

Meeting Report – UNIMA Artists of Hope: Supporting Gaza's Puppeteers

Date: November 7, 2025

The meeting of November 7, 2025, was held within the framework of the *Artists of Hope* campaign, initiated by UNIMA International to support Palestinian puppeteers in Gaza:

<https://www.unima.org/en/artists-of-hope-supporting-gazas-puppeteers/>

The meeting provided an opportunity to take stock of the actions carried out so far, define the next steps of coordination, and reaffirm the ethical, artistic, and human dimensions of this international solidarity effort.

Presentations were made by Clément Peretjatko (UNIMA International), Terence Tan (UNIMA International), Raphaële Fleury (THEMAA) and Samuel Beck (THEMAA) in the presence of the Secretary General of UNIMA International, Fabrizio Montecchi.

Attendees included fellow UNIMA Executive Committee members (and board members of their respective national centres) Kembly Aguilar, Janni Younge, Nazli Ümit, and Omar Alvarez, representatives of several UNIMA national centres, volunteer, interpreter, and chair of UNIMA Jordan Buthaina Bandora, Henry Plavidal, co-producer of *Everything That Is*, and other interested parties (non-exhaustive list). The Palestinian artist now situated in Gaza, Mahdi Karira, joined the meeting later due to technical challenges.

Clément Peretjatko, Treasurer of UNIMA International, opened the session by emphasizing that this meeting represented a moment of shared responsibility and collective mobilization.

He highlighted that the *Artists of Hope* campaign, born out of humanitarian urgency, now fits into a long-term dynamic where culture and puppetry become spaces of resistance, memory, and symbolic reconstruction.

A Call for Cultural Internationalism

Fabrizio Montecchi thanked attendees for their broad participation, which he praised as a strong sign of vitality and unity within the UNIMA global network.

He distinguished between two notions: internationalization, often linked to institutional circulation, and internationalism, which he defined as the connection of peoples and artists through solidarity and creation.

According to him, this internationalism lies at the heart of UNIMA's founding identity.

He also recalled the symbolic coincidence between this meeting and the first public screening of the film shot in Gaza, which was taking place the same day in Lecce, Italy, at a Mediterranean festival : a sign of hope and continuity for the *Artists of Hope* campaign.

Current Actions and Screening Protocol

Clément Peretjatko, Terence Tan, Raphaële Fleury and Samuel Beck commenced their presentation of the progress of the *Artists of Hope* campaign, which now includes several components: support to application of puppeteers to evacuation programs, solidarity screenings, documentation, and direct financial support for five Gazan puppeteers and their families. Each presenter had been coordinating different components for aid to the five puppeteers listed in *Artists of Hope*, accumulating to one holistic campaign.

They presented the PAUSE program for endangered researchers and artists (<https://www.programmepause.fr/>). It allows evacuation of the artist and his family + 1 to 2 years in France, working in an institution.

THEMAA and the collective Ma'an for Gaza have deposited 3 applications for puppeteers in September for :

- Yousef Al Hindi : Théâtre Château Rouge (Annemasse) - private donor
- Murad Al Maghari : Centre Dramatique National de Rouen - Latitude Marionnette (30 institutions)
- Mahdi Karira : Théâtre Nouvelle Génération - CDN + Théâtre Municipal Guignol + Musées Gadagne (Lyon) - lack of institutional support and funding (still 26 k€ to be fund).

100 applications to PAUSE have been received in total by the College de France. 15 will be selected. An answer is expected in November.

The two other artists listed in UNIMA's website, Bahaa Al Yazji and Waseem Al Hindi, recently updated that they would like to be applicants for the next call for application. Buthaina Bandora (UNIMA Jordania) and Anne Murray will help them to prepare the documents so that Samuel and Raphaële can look for institutional partners.

The coordination team tries to find other partnerships and funds so as to help all of the 5 puppeteers. The methods can be different for each one.

Regarding Mahdi Karira, which application will our main action lever are 3 films about him or made by him :



1- "We truly deserve life!" - captation of sand art performance by Catherine Gignac with Mahdi's testimony, during the event Float2Gaza at Floating Castle (Slovenia) during summer 2025.

Duration: 9'30"



2- *Everything That Is*, documentary by Shourideh C. Molavi (2025), follows Mahdi making puppets and thinking about it among rubble in Gaza. Mahdi's thoughts are intertwined with unpublished poems by Jawad.al-Aqqad. Duration: 20 min.



3- "*The Awakening*" (L'Eveil) short-film directed by Mahdi Karira with his puppets for the project *From Ground Zero* (2024), of which it constitutes the 22nd and final chapter. Durée : 4'57" min.

The screening evenings serve both as acts of awareness and as concrete gestures of solidarity with the puppeteer Mahdi Karira.

To ensure coherence and traceability, and in concertation with the producers of these 3 films, a shared protocol was adopted:

1. **Notification of the screening project:** any national center, institution, or organization wishing to organize a screening must inform the international coordination team specifying the proposed date and venue : treasurer@unima.org for the UNIMA network or raphaele.fleury@gigogne.art for screenings outside the UNIMA network.
2. **Transmission of the screening contracts** then the organizing center will receive standard contracts to complete and sign. It must be sent back to Clément (treasurer@unima.org), so that he can coordinate with the different producers and the Communication Commission, and update the international calendar on the UNIMA website.
3. **Access to the film:** once the contract is signed, download codes will be provided to the organizer. These codes give access to three films and the accompanying materials required for the screening (specific poster, QR codes, etc.).

The screenings are copyright-free, provided they are part of UNIMA International's « Artists of Hope: Supporting Gaza's Puppeteers » campaign and the organizer commits to holding a fundraising collection in support of Mahdi and the camerawoman during the event.

4. **Feedback and donation report:** after each screening, organizers are invited to send (treasurer@unima.org):
- a few photos of the event and a short report (audience, discussions, impressions, etc.);
 - declaration of the total amount of donations collected (for reporting purposes).

Organizers should inform audiences that the donations are equally divided (50/50) between Mahdi Karira, for the development of his traveling bus-theatre via his personal GofundMe, and Shorouk Alaila, camerawoman in Gaza, via the PayPal account managed by the film's director.

This protocol aims to ensure transparency, visibility, and unity across the campaign, while respecting each country's specific context.

Screening Donation Protocol and Use of QR Codes

Each solidarity screening includes a clear and verifiable donation system, based on two distinct QR codes (or links):

- The first QR code links to a GoFundMe page dedicated to Mahdi Karira, to support his creative work and the development of his traveling bus-theatre, designed to bring puppetry and joy to devastated areas of Gaza.
- The second QR code links to a PayPal account managed by the film's director, specifically intended to be transferred to the camerawoman based in Gaza, who filmed the documentary under extremely difficult conditions.

This dual system was deliberately designed to reduce the number of financial intermediaries and ensure that donations reach beneficiaries as directly as possible.

Using UNIMA's PayPal account would imply:

- a logistical delay for fund collection, conversion, and redistribution;
- and, more importantly, a financial loss due to platform fees: PayPal retains around 3% of each transaction, in addition to international bank transfer fees.

These intermediaries have represented an estimated total loss of up to 55 to 60% during the last months. **After the meeting we received an update according to which this loss through intermediaries is reduced now to about 18 to 30%.**

Therefore, the use of two QR codes during screenings - and five distinct links on the UNIMA website (corresponding to the five supported puppeteer families) - makes it possible to:

- minimize losses due to intermediaries;
- ensure direct and traceable distribution;
- and lighten the administrative workload of the international secretariat.

However, it was noted that in some countries, PayPal and/or GoFundMe do not operate. In such cases (and only in these cases), national centers are invited to contact the UNIMA Treasurer (treasurer@unima.org) to find an alternative solution.

This technical and ethical choice reflects UNIMA's commitment to combining transparency, efficiency, and direct solidarity with artists in the field.

Training, Transmission, and Exhibition Initiatives

Terence Tan (chair of the Applied Puppetry Commission and former Vice-Chair of the Cooperation Commission) presented the Strings of Support project, initiated at the Cooperation Commission and now in collaboration with members of the Applied Puppetry Commission, which would gather resources to support targeted beneficiaries of the Emergency Aid fund. To volunteer or contribute to the Strings of Support project, please write to appliedpuppetry@unima.org.

In response to a request from Mahdi Karira, Narguess Majd (member of the Training Commission) proposed to implement **a program of remote workshops for puppeteers in Gaza**, based on simple techniques and accessible materials (paper, cardboard, shadow theatre...). Suggestions and volunteers for the remote workshops may also contact Terence Tan (appliedpuppetry@unima.org). He will connect all propositions with Narguess, Salma, or any other appropriate members of the campaign until further notice.

Documents subtitled or translated in Arabic, with the help of Raphaële Fleury and Buthaina Bandora, will be shared on UNIMA's YouTube channel and/or Google Drive to ensure continuity of transmission despite communication disruptions.

Buthaina also presented **an exhibition project** featuring Mahdi's puppets made of cans she managed to take out of Gaza with humanitarian's help. With the puppets come audio recordings of the puppets' characters.

These puppets, currently in Jordan, bear witness to the vitality of Palestinian creativity, resilience, and the symbolic power of these objects rescued from destruction.

The exhibition tells the story of the people of Gaza through and to keep their living memory present in international cultural circuits.

Henry Plavidal, co-producer of the documentary *Everything That Is*, is about to move to Europe with 5 other puppets made by Mahdi, and will be available to facilitate any screening event of this film.

Please write to UNIMA if you want to join this project.

The Testimony of Mahdi Karira: A Moment of Grace and Resistance

At the end of the meeting, Mahdi Karira was able to connect from Gaza with a borrowed laptop.

His voice, transmitted despite power and internet cuts, deeply moved all participants. Buthaina interpreted all questions, presentations, and answers for Mahdi.

Mahdi first spoke about the destruction of his workshop and the rescue of his puppets:

“They were covered in dust, sometimes broken, but I couldn’t leave them behind. I took them out one by one, as if lifting children.”

Having this rare opportunity to meet, he was asked to present his idea for a traveling bus-theatre. This is envisioned as a mobile cultural center capable of bringing theatre and joy to the most affected areas, and will continue in Gaza with the help of his apprentices, regardless of his artist-residency in France:

“This bus will be a theatre, a school, a refuge. It must travel everywhere children can no longer go to the theatre. With paper and thread, we will make stories come alive. Imagination cannot be bombed.”

Mahdi was also asked to take a moment to share his dedication when he returned back to the bombing zone to retrieve his puppets - even while his PAUSE application was in process. Clément responded to Mahdi that UNIMA International has heard his appeal to connect with international NGOs, and would reach out to them to help implement this bus-theatre project.

The success of the screenings and the mobilization of the global network will help give visibility and credibility to this initiative among potential new partners.

A Collective, Transparent, and Sustainable Commitment

Clément Peretjatko clarified that the current screening campaign focuses on Mahdi because UNIMA International was able to gather a short documentary film about his work and he is a current PAUSE program applicant that still lacked funding (26 k€). He clarified that the five Gazan puppeteer families introduced by the Cooperation Commission remain supported under the *Artists of Hope* campaign. The *Artists of Hope* initiative remains open to other potential partnerships and host countries.

Terence Tan also responded to the salient frustration about the steep costs of money transfers from donors to cash in hand of the beneficiaries. It would be important for donors to know where their money goes to, but providing an understanding of the universal economy and historical costs of conflict and war might assuage this large concern.

The actions currently underway represent a first step, and UNIMA will continue to support all these artists and their families through other forms of cultural, technical, and human assistance. A dedicated webpage has already been created and is regularly updated to present the initiatives, screenings, exhibits, processes, and other related details regarding UNIMA International's *Artists of Hope / Support for Puppeteers in Gaza* series.

These initiatives are part of a broader, long-term dynamic that seeks to strengthen ties between artists and the international community within the global *Artists of Hope* campaign.

Conclusion

The meeting concluded with a feeling of unity and determination.

Mahdi's testimony gave a human face to the *Artists of Hope* campaign, reminding everyone of UNIMA's core mission: to act through culture, for life.

Fabrizio Montecchi closed the session, declaring:

"Today, we are not only supporting an artist, but an idea of culture as an act of life and freedom."

Participants reaffirmed their commitment to sharing the voices of Gaza's artists, organizing solidarity screenings, and providing ongoing support to Palestinian puppeteers as part of the international *Artists of Hope* campaign.

Report drafted by Clément Peretjatko (UNIMA International) from the notes and full meeting transcript with contributions from Raphaële Fleury (THEMAA) and Terence Tan (UNIMA International). Full recording is available upon request.