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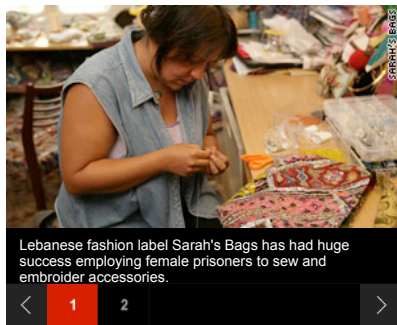
**Inside the Middle East**



# Beirut designer brings prisoners' handbags to Paris catwalks

By **Olivia Sterns** for CNN  
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Lebanese fashion label Sarah's Bags has had huge success employing female prisoners to sew and embroider accessories.

**London, England (CNN)** -- In the prisons of Lebanon, women are turning their attention to fashion and stitching their way to a brighter future.

They're part of a program run by Sarah's Bags, a Beirut-based label that employs convicts and the recently-released to sew and embroider handbags by hand.

For the past ten years, the program has steadily grown, after catching the eye of the Lebanese elite early on, including the wife of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri -- still one of their best customers -- and Queen Rania of Jordan.

### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Former prisoners stitch their way to a brighter future in Lebanon
- Sarah's Bags gives inmates income and a second chance
- Sarah Beydoun is building her brand abroad, branching out in European markets

Today Sarah Beydoun, the company's founder, has plans to expand and has set her sights on European markets.

"We're starting to exhibit in Paris. It's part of becoming more international. We want to sell to more stores beyond the Middle East and the Gulf," she told CNN.

Having already had a successful sales trip to Paris in 2009, Beydoun is planning to return in February, hoping to attract new stores. But unlike her clients at home, she says the European buyers don't blink when they hear her bags were built behind bars.

"You feel that the fashion world doesn't care where it comes from," said Beydoun. "They just care about the end product ... at least the buyers for the department stores."

## Learning to sew stopped me obsessing about my crime

--Sarah's Bags employee, convicted of murder

Beydoun said she won't emphasize that fact at the upcoming Paris shows, but that her strategy remains "to target stores that can carry our story and not just our collection."

And what a story it is.

Beydoun devised her business plan while working on a university thesis about women in prison.

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Then with the help of House of Hope ("Dar al Amal"), a non-governmental organization that supports vocational training in Lebanon's jails, Beydoun began sub-contracting handiwork to female inmates.

The women who work for Sarah's Bags have been convicted for a range of crimes, from prostitution to drug dealing, even violent crime. Whatever the charge though, the opportunity to learn a skill and



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make some money has helped hundreds find hope of a fresh start.

"One of Beydoun's proteges, who was convicted of murder -- a crime of passion, told CNN that "learning to sew stopped me obsessing about my crime, it helped my situation." She asked to remain anonymous as she does not wanted to be stigmatized for her crime.

Not all the women employed by Sarah's Bags have worked out, however.

"There were those who didn't meet deadlines, or would lie about when they finished their work, but we keep on those that are serious and those we can trust," said Beydoun.

Several women have even become real partners, building their own teams.

"Slowly the girls started to come out of prison and they would come to my shop. I would offer them to work with me. Each girl would take her designs and go to her village and do her handiwork and teach a small group of women around her how to work," said Beydoun.

Beydoun is now relying on these out-sourcing teams to help her ramp up production as Sarah's Bags enters the Western market.

To make the leap, she's tweaking her designs to make them more universal, which means less Arabic calligraphy and more conventional shapes.

However her wares fare abroad though, it looks like Sarah's Bags will always have a devoted following of customers, and staff, back home.

Brent Sadler contributed to this report.



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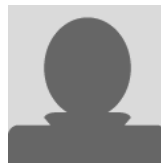
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