

EUTOPIA Certificate of Internationalisation 2022
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Looking back is trickier than it might seem. Although we try our best to find reasons that can justify the trajectory our life has taken, it is undeniable that these life events themselves play a part in shaping us and then again remodeling us, slowly creating a different person than the one being remembered. Looking back and putting aside the countless out-of-hand events that have driven me to set out, I'd like to believe that I have left because I knew there was more out there. That if I was only brave enough, there was much more to be seen and learned than what I was born to. I was curious and mostly wanted to prove to myself that I can adapt to overcome unknown settings by myself.

I was born in a small town in the Bekaa valley of Lebanon, located on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean sea. The country is surrounded by two neighbors. However, due to countless tragedies, woven into the very fabric of the reality of the region, it is so that one of the borders was officially blocked since the forties of the past century, and the other de jure blocked due to the ongoing bloody conflict which enveloped it for the past eleven years. Surpassing geography, my nation, or its people to be more precise, had an almost innate talent of further secluding themselves. On this tiny spot of land, that doesn't exceed ten thousand square kilometers by much, 18 different sects constantly found obscure historic and current alibi to disagree and further split themselves, into narrow isolated villages and neighborhoods. I could not fathom a reality where I would spend the entirety of my life bound to the barriers surrounding me. For as far back as I had the capability to think about my future, almost a decade before I left, I remember the almost certain belief that it was bound to happen. I didn't know where it would be or how, but I was certain that the day would come.

I'm guessing my start to this article might be getting a bit tedious and maybe even confusing at this point. Knowing the premise of what this essay should entail, my aim will be to explore this premise through episodes of the different stages of my life over the past ten years. Ones that helped shaped me into the person I am today. Although I believe this might not be the most straightforward way to complete the task and might be frustrating to the reader, I firmly believe it is the most realistic way of completing it, without trivializing the experiences or the learning outcomes expected to be cultivated. I don't think any worthwhile experience can be defined solely by a single aspect, and I also believe that the outcomes discussed naturally complete each other and wouldn't be of significant value in their isolated state.

After finishing my bachelor's degree, I found myself struggling to continue with the targets I had set for myself. I was very proud of the fact that I had completed my four-year degree in three and I wanted to continue my education to reach the goal of being a Ph.D. by the age of twenty-five. As I registered to attend my first semester of a master's degree in clinical psychology, I could not help but also accept a chance to work with Greenpeace, to become a direct dialoguer for their fundraising team. My job was simple: after class, I met my colleagues and we spent 5 to 6 hours a day on the streets, stopping random passersby to speak about some of the environmental issues we faced locally and internationally. I have hoped this would keep me on track, while also satisfying my urge to immediately be part of something bigger, something more meaningful that

would impact not only myself. However, as well-thought and convincing this compromise to simultaneously work and study full-time was to me at the time, it did not take long to see that it was a fragile one. Finding myself facing a challenge that I thought should be everyone's main concern was energizing. And being face-to-face with looming and often ignored environmental issues on a daily basis, intensified my own sense of emergency while I was trying to ignite it in others. My enthusiasm was quickly transformed into dedicated and ever more consuming work. This was luckily noticed, as I have been promoted twice in a span of twelve months to lead the direct dialogue program on a national scale.

Still hanging on to my plan, it took one further push, to unravel what was set, and push me to finally decide to momentarily halt my studies and take the leap. Growing up, I was reminded almost daily of the atypical series of events that led me to be born and raised where I was. I was the grandson of genocide survivors on both sides of my family. As ethnic Armenians, my ancestors were lucky to escape their lands and homes, in regions that are now part of eastern Turkey. I have grown up, being reminded time and time again, about the injustices that have made “us” who we were, about the extent of destruction and darkness that people can harbor. More importantly, however, I've been constantly reminded of the fine line that separates being from the countless reasons that can prevent or end it, and the importance of making the most out of my time while I was blessed enough to have it. Luck would have it that after around a year of working at the local Greenpeace office in Beirut, I would be receiving another promotion for a regional position, which required me to move to Istanbul. I could not but admire how strange and yet beautiful this opportunity was. The decision seemed larger than me or my ability to live with rejecting it. I have been given the chance to work for a future I wanted while countering prejudices of the past, all while facing my personal demons, and remnants of a traumatic collective past.

My time in Istanbul was immense for my being to say the least. I've managed to work with teams from around the Mediterranean, on critical issues that are often drowned and forgotten amongst the countless turmoil of the region. During the three and a half years that I was there, I have moved on five different occasions and shared living spaces in colorful apartments where I could listen to the various stories of international tenants that came and left after staying for a few months. I've met the closest friends I have to this day, and I've lived the very highs and the lows of lows, the ecstasy and the heartbreaks that a young man's early twenties can deliver. Professionally, and if I have to mention just one of the countless moments I'm proud of, it must be the work I have accomplished as part of a team of activists, media experts, campaigners, volunteers, and risk management advisors, during the visit of Greenpeace's flagship The Rainbow Warrior, and the culmination of the event with a direct action that has blocked the entrance of Turkey's largest coal importing sea-port.

On a personal level, my time was marked by the intensity of emotions and acquiring the building blocks of my current view of the world. On more than one occasion I would find myself astounded by learning of an obscure historic event or physically being next to a relic that's hidden in plain sight in the midst of unaware crowds that walk by it heedlessly on a daily basis. I was lucky enough to be part of a team that traveled to southern Turkey on a mission to geomap and create an online virtual museum of a mountain route that refugees of seven villages have used to escape the atrocities. It was the very same route dramatized by Franz Werfel for his

seminal novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. It was humbling to think of the fearful children and bewildered townsfolk that have traversed the very path that exhausted a youthful group like ours. I was also lucky to be chosen to coordinate a youth leadership program for the Initiatives of Change in Caux, Switzerland. The organization was famed for being the initiator of the first reconciliatory meetings amongst everyday German and French citizens after World War 2. I was given the opportunity to spend five weeks with a group of very talented and ambitious interns, who attended seminars on the theory of peace and nonviolent resistance in order to create change in the 24 distinct countries they have come from.

As rewarding as it was, by the start of 2016, I was ready for another change. Agitated as I was the first time I tried to take a similar step, and as dear as Istanbul has become for me, I was more confident in my step this time around. I've grown to know that decisions are made regardless of whether we take them or not, and that staying put does not equate to maintaining the status quo. Things change around us without ever asking for our permission. Just as I have put my academic ambitions on hold to pursue a career, I've decided to quit my post at Greenpeace, in order to pursue a master's degree in organizational psychology. My challenge of choice this time however had to do more with my senses than my psyche. Without being constrained by choices, my selection of destination was based on a yearning to physically experience something new. I don't think I'm capable of fairly explaining what it meant to someone born and raised where I was, to be suddenly immersed in the extraordinary unique environment of Tallinn, Estonia. Surpassing the superficial yet significant differences in climate and landscape that outright shocked my senses, I've had to adapt to and learn a completely new set of social rules and cues. In hindsight it's clear, but at the time it took longer than my slightly arrogant expectations to grasp the norms. I had not planned or foreseen it, however, Tallinn turned out to be the perfect setting to tangibly experience the scientific literature and theory I was learning in class. The remoteness and peculiar nature of the program have attracted very small yet extremely remarkable students. Each with their own unique path, this tiny remote city with charming and often icy medieval streets, has somehow attracted 8 students from the States, England, Argentina, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, China, Estonia, and Lebanon. Being fascinated by each other's journey and finding comfort in our shared exploration of a foreign present, this soon-to-be tight-knit group has formed with its unique core, a source for understanding the mechanisms of collective action where the whole is more than the sum of parts.

My selection of this particular, organizational branch of psychology was also largely influenced by the experiences I've gained in the 4 years prior, which separated my choice from my earlier attempt to go forward as a clinical psychologist. I've realized my approach to personal psychology was based on my affinity to have conversations with others. Regardless of who they were, I never lacked the curiosity to ask and listen. However, what motivated me and where I felt I needed to sharpen my skillset was a better understanding of cooperation amongst members of various groups. I realized, or to be fairer, decided, that unlike what person-oriented history books or our fondness for the narrative of the hero might assume, most worthwhile changes on a global scale are due to large networks. More importantly, the most important challenges related to the looming climate catastrophe can only be resolved through collective action. My convictions made reaching for my goals easier, and any decisions I had to make were simpler, as whatever would be necessary to enable me to strengthen my credentials would be the choice I would take.

This did not however translate well in practice as it should have in theory. My focus, which along with ambition was fueled by anxiety, has led me to take one too many decisions that with time exhausted those that were close to me. I have gained invaluable knowledge during this period. I participated in activities that have occupied me for months, and have even led me to temporarily relocate. I have spent close to four months in the south of the Netherlands, to take courses on physiological determinants of decision-making and motivation, which were not available in Tallinn. But, looking back at this time, I can say the lesson it taught me, was to realize that decisions we take for ourselves, can heavily impact those around us. My single-mindedness has led me to gradually lose contact with too many dear friends, and irreconcilably damage my relationship with loved ones.

It was through this emotionally heavy, and mentally exhausting time period that I finally arrived at the point from which I'm currently writing this reflective portfolio. I find myself in a position that the person I have mentioned above wouldn't have been capable of envisioning when they first took that leap. I'm proud of that decision, knowing full well that a whole number of unforeseen events have done much more to bring me to where I am at now. Of all the places I have ever imagined going to, it has never crossed my mind that I'd be in sunny Barcelona, in a position that allows me to keep learning on a daily basis while simultaneously having a measurable positive impact.

Three years ago, I was lucky enough to become part of the [Mosquito Alert](#) team. Utilizing the collective strength of communities through citizen science, the project relies on more than forty thousand volunteers/citizens around the world along with scientists and managers of public health to fight against the spread of invasive mosquito species which are vector diseases like Zika, Dengue and Chikungunya. Countering one of the side effects of the climate catastrophe, citizen scientists fill out reports on their mobile phones about mosquito specimens they encounter. The method has been proven to be adaptable enough to record entries from 158 different countries, and efficient enough to contribute to knowledge about the distribution of autochthonous mosquito species, as well as providing critical input on the spread of invasive species -- such as being the first to detect and report *Ae. japonicus* in Spain. The long-arching goal of the project is to improve understanding of the distribution, population densities, and spreading dynamics of disease-vector mosquitoes, as well as human-mosquito interactions and inequalities in risk exposure to vectors.

My current role as a researcher is to analyze what motivates individuals to take part in such activities and what keeps them engaged to do so repeatedly. I find myself linking grand societal health and environmental issues with individual action.

As part of my work, I study the impact of variables such as task granularity, self-validation, and participant regulatory focus. I believe I have found my calling. I spend my time studying things I'm already curious about, which translate into results for issues I deeply care for. During the past three years, I have taken pride in the fact that I collaborated with a team that, in a global first, has created an online resource, mapping with real-time data, a forecast of risks of exposure to *Aedes Albopictus* for the city of Barcelona.

For now, my foreseeable plans seem set. But, soon enough, I'm confident the time to move forward will come again. As an individual, I'm attached to every single location I've had the chance to dwell in, and I'll always have parts of them in me, while I left parts of myself in them. Regardless of what will come next, I'm sure I have much to learn, and a whole lot left to explore.