

International House NY
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Culture for Peace
Istanbul, Turkey

Description of the project:

The Middle-East has been through wars and civil strives for years, notably because of inter-community and inter-religious divisions. On the other hand, all the communities within the region share a common cultural and historical heritage. The project *Culture for Peace* aims to help the children of the Middle-East to learn more about their common historical and cultural heritage so that they focus more on their similarities and the beauty of their countries rather than on their differences. More precisely, the project will focus on bringing together a group of 30 to 35 Syrian, Turkish, and Kurdish children living in Istanbul to:

- Develop a strong concern about peace-building issues, inter-religious and inter-community-dialogues, and the preservation of the cultural heritage of the Middle-East.
- Explore beautiful cultural places of Turkey so that they develop strong links during the trips and feel more integrated within the country;
- Express their full potential through artistic creations based on what they learned and saw;
- Cooperate with each other for the organization of their own collective exhibition event.

Istanbul is the city chosen for the project because it hosts an important community of Syrian refugees (at least 560,000 are registered in the city) as well as Turkish and Kurdish people. Some leaders and people of these three communities oppose each other (for example, with the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, the Syrian-Kurdish conflict, or with the way Syrian refugees are sometimes seen by local populations). This is why the project wants to bring together children from the three communities to show that they share common heritage and interest for a lasting peace. In addition, Istanbul is the home of important cultural and historical places such as the Hagia Sophia, the Chora Church, or the Blue Mosque). *Culture for Peace's* goal is to serve as an example of successful inter-community dialogue. Hence, our team will make a short documentary out of this project that will be published on social media to advocate for peace.

Proposed activities:

First week: learning for peace: In the first week, we will introduce the children to the ancient history of the Middle-East. These classes aim to show the kids how ancient and beautiful their region is, and that they should be proud of it. By teaching the history of the whole region, the objective is also to show to the children how much their neighbors, despite religious or national differences, are close to them. The classes will mostly focus on the ancient civilizations of the Near-East (the Phoenicians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians, etc.).

Second week: exploring for peace: The second week, we will organize a number of trips to historical places of Istanbul and UNESCO World Heritage Sites for the children. The trip's goal is to help the children from the three different communities to get close and understand their common roots. These trips also aim to show to the children the beauty of the region and to help them to learn more about the country in which they live. In the long-run, such initiative aims to make them realize how much peace is necessary for preserving the cultural heritage. The potential places that the children will visit are Bursa and Cumalikizik (UNESCO World Heritage Site), the site of Troy (UNESCO World Heritage Site), the Blue Mosque (Istanbul), the Chora Church (Istanbul), and Hagia Sophia (Istanbul).

Third week: creating for peace: The third week will be the one during which the kids will express their full potential. After learning and exploring, they will create pieces of art relating to what they have seen. The third week will also be the occasion for them to share with each other their experiences, notably for the Syrian refugee kids, and to develop empathy for each other. This phase will take place during the third week so that they have the two first weeks to feel comfortable with each other. The idea is to use creation and expression as a catharsis for the kids.

Fourth week: cooperation for peace: During the final week, the goal will be to help the children to cooperate with each other for organizing an exhibition. Once they completed their creation work during the third week, they will prepare an exhibition. The team will set the exhibition, but the children will be in charge of developing collectively their own vision for the organization. The exhibition will be the

occasion to invite the local population from all communities so that they share an enjoyable moment and learn to know each other better.

Results and goals:

- Highlight the beauty and the rich culture of the Middle-East, that was, for so long, shadowed by wars and civil strives; change the wide-spread negative vision of the Middle-East.
- Help the children to overcome religious divisions, racism, and to be open to inter-religious and inter-community dialogue, forgiveness, and relief.
- Help the children to express their full potential through writing, art, and knowledge; let them dream for a better peaceful future and maybe becoming the future advocates for peace.
- Empower the children so that they develop hope and pride when it comes to their origins, and maybe one day become the future peace activists of the region.

Indicator of success:

Short-term indicators:

- Number of places visited by the refugee children.
- Number of people attending the exhibition.
- Number of historical facts the children learned about (a small test will take place at the end).

Long-term indicators:

- Evolution of the children through the years (a follow-up mechanism will be established by our team to help the children for their future academic and professional projects).
- Integration of the children within the Turkish society and motivation to advocate for peace, inter-community, and inter-religious dialogue.
- Children's concern regarding the preservation of cultural and historical heritage and the importance of peace for that.

Practical aspects: The team include four people: two people of Turkish and Tunisian descent living in France but regularly going to Turkey, one person already living in Istanbul (a former student of Columbia University), and me. This person is in charge of entering into contact with local NGOs for gathering a group of 30 to 35 children (between the age of 9 to 12) to participate into the project. The priority will be given to the children who are in need or lost both parents.

Project background: This project is part of broader one I created while living at International House and studying at Human Rights at Columbia University during the Spring 2018: *Rebuild the Middle-East*. Launched during a speech at International House, *Rebuild the Middle-East* aims, through social medias (<https://www.facebook.com/rebuild.middleeast>) and its website, to show the beauty of the Middle-East, to teach its ancient history, and to promote the actions of the NGOs in the region.