

# VOGUE

ARABIA

JUNE 2020

THE WOMAN  
BEHIND THE ICON

Majida El Roumi

*Her first cover in her  
45-year-long career*

STRENGTH, PRIDE, RESILIENCE, HOPE

LOVE LETTER  
TO LEBANON

# 10

the

Defiant, hopeful,  
resourceful – these  
are the movers  
and shakers  
of Lebanon

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## MAYA IBRAHIMCHAH

With one-third of Lebanon's population living in abject poverty and 1.2 million subsisting on an average of US \$5 per day, Maya Ibrahimchah's non-profit organization, Beit el Baraka, is a lifeline for many. Ibrahimchah reaches out to the forgotten members of society – the elderly and impoverished – putting food on the table and giving them the dignity of care and love. "Not helping them would've made me miserable," she says. "I look at some people around me who watch their country sink and do absolutely nothing. And I pity them." Along with helping people access medical care and improving their living conditions – even settling utility bills – one of Beit el Baraka's most needed initiatives is its free supermarket in Karm el Zeitoun. But Covid-19 has closed its

doors, forcing Ibrahimchah and her team to adapt – and quickly. They now deliver supplies to more than 1 000 doorsteps, following stringent protocols. Beit el Baraka is also working with Lebanese Food Bank and 95 NGOs on one of the biggest responses in the country, distributing food boxes and vegetable seeds to 50 000 families with the support of the army. Her plans are bold and expansive: for Beit el Baraka to produce its own food through agriculture and farming projects; free schooling for all; and adequate pensions. "The human element in Lebanon is the shield that has always protected us from the hostile political environment we live in," Ibrahimchah says. "The beauty and magic of life in Lebanon lies within this warm and human bond between us."

## ADIB DADA

Planting trees in the thick of a revolution might seem counterintuitive to some, but to Adib Dada, founder of theOtherDada Integrated Consultancy & Architecture, trees speak to our very souls – and the interconnectedness of it all. Dada and the NGO which he helped form, Regenerate Lebanon, engage in “guerilla gardening” to help bring lifeless areas around Beirut and its river back to verdancy. “There’s a strong underlying environmental and social justice component to the revolution,” he says. “There was such an energy.” The environmental activist, who studied biomimicry in the US after gaining his architecture degree in Lebanon, feels strongly about reclaiming the city’s public spaces. “There are so few public spaces in Beirut and for me it’s a deliberate act to make them inaccessible – public areas bring people together but our leaders want us to be apart, they don’t want us to join forces.” During the protests, Dada and his team also helped clean up the streets and provided food from an off-the-grid, solar-powered kitchen with its own water filtration system, while planting 2 000 trees and shrubs, encompassing 17 native species. “Our intention is to bring life back,” he says, by recreating ecosystems with their urban afforestation efforts. “It seems like such a benign, non-political act – planting a tree, it’s hard to argue with that – but for me it’s politically charged. When you’re planting native tree species, it’s like you’re saying you’re bringing back the people as well.”



## IMANE ASSAF

Strolling through the streets of Hamra in Beirut – socially distanced, of course – striking murals loom overhead. The revolutionary street art depicts images of resistance and famous Beirut residents, adding a sense of dynamism and immediacy to this most vibrant of cities. Imane Assaf is the firecracker behind Art of Change, a movement she pioneered after watching a BBC documentary about how street art helped uplift a rundown neighborhood. She roped in a few British artists to collaborate with local ones in Beirut during a two-day festival in 2017 – but it was when the revolution came that the true power of art to question the status quo was brought to a natural denouement. Work like Roula Abdo’s mural *We Shall Pass*, depicting two hands opening the concrete barricades put up by the government, became a viral symbol of the movement; as did Lea Bou Habib’s murals focusing on women empowerment. The culture of art in the country was palpably changing. “Lebanese artists can sometimes feel a bit strangled by society,” Assaf says. “I think it’s about culture more than government. But it’s changing in a huge way. Artists are realizing they have to be free in their art.”

Art of Change is not Assaf’s only initiative. With her NGO Ahla Fawda, she is distributing food parcels to families as well as organizing concerts outside hospitals, including the ones of Joy Fayad singing on a crane. “We thought, what can we do to bring joy to the community?” Assaf shares. “It’s had such a positive impact on all of us, the reaction was overwhelming.”