State of Mind
Episode #02: A Liferaft to Safety
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LOBNA MONIEB FILM ARCHIVE OMAR SAMRA OMAR NOUR
BENEDICTE DUCHESNE AHMED ASHOUR (Both NARR and INT)

[SFX - Ship Fog Signal]

Today's episode starts at... the Kefalonia. A ship in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

[SFX - Water]

LOBNA MONIEB: It's going up against some strong winds — we're talking 80 kilometers an hour here. And some even stronger waves.

[SFX - Wind and Strong Waves]

LOBNA MONIEB: The Kefalonia is trying to do something... incredibly dangerous.

From the documentary *Beyond the Raging Sea*, here's Fahad Talkan, the Kefalonia's captain.

FAHAD TALKAN: We received a telephone call from MRC Las Palmas. They say, "There is [a] ship, she needs assistance." And I ask him what kind of assistance? They told me, "We don't know. Can you go [to] this position?" I checked the position, it was 50 miles...

LOBNA MONIEB: So the ship goes to this position and finds a half-inflated life-raft on which Omar and Omar - Team O2 - had been floating for hours. They had embarked on a journey to become the first Egyptians to cross the Atlantic Ocean, but had capsized about 8 days in.

[MUSIC]

FAHAD TALKAN: And when we are ready, I stop the engine and they are already very close to us - about five meters. I send the rope.

[SFX - Slow it dowwwwwn. Slow Mo, almost]

LOBNA MONIEB: The rope was to bring the liferaft closer to the Kefalonia. The Omars would then have to jump onto a fixed rope ladder that only goes about halfway down the side of the ship. So far away from where they were on the raft.

[BEAT]

Now what happens next is pretty scary, actually. Omar Samra makes a jump for the ladder and grabs the second-to-last rung.

OMAR SAMRA: I'm getting very, very desperate. I can tell that I'm not going to be able to hold on for much longer. I start shouting and screaming at the guys, “I can't hold on much longer. I'm slipping.”

OMAR NOUR: And the last thing that I saw as I was getting sucked to the back of the boat is Omar with the one arm yelling, “I'm going to let go. I'm going to let go.”

OMAR SAMRA: But then I remembered my daughter Teela... It was very clear to me at that point that I made a conscious choice to live, to keep going, and that it wasn't going to end in that way.

LOBNA MONIEB: And it didn’t end in that way. Omar kept going despite the odds, got a hold on the ladder, and was able to make it onto the ship. Omar Nour was saved shortly after.

[TRANSITION - transitioning out of this describing this part of the film]

“Desperate times call for desperate measures.” It’s something I read and hear all the time and, in theory, I can make sense of it. This idea that if someone is going through something so hopeless, so difficult... they will do whatever it takes to get out of that situation.

But what does that look like in practice? Today on *State of Mind*, we explore desperation: from the way we assess risky situations, to how we nurture the resilience needed to continue. We’ll also explore how the Omars are using their experience to raise awareness about one of today’s most pressing global issues: the refugee crisis.

I’m Lobna Monieb, and you’re listening to *State of Mind*, a deeper dive into the chilling true story of survival documented in the film, *Beyond the Raging Sea*.

State of Mind is produced by Kerning Cultures Network. Episode two is supported by UNHCR.

[STING]

LOBNA MONIEB: Episode 2: A Liferaft to Safety

[TRANSITION]

AHMED ASHOUR (INT): And we're recording?

OMAR SAMRA: Yeah, we are.

AHMED ASHOUR (INT): Amazing. Ah-may-zing…

LOBNA MONIEB: Producer Ahmed Ashour takes it from here.

AHMED ASHOUR (NARR): When I sat down with the Omars recently, nearly five years after that moment you heard at the top of the episode — five years after they capsized in the Atlantic — they knew I was going to ask them about their most desperate moments on the journey, but somehow they weren't… phased by it.

OMAR SAMRA: Have you read this book called *The War of Art*?

AHMED ASHOUR (INT): *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu?

OMAR SAMRA: No, *The War of Art*.

AHMED ASHOUR (INT): No, I've not…

AHMED ASHOUR (NARR): That's Omar Samra. He's reading *The War of Art* to help him get over writer's block while writing his memoir. We got to talking some more about his many adventures, and ended up on this experience with the Kefalonia…

AHMED ASHOUR (INT): How would you say Omar Samra before this incident defined despair and desperation versus, you know, that moment, that pivotal moment… How do you look back and understand desperation and despair in a new way, almost?

OMAR SAMRA: From an adventure perspective, physical kind of realm… the most desperate I would've been was, you know, somewhere cold up on a mountain or near the polar regions.

[MUSIC]

When I felt that I would get frostbitten, or maybe I was in some sort of objective danger that I had to navigate. But I think the deepest sense of desperation that I felt up until that moment was when I lost my wife. And I think that's probably the definition of desperation in the dictionary, which is, you know, loss of all hope.

[MUSIC continues]

OMAR SAMRA: That point on the ladder, the moment that you asked me about, that I just described... I had lost all hope. I reached the absolute point of saying, "Just let go."

OMAR NOUR: When you look at a situation where it's so big, so big that you do not see a solution — there is no solution in sight. This is when you start to feel this despair. This is when you start to be like, "I don't know what to do."

[BEAT]

AHMED ASHOUR (NARR): It's a very real feeling, despair, this "loss of all hope" and "not knowing what to do." But not all desperate people give up. The Omars certainly didn't. I asked Omar Nour why they think that is.

OMAR NOUR: Human beings are extremely adaptable. It is something that makes us survive. Our brains erase very painful memories, right? Which can be good, because this is how you can, like, move on and live from trauma, from experiences like the ones we experienced. Or else, you'll always be stuck in them, right?

But the negative side of that is when you have news of bodies washing ashore — of refugees — bodies washing ashore over and over and over again, the traumatic experiences — you get desensitized from that. You stop relating. You shut it off. Your brain switches it off.

AHMED ASHOUR (NARR): It's that sense of being desensitized to someone else's traumatic experience that made the Omars want to use their journey to talk about something much bigger than just the two of them: the refugee crisis.

[ARCHIVE]

OMAR NOUR: The longer a problem lasts, the worse it actually is getting. However, the less patience we have for it, the less attention span we have for it. So for us, we said, "Listen,

this is a unique opportunity to be able to shed light in a different way."

[BEAT]

AHMED ASHOUR (NARR): From *Beyond the Raging Sea*, here are Louay AlZouki and Mohammed AlHassan, two refugees who crossed dangerous bodies of water in search of a better life.

LOUAY ALZOUKI: How did I take a decision to put myself in such a situation, me and my wife and my kid? I kept blaming myself, all the way. From the point I got on the bus with the smugglers, I started to blame myself: what I did, what I have done.

MOHAMMED ALHASSAN: Some of us didn't have a choice to make. Some of us just had to put, like, myself — I didn't even know where I was crossing over, which country I was going, how safe I was going to be and everything. Because I was trying to move away from danger.

[CHAPTER TRANSITION]

AHMED ASHOUR (NARR): I came into this episode thinking that I'd be able to draw some universal connection between the Omars' experience and the refugee crisis, that somehow these two experiences can meet eye to eye. My conclusion? The experience of the Omars is nothing like the experience of refugees. And the Omars know that. They always knew that.

But how can one experience help us understand the other even if a little bit better?

To answer that question, I spoke to Benedicte Duchesne, Senior Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Officer at the UNHCR's Amman office. For context, the UNHCR is the UN agency dedicated to protecting refugees and displaced populations.

BENEDICTE DUCHESNE: Refugees have no choice. Very often, refugees are carrying invisible wounds, are carrying histories of complex trauma: prosecution, gender-based violence, survivors of torture.

[PAUSE]

So before they embark to this very dangerous journey, they've been exposed to a tremendous level of violence.

AHMED ASHOUR (INT): I'm curious to hear from you, you know, that sense of desperation, that sense of, "I need to leave because I have no other option." What's happening in the brain in that moment?

BENEDICTE DUCHESNE: What happens in the brain is basically driven by the survival mode mechanism, where instead of having an elaborated and sophisticated analysis of the situation, in a situation of danger, life-threatening conditions, the brain will shift to a survival mode. Basically, a specific part of our nervous system will be activated that will release specific hormones.

AHMED ASHOUR (NARR): These hormones include adrenaline and the stress hormone, cortisol.

The heart beats faster, breathing becomes more rapid, and energy is released to all parts of the body.

BENEDICTE DUCHESNE: And the response to this threatening situation will be around three main actions: freeze, fight or flee.

AHMED ASHOUR (NARR): What is commonly known as a fight or flight response.

BENEDICTE DUCHESNE: And the risk is that instead of having an adaptive response to the situation, meaning that they activate the survival mode during the journey, and once the threat is over, they come back to the normal stage. Instead of that, very often because of the complexity of their own journeys, there is a cumulative factor in the traumatic experiences. So they start to develop mental disorders, severe depression, or anxiety related disorders, or even — in some cases, it's not the majority, but — post-traumatic stress disorders. And these type of disorders are extremely hard to tackle.

AHMED ASHOUR (INT): So, in a way, leaving — by crossing a sea or an ocean — is the only option. And while survival mode is supposed to turn off once the threat is over, it often doesn't in the case of refugees. So, how do we assess risk in this situation? How does the body know when to turn off survival mode?

BENEDICTE DUCHESNE: The perception of risk is distorted and what would appear as a risk for you and me — even though you and I may have very different perception of the risk — will be completely different for a person that's been exposed to so much.

[MUSIC that takes us back to the sea/the beginning of of the ep to cue the Omars]

And this is why the journeys can be particularly dangerous, just because the push factors are so powerful that there is very little space for rational evaluation of the risk at this stage.

[BEAT]

AHMED ASHOUR (NARR): I asked the Omars what this survival mode Benedicte described looked like for them on *their* journey. Here's what Omar Nour had to say.

OMAR NOUR: You getting hurt, or you dying, or you seriously damaging yourself is immediate — that's adrenaline. That is fight or flight, right? This is like a primal... Everything goes out the window and you're trying to figure out what's going on and how to get out of it, right?

[BEAT]

OMAR NOUR: In these situations what I always say to myself, and it served us so well in the Atlantic when we capsized — and when I say it served us well, it was my mantra — "How can we make our situation a little bit better?" That's it. I'm not trying to solve anything. I'm trying to make my situation a little bit better.

OMAR SAMRA: There isn't a lot to do inside the raft, but here, there's this little bit of thread that's hanging, let's tie it up and clean it and make sure that it's kind of all neat and tidy. Or, there's a little bit of — there's more water than we can sort of manage inside things. So let's start cupping it with whatever that we have and throwing it overboard. Let's count all the things that we have. Let's make sure we take stock of all of these things, right? And so... we were just doing all of these things to occupy ourselves, but at the same time as well, we were joking around a little bit.

OMAR NOUR: So as long as there's motion and thought about what you're doing. You don't see despair. I think despair comes when it quiets down. Despair comes when the adrenaline is gone and all of a sudden, all you're thinking of is, "Let me just hang on, let me just hang on." That hanging on is not going to solve anything.

[CHAPTER TRANSITION]

AHMED ASHOUR (NARR): Risk assessment for the Omars is a bit more complicated because it's more tied to their resilience. I shared with Benedicte the moment we heard at the beginning of the episode, where Omar Samra almost let go of the ladder on the Kefalonia, and asked her where his resilience could have come from to pull off such a risky jump.

BENEDICTE DUCHESNE: It's a beautiful example, and there are different traits and behaviors that are correlated with resilience. The most important actually is the flexibility — the ability to adjust to new situations. And it's not a passive process. It's something that we can cultivate. Exposing ourselves to different types of environments, leaving our comfort zone... Those experiences that are not necessarily harmful in daily life, but they can help us to really strengthen our resilience. Also the ability to cope.

MUSIC

Knowing that, for instance, in this situation, maybe Omar has been exposed to a very extreme situation in the past, and he knows that he made it. So this gives you this confidence that I have this ability to cope and I can do it again.

AHMED ASHOUR (INT): Omar Samra is actually a very well-known extreme athlete. He's peaked all seven summits. Did that also contribute, do you think, to his ability to make that jump and have confidence in the fact that he would make it?

BENEDICTE DUCHESNE: Yes, definitely — see, from a psychological point of view — from a physical point of view, it's hoping yes. But the fact that he has been able to push himself to the limits physically and mentally in the past does play a key role.

[BEAT]

OMAR NOUR: If I told you, "Hey, listen, this building is on fire. Run in." Now, if you're just wearing a t-shirt and shorts and you've never run into a building on fire, you have to be in a very desperate situation to run in. You're a fireman that has all the right equipment, has been practicing for years. There's two things that happen simultaneously: not only is the level of risk down because of your knowledge and experience, and your experiences in that field. But also, you know that that's what you do. You go into burning buildings and you come out on the other side.

OMAR SAMRA: I think the... My previous experience, both having undergone things of not equal measure but similar measure allowed me to emotionally compartmentalize, allowed me to understand that even my body was shutting down, all of these things were happening, I could still come back from this. But I know that the image of my daughter did give me that jolt that got me back to where I was at that moment.

AHMED ASHOUR (NARR): Benedicte says that image of his daughter — scientifically speaking — was another source of resilience.

BENEDICTE DUCHESNE: And of course, the social aspects. The feeling of belonging, hope, mobilizing positive memories of families or people we love... Those are extremely important factors that play a key role in resilience.

OMAR SAMRA: I think if we have core memories, positive memories that make you feel a sense of belonging, sense of hope, sense of feeling love, sense of being lucky, sense that the world is conspiring with you not against you all the time... I think all of these contribute to us being able to navigate deeply dangerous and taxing situations. You know, you're going to make this. This is going to be a story that you're going to tell one day.

OMAR NOUR: We mattered. We mattered. A lot of people are following it. Our families are following it. Our friends are following it. They're looking at our progress every single day. We know that. And that is a buzzing, that's a humming in the background, where you feel that you're part of something bigger And that gives you purpose. That allows you to push forward.

AHMED ASHOUR (NARR): "We mattered." I could feel this idea of mattering to someone, somewhere, near or far, as a source of resilience for the Omars, but in the film, I also found that having someone who matters to you can be equally as powerful. Here's Louay AlZouki again, speaking about how his then unborn child helped him see the journey through.

LOUAY ALZOUKI: All of them, thinking about like... I need to be with Sarah, the rest of my life, after this experience. No one will know about this except me and Sarah, what we did to save our child and to come here. His name is Nouh, because he saved us from the sea. He's the only reason that kept us strong to continue the trip.

[CHAPTER TRANSITION]

AHMED ASHOUR (NARR): "Desperate times call for desperate measures." What strikes me about this exploration of a desperate state of mind is that despair is not experienced equally. I almost wonder if the idiom should go, "Different desperate times will probably call for different desperate measures from different desperate people."

I struggled to find connections or even parallels between the Omars' experience and the experiences of refugees, because the given circumstances are just so different. But then... I was reminded by the Omars that they never saw their experience as equal to that of refugees crossing by sea.

OMAR NOUR: Nothing can be compared, but I can tell you that human, raw feeling that

comes out when you just want to live, right? I think that is very, very similar. Now, I think that's where the similarities pretty much end for me, right? You're talking about two people — I mean, if we're going to use the firefighters example — that have been firefighting and training to firefight and have the right equipment to firefight. We have the right boats, the right life jackets — everything, right? Communication, all of these things, to tackle this. We've had the privilege of thinking about it for 18 months, in detail. We had the privilege of putting ourselves in these situations gradually and progressively increasing the amount of stress. So we have adapted ourselves, and we're ready and slowly had more knowledge about what you're about to embark on.

OMAR SAMRA: We had the benefit of getting the best training in the world, the best advice... An average refugee story is that you're on a dilapidated boat that is overcrowded with a smuggler who may throw you overboard.

OMAR NOUR: Some of them haven't seen the sea. They can't swim. You have nothing to base it on. Everything is out of your hands. There is nothing in that experience that is the same, okay? And you make it on the other side. And now your problems start. What? What? There must be despair. There must be despair. There is no other option. Nobody runs into a building on fire, right, unless what's chasing them is worse.

[BEAT]

BENEDICTE DUCHESNE: Humans are far better at coping with traumatic events than we think actually as long as they are in an enabling environment; they have access to safety; they are treated in a dignified manner. And this is why the UNHCR is trying to promote this community-based psychosocial support, because we do know that for the majority of people who display symptoms of anxiety or depression, the answer is not necessarily medication. The answer is not necessarily therapy with the psychologist. But they need to break isolation. They need to meet with their peers. For children, they just need to play again. And all of those elements are extremely important.

[BEAT]

LOBNA MONIEB: Next on *State of Mind*....

OMAR NOUR: My longest time on the oars was seven hours straight, right? So it's a huge physical stress, but in many ways I was doing it, not for me. I was doing it for... I have to take care of... I have to take care of us. I have to take care of Omar. I gotta take care of this.

LOBNA MONIEB: State of Mind is produced by Kerning Cultures Network. Episode two is supported by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency dedicated to building a better future for refugees.

This episode was produced by Ahmed Ashour and edited by Heba El-Sherif. Research and fact checking by Deena Sabry and Eman Al-Sharif, sound design by Youssef Douazou and I'm your host Lobna Monieb.

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