



Dear supporters,

“This project has now existed for almost thirty years. We owe this to the tireless work of our partners and the loyal support of our donors”, Brigitte Kläß said in her introductory statement to the presentation on Vacation From War. In mid-June, after many postponements, the official award ceremony of the “Sievershäuser Encouragement”, the peace prize the project had already received last year, could finally take place.

We feel very honored and move into the most intensive phase of the year reassured: In both project regions, preparations for the dialogue encounters this summer are almost complete.

The big Youth United in Peace Camp will again take place in Seget Donji in Croatia this year.

After the group of participants had been reduced last year for pandemic reasons, this experience showed us and our partners that both the broader age range of participants as well as the adapted size of the group had very positive effects on the dynamics of the encounter and the intensity and depth of the participants' engagement with the political issues.

Thus, our partners decided to limit the number of participants to sixty in 2022

as well. However, instead of eight days last year, this summer the encounter will last ten days. Alma Dzinic-Trutovic, regional coordinator of the project in the successor states of the former Yugoslavia, gives insights into the team's preparatory meeting in May (p.4).

The preparation phase of the dialogue seminar for young women* from Israel and Palestine is particularly challenging this year. Especially the tense political atmosphere brings new adversities that our partners have to deal with (p.3).

Our second partner organization in Palestine and Israel, Seekers* (name changed), likewise describes the tense politi-

cal situation. In spite of it - or perhaps because of it - they are moving decisively into the final phase of their evaluation and planning process for new dialogue programs to start this fall (p.2).

We support our partners in their important and courageous work and look forward to the dialogue encounters this summer.

**YOUR SUPPORT IS THE FOUNDATION
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THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR
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After moving our donation bank account to a new bank, donations through SEPA direct debit are now finally possible for Vacation From War Project. Especially if you want to support us on a regular basis, direct debit is a fast and convenient option to do so. You can easily order a direct debit online via the donation form on our website.

If you support us with a standing order, we kindly ask you to change it to the new bank account. You will find the details of our new bank account on the last page. Thank you!

“WE DON’T HAVE THE PRIVILEGE OF GIVING UP”

A 10-day binational seminar in Greece concluded the one and a half year evaluation and strategy process of our partner organization Seekers* (name of organization changed) in early July. After a facilitator training in late summer, they will start working with new dialogue groups in autumn this year. In preparation for the seminar, several weekend workshops took place, one of them in May this year. Shortly before the final seminar, the facilitation team depicted the challenges of their work and how they overcome them together time and again.

(Text: Seekers*) Ahmed* from the West Bank and Ben* from Tel Aviv (*names changed) kept glancing at their cell phones, which they were trying to hide. For us as facilitators, this is disturbing and we cannot ignore it. Therefore, our approach has always been to work with such “disturbances”, not to ignore them,

not to “punish” participants or to lecture them. Especially when we know very well what they are looking at.

So, we asked them to share with us what they were watching, and they shared with us the news about the funeral of Shireen Abu Aqleh (editor's note: Palestinian-American journalist who reported from the West Bank for Al-Jazeera TV, among others), who was shot dead a few days earlier by an Israeli soldier (editor's note: so far there are no final official investigation results).

This happened on Friday morning, the first day of a two-day binational workshop in preparation for the evaluation seminar that would take place in Greece in early July. For this purpose, we brought together past participants, team members from the different periods of our work with current team and board members.

We are now approaching the peak of a

deep and serious evaluation of the decades-long work of Seekers*, a work which aims to bring Palestinian and Israeli youth into conversation with each other. Members of the evaluation team have been meeting regularly since April 2021, mostly digitally, to go over our archives: studying programs, applications and reports, protocols of workshops and seminars, and jointly produced publications, such as the journals written by Israeli and Palestinian youth that reflect the process we have gone through as an organization.

Of course, the process is not quite finished yet, but a few things are already clear: While our work to promote peace between our nations did not bring it any closer, looking around it seems that the situation is getting worse and worse.

But what comes up again and again in the questionnaires that participants and team filled out for this evaluation, or in interviews and during workshops, is the

Palestinian journalists in Gaza City protest the violent death of Shireen Abu Aqleh ©dpa



enormous impact of our work on an individual level.

For many, participating in our programs was a life-changing experience. They never again watched news or saw life the way they did before taking part in our programs, before meeting each other, before they were exposed to information they had not known before.

The participants in this weekend seminar did not all know each other. But they all had one thing in common – dedication to Seekers* and our goals. And as they shared the pain and anger over the killing of Shireen Abu Aqleh and the conduct of the Israeli police at her funeral, as well as other events of the day, trust built between people who never met before, but who share a common goal: ending

the occupation and the suffering it brings.

With this trust, it was easier to move on to the main questions of this evaluation process: What were the challenges we faced along the years, how did we deal with them, and what can we learn from all that as we face the new challenges – the deterioration of the political situation and the growing violence that is a result of the political situation and feeds it with growing frustration, anger and hatred.

Our biggest challenge is the sense of despair on both sides. While we believe that still on both sides most people are looking for a solution, it is hard to show that this is indeed the case on both sides.

We all have our moments of doubts. We share them with each other, we talk about them in and we agree again and again: We don't have the privilege of giving up.

We look at each other and know that we will continue.

“DESPITE EVERYTHING”: DIALOGUE IN CHALLENGING TIMES

In August, after two years in which the Corona pandemic made travel impossible, Palestinian and Israeli women* will finally come to Germany again for a dialogue seminar. Already at the beginning of the year, the local coordinators had concerns: In view of the recent political developments, the willingness on both sides to talk to each other has decreased.

In recent months, the situation has escalated further – attacks in Israel, military operations in the West Bank and the death of Al-Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Aqleh have worsened the already tense atmosphere to an extent that we could not have imagined a few months ago.

As the two coordinators describe it, “the two difficult years of the Covid 19-pandemic had a very strong economic and psychological impact on young people, especially in Palestine and have further deepened divisions within Palestinian society. There is a strong sense of despair and hopelessness. Combined with the political escalation and growing frustration after the war on Gaza in May 2021

and recent events, the political and social ground is not in a place that is ready or open for dialogue with the other side. On that ground, there is a lot of pressure from the anti-normalization movement, which is pushing hard against any relations with Israelis.”

The advocates of this movement and its discursive, social and political power pose a real threat to Palestinian women* who are considering participation in the dialogue seminar.

Furthermore, this year the risk for the organizers has also increased: “We decided to not give up and make the seminar happen despite everything. Since recruiting participants for the seminar at this time will most likely be perceived as illegitimate at best and dangerous at worst, we decided to hold the seminar on a somewhat smaller scale in order to minimize the risk of possible repression and persecution, alongside the many challenges the current political reality presents,” write Rana K.* (name changed) and Dina G..

In addition to the smaller group of participants, there are also some adjustments

in the seminar program that take special account of the sensitive political situation. While the proven concept of the political-narrative dialogue approach remains, the facilitation and coordination teams in Palestine and Israel have jointly decided to create more spaces in which the Israeli and Palestinian groups, respectively, can exchange ideas among themselves.

The strengthening of these “uni-national” spaces may seem paradoxical at first sight, since the seminar is precisely created as a space for dialogue between the two sides. However, in order to be sustainable and successful, the dialogue process needs additional safe spaces for both groups and more time to absorb and reflect on thoughts and feelings that may arise during the dialogue group phases, especially in this year of heightened social and political tension.



“TOGETHER WE PREPARE FOR EVERYTHING THAT MAY COME”

(Text: Alma Dzinic-Trutovic) In mid-May, we organized a two-day weekend workshop in Tuzla for all team members of the Youth United in Peace network.

We planned all this year's activities, but we also evaluated those activities that we were already able to organize in the past months: At the beginning of the year we had a supervision workshop for the team and twice we organized weekend trips for our youngsters.

We visited the political theater play “In the Name of the Father” together in Osijek and the following day we visited our friends in Vukovar. Shortly after, we were able to organize a guided tour of the War Childhood museum in Sarajevo with a group of young people.

These visits were all the more important for us now because we had missed such activities very much in the last years. Especially on these occasions, contacts and friendships grow between young people who met at a peace camp at the sea. Our continuous digital meetings could not replace these personal encounters.

Very meaningful are usually those weekend visits where the young people can stay overnight in the families of their friends and get to know their homes and neighbors. Unfortunately, visits with accommodation in the families of the young people are still not possible without risk, but the weekend trips to Osijek and Sarajevo were really good alternatives.

There, young people were able to be

active together, exchange experiences, talk about their feelings, laugh and cry together - as it should be.

The preparatory workshop was equally significant: this is a space in which we have been meeting as a team every year for more than 20 years now to jointly plan the activities of the coming year - with love, respect, mutual understanding and with a lot of heart and mind. This is what makes our group special, what makes us strong and has kept us going for so long. Together we are preparing for whatever may come. This year, among other things, the big peace camp in Seget Donji will take place at the end of July and the follow-up camp for older activists in Vukovar in mid-August.

Guided by last year's experience and feedback from participants, we are once more planning a diverse program for the camp in Seget Donji with some exciting guest speakers, but also some of our long-time volunteer activists will lead workshops. They are successful and inspiring young people of whom we are very proud.

Empathy, solidarity, media manipulation, hate speech, wars and flight are some of the topics we will address. We will report regularly on our social media channels and invite everyone to follow us.

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Editorial

Brigitte Kläß, Katharina Ochsendorf,
Tessa Pariyar

GRUNDRECHTE **KOMITEE.de**

Project Vacation From War

Aquinostraße 7-11 | 50670 Köln
Phone +49 (0)221 97 26 918

info@ferien-vom-krieg.de
www.vacation-from-war.com

 FerienvomKrieg.VacationfromWar
 vacation_from_war