

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نېاشد تن من مېباد بدین بوم و پر زنده یک تن مېباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

By Helga Baumgarten
02.03.2025

"There is so much to do"

Letter from Jerusalem. Israeli lawyer Lea Tsemel has been helping Palestinian prisoners for decades



Download

Christian Mang

Militant fighter for justice: Lea Tsemel at the XXV Rosa Luxemburg Conference (Berlin, 11.1.2020)

This is the 28th “Letter from Jerusalem” by the Emeritus Professor of Politics at Birzeit University.

Before I could even ask my first question, Lea Tsemel stood up to show me how Palestinian prisoners are tortured in Ofer Prison between Jerusalem and Ramallah: She put her hands behind her head: "This is how the Palestinians have to hold their hands, brutally handcuffed with metal handcuffs. When a guard comes, they have to put their heads down immediately,

otherwise they will be beaten up." The Palestinian she is defending was held in a kind of cage, handcuffed, as she described: she could only talk to him through a hole in the wall.

Since the early 1970s at the latest, Tsemel has been defending Palestinians : men, women, and children who have been arrested by the army, the secret service, or the police. How and why did she begin this work? The trigger, she says, was the June 1967 war. Before the war, she was a law student and a staunch Zionist. When the war began, she was doing voluntary community service. Like all Israelis, she visited the Old City as soon as she could. There, however, she saw the Maghrebi quarter, right next to the Western Wall, destroyed and the Palestinian residents expelled. A trip down to Jericho completed the impression: a never-ending line of refugees. At first, this aroused feelings of guilt in her. The step towards political activity followed. The arrest of Khalil Toumeh (a Palestinian Matzpen activist who recently died in exile in Germany), a fellow student at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, eventually led her to join the radical left-wing organization Matzpen.

Along with Felicia Langer, a generation older than Lea Tsemel, she was one of the first Jewish lawyers to defend Palestinians. She had actually hoped to do her practical training with Langer. But the ideological differences between a member of the Communist Party and a member of Matzpen were initially too great. It was only later that they cooperated in numerous cases.

In 2019, director Rachel Leah Jones and Philippe Bellaïche made the film "The Advocate" about Lea Tsemel and her work . It premiered in January 2019 at the Sundance Festival. The film has won several awards and ultimately won the Emmy Award for Best Documentary Film. In the film, Lea Tsemel reports on some of her special cases. For example, there is thirteen-year-old Ahmed. Together with his 15-year-old cousin Hassan, he ventured from Beit Hanina down to the Pisgat Zeev settlement. There, Hassan attacked an Israeli youth with a knife and was immediately shot dead by the police. Ahmed was arrested and charged with two counts of attempted murder. It was not proven in court that he was involved in the stabbing, but that did not change the verdict: nine and a half years in prison. Ahmed is now 20 years old. He has not been released in previous prisoner exchanges, even though he is in very poor health: mentally, he is probably permanently damaged. Lea Tsemel hopes that he will be released from prison in April.

Today, she is appalled by the mistreatment of Palestinian prisoners. The prison administration is taking revenge on the Palestinians for what they imagine happens to the Israelis who were kidnapped to Gaza: starvation, humiliation, no contact with the outside world, unimaginable conditions in the cells with too many prisoners, not enough mattresses and blankets. Finally,

she explains an important Israeli method of denying the protection of the Geneva Convention, especially to Palestinians from Gaza: they are simply defined by the military commander as "illegal combatants". For her, this method is worse than the widespread administrative detention, which requires that prisoners appear before a judge at least every six months.

Lea cannot imagine giving up: "There is still so much to do," she says and says goodbye to her next court date.