

# courage

## A Greek island welcomes a refugee doctor from Iraq

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*Dr. Soleiman Barzani attending to a young patient in his paediatrics clinic on Los island.*

What is an Iraqi of Kurdish origin doing on a Greek island? We immediately think of rusty boats arriving at the islands, carrying exhausted and thirsty men, women and children, often a mix of economic migrants and asylum seekers fleeing the conflict at home. Soleiman Barzani was a refugee too. But now those days are over. Fifteen years after he arrived in Greece, he is now a Greek citizen, with a paediatrics clinic on Los, an island situated between Greece and Turkey.

In 1975, at the tender age of five, Barzani and his family fled Iraq for Iran, where they spent many turbulent years as refugees. But

after graduating from high school in Iran, Barzani was given a unique opportunity when the Greek government offered him a university scholarship.

Life in Greece was very difficult in the beginning. After dealing with the inevitable bureaucratic hurdles, Barzani succeeded in getting a place at the University of Thessaloniki to learn Greek. Then in 1990, because his student residence permit did not protect him from one day being returned to Iraq against his will, he applied for asylum.

Barzani later moved to the medical school of the University of Patras, in the Peloponnese, but without informing the police of his change of residence. "The police were looking for me in Thessaloniki for the refugee status determination interview, and I was in Patras," recalled Barzani. "I got a rejection notice in 1991, and then second and third rejections on appeal. I had no residence permit, just my student card." Barzani continued the story: "I visited the Greek Council for Refugees (GCR), which took me under its wing, and granted me a UNHCR refugee card. They also gave me a small allowance, and the support of a social worker to help me cope with my problems."

The first year at university was hard for Barzani. He was anxious about his legal status, and had to cope with a different culture and language. All this while missing his family, and feeling lonely and traumatized by memories of his childhood. "What frustrated me more than anything else was that without any legal documents, I could not withdraw the scholarship funds from the bank," he remembered. "I still feel strong gratitude for the employee at a bank in Patras who, risking his job, gave me the money without requesting any identification or residence permit other than my student card."

Barzani says that the support he received from some individuals gave him the strength and courage to survive the tough years. "It meant a lot to me when the president of the Patras medical school, and the dean of the university, sent letters of support to the Ministry of Public Order in 1995 and 1996," he added gratefully.

After graduating from medical school, Barzani went to Athens and worked in a flower shop while trying to finalize the formalities needed to start his specialization as a paediatrician. "At the same time I started a very big project for me to be recognized as a refugee," he said. "UNHCR helped me resubmit my case, since I had not even been granted an interview the first time." He explains: "When people live in uncertainty, they cannot plan for their future, they cannot live a normal life, and their only preoccupation is how to solve their problem." Barzani's appeal was finally successful in October 2002 – 12 years after he first sought asylum – and at last he became officially recognized as a refugee in Greece.

After he finished his specialization training, Barzani started working as a part-time interpreter and as a doctor for Médecins du Monde (MdM). "Through this experience, I realized that I am not the only person on earth who has problems. MdM and other non-governmental organizations such as the Social Work Foundation and the Hellenic Red Cross helped me to help other people in need. They also helped me to grow out of the stereotypes and prejudices I had acquired in my childhood. They showed me that every human being is equal."

Other paediatricians who know Barzani call him "one of the best doctors we have." One of them noted, "The children love him, the parents respect him and his medical expertise is superb." In June 2003, at the instigation of the president of Agia Sofia children's hospital, Barzani decided to settle on the island, where he opened his own paediatrics clinic. The island's public health centre had been trying to find a paediatrician for several years without luck, perhaps because of the lonely winter months.

"Once the mayor found someone willing to assume the job, he didn't want to lose me, so he fully supported my case for citizenship, a prerequisite for recruitment in the public sector," said Barzani, who has earned the community's trust with his medical proficiency.

In April 2004, Barzani received Greek citizenship, a privilege granted to very few people of non-Greek origin. "I cannot tell you how happy I was when I got the news – I could not believe it!" he recalls with pride. He is now awaiting military service to fulfil his public duty to his new country.

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