



Live Your Dream and Do the Impossible

The Inspiring Story behind Palestine's First-ever Bodybuilder Anoush Belian

By Hillary Kipnis



It is 6:30 a.m. and Anoush Belian has just woken up. She's having a protein shake, preparing meals for the day, and getting her gym gear ready. At around 8:00 a.m. she is at the Champions Gym in the Old City where she will spend the next few hours devoting time to lifting weights, resting, eating, and then ending her training session doing cardio under the watchful gaze and encouragement of her trainer, Basel Said.

Anoush Belian is no ordinary gym enthusiast; she is Palestine's first-ever female bodybuilder. As this article is being written, Anoush is two-weeks away from competing in the National Amateur Body-Builders' Association (NABBA) 2015 competition in Tel Aviv on August 22, 2015. If she wins, she will move forward to the world championships in Malta. Thus, I am happy to report that Palestinian history has forever changed. This time for good.

I would like to introduce you to Anoush Belian, and by sharing her inspirational story I expect that you will be surprised to learn many things about the sport of bodybuilding, about Palestine, and about the deep strength and courage of one Palestinian woman. For Anoush's story is something that everyone can draw inspiration from, especially those who dare to dream.

So how did this "normal" Palestinian woman become involved in a grueling sport that is still predominately dominated, in images and in practice, by men throughout the world? Some say that nothing happens by chance. One fateful day when Anoush, who originates from the Armenian Quarter in the Old City in Jerusalem, was on her way to buy *ka'ak*, she passed by the Champions Gym in the Christian



Bodybuilder Anoush Belian.

Quarter of the Old City and saw Basel Said standing outside. The two began to talk. Basel, a champion bodybuilder and seven-time champion Palestinian power lifter, remembers that in their initial conversation Anoush asked him if there were any girls who competed. He said yes, and unbeknown to them both at the time, the seeds of fate were planted.

This serendipitous encounter between Anoush and her trainer Basel occurred approximately one year ago, in September 2014. When you consider today how far she has come, it is hard to imagine that Anoush started

With only two other well-known competitive Arab women bodybuilders, Anoush Belian is extraordinary not only in Palestine but throughout the Arab world. While more Arab women are battling culture and stereotypes and achieving victories in many sports, women's bodybuilding remains largely underfunded and un-recognized in the Arab world. This is the story of a small but unique number of female bodybuilders.



from scratch. Like many women, Anoush had never lifted a dumbbell or used a weight machine in her life. She recalls how at first she could not hold the dumbbells properly and her arms flopped everywhere because she couldn't control them. Throughout her first month of training, she knew she wanted to get in shape but wasn't sure she wanted to become a bodybuilding competitor.

Everything was hard at the beginning. The workouts were grueling, filled with tears and pleas for mercy. But Basel saw in Anoush great potential and, as a good trainer, he demanded a lot during the training sessions to bring out the best in her. As her body began to take shape and Anoush began to see her muscles develop, her mind also changed. "I started wanting muscles. I didn't want to be fit and skinny....I wanted abs, shoulders, and muscles." Anoush strived to achieve more and make more of her success at the gym. Eventually, she made the decision that would change her life, and the history of Palestine: she decided to put all her effort into training with the goal of competing. This is was just the beginning.

To say that Anoush's journey became easier from the first month would be a lie. Bodybuilding is a tough sport. It demands superior discipline and control over mind and body. It requires sacrifices that few are willing or strong enough to make. These are individual challenges that all bodybuilders can relate to. But Anoush's bodybuilding journey is exceptional, considering the additional challenges she has had to contend with, such as daily battles with racism, living in Occupied East Jerusalem, and overcoming cultural norms and societal views on gender.

Thus, hidden behind her outward passion and addictive enthusiasm for the sport of bodybuilding, Anoush endures many hardships. Moreover, she lacks support for her dream outside Champions Gym and for this reason

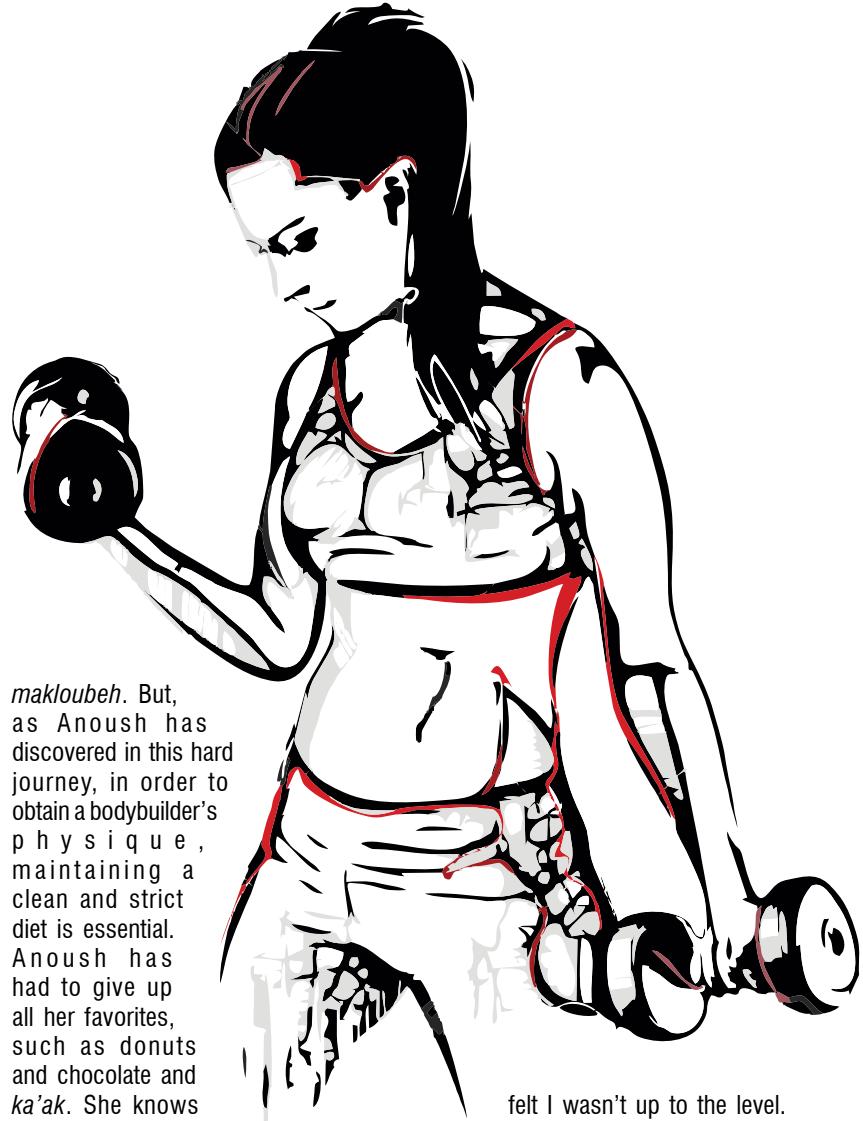
she feels like she is alone in this. She constantly has to deflect negative comments directed at her changing body, such as "you're not feminine like you used to be" or "don't exaggerate" or "that's enough." According to Anoush, most people believe that women should have curves, that they should not be skinny, and that most definitely they should not have muscle.

Let's be honest, you may find yourself slightly on the side of those who are against women building muscles and becoming bodybuilders. At 154 cm and weighing 48 kg, Anoush is both petite and beautiful. She therefore challenges the stereotypical image of female bodybuilders who are often disparaged for looking like hairless male gorillas. Indeed, it is physiologically impossible for women who lift weights or pursue the sport of bodybuilding in a natural way to bulk up like a man.

Anoush fully recognizes that she is going against all the weight of societal opinions. She also believes that views that spread through society and permeate the cultural lens prevent many women from participating in sports. And for these reasons her journey has been filled with many challenges and has been tough. But she knows that she is doing nothing wrong and wants to prove this to others.

As a Palestinian woman who has fought and who continues to fight against obstacles in her way in order to pursue something she loves, Anoush recognizes that her struggle is shared by many other Palestinian women who dream big but experience difficulties and challenges that force them to give up their dreams. Anoush hopes that she can show other Palestinian women that it is possible to overcome difficulties and hardships. The secret is to keep going forward.

Like most bodybuilders, Anoush has had to make a number of sacrifices. Imagine, for instance, a year without sugar, pizza, donuts, *kanafa* or



makloubeh. But, as Anoush has discovered in this hard journey, in order to obtain a bodybuilder's physique, maintaining a clean and strict diet is essential. Anoush has had to give up all her favorites, such as donuts and chocolate and *ka'ak*. She knows that to be a champion means "you have to be different from everyone."

As the following quote demonstrates, Anoush's difficult journey became harder six weeks before the August, 22, 2015 NABBA Competition when Anoush had to make her strict diet stricter in preparation for the competition:

"I wake up and I want to train. I have no energy. When I reach cardio, I am dead. I say to Basel, I cannot. I have no energy. It was frustrating for me when I started. I used to lift 20s (kg). It was easy. Then I started dieting and I fell to the ground. I felt frustrated. I

felt I wasn't up to the level. I was losing my mind. It's hard. This is where you make a difference. The people who want it will continue. Those who don't see it as a dream will give up."

Her strength, determination, vision, and dream get her past the negativity that she confronts, as does the support of her trainer, Basel. She understands that many people "don't get the idea that I will be the first women doing something like this here. There is war, conflict. It is not the US or the UK."

She has a message for women who may be considering doing sports or anything else in their lives: "You will

never get anywhere if you allow culture to squash your dream." She observes that "people get shocked when women do something," and "people talk, everybody talks here. I want to show women that they can do whatever they want to do. If this is your dream, then do it." She believes that those who are originally against your dream will eventually change their minds once they see your success and happiness.

Over all, Anoush believes that all her hard work is worth it.

"I never regret anything – the food, exercises, tears, sore muscles, sore body, time in the gym. I use to cry in the gym over my sore muscles. It's hard. I stayed motivated. Even if I don't see any girls at the gym doing what I do, Basel keeps me motivated.

By the time you read this, history will have been made. Win or lose on August 22, 2015, Anoush Belian will remain the first-ever Palestinian women to walk on stage in the bodybuilding, fitness category.

To all the women in Palestine, Anoush has a personal message for you:

"Have the hope and the courage to dare to dream even if you do not see anyone doing what you desire. Work hard and prove to yourself that you can achieve what you want because we Palestinians can! Dreams do come true even when we have so little. Have the strength to get up every morning and make a difference and work hard

each and every day and keep trying until you succeed."

Champions Gym in the Old City of Jerusalem has been dubbed "the cave" by Anoush for its small, cave-like structure. It has limited equipment and funds but it shows that with big dreams and determination nothing can stop Palestinians from succeeding. It is a gym where you will find opportunity and new dreams being hatched for Palestine, for women, for children, and for everyone. Basel and Anoush are excited to get their story out as they dream big and hope that other like-minded aspiring individuals come to join their team. In addition to Anoush, Basel has trained one other competitor for this year's NABBA competition: Mousa Qaq, Jr.

Hillary Kipnis is a US attorney with a background in law, conflict, and security and international law, and she is currently pursuing a PhD at the University of Brighton. She is here in Palestine to meet with women and research the role of sports and physical activity in the lives of Palestinian women. Hillary wants to use her research to make a positive difference for all of Palestine, part of which will be to break down the negative "terrorist" stereotyping that Palestinians endure, and showcase a side of Palestine that many don't see or focus on – strong and intelligent women. If you have any personal stories to share, please get in touch! h.kipnis@brighton.ac.uk

Our Readers Say ...

I ran the "Right to Movement" marathon this year. Well, I tried to run it. It made me realize that I need to work out more. I'll try again next year.

Ramah Nassar, Bethlehem