

The Hum Podcast

Episode 36: "You Get Used To The Shootings"

[Theme music fades in]

Mohamad: Now you can't just hear the shots and just stay at your home, at the end you kind of just get used to it. We kind of get used to where the shooting is coming from. Not go there, don't walk close to the sidewalk or close to the buildings. Getting as far as you can from the incident. It felt usual because you have to do your everyday things, you can't stop life. I had to go to school, I was grade seven, I had to go to school with the war. And I remember my school got bombed that one day, but lucky for me I wasn't there.

[Music increases in volume]

Gilad: You're listening to The Hum.

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Simona: We are incredibly excited to have Mohamad Lazakani with us today. Mohamad is a 20 year old Syrian who arrived in Toronto as a refugee in January 2016. He came here with both parents and three siblings. Mohamad is wrapping up his final year in high school with the dreams of one day becoming a doctor. He's also an incredibly talented photographer and one of the first people that Gilad and I actually interviewed for The Hum Podcast when I joined as co-host.

Gilad: Mo, so happy that you can join us. How are you?

Mohamad: Good man. Thank you for having me.

Gilad: It's an honor. Listen, I want to jump right into things. So you've been living in Toronto now for quite a while. How do you like Toronto and what would you say, for you, what was the biggest adjustment to life here in Toronto when you first arrived?

Mohamad: Toronto is a pretty cool city man. I love it very much. What mostly I like about is people, they're really open-minded, have different perspectives. They see the world from so many angles. So when I came here I did not think I would have to adapt, or find hard time adapting. First when I came I immediately felt at home and I got really welcomed a lot. So that's perhaps where the diversity. The adjustment I would say maybe I found really hard to get is maybe just getting used to the Canadian culture, understanding all the differences and stuff.

Gilad: Why do people say sorry every five minutes?

Mohamad: Yeah, this one too. Like being so nice.

Gilad: Actually take us back. Take us back to Syria. Can you tell us a little bit more about the neighborhood or the city or the town you grew up in and really like what was your first memory, if you can even go that far back, what was your first memory in that community?

Mohamad: Yeah, so I grew up in Idlib, which is in the North, Northwest of Syria. And it's a pretty, it's known to be the most calm city in Syria because it's mostly farms and known for olives actually. And that's why actually when they protested and stuff, they would put out the olives, so like a sign of peace. But my early memories in Syria and Idlib basically just where like school friends, your early friends that you grew up with in kindergarten, grade one, two, three. And just going to their houses, visiting me, playing, basically that's it.

Simona: So I really want to kind of give more of a background around what's going on in Syria, because I think a lot of our listeners hear it all the time. So in 2016 from an estimated pre-war population of 22 million people, the United Nations estimated and identified that about 13.5 million people were requiring humanitarian assistance, for which about 6 million are internally displaced within Syria and around 5 million are refugees outside of Syria. So what's really interesting, as of 2017 over 62,000 Syrians made refugee claims in Canada with about 43,000 applicants getting approval. So we are one of the countries that actually took in a lot of Syrian refugees and it was I think I would love to know what were some of your earliest memories with the war starting and then that kind of journey to come to Canada?

Mohamad: Yeah well, when war started I was 12 years old and I remember not understanding, why we are people protest and stuff? And it was exciting for me.

And I actually, sometimes I would join them, yeah, like people are crowded and is cheering for stuff. So I would join. I did not understand why would they ask for freedom? I did not understand social justice problems and stuff. And when this happened I started asking more questions to my parents, to people around me, "Why is this happening? Who's causing it?"

Mohamad: But it did not last for long because as soon as it started, weapons were being brought out and people being shot, bombs. I remember one time I was at my grandparents house and they bombed the car and thank God there was no physical loss, but there were damages to the houses and stuff. So that was maybe one of the biggest scenes I had, that scene.

Gilad: Was there a time when war started to feel normal for you? Like you're still at this point 12, 13 years old, you're still living there as a child. There's still things to do, like go to school and hang out with your friends and all that stuff. Did war ever feel normal? Like as all of this is happening in the background?

Mohamad: Well yeah, because I stayed in the war for one year before we left Syria. So full one year you can't just hear the shots and just stay at your home for a full year. So at the end we kind of just got used to it, we kind of get used to where the shooting's coming from. Not go there. Don't walk close to the sidewalk or close to the buildings. Basically this type of things, like getting as far as you can from the incident. It felt usual because you have to do your everyday things, you can't stop life. I had to go to school, like grade seven. I had to go to school with the war. And I remember my school got bombed that one day, but lucky for me I wasn't there.

Simona: You were in Syria for a full year before your family decided to leave. What was the breaking point? What was the day the decision that had to be made? What was like the catalyst for it?

Mohamad: Yeah, actually my little sister Islam, which was four years younger than me, which at that age she probably was eight. She kept crying every day. When she hears the shots and the bombs she kept crying to my parents and like, "Please, let's leave, let's not stay here. I don't like it. I'm scared." So, and my parents they will feel but their, it's like a big decision for them to leave everything behind and go start a totally new life.

Mohamad: So it kind of took them a while. They would keep hearing my sister crying every day until then, until my dad decided to sell. He was a pharmacist, so until he decided to sell all his medicines and stuff. We sold our car too, so it was like we have the little money, because we can't like ... And actually when we left, we did not take anything with us. Because we're six, we barely took just the most important.

Simona: What did you take with you, I'd have to ask?

Mohamad: What I took with me? I mean for sure we took some memories. We took photos. I actually had albums and stuff. I remember I took a doll. It was a leopard actually that I had when I was a kid. I still have it actually.

Gilad: And Idlib where you were from, as I understand it, is not too far away from Turkey. It's also been the site of tons of suicide bombings and anyone who's following the news on Idlib would have known that there was a chemical attack there that killed over a hundred people and injured over five hundred. So, Turkey being very close by, I'm actually curious to know what was your journey to Toronto? Because I don't imagine it's like, "Okay, well let's get the fuck out of here and now we're in Toronto the next day." I imagine that that process was not that easy. Can you guide us a little bit through what it took to get to where you are today?

Mohamad: Yes, you're right. Indeed Turkey is so close that we actually decided that it should be our first destination and it actually so close that we walked to it. We drove a little bit to a close village and then walked from there because you couldn't use any car or anything because the Turkish army would think you're an enemy or something and shoot you. But they accepted refugees if they're walking. So we had to walk to there. And the bad thing is we didn't speak Turkish language. So we stayed only there for six months. And then we had to search for a new destination, new life. And the destination was Jordan, because my uncle lives there and he's married to a Jordanian woman.

Mohamad: So when we thought about traveling there he convinced us and stuff, but they did not accept Syrians. So we had to change again. We were stuck in Lebanon in the airport and they did not tell us from Turkey that they don't accept refugees. They told us in Lebanon. So we had to make a new decision in the airport in Lebanon. We didn't have sleep, much sleep. We did not have rest, nothing. So we chose to go to Egypt. So we went to Egypt, first day, shittiest day of my life. People there treat refugees like shit. They go to you and be like, "Here's \$5, give me your daughter." That's how bad. And most of them were on drugs and stuff because their situation too with their countries.

Gilad: And politically things were falling apart?

Mohamad: Yeah, for sure, yeah. And people don't get paid enough. People barely live. People just be happy to survive. So, when we found that we also had to make a new decision to leave this life and to go a new life. And we only stayed two days in Egypt. So my uncle comes again, and says, "If you come by the sea, by a ship to Jordan, you will get accepted this time." So like, "Okay, let's go."

Gilad: At this point you've got nothing to lose.

Mohamad: Yeah, nothing to lose. So we're like, "Okay, we'll try that out." We go to the ship, two days we go to Jordan, we arrived there. Sorry, you're not accepted, you're Syrian. We go there, but this time is even more fucked up because this time they going to get us back to the land. We're not anymore in an airport. So this time they took us and put between the borders of the Syrian and Jordanian borders. And we can't get to Jordan. We could only get to Syria. But our life is on the road because we went to Turkey and we went illegally.

Mohamad: So the government of Syria consider us as terrorist, but we stayed full night and it was winter. It was so cold. If you know the desert, desert could get really cold in winter. And it was night. And my dad is a diabetic, so he got so bad at night. So they took him in the Jordanian border, healed him up, put him back between the borders and basically just me at that time seeing all this happen, that when it became normal. That when I started just got the numb feeling, like I don't care anymore what happen. So I just go in a cold hearted way, tell my dad, "Let's go to Syria. Fuck it, let's die."

Gilad: Such a brave and also scary thing for a 12 or 13 year old.

Simona: Yeah, you're still-

Gilad: Child to say.

Simona: You're still a teenager.

Mohamad: Yeah. But exactly like-

Gilad: Barely.

Simona: Yeah, like-

Mohamad: Yeah. That's what I love and hate at the same time. Because I love being brave and stuff, but I hate being numb and not care. But I had to do it at that time, like seeing all of that. I just wanted to ... I just wanted peace, I just wanted to rest. We stayed and just keep traveling from one place to another. So I'm like, "Wherever, if we want to die, let's die in our country."

Simona: So when did Canada become an option? When did you start, or your family start thinking that this was an opportunity?

Mohamad: Yeah, so this became like an option after actually, after another three years after we were between the borders. So we decided to go to Syria, stayed there for

one month and then you can't say in Syria anyways because it's war. We were very lucky to survive going through the border. And they actually took our passports when we went through the border because and they're like go to the police station and review the police. And if you're Syrian you know that if you go there that's it. You go to jail and you basically got tortured. So then we traveled, thank God you could travel to Lebanon with using ID, no passport. So we traveled there, that was our last destination. We can't do anything more than that.

Mohamad: And we struggled a lot there too, because they do accept you but they don't accept ... They don't let you in to work, they don't let you go to schools. I had to go to school like illegally, not proving any work and not getting any marks. But my dad talked to the manager, to the principal and he was like, "Just accept him, whatever. I don't want his report card." So three years staying in there. We actually registered for the UN program for like immigration program. And that's actually how ... We did not choose Canada. They just told us what was the country you would like to choose. And my dad was like, "A country that accept us the way we are." And I guess Canada's one of those countries.

Gilad: You talked a little bit about what it was like for you to be in Egypt and you said that it was one of the worst days of your life. I'm curious to know what was it like to be a displaced person, a person seeking refugee status in Lebanon, because you were there for three years. Did you face any sort of racism or discrimination? What was it like day to day for you there?

Mohamad: Yeah, actually, life was pretty tough. I remember getting beat up in schools twice because I'm Syrian. And this wasn't nothing, this was normal, because I seen other people getting their cars destroyed and burned down, because they're Syrian. I remember seeing signs in the road. Like if you're a Syrian, you can't be walking down the streets after 6 PM or 8 PM, and questioning everything. Like why these people act like this? What did we do to them? And when I find out that they have such hatred because of goddamn 20 years or 30 years of Syrian army going in their countries and they still keep the hatred. But I also thought it was stupid because we, my family and many Syrians were running from the same enemy. So they were treating us bad because of their enemy, but we were running from the same enemy.

Simona: You've been in Toronto now for three years. It seems like a lot has changed in the last three years since you've arrived, I'm sure. Do you ever feel that that stuff could come here in Toronto? Have you ever experienced that stuff in Toronto and ...?

Mohamad: Yeah, sure. I have experienced, but I was talking with Gilad earlier and we were talking about how there's more nice people than bad people, but how it is at the

same time it's like I was telling him it's like a plane crash. It doesn't happen frequently, but when it happens it leaves a big destruction. But at the same time, sometimes I kind of hate to name it "Islamophobia," because it's not being done out of fear. Sometimes it's being done, most of the time it's actually being done out of hate. It's like how when you call, it should be anti, like antisemitism or something. It's not phobia, you know? It's people just being grown up with hate and just doing actions out of hate.

Gilad: Do you worry though here in Toronto ever? Do you experience, because I mean a lot of what we see in the news is that overall, the Syrian refugee thing was a happy story. It was a happy story. Justin Trudeau when he got elected, part of his campaign was to resettle 25,000 refugees. So we get to hear a lot of the happy stuff. But I'm curious, when it comes to the actual day-to-day experiences, and I'm asking about your experience but also on behalf of other Syrians that you know, generally what is it like here in Canada for a Syrian refugee? And this could be like anti-Muslim or anti-Islam hate. It could be just day-to-day life, but I'm curious to know what is really going on?

Mohamad: Yeah, I'm glad you asked that because actually I know for me personally, I don't really worry, I like a kid who say to his parents, "Let's go die in our country." Wouldn't worry as much. But I feel bad. It mostly happens to hijabi girls. I heard a lot from my hijabi girlfriends and stuff. They come to me and be like, "Today this happened to me because I'm wearing hijab." Some woman shouted, "Go back to your country or something." And I feel bad because people wouldn't say to me because of the way ... Because I don't have something to say who I am. But they say two women who have hijabs because they're declaring who they are.

Gilad: Like physically they can tell.

Mohamad: Yeah, exactly. They look at them, they're like, "Oh." Even though some hijabi girls are actually born here and raised here and they consider themselves 100% Canadian, it still happened to them. So it's pretty tough. But I know a lot of people who also progress, people who were almost finished high school and want to go to policing. People who are like ... Actually hijabi girl who had racism actually go against her and she still want to be a social worker, fight for rights and stuff.

Gilad: That's awesome. I don't know if you've noticed Sim, or you Mohamad, but I've been noticing especially in downtown Toronto a lot more women wearing hijabs on the streets asking for money. And I mean, this could just be like happenstance or it could just be ironic or it could also be the fact that there are refugees here who aren't doing well. Like Sim, have you noticed?

Simona: Yeah, my parents live in Markham, so there at grocery stores they have a sign usually that says, "I'm a refugee." But you are seeing a lot more of that because it's not, I don't think, there's not ... For every successful refugee story, there are usually 10 or 20 that we hear of people really struggling to find housing, to find jobs, not to assimilate but to kind of engage with the culture. So do you, I think it's great that you are finishing high school and you want to be a doctor-

Mohamad: Thank you.

Simona: ... but do you hear other stories from the community of some of the challenges?

Mohamad: Yes I actually, I haven't heard a lot of stories, but I heard few and I could approve to that because especially for women. Because usually in my country women get forced to marry. They don't get to choose or even if they chose, they don't get to let's say divorce. Divorcing is considered a bad thing. And I guess when they come here, they feel the freedom, feel like, "Okay, I have the choice here. Nobody can force me to do what I don't want to do." And I guess that's when they take the choice. But then face really hard time maybe working and finding a job and surviving, so they probably go on the streets.

Mohamad: I heard of my mother's friend who came here alone, she was already divorced when she came here. And she had three boys and two of them actually left the house. They left their mothers completely because they also did not have choice back in my country and they were forced to follow a certain pattern, certain religion. They were forced to not drink, not go out with girls or something. So when they came here they had to completely separate from that and they left their mother. So I wouldn't be surprising their mother like on the streets.

Gilad: And I'm asking this from my own personal experience. My parents grew up in a very different country than this one and they came here and sort of expected that I would follow in the same way that they did. But there's cultural differences now between my mom and myself, or myself and my family. One thing would be for example, I don't follow the holidays anymore. Just because I'm living in a country now where not everyone is celebrating all the holidays. Different customs. Like I have tattoos on my body, which for my mom was a no, super taboo. I'm wondering, because you've been here now for only three years, are you finding that you're starting to develop Canadianisms that are kind of rubbing up against your parents in a weird way or in a different way? Is there a resistance?

Mohamad: Yeah, actually it happens on the daily, even just with arguing with my parents. Like having a conversation my mom tells me like, "Oh I never, you never used to talk like that or something." Actually happens everyday. It's pretty, I would say it's pretty good and pretty like more options for me. Because I don't want to

grow up in a country that has only one way. I want to grow up in a place where there is more options, you can choose. Not like, "Oh you have to go because there's the only way." So yeah, it happens every day my mom always notice it and stuff. And my dad also sometimes say to me like, "You never used to be like that and stuff." But they accept it, they know it's how it's going to be.

Simona: But could some of that be chalked up to be like you're a teenager, you're growing up to be a young man so there is going to be some conflict, or is that kind of not how things are done in Syria when you were growing up?

Mohamad: Yeah, for sure. Sometimes it causes conflict. I would say it's pretty different from Syria. Even sometimes me posting let's say my hairstyle, like my wearings and stuff. Sometimes I post a picture and my uncle, he's like, "Woah, what is this? You became a Canadian, you know?" And I'm like, "What is a Canadian? Why is a Syrian different? What does a hairstyle makes different from Syrian to Canadian?"

Gilad: I want to ask, do you still have family back in Syria? You mentioned being from Idlib. Are there still family, uncles, aunts, cousins in Syria? Are you able to communicate with them? Do you know how they're doing?

Mohamad: Yes, actually all of my aunts and uncles, except for one uncle from my mother's side are in Syria still. And we still communicate with them. Not frequently, because they either don't have internet, they either don't have electricity, you know? So we have to find the perfect ... Like time differences too between Canada and Syria. So we have to find the perfect time.

Gilad: Is life there getting better? Are you hearing stories where people are actually able to live their lives in a semi, and I mean I use the word normal very loosely, like in a semi-normal way. Are things changing for the better? Are they getting back to the way they used to be?

Mohamad: No, not really actually. Because what I want to say is that the problem wasn't ISIS when the protesting started, it was the president. And just him insisting on staying in power. And he's still in power, you know? And that's, people don't get paid well right now in Syria.

Mohamad: Like if you want to eat even potatoes, you have to be getting twice as much as you're getting paid right now in Syria. Life is pretty hard when we're here and stuff. And we actually sometimes send money to our people. Like my parents, they send money because they survive one month, the next month prices go skyrocketing. They can't survive anymore.

Simona: Is there ever a time, do your parents ever think about, "We would only go back to Syria if it was safe and we could rebuild," or is that kind of chapter closed?

Mohamad: O wouldn't say they think about it. I would say they dream about it because they know it wouldn't happen. They know like, we saw Iraq happened before Syria. We saw all Egypt started before us and look at it. It's still a really bad situation. So I would say, they dream about the life we had, like having your own home, having your car, having your people. Being like everyday living, not worrying about what if this happens, what I'm going to do, like having to take the 10 second decision. So they only dream.

Gilad: Is there anything you do miss about Syria? Because you did mention Canada being home. Does Syria ever still feel like home? Is there anything you miss about Syria?

Mohamad: No, I actually, the only thing I would miss is just like I said, the feeling of peace, the feeling of not worrying about the future. Like now, even though I feel like Toronto is home, Canada is home. I can't be as settled as I was. I can't feel like this feeling of not worrying. I have to keep worrying about paying rent, doing this, doing that. Going to school, surviving, worrying about my future. I never had to worry about my future back in Syria. That's what I miss basically.

[Theme music fades in]

Gilad: Thank you so much Mohamad for joining us.

Simona: For sure.

Gilad: Thank you Mohamad.

Simona: Thanks.

Gilad: My name's Gilad Cohen.

Simona: And I'm Simona Ramkisson.

Gilad: This podcast is edited and produced by Brandon Fragomeni and Alex Castellani. Our associate producer is Ron Ma.

Simona: This is an initiative of JAYU, a charity that shares human rights stories through the arts.

[Music fades out]

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