to view young female domestic workers as autonomous decision-makers. Further, though the late-nineteenth and twentieth-century Egyptian state may have sought to closely document young

people within its education system, Verlato reminds us that neither student labels nor one's grade level necessarily correlated to chronological age.

By welcoming children and youth into its treatment of migration, this issue aims to dismantle and expand the categories we use to think of migrants.²⁹ In turn, by bringing migration into the history of young people, it reconsiders the ways in which we have tended to approach children and youth as static and passive, even or especially when forcibly relocated. Finally, by intentionally addressing migrant children and youth alongside one another, this issue acknowledges the contextualized boundaries and definitions of childhood and youth.

Taken together, the pieces in this issue, far from covering comprehensively the MENA region or its diasporas, allow us to engage with topics and sources spanning three centuries, four continents, and multiple state formations. Such diversity points to new productive challenges, shared themes, intriguing divergences, and insights for scholars interested in children, childhood, and youth, and in migratory movements within, around, and beyond MENA.

NOTES

¹ Ella Fratantuono, *Governing Migration in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024); Lucia Carminati, *Seeking Bread and Fortune in Port Said, 1859–1906: Labor Mobility and the Making of the Suez Canal* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023), 64. *Seeking Bread and Fortune*, for example, acknowledges that “children have the power to beget additional accounts” yet falls short of exploring said accounts further.

² As Maza reminds us, feminist scholars since the 1970s have been vocal in connecting who they are and that they studied to how they studied it. We are inspired to do the same. Sarah C. Maza, *Thinking about History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 204.

³ “Childhood Displaced in Gaza,” UNICEF, 9 February 2024, <https://www.unicef.org/stories/childhood-displaced-gaza#:~:text=Around%201.7%20million%20people%20are,water%2C%20food%2C%20or%20protection.>

⁴ “The Sudan Crisis – A Children’s Crisis,” UNICEF, accessed 25 April 2024, <https://www.unicef.org/sudan/sudan-crisis-childrens-crisis-0#:~:text=Sudan%20is%20now%20the%20largest,shift%20camps%20in%20neighboring%20countries.>

⁵ “Figures at a Glance,” UNHCR, last modified 14 June 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/who-we-are/figures-glance.>

⁶ Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, "The Special Issue 'Forced Migration and Refugeeedom in the Modern Middle East': Towards Connected Histories of Refugeeedom in the Middle East," *Journal of Migration History* 6 (2020): 6.

⁷ Suraiya Faroqhi, "Introduction," in *Children and Childhood in the Ottoman Empire: From the 15th to the 20th Century*, eds. Gülay Yılmaz and Fruma Zachs (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 1.

⁸ Robert A. Fernea, "Introduction," in *Remembering Childhood in the Middle East: Memoirs from a Century of Change*, ed. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 1–2.

⁹ Aristide R. Zolberg, Astri Suhrke, and Sergio Aguayo, *Escape from Violence: Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Developing World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 30; Christiane Harzig, Dirk Hoerder, and Donna R Gabaccia, *What Is Migration History?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009), 66–67; Rebecca Hamlin, *Crossing: How We Label and React to People on the Move* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021), 12.

¹⁰ For discordant views on this point and rich bibliographies, see the dialogue between Mazah and Mintz: Sarah Maza, "The Kids Aren't All Right: Historians and the Problem of Childhood," *American Historical Review* 125, no. 4 (2020): 1267; Steven Mintz, "Children's History Matters," *American Historical Review* 125, no. 4 (2020): 1286.

¹¹ Heidi Morrison, "Introduction," in *The Global History of Childhood Reader*, ed. Heidi Morrison (London: Routledge, 2012), 1–8.

¹² Benjamin C. Fortna, *Childhood in the Late Ottoman Empire and After* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Gülay Yılmaz and Fruma Zachs, eds., *Children and Childhood in the Ottoman Empire: From the 15th to the 20th Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023). For historiographical overviews, see Suraiya Faroqhi's foreword and pages 4–5. An early notable example of interdisciplinary concern with MENA children, even if preoccupied with Muslims in all but one chapter, is Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, *Children in the Muslim Middle East* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996). For more extensive references to the growing literature of this field, see the Association of Middle East Children and Youth Studies's (AMECYS) bibliographies in English, French, Turkish, Persian, and Arabic, first compiled in 2020. "AMECYS Bibliographies/Directories," AMECYS, accessed 25 April 2024, <https://amecys.wordpress.com/amecys-bibliographies/>.

¹³ Dirk Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact: World Migrations in the Second Millennium* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 4, 15, 17. For further elaboration on similar oversights in the literature, see Ella Fratantuono and Alyssa Martin, "Moving Subjects: Directions and Methodological Challenges in the Historical Study of Migrant Children and Youth," *History Compass* 21 (2023): 3.

¹⁴ Betty S. Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East: Rulers, Rebels, and Rogues* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 134. See Akram

Fouad Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

¹⁵ Nazan Maksudyan, *Orphans and Destitute Children in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014); Nazan Maksudyan, *Ottoman Children and Youth during World War I* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2019); Tylor Brand, “Childhood and Children in the Lebanese Famine of World War I,” in *In the Steps of the Sultan: Essays in Honor of Abdulrahim Abu-Husayn*, eds. Tylor Brand and Bilal Orfali (Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 2024).

¹⁶ Anderson, *History of the Modern Middle East*; Dylan Baun, *Winning Lebanon: Youth Politics, Populism and the Production of Sectarian Violence, 1920–1958* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Maysoun Sukarieh, *A Global Idea: Youth, City Networks, and the Struggle for the Arab World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2024).

¹⁷ Matthew S. Hopper, “The Globalization of Dried Fruit: Transformations in the Eastern Arabian Economy, 1860s–1920s,” in *Global Muslims in the Age of Steam and Print*, eds. James L. Gelvin and Nile Green (Oakland: University of California Press, 2013), 171.

¹⁸ Yahya Araz, “Rural Girls as Domestic Servants in Late Ottoman Istanbul,” in *Children and Childhood in the Ottoman Empire: From the 15th to the 20th Century*, eds. Gülay Yilmaz and Fruma Zachs (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 196–219.

¹⁹ Maksudyan, *Orphans and Destitute Children*, 8. See also Yilmaz and Zachs, *Children and Childhood*, 3.

²⁰ Andrew Arsan, John Karam, and Akram Khater, “On Forgotten Shores: Migration in Middle East Studies and the Middle East in Migration Studies,” *Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East and North African Migration Studies* 1, no. 1 (2013): 1–7.

²¹ We are reasoning by analogy with refugeedom; see Peter Gatrell, Anindita Ghoshal, Katarzyna Nowak, and Alex Dowdall, “Reckoning with Refugeedom: Refugee Voices in Modern History,” *Social History* 46, no. 1 (2021): 93.

²² Rosemary R. Carlton and Nesa Bandarchian Rashti, “Girls on the Move: Girlhood and Forced Displacement, Migration, and (Re)Settlement,” *Girlhood Studies* 17, no. 1 (2024): viii.

²³ This point is inspired by Brand, “Childhood and Children,” 246.

²⁴ Mintz, “Children’s History Matters,” 1291. For further discussion of this issue, see Fratantuono and Martin, “Moving Subjects,” 3.

²⁵ Lauren Banko, “Refugees, Displaced Migrants, and Territorialization in Interwar Palestine,” *Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East and North African Migration Studies* 5, no. 2 (2018): 41.

²⁶ Ulrike Bialas, *Forever 17: Coming of Age in the German Asylum System* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023).

²⁷ The significance of approaching young people on their own terms rather than for the adults they may become is well-developed within debates on pedagogy. For a recent discussion of this in the Italian context, see Vanessa Roghi, *Un libro d'oro e d'argento: Intorno alla Grammatica della fantasia di Gianni Rodari* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2024).

²⁸ Fratantuono and Martin, "Moving Subjects," 8.

²⁹ Thomas Nail, *The Figure of the Migrant* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).