



## Reflecting on Nakba, Embracing Pentecost

Saturday, May 18<sup>th</sup>

Testimony from Toine van Teeffelen, Arab Educational Institute - Pax Christi

### Sumud, Nakba and Gaza

Sumud, or steadfastness, shaped my perception of Palestine and Bethlehem where I live. My Palestinian wife Mary, through her way of living, taught me the essence of the concept.

Sumud as an act of clinging to the land dates back to the early days of resistance against Zionist colonization in Palestine, in the 1920s and 30s. The Nakba, which followed in 1948, was marked by the expulsion of over 700.000 Palestinians who fled their homeland which was to become Israel.

Sumud evolved into a prominent concept among Palestinians who remained under Israeli military rule after the Nakba. Literary figures like the poet and former mayor of Nazareth, Tawfiq Zayyad, likened the strength of Palestinian sumud to the deeply rooted olive tree.

Sumud became a familiar notion among the Palestinian refugees who were forced to reside in refugee camps outside their homeland after 1948. Their sumud signified the determination to maintain ties with the Palestinian land and uphold their national rights.

In the occupied West Bank and Gaza during the 1970s and 80s, Palestinian grassroots organizations looked for creating conditions that would enable people to keep their sumud and prevent another Nakba of Palestinians being forced to leave the land under occupation. These organizations wanted to enhance the status of societal groups like women, peasants, and health workers as they confronted the mounting pressures of occupation.

Palestinian sumud shows moral agency, even civil heroism. There are well-known stories of sumud as resolute defense. Think of the family persistently keeping their home despite the nearby presence of settlements, walls, or checkpoints; the individual standing in the path of a bulldozer and refusing to yield; the family rebuilding their so-called "illegal" home after multiple demolitions; or the prisoner standing up to torture in prison.

Perhaps sumud's most remarkable aspect is its adaptability across countless forms. An example: Munther Isaac, Academic Dean at the Bethlehem Bible College, once said: *"Sumud is the discovery of my roots, living this rootedness in this land, and living the will to love one's neighbor in all its aspects. This all is part of my Christianity."* In its work, the Arab Educational Institute has been inspired by the many meanings of sumud. In the Sumud Story House, we tell stories of sumud. On the nearby Wall we fix large posters with stories of sumud.

Can we apply sumud to present-day Gaza?

Consider the following story. Besan was a Palestinian third-year student of medicine in Gaza. The bombings by the Israeli army killed her mid-October together with 12 members of her family. Besan's last post on X (formerly Twitter) said: "I have dreams I have not yet fulfilled," "I have a life that I have not fully lived." "I have a family that I love and fear for," she continued.

And just before she died, she wrote on Facebook: “When I talk with people here ( . . . ) they don’t want to be called heroes. They didn’t ask to be heroes, they just asked to live. And they’re asking for a ceasefire now.” And: “Calling us resilient [- or having sumud, TvT] just frees the world from responsibility and guilt.”

These last, almost desperate words should make us pause. The meaning of sumud and similar concepts like resilience can become hollow and perverted when it creates impossible demands on suffering people while taking away other people’s responsibility to affect a real change in the inhuman situation in Gaza.

Many Palestinians have in the course of time shown enormous strength, determination and ability. It is true that the Palestinian spirit of sumud cannot be destroyed. However, Palestinians don’t ask to be heroes to be applauded. They rather ask for effective pressure and solidarity in their struggle for survival.

Toine van Teeffelen  
May 2024

*Passages are taken from: Toine van Teeffelen, The Birthplace of Jesus is in Palestine: A Memoir. Resource Publications, Wipf and Stock, Eugene (OR), 2024. With a preface of Marie Dennis.*