Lebanon gives doctor 10 years in absentia for working with Israel on medical aid

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A Lebanese doctor says he has been sentenced to 10 years in prison in absentia by a military tribunal in Lebanon because he works with a charity organization that helps bring Palestinians to Israeli hospitals for medical treatment.

Sydney-based Jamal Rifi said the sentence was a result of Lebanon’s corrupt political system and the Iran-backed Hezbollah terror group’s influence, [ABC reported](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-24/jamal-rifi-sentenced-by-lebanese-military-tribunal-in-absentia/100403548) on Tuesday.

Rifi said he believes the charges came because of his work with Project Rozana, which brings Palestinian patients from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to Israeli hospitals. It also provides training for Palestinian medical workers.

He speculated that he was specifically targeted as part of a smear campaign against his brother, [Ashraf Rifi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashraf_Rifi), a former director of Lebanon’s internal security forces who is an outspoken critic of Hezbollah, the terror group backed by Iran.

“He is one of the loudest voices against Hezbollah doing everything as per master, Iran,” Rifi said. “They wanted to affect his name and reputation and they are using my humanitarian work to label me, and through me to my brother, as being traitors and that sort of thing, to minimize his voice.”

Project Rozana has an [Australian division](https://australia.projectrozana.org/) that works in cooperation with members of the local Jewish community and Rifi has been involved with the group since 2017.

Project Rozana recently helped the Palestinian health system prepare for dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, sending 30 ventilators to the Palestinian Authority.

“The ventilators were worth their weight in gold,” Rifi said. “They have been used in hospitals private and public and in Gaza.”

According to its website, Project Rozana seeks to build better understanding between Palestinians and Israelis via health programs.

Rifi told the station that his brother had informed him of the sentence on Monday and that the prison time was for being “a collaborator and a traitor with the enemy,” meaning Israel. The announcement was made in Lebanon by a journalist close to Hezbollah, he said.

“I am upset, definitely, because no one wants to be labeled a traitor and it is a distraction from the work I am doing right now,” he told ABC.

Rifi said the charge of being a traitor and the sentencing was “a reflection of the Lebanese corrupt system, which failed to protect their own citizens in Lebanon and now they are chasing expatriates outside of Lebanon for doing a good deed, for speaking the truth and for standing our ground by exposing their failures.”

With the sentence hanging over him, Rifi can no longer travel to his home country to visit family.

But he added that if the powerful political forces at work in Lebanon felt the need to scapegoat him at a time when the country is facing a catastrophic economic crisis, then his work must have significance.

“People live with no electricity and don’t have access to water. In a country where nothing is working, for them to pay such attention to such a minute detail, I must be doing something right,” he said.

According to Sky News, Rifi has also visited Israel, which is forbidden under Lebanese law for its citizens.

In 2019, the Rozana Project helped the family of 21-year-old Israeli student Aya Maasarwe, who was raped and murdered in Australia, to [launch a fellowship](https://www.timesofisrael.com/family-of-arab-israeli-slain-in-australia-starts-medical-scholarship-in-her-name/) for Palestinian doctors in her name. The student’s murder shocked Australians and sparked a huge outpouring of grief that saw thousands attend gatherings in her memory, and raised questions about the safety of women on public streets.