



## THE YALA MENA LEADERS FOR CHANGE PROGRAM

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### EMPOWERING A NEW GENERATION OF MIDDLE EASTERN LEADERS

MENA Leaders for Change (MLC) was an innovative regional leadership program of the YaLa Academy sponsored by the U.S. State Department. The program combined online training with face-to-face workshops in order to create a cadre of skilled, connected, emerging young leaders (aged 18-35) from all across the MENA region. The intensive, fast-paced program included two online courses, ongoing online dialogues and periodic face-to-face workshops. Excelling students were selected to participate in a final conference to discuss cooperation and develop projects to promote positive change throughout the region.

The program was first implemented in 2013, during which the first cadre of 150 students from Israel, Palestine and the MENA region completed online courses in negotiation and innovation and built understanding, connections and initiatives through the program's dedicated online dialogue group. In October 2013, the first year of the MENA Leaders for Change program concluded with a final conference in the Dead Sea, Jordan, where the top 110 students met for 3 days. Participants hailed from Israel, Palestine, Yemen, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and Sudan and the event featured the participation of Special Adviser to the U.S. Secretary of State Zeenat Rahman (via videoconference) and officials from the U.S. Embassy in Amman, the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv and the U.S. Consulate General in Jerusalem. The Conference was overwhelmingly successful, with high participant involvement and motivation, and opened the door for a new chapter in YaLa, with exceedingly talented and motivated young leaders.

In January 2014, YaLa kicked off the second year of the MLC program. Another group of 150 extraordinary activists from Israel, Palestine, and the wider MENA region were chosen to participate, including from Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen. As did the 2013 cohort, students from the 2014 program took two online courses to enhance their knowledge and skills for leading peace and positive change in their communities, countries and throughout the region:

- ***Introduction to Negotiation and Conflict Management***, by the **U.S. Institute of Peace**, provides a thorough conceptual framework to help students structure their efforts in negotiation and develop successful alternatives to violent conflict.
- ***Leading Strategic Innovation in Organizations***, by Prof. David Owens of **Vanderbilt University**, focuses on improving participants' ability to manage creativity and lead processes and projects of innovation.
- Israeli and Palestinian students also participated in a ***Negotiation Skills Workshop*** in Jerusalem facilitated by experts from the **Harvard Program on Negotiation**.

Throughout 2014, despite the breakdown of negotiations, the kidnappings and murders of teenagers from both sides and the devastating 2-month war in Gaza, the MENA Leaders for Change program forged ahead, showing that another way truly is possible. Students continued to actively engage with one another on the program's dedicated Facebook group

and to work together to develop joint project initiatives in order to promote peace, social equity and economic development in the Middle East.

### **The 2014 Conference**

The 2014 MLC program had its final conference in October 2014 at the Dead Sea, Jordan, where 68 of the top participants from the two semesters met for a three-day workshop. Participants from Israel, Palestine, Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, Iraq, Algeria, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Yemen, Sudan and Saudi Arabia came together to foster strong personal connections, prepare and facilitate work on the cross-border projects, and boost involvement in YaLa. The 2014 conference focused on the community organizing methodology developed by Prof. Marshall Ganz of Harvard University, giving participants the tools to further reach their communities and mobilize people for their cause.

The conference was opened by Michele Dastin-van Rijn, Cultural Attaché, U.S. Embassy Tel Aviv, Richard Buangan, Chief of Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy, U.S. Consulate General Jerusalem, and representatives from the two organizations that co-founded the YaLa Young Leaders movement: the Peres Center for Peace and YaLa Palestine. Among the 7-member delegation of the U.S. Government in attendance at the conference was Laura Blumenfeld, Senior Advisor in the Office of the Special Envoy for Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations.

During the conference, 31 initial project ideas initially presented by participants were fused together during group-work into 15 project initiatives including: Humans of MENA (following the model of Humans of New York); TEDxCOEx (a coexistence and peace focused TEDx series); Middle Ground Up (a crowdsourcing platform dedicated to peace projects); Pacing for Peace (a jogging and coexistence and program for Israeli and Palestinian women); Zeituna (a regional cooperation project to scale-up the markets of small Palestinian olive farmers), and the list goes on and on. The CEO of Zoomal, a crowdfunding platform for the Arab world, announced his willingness to support these initiatives and to assist in their campaigns to generate further funding, as have other YaLa partners from the social entrepreneurship world who were unable to attend the event. Overall, the Conference was an unprecedented gathering of young people from 13 countries across the Middle East and North Africa, coming together to honor what unites them rather than what divides them.

### **Conclusion of the MLC Program**

Following the Conference, a training day was held in Jerusalem for Israeli and Palestinian participants on January 12, 2015 by Carey Hogg, Regional Alumni Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, U.S. Department of State. The “Think, Plan, Lead: Turning Ideas into Action” training by Ms. Hogg took participants through the stages of: 1. Defining the problem (what, who, how, where) 2. Implementing a solution (what, when, how) and 3. Telling your story. During the training day, participants also received help revising their project ideas and proposals in preparation for the MLC Pitch Day during which they would be able to compete for a small Seed Funding Prize to allow them to kick start their projects.

A total of 9 projects were presented during the Pitch Day on January 14<sup>th</sup> at the America House in Jerusalem by Israeli and Palestinian participants and via video conference from Tunisia, Gaza and Sudan. A committee made up of representatives from YaLa Palestine, the Peres Center for Peace, the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv, the U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem and the U.S State Department selected five finalist projects and of those, three award winners. The three projects selected for the Prize were: Pacing for Peace, a female empowerment and dialogue project focused on the sport of running; Peace of Fashion, a joint Israeli-Palestinian clothing line, and Skype with Your Enemy, a dialogue project for youth from conflict areas.

The 2014 MENA Leaders for Change program concluded with two final workshops for the Israeli and the Palestinian participants to meet and strengthen their networks and connections. In May and June 2015, workshops on Storytelling and Photo-journalism were organized for approximately 50 Israeli and Palestinian MLC participants. The workshops took place at the America House in Jerusalem and participants learned hands on how to use their personal stories to create compelling visual and written stories about their causes. Both workshops focused on building the participants' capacity to spread their message, to promote their projects, to network and most importantly to stay connected to one another.

Currently, YaLa is working with the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv and the U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem to define avenues for Alumni of the MENA Leaders for Change program to be further empowered. In the meantime, the Alumni continue being active through a closed Facebook group, where they collaborate, share opportunities, develop their projects, foster relationships as well as take part in other YaLa Initiatives.