

## **Culture for Peace**

**Location:** Istanbul (Turkey)

**Affiliated institution:** International House New York

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### **SECTION 1: Narrative**

*Culture for Peace* aims to help children from different communities of the Middle-East to learn about their common history, encouraging them to focus more on their similarities and rather than on their differences. More precisely, the project brought together a group of 30 Syrian, Turkish, and Kurdish children living in Istanbul for helping them to:

- ⇒ Develop a strong concern about the preservation of the cultural heritage of the Middle-East.
- ⇒ Explore beautiful historical places of Turkey together so that they feel more integrated.
- ⇒ Express their full potential through artistic creations based on what they learned.
- ⇒ Cooperate with each other for their collective exhibition event.

The project was made in partnership with Qnusyho, a registered NGO based in Istanbul, which notably conducts activities for improving the integration of Syrian refugees. *Culture for Peace* was fully funded by the Davis Projects for Peace's grant with no other fund-raising efforts.

#### **I. Project's contribution for a lasting peace:**

The project, at its small level, tried to contribute to a long-term peace in three ways:

- ⇒ First, by highlighting the beauty and the rich culture of the Middle-East that was shadowed by wars and civil strifes. By changing the negative vision of the Middle-East, the project aimed at encouraging the children to develop hope and confidence when it comes to the future of their countries (especially the Syrians).
- ⇒ Second, by bringing together children from different communities, the project wanted to encourage the kids to overcome racism, and to be open to inter-community dialogue.
- ⇒ Finally, by enhancing the children's great potential through educational and artistic activities, the project aimed to motivate them for envisioning their life goals (despite their complex social and financial situations).

#### **II. Project's program and activities:**

All the activities were designed to develop the learning and artistic skills of the children. The program was divided into four weeks, each of them focusing on one category of activities:

***First week "learning for peace" (07/16/2019 -07/20/2019):*** During the first week, the children were introduced to the ancient civilizations of the Middle-East. These classes aimed to show them how ancient and beautiful their region. The first week's classes focused on the following civilizations: the Sumerians, the Babylonians, the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Achaemenids, the Phoenicians, the Sassanids, the Byzantines, and the Ottomans. The goal was also to show to the children how much their neighbours, despite religious or other differences, are close to them (since the classes were about civilizations originating from different countries of the region – such as Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey). At the end of the week, the children passed an exam to measure what they learned. Most of them succeeded very well, getting impressive grades, except three. These three kids could then review all the things they have missed with the team: later, they passed the exam again to make sure they learned everything well.

**Second week “exploring for peace” (07/22/2019-07/26/2019):** During the second week, the children have been to museums and historical places of Istanbul. These excursions aimed to show the beauty of Istanbul to the children, and to help them to learn more about where they live (especially for the refugee children). In the long term, such initiative’s goal is to make them realize how much their cultural heritage is important and must be preserved from war and destructions. The places visited that week were the following: Hagia Sophia, the Basilica Cisterns, Sultanahmet Mosque, the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul, the Zeyrek Mosque, and the Chora Church.

**Third week “creating for peace” (07/29/2019-08/02/2019):** During the third week, the children could express their full potential. After learning about the ancient history of their region and exploring historical places, they created pieces of art relating to the ancient architecture of the Middle-East (with a focus on Turkey, Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Egypt). This week’s goal was to help the children from the three different communities to get close and to understand their common roots through art.

**Fourth week “cooperation for peace” (08/05/2019-08/09/2019):** During the fourth week, the children cooperated with each other in order to organize an exhibition event of their paintings. Based on the artistic work they did the week before, they spent two days preparing their own paintings with the thematic of their choice among the architectural and historical things they studied (such as the pyramids, the old mosques, the old sculptures of the Archaeological museum of Istanbul, etc.). The third day was dedicated to the exhibition event, which took place in Taksim, a neighbourhood located in the center of Istanbul. More precisely, the exhibition was in Dam, a co-working space with a beautiful view on one of the main streets of the city. On the fourth day, a trip to the forest was organized for celebrating the end of the program and gathering the children, their mothers, and the team together. The last day, a small ceremony took place during which the children received a certification for having participated into the program. This day was also the occasion to review together all the things they learned and places they visited.

### **III. The ideas and motivation that led to this project:**

While completing my last semester at Columbia University (Spring 2018), I launched *Rebuild the Middle-East* during a speech at International House New York. This initiative’s goal was to show the beauty of the Middle-East through a website and videos on beautiful places and ancient civilizations of the region. When I submitted my project to Davis Projects for Peace, I saw this project as a practical application of *Rebuild the Middle-East* since *Culture for Peace* mostly consisted into teaching the ancient history of the region to the children.

Furthermore, the values I wanted to promote through this project were hard work, interest into learning new things, tolerance, and discipline. The more children get used to study and to lead efforts, the more they will succeed in their future lives and be able to undertake the necessary tasks for rebuilding countries affected by war. This is why the program contained numerous historical courses, artistic activities and museum’s visits.

### **IV. Challenges faced during the project:**

Two issues were faced during the project. During the first day, because the program was very busy and some children could not speak Turkish perfectly, it was complicated to make them focus on the historical courses. To make the presentations more accessible, I reduced the text and added many pictures to illustrate it. Along with my team (especially Attila who used to be a history teacher when he was younger), we made sure to give interactive presentations to the kids so that they all participate. At the end of the first week, only three children failed the exam, and, with the team and the Qnushyo’s staff, we made them review again the courses they have not learned well enough.

Another issue occurred during the second week: while we were visiting Hagia Sophia, Syrian and Turkish kids fought against each other. These tensions initially appeared because of misunderstanding between the Syrian and the Turkish children. The next day, the NGO's staff and our team reminded the children how important respect was and that they should learn to live together no matter what. Following that, they stopped fighting, and the Syrian kid and the Turkish kid that started the fight even became close friends, spending most of their time together.

**V. The city of Istanbul:**

The project focused on the historical and cultural heritage of the Middle-East. Hence, Istanbul was the perfect place for leading such project, since numerous important places are all located there (like the Hagia Sophia, the Chora Church or the Blue Mosque). Overall, working in a beautiful country like Turkey for this project has been a great experience. In addition, 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.

**SECTION 2: Photographs**



