A physician in antiquity was asked how to educate children. He replied that this should begin twenty years before they are born. People asked him how this was possible, and he answered, by educating their mothers from a young age.1

Introduction

In recent decades, the history of childhood has become a separate discipline, and more than a branch of family history, in Western culture. However, the modern history of children in the Middle East has yet to be written. Interest in children’s education and the acknowledgement of the uniqueness of childhood—or what Philippe Ariès calls the growing awareness of the specific nature of children and moral solicitude2—was not a novelty in 19th-century Arab society. Islamic law and the Hadith, for example, refer to the need to instill children with self-respect.3 During the medieval Islamic period several treatises were written on methods of childrearing, and there are indications that Muslim religious men and scholars were interested in children’s education. In this pre-modern period, the prime texts were translations of Greek writings dealing exclusively or in part with children from ethical, pedagogical and pediatric points of view. Some of these translations were Islamized by Muslim writers and philosophers.4

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4 See for more details Avner Giladi, “Concepts of Childhood and Attitudes towards Children in Medieval Islam: A Preliminary Study with Special Reference to Reaction to Infant and Child Morality,” Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient 32/2 (1989): 121–52; on the issue of poetry written on children in the medieval period see
Unlike in Europe, modern research on children in Arab provinces during the early modern period of the 18th and 19th centuries is still in its infancy. Nevertheless, there has been an upsurge in research drawing on shariʿa court records of family life, especially on the condition of women, but also children. Some studies have shown that the Muslim jurists and courts of the period exhibited a certain flexibility in their approach and showed a willingness to temper many of the strictly delineated gender roles to the needs of the child.5

The present article is not a comparative study. It examines one facet of children’s history, namely parental education and childrearing among the Arab middle class. It deals with the public discourse on children and the ideas surrounding childhood as manifested in the Arabic-language press, especially in the region of Greater Syria at the turn of the 19th century, and does not attempt to deal with actual conditions, evidence of which may be found in annals of Islamic law such as the fatawa collections and the shariʿa court records (e.g. the sijill). It thus constitutes an initial foray into the field of children’s history in the 19th century (the nahda-Enlightenment period) and suggests preliminary findings. It should be emphasized that the Arab middle class in Greater Syria was mainly Christian but evolved within a Muslim majority. On matters of culture it was the Christian Arabs who had the dominant voice in local newspapers, yet the ideas found in the press are an amalgam of both Christian and Muslim Arab thought.

This research also provides a glimpse into public opinion, including that of women, and thus reflects a different perspective on approaches to

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