

# Sumud and Freedom, June 5-6, 2017

“Sumud and Freedom” was the slogan of AEI’s Monday June 5 public meeting in commemoration of 50 years of occupation. It took place in front of the Wall in north-Bethlehem. The Wall is a reality and symbol of occupation as well as of the imposed fragmentation of the Palestinian land and its people. A few hundred people, including the new mayor of Bethlehem Tony Salman and a visitor group of Pax Christi Germany, participated in a program that extended into the Tuesday when a community *Iftar* [Ramadan evening meal to break the fast] was held in the same place.

Special attention was raised to 50 large weather-resistant posters which narrate 50 years of occupation. Supported by the annual lottery action of the Dutch Friends of Young Bethlehem, they comment upon occupational topics ranging from the cutting of olive trees, house demolitions and medical emergencies to, of course, the many limitations on the freedom of movement for Palestinians. All posters show drawings on the theme made by Palestinian youth and women guided by artists Ada Krowinkel from the Netherlands and Angela Blackwell from the UK during several workshops in the preceding year. Each poster also comments upon *sumud*, a concept which came back in the event’s program.



*Sumud*, literally steadfastness or perseverance, emphasizes the connection with the land, the people, the traditional culture. A children's program by 'Inad Theatre from Beit Jala featured hilarious conversations between a grandfather and his grandchild who among other things learned about the healthy effects of eating fresh fruits from land now largely stolen.



The women of the Bethlehem Sumud Choir showcased the heritage in their songs and traditional red-embroidered dresses. How to rhythmically connect to the land was shown by a youth *dabkeh* [traditional dance] troupe from the village of Wadi Fouqeen near Bethlehem. The call for freedom was loudly heard in the swinging music of Bethlehem singer George Thalgieh and AEI's youth music group Sawa [together], the last singing the Human Rights Song, "The world should be a fair place, where we can all live in peace..."

Twenty international artists or groups of artists contributed to a rotating digital exhibit displayed on a screen behind the stage. They expressed visions of occupation and freedom. The artists drew abstract forms of shrinking space, brought out the fate of Gaza in sensitive drawings, painted the soul of the Palestinian people, sang the poetry of a bird on top of the Wall looking both sides, presented the terrible conditions of refugee camps in Greece (one automatically thought of Palestinian refugee camps), sung a Biblically inspired peace message.

Dutch painter Marlies Verda was present at the occasion and told how she, as a visual artist, had been looking for the human faces of her ancestors who perished during the Second World War in Europe, and whom she doesn't know. In a series of self-portraits she recreated those faces yet in a way that all were invited to project their own names and faces and humanity in them: "it may be me, it may be you." Human connection is key.

In the same month as this event, AEI collaborated with Dutch peace organization PAX's activist lab in a brainstorm about designing creative actions around Rachel's Tomb in northern Bethlehem.

*AEI would like thank:*

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The contributions of international artists: Christine Bader (Germany), Klaus Fezer (Germany), Forschungsgruppe Kunst (Germany), Sibylle Hofer (Germany), Roger Iredale (England), Ada Krowinkel (Netherlands), Mélina Mauberret (France), Lidy Meier (Netherlands), Christa Nistrath (Germany), Armin W. Nimra-Ruckerbauer (Austria), Gangolf Peitz (Germany), Anke Pfandler-Spiegel (Austria, Germany), Carla Rus (Netherlands), Gudrun Ryssel (Germany), Elena Sofia Stranges (Italy), Unamore (Netherlands), Marlies Verda (Netherlands), Peace Choir, Oisterwijk ca (Netherlands), Thijs Verster (Netherlands), Willem k Vreeswijk (Netherlands).