

# Beirut: The Strong Lady Lives

by Neil Leadbeater

**The Beirut Call: Harnessing Creativity for Change.** Edited by Pamela Chrabieh and Roula Salibi. Redlands, Calif.: Elyssar Press, 2021. 236 pp. \$49.99.

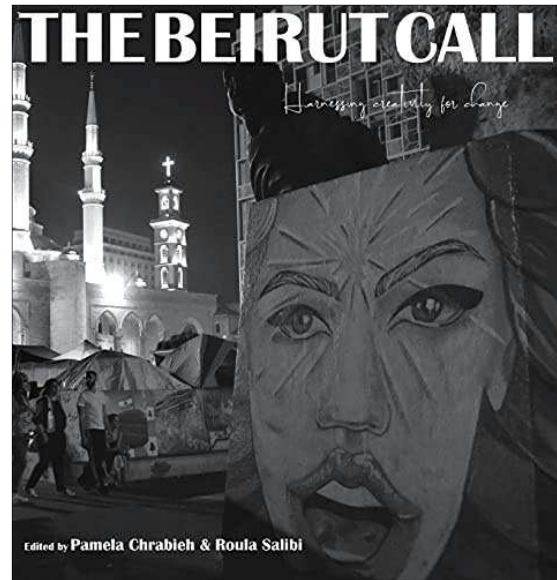
The explosion of a stockpile of 2,750 tons of highly volatile ammonium nitrate off-loaded into a warehouse in the port of Beirut on August 4, 2020, provided the catalyst for *The Beirut Call*, born from unimaginable tragedy. The explosion, perhaps the most powerful non-nuclear blast in history, ripped apart a city: It killed more than 200 people, injured more than 7,000, and displaced almost 300,000.

*The Beirut Call* represents a cooperative effort by publishers, journalists, translators, poets, musicians, choreographers, photographers, singer-songwriters, activists, and visual artists, all of whom share a love for Beirut and a belief that art can bring about change, agreeing with Mitri Raheb that

art is one of the most important  
elements for people's survival ...  
art allows the soul not only to  
survive but to thrive.

This may sound grandiose, but art can draw together people of divergent views to process collective grief as artists raise awareness about socioeconomic, political, and environmental concerns and develop a vision for the future.

Black and white illustrations and photographs showing scenes from the revolution of October 17, 2019, and the



devastation caused by the explosion on August 4, together with sketches on paper and digital art, accompany the text. Footnotes provide references and web links to more detailed information.

In her introduction, Chrabieh writes about the Nabad program (*heartbeat* in Arabic), established by Bethlehem's Dar al-Kalima University College of Arts and Culture, largely as a response to the port blasts. The program empowers artists, art organizations, and creative enterprises in the Middle East to implement their artistic ideas and market their artworks.

Rabih Rached informatively and accessibly charts the history of culture in Beirut from Roman times up to the twentieth century. Nada Raphael gives us a further glimpse of Beirut as

it was before the tragedy struck. She describes it as a

Capital with a capital C—the place where every-one meets, be-friends and un-friends, falls in love or breaks up ... a melting pot of cultures, colors, and religions ... an inspiration for filmmakers, artists, street artists, and painters ... a picture, or rather an album, where colors meet black and white; where 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century palaces meet modern buildings; where paved streets lead you to the sea; where fishermen and businesswomen walk on the same path; where street vendors meet designer and high-end boutiques, and where the old Beetle races with the new Mercedes.

Katia Aoun Hage’s poem “Beyond the screen in my palm” describes the anxiety experienced by so many who heard about the port explosion on hand-held devices:

the screen lists numbers  
of family and friends  
names sift through my fingers  
my memory of where they live  
places of their work  
011 – 961 –  
aloo Beirut?  
011 – 961 –  
my heart skips a beat  
before hearing the familiar voice ...

The camera zooms in on what actually happened in Linda Tamin’s eyewitness account. Loulou Malaeb reflects upon the random nature of death. Faten Yaacob’s poem “Bayrut” recalls that this Arabic name derived in turn from the

**The positive messages in the book show it to be about a people looking to the future.**

Phoenician word *be’rut* meaning “wells”:

Wells of weeping,  
That’s what evil times  
Have turned you into.  
You used to quench  
Our thirst for beauty,  
Our love for life.

*The Beirut Call* features Maha Nasrallah’s detailed watercolor sketches of abandoned houses in Beirut, mapping their locations, many of them almost completely destroyed, in the hope that preserving their memory will help with their eventual restoration. Art therapy workshops for nurses at Saint George’s Hospital University Medical Center have been specifically designed to help those heavily traumatized by the port blasts.

The positive messages in the book show it to be not about a people who feel defeated but one already looking to the future, who understand that “suffering creates creativity” and that “any destruction on the ground coincides with the construction of art.” In Nadia Wardeh’s words,

We need the power and the determination of inimitable Beirut, the strong lady who, despite all catastrophes in the past, and the current suffering, remains committed to produce Goodness, Beauty and Truth.

**Neil Leadbeater** is an author, essayist, poet, and critic living in Edinburgh. *Reading Between The Lines* (Littoral Press, 2020) is his most recent book.

