

BAZAAR

TALKING POINT

FROM MIDEAST TO MIDWEST

In America's heartland, Bazaar meets a generation of Middle Eastern women who are redefining what it means to be a global citizen

Words by *ALEXAUBRY*
Photography by *SEBASTIAN BÖTTCHER*

On January 3, 2019, Rashida Tlaib made her way up the stairs of the US Congress dressed in her mother's intricately embroidered thobe. That day, she became the first Arab Muslim American woman to be sworn into the House of Representatives. By the time she made it to Capital Hill, Rashida had established her career as an attorney fighting for civil rights, affordable healthcare and raising the minimum wage. A single mother of four and the daughter of Palestinian immigrants, she'd arrived in Washington DC to represent the State of Michigan. That a powerful voice such as Rashida's could emerge from the country's Midwest came as no surprise to a region that's home to the largest concentration of Middle Eastern immigrants in the country.

The first Arabs to arrive in the United States during the 1860s were referred to as 'Turks,' because they came from a province of the Ottoman Empire that encompassed Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine. From 1888-1914, immigration peaked when more than 100,000 men and women left the region for the United States. The early immigrants fanned out across the Midwest to establish communities in Michigan, Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa, Ohio and Oklahoma. The country witnessed a second wave of immigration from the Middle East following World War II, which included Yemenis, Iraqis, Egyptians and Iranians.

Many settled in Midwestern cities such as Chicago, Illinois, the state with the largest Muslim population in the country. An important part of the city's fabric today, their presence can be seen in charitable organisations dating back to the 1960s, as well as Arabic, which is taught to more than 3,000 students in Chicago's public schools. From this once invisible minority has emerged a new generation of women, who are contributing to Chicago's cultural and civic life through the power of reinvention. Each makes the point that to be a global citizen today means navigating complex geographies, while celebrating the bonds that link us together. ►



From left: Azadeh Hussaini, Vivian Khalaf, Khitam Masoud and Azeh Atout wearing looks and jewelry by Chicago designers Melissa Serpico Kamhout, Katrin Schnabl, Anke Loh and Gillion Carrara

AZADEH HUSSAINI

Iranian-American artist, curator and educator

“I worked 14-hour days over a span of three weeks to complete these in time for the opening,” says Azadeh Hussaini, while pointing to one of seven monumental art pieces at the new Marriott Hotel in downtown Chicago. Blurring the line between painting and sculpture, the artist reimagined the city’s skyline with vertical stacks of repurposed newspapers and magazines, which she painted over in vivid colours. “Chicago is one of the most beautiful cities in the world and I’ve spent a lot of time researching its architecture for this commission,” says Azadeh, who began incorporating paper reliefs and sculptural forms into her canvases in 2013.

The daughter of noted Iranian artist Reza Hosseini, Azadeh was born in Atlanta, Georgia in the mid 1970s, where her father was studying for his BA in Fine Arts at Georgia Tech. “We ended up moving back to Iran when I was three years old, even though my parents initially wanted to stay in the US,” says the artist, whose family lived in Southern Iran before settling in Tehran when she was 13 years old. That same year Azadeh began to learn painting under her father’s guidance. “They were very informal sessions in his studio, where I’d observe him at work. It was then that I realised how much I enjoyed painting,” says Azadeh, who pursued a BA in Fine Arts at Tehran’s Azad University in 1995. During her first semester, she’d meet her future husband who was a pre-med student at the university.

“I enjoyed my time at Azad and grew a lot as an individual while there. But I was also questioning whether a degree from an institution automatically makes one an artist,” recalls Azadeh, who had her first exhibition at the age of 19. Held at Tehran’s Daryabeigi Gallery, the artist found success that day when she sold all her paintings, in addition to winning five commissions. “That early experience encouraged me to pursue painting as a career, but I also knew that I still had to work hard to prove myself,” adds the artist, who began teaching art to elementary and high school students shortly after graduating in 1999. As demand for her classes grew, she left Tehran’s school system and continued to offer private lessons at her studio. “Teaching is my way of giving back, because an arts education isn’t simply about learning a drawing technique, but a way of seeing the world and developing critical thinking skills,” she says, while noting that she learns as much from her students as they do from her.

Azadeh and her husband moved to the United States in 2006, where they initially settled close to relatives in a suburb of Virginia. During those first months, she immersed herself in painting to deal with homesickness and navigating a new culture. She eventually overcame her feeling of isolation thanks to a chance encounter in a Persian grocery store. “I picked up a local Iranian newspaper and came across an open call for artists to take part in an exhibition. It was organised by a women’s group, through which I met a lot of amazing people,” says the artist, who decided to pursue an MFA at San Francisco’s Academy of Fine Arts a year later.

In 2008, Azadeh’s husband accepted a position at a Chicago hospital and the couple moved to the city, where their son was born a year later. “When we got here, I instinctively knew this is where I wanted to live, because it felt familiar and reminded me of Tehran,” says the artist the next day at her studio, where works in various stages of completion are propped up against walls. She points to stacks of Iranian newspapers and cardboard boxes that await her attention. Today, these materials form the basis for the artist’s wall-mounted sculptures that explore her journey as an immigrant.

“Compelling art doesn’t just ask questions, but also addresses universal concerns such as the refugee crisis, the immigrant experience and global



Azadeh wears a geometric sheath by Melissa Serpico Kamhout

warming,” says Azadeh, noting that over the course of her life she’s moved 22 times. Frequently packing her belongings between layers of newspapers in cardboard boxes, these materials eventually became the language with which she expresses her experiences. “All these materials represent my life as an immigrant because these papers hold my memories,” adds the artist, who in 2018 cofounded Didaar, an organisation supporting Chicago-based Iranian artists and art historians through lectures and workshops.

Today the group’s also focused on exposing larger audiences to Iran’s contemporary arts and culture. On June 23, Didaar will team up with Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art for a series of talks and film screenings by the late Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami. “We’re also showing short films by some of his students. It’s an opportunity to humanise our experiences as Iranians, because film is one of the most effective mediums to bridge cultures,” says Azadeh.

In addition to her love of painting, music has played a central role in her creative process. Having played the piano and the guitar from an early age, Azadeh shifted her focus to singing three years ago. “A friend introduced me to a group at the University of Chicago that organises free concerts of Middle Eastern music once a year,” says the artist, who recites classical Persian songs using techniques learnt through a trained opera singer. “The most gratifying part of performing on stage, is connecting with audiences and seeing the emotion in their eyes,” adds Azadeh, who celebrated her 40th birthday by embarking on a walking tour of northwestern Spain with members of Chicago’s Theatre Y.

“I first found out about the theatre company when a friend invited me to a private performance in someone’s backyard. When I learnt about their trip to Spain, I immediately signed up. Shortly afterwards they invited me to become a board member,” says the artist, who since 2017 has also served as Theatre Y’s curator, where she organises exhibitions related to its plays. “They work with playwrights from around the world who touch on universal experiences,” says Azadeh, of an approach to sharing stories that reflects her own identity. “I’ve always believed that I can learn just as much from different cultures, as they can from me. It’s why I try to find the best in people no matter where they come from.” ▶



Artist Azadeh Hussaini in an embroidered dress by Chicago designer Beata Kania



Azeh wears a jersey dress by designer Katrin Schnabl

A Z E H A T O U T

*Jordanian-American HR consultant
and volunteer firefighter*

on to become leaders in their respective fields and countries. “I applied immediately together with thousands of other Jordanian students. Only 13 finalists received visas to come to the United States, so I knew it was an opportunity that I couldn’t take lightly,” says Azeh, who flew to Pennsylvania shortly after graduating from high school in 1999. “I was 18 and had led a pretty sheltered life, where I’d never travelled without my family. Yet here I was boarding a plane for the United States,” she adds, noting that she met fellow students from countries such as Rwanda and Bosnia who had survived wars and genocide.

While there, she pursued a bachelors degree in accounting and business administration. Despite the many math and business courses she took at La Roche, it was her liberal arts electives that left a profound impact on her. “Up until then, I had been taught to simply memorise facts and not question anything. All of a sudden I was being asked to think critically about what was taught, to have an opinion and consider a topic from multiple perspectives,” says Azeh, noting that she also experienced a period of culture shock after arriving in McCandless Township, where the university is located. She struggled to find a community to call her own until her sophomore year, when she took a position at the university’s public safety office and became a resident assistant at a dorm.

“One of the job requirements included going through fire safety training. When I told my boss how much I enjoyed it, she recommended that I apply for a volunteer position at the local fire station,” says Azeh, who hesitated as she didn’t know what her family would think, since they expected her to focus on her studies. She decided to apply for the position despite her initial concerns, knowing she’d be entering a new environment that was outside of her comfort zone. To become a certified firefighter, she underwent rigorous training sessions for 88-hours over the course of 11 weeks. “It wasn’t just physically challenging because I had to get back into shape. I was also juggling a job and trying to maintain a 3.0 GPA to retain my scholarship,” says Azeh, who found at the fire station a close-knit community that became her surrogate family.

While a volunteer firefighter, Azeh responded to fire calls by either getting a ride in a friend’s car or jogging to the station, which was less than a mile away from campus. “Then September 11th happened and many firefighters died trying to save people at the Twin Towers. I worried about how I would be received at the fire station so I stopped going,” recalls Azeh, whose absence was immediately felt by the station’s team and chief, who encouraged her to come back. “They welcomed me with open arms and even asked me to write their names in Arabic on the station’s black board. That day I saw the good side of people in the face of tragedy,” says Azeh, who in 2004 received her masters in HR administration, before working her way up the corporate ladder as a compensation analyst.

A year later, she met her husband Nayan Shah on a flight from Pittsburgh and eventually moved to Chicago in 2005, where they’re raising their daughter Leila and son Adam. “My husband is Indian-American, I’m Jordanian-Palestinian and our kids are growing up in a world where having a multi-cultural background is increasingly the norm,” says Azeh, who volunteers at Chicago’s annual Palestinian Film Festival, the longest running event of its kind in the United States. “In addition to its museums, theaters and parks, Chicago is home to several universities which makes it a vibrant place to live,” she adds, while noting the importance of exposing her children to the world from a young age. “We’ve travelled to many countries and cities including Mexico, Istanbul, Sydney and Granada in Spain. I ultimately want them to know that they too are citizens of the world with a heritage that spans all these places.” ➤

On May 4, 2002, Queen Rania of Jordan took to the stage at Pennsylvania’s La Roche University, to deliver the keynote speech during its commencement ceremony. As she spoke, she singled out one particular student amongst the graduates that day. “I am quite sure that La Roche student Azeh Atout never dreamed she would someday be honoured as the Firefighter of the Year. She became the first woman to win this award and I’m proud to say that she is one of 25 Jordanians participating in the Pacem in Terris Program,” noted Queen Rania, as Azeh listened quietly amongst the audience, while looking back on the journey that brought her to this moment.

“I SAW THE GOOD SIDE OF PEOPLE IN THE FACE OF TRAGEDY”

A z e h A t o u t

“It was pretty surreal for me as a young Arab Muslim woman, because I never thought I’d be in the news let alone mentioned by a queen,” says Azeh, who also received an honorary certificate from the Senator of Pennsylvania. “Depending on where you grow up in the world, having potential doesn’t necessarily lead to success. But I found myself in a place where you could make it in life if you worked hard enough,” says Azeh, who was born in Amman to Palestinian parents. While growing up in Jordan, she looked up to figures such as Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr. who had fought for justice and gave millions hope. Yet the individual that loomed largest in her childhood was her mother, a strong and independent figure who passed away three years ago.

“She came from a very traditional family and yet defied convention by pursuing a degree in English literature at Ain Shams University in Cairo. It’s where she met my dad, who was also studying there at the time,” says Azeh, who attended an all-girls school in Amman where classes were taught in Arabic, English and French. “It was an amazing environment to grow up in because I was surrounded by peers from different backgrounds and faiths. You learn from an early age to build friendships and respect each other,” she says, while recalling the day she came across an advert in the newspaper for the Pacem in Terris Program at La Roche University.

Founded in 1993 by its late president, Monsignor William Kerr, the programme offers scholarships to students from war-torn and developing nations to study at the university. Over the years, many of its graduates went



Certified firefighter Azeh Atout in a draped velvet dress by Anke Loh and ring by Gillian Carrara

KHITAM MASOUD

Palestinian-American founder of Blessons for Women Foundation

“I am passionate about helping women because of the adversities I’ve encountered throughout my life,” says Khitam Masoud, while looking out at the Chicago River from her downtown apartment. As the founder and director of Blessons for Women, a non-profit organisation, she’s spent the last three years helping women rewrite their stories. It’s an experience that she’s all too familiar with, having had to reinvent herself over the years. “Turning wounds or tragedies into wisdom and teachable moments can be a very powerful tool. It’s a way of navigating through life that took me a while to figure out,” says Blessons’ director, who was born the eldest of seven children to Palestinian parents in Sacramento, California.

While growing up in a strict household during the mid-90s, she read books about the late Princess Diana, a public figure she related to despite the worlds that separated them. “Here was someone who had constantly been told how to behave and dress in public, and her defiance cost her dearly. Despite that, she continued to be a humanitarian and help others, which resonated with me from a young age,” says Khitam, whose life would change at the age of 16 when her parents tried to marry her to an older cousin without her consent. Faced with few options, she took them to court to file for emancipation as a minor and won her case in 1998.

“After the court settlement my family never spoke to me again despite reaching out to them. But I’m at peace with it now, because I wouldn’t be the person I am today had I not gotten out of an abusive situation,” says Khitam, who found a sanctuary in high school, where she maintained a 4.0 GPA while serving as the president of the student body. “I was the only teenager there who wasn’t legally considered a minor anymore. I became eligible for a work programme and was able to rent an apartment and juggle two jobs while completing my senior year,” says Blessons’ director, who received a scholarship to California State University where she pursued a degree in Corporate Communications and Marketing.

In 2007, as she struggled to maintain her grades while balancing two jobs, she was diagnosed with a rare cancer that would change the course of her life yet again. “I remember sitting in the doctor’s office thinking how could this happen to me. I was a 26-year-old who played sports and never smoked,” recalls Khitam, who went through a series of surgeries and treatments at the University of California’s hospital in Berkeley. “It was probably one of the most challenging periods in my life. Even though my co-workers and friends became my family during that time, I felt very isolated and alone because I didn’t have anyone to confide my fears to,” she says, noting that she spent four days in the hospital recovering from her surgeries, during which she thought about her future.

“I made the decision that if I beat cancer, I’m going to leave California to start over somewhere new and do all the things I’ve wanted to do in life,” says Khitam, who moved to Chicago in 2007, where she continued working in the restaurant industry while trying to complete her higher education. A few years after arriving in the city she joined Imerman Angels, an organisation that provides one-on-one cancer support to those fighting the disease. “I became involved with the charity because they bring people together, to make sure no one goes through cancer alone as I did,” adds Blessons’ director, who mentored a young woman going through a similar cancer as she had. In addition to meeting every week, Khitam

“TURNING TRAGEDIES INTO TEACHABLE MOMENTS CAN BE A VERY POWERFUL TOOL

Khitam Masoud

accompanied her to doctor’s appointments for moral support.

“Her journey became part of mine, because we were able to discuss concerns that aren’t always easy to talk about with friends and family when you’re going through cancer,” says Khitam, noting that being a mentor was one of the most rewarding experiences of her life. Over the next four years, she also recruited the largest number of runners for the charity’s team during the

Chicago Marathon. In 2016 alone, she brought 200 runners together for the event, which raised close to \$400,000 for Imerman Angels’ programmes.

Her experience with the charity gave her the confidence to establish her own non-profit organisation that same year. “When you’re able to view painful lessons as blessings, they become blessons. So I started my charity to give women the opportunity to advance economically and better their lives, because I struggled to obtain a higher education with limited resources,” says Khitam of her organisation’s mission, which has helped hundreds of women overcome difficult circumstances to achieve their dreams. In addition to providing scholarships, Blessons also organises free mentorship programmes, therapy sessions and self-care workshops for women.

“Many of our members have endured hardships such as cancer, mental health conditions, physical and emotional abuse or are first-generation immigrants. We want these women to know that no matter what happens to them in life no one can take away their dignity,” says Blessons’ founder, who also, realised there was a need to teach women how to love themselves regardless of their background. “When you acknowledge your self-worth, no one can walk all over you again. Yet young girls and women are seldom taught to love themselves, which is why we focus on mental health in many of our women’s only support groups,” says Khitam, who’s taken part in more than 200 speaking engagements to increase awareness of her charity’s work, and is currently preparing for a TEDx Talk next summer.

Since 2016, she’s fundraised over \$100,000 through blessons.org, as well as taken part in the Bank of America Chicago Marathon. “I once ran six marathons in 12 months that took me to New York, Boston, London, Tokyo and Berlin,” says the cancer survivor, who continues to grow her charity. “My dream is to open a Blessons House that can serve as a safe space, where women can find encouragement and support to become their best.” ▶



Khitam wears a trapeze dress by Abigail Glaum-Lathbury



Blessons founder Khitam Masoud poses in a brocade jumpsuit by Chicago designer Abigail Glaum-Lathbury and wood cuff by Gillion Carrara



Vivian in a geometric A-line dress by Melissa Serpico Kamhout

VIVIAN KHALAF

Palestinian-American immigration lawyer and activist

where she attended a Quaker school established by American missionaries in 1889. “My parents wanted us to be closer to family and not loose touch with our heritage, so we either visited my dad in the UAE during holidays or he came to see us in Ramallah,” says the attorney, who has fond memories of attending an all-girls school run by the American Friends Service Committee. “I thrived in that environment because I had friends from different nationalities and joined the school’s theatre group,” adds Vivian, who took part in a number of plays including performing the role of Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*.

During her senior year of high school, Vivian’s family decided to move back to the United States, this time settling in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Preferring to complete her final year of school with her friends, she stayed behind in Ramallah with her grandparents before moving to Chicago to attend the University of Illinois. While there, she majored in political science with a minor in history, to better understand the colonial and geopolitical forces that shaped the map of the Middle East. Shortly before graduating in 1987, she landed a part-time job at an immigration law firm run by Irish-American attorney James Fennerty. “He became my mentor and was well known in Chicago’s Palestinian community for providing free legal services to those who couldn’t afford them,” says Vivian, who was encouraged to pursue a law degree in order to give back to her community as well.

While attending the Chicago-Kent College of Law at the Illinois Institute of Technology, she was one of only two Arab Muslim women studying there. By the time she graduated in 1991, she was already married and pregnant with her second child. “At the time I was working long hours at a law firm and went into labour at the photocopy machine. I knew then that I needed to take my career into my own hands,” says the attorney who went on to open her own firm in Chicago’s Middle Eastern community, specialising in immigration law for Arabic speakers. “At the time there wasn’t anyone providing those services at a rate people could afford. But I still had to prove myself early on, because a lot of people hadn’t seen a Muslim Arab female lawyer before,” recalls Vivian, whose practice quickly grew and eventually merged with a larger firm in downtown Chicago.

Since then, her firm Khalaf & Abuzir has opened offices in Ramallah and Beirut, where she frequently travels to meet clients in addition to other parts of the Middle East. A member of the Arab American Bar Association of Illinois, Vivian’s also actively involved in a number of organisations such as the Palestine Children’s Relief Fund. “It’s a charity that’s dear to my heart because they’ve saved thousands of children by providing them with urgent medical treatment either at hospitals in the region or by flying them to the United States,” says the attorney, who’s also on the advisory board of the American Middle East Voters Alliance. “Being involved in political organising and civic engagement is part of who I am, because if you don’t have a seat at the table then you’re most likely on the menu,” adds Vivian, noting that each vote can make an impact in Arab and Muslim American communities.

“We’ve always been led to believe that our vote wouldn’t make a difference, but with the election of the first generation of Muslim female representatives to Congress, we now feel empowered to speak up,” says the attorney, noting that Arab and Muslim Americans are no different than other communities, whether advocating for better schools or safer neighbourhoods. “I always say I’m going to die with my boots on. I’m passionate about my job and I’ll continue to advocate for fairer immigration laws, to ensure this country remains a welcoming and safe haven for future generations.” ■

In January 2017, some 20 Chicago lawyers converged on Terminal 5 at O’Hare International Airport. Each held up a sign offering free legal services to anyone needing assistance, following President Trump’s executive order suspending immigration from six predominantly Muslim countries. Together with Los Angeles, New York and Boston, Chicago’s mayor issued a statement that the city would fight to remain a welcoming sanctuary for those fleeing wars and oppression. Among the lawyers and activists who were there to oppose the ban was Vivian Khalaf. Since opening her practice in 1993, the immigration lawyer has spent the past 25 years assisting immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

“IF YOU DON’T HAVE A SEAT AT THE TABLE THEN YOU’RE MOST LIKELY ON THE MENU”

Vivian Khalaf

Born in Jerusalem, Vivian came with her parents to the United States as immigrants in 1967. Only six months old at the time, she settled with her family in Denver, Colorado. It was 49 miles away from the city of Greeley, which her father commuted to every day to pursue his doctoral degree at the University of Northern Colorado. With money from her maternal grandfather, her parents were able to purchase a small grocery store and they lived in the apartment above it. “I didn’t experience culture shock, but I always felt we were different because there wasn’t much of a Middle Eastern community in Denver, while growing up there in the ‘70s and ‘80s,” recalls Vivian, whose mother would open and run the grocery store throughout the day.

“When I came home from school she’d have me stand on a milk crate behind the register and ring up customers while she cooked dinner upstairs. I was only ten or eleven at the time and she installed a button I could push, that rang a bell if I needed her,” says the attorney, whose responsibilities grew with the birth of her two younger sisters and brother. “My family owes a lot to my mum because she carried the financial burden of running a household and raising children, so that my dad could complete his degree,” she says of her mother, who also helped Vivian raise her own children while she was a young attorney launching her career. “I realised early on that my mum was different from other Palestinian Muslim women of her generation. She managed to convince her family to allow her to leave her small village of Al-Bireh at 19 to study in Cairo in the 1950s,” says Vivian, whose mother pursued a degree in political science at the University of Cairo.

When Vivian was 12, her father got a job at Abu Dhabi’s National Oil Company and she moved with her mother and siblings to Ramallah,



Immigration attorney Vivian Khalaf wears a dress by Anke Loh and Bambi Breakstone neoprene coat, accessorised with brooches by Beata Kania

Prices approximate. Stylist: Melissa Serpico Kamhout. Location: SAIC Sullivan Galleries in Chicago