

Nabil, a 16 year old Iraqi asylum-seeker living in Greece

Nabil is not too sure what the problem was for his family in Iraq except that he knows his parents had trouble with the ruling Ba'ath party. Nabil lived with his parents, elder brother and sister in Kerkouk in north-central Iraq. His father was a bank manager and his mother was a teacher. When he was 11 years old, in 1997, his mother told him that she had been having trouble with the ruling Iraqi Ba'ath party, and so the family had to leave the country for Turkey. They moved to Istanbul but soon afterwards, for reasons unknown to Nabil, his father returned to Iraq. His mother did not want to return to Iraq and later, went on to Germany. His father is still in Iraq. Somehow he gets by doing odd jobs.

Nabil, brother and sister lived in Istanbul for five years. To pay for their rented accommodation, the brothers took on various jobs, including working in a laundry and as bar tenders. Nabil did not go to school but he did learn to "read, write and speak Turkish better than a university graduate". They left Turkey because there was no asylum procedure for them, no prospect of integration, no bright future.

In June 2002, Nabil, his brother and sister, together with some 30 other people entered Greece at the northern Evros River border, and arrived in the northern Greek town of Komotini. Soon after, his siblings left to join their mother in Germany. There was not enough money to enable all three children to reach Germany, so Nabil remained in Greece. First, he stayed in a camp in Thessaloniki, and then in two camps near Athens. Now, he is staying in the Melathron Hostel, in the hills outside Athens. The hostel is run by the Greek Council for Refugees, a UNHCR implementing partner, and is funded by the Greek Ministry of Health and Welfare.

The Melathron hostel has only been open for three months, and is awaiting approval from the Government for funding for another year. There are currently 30 refugees living at the hostel, which has a capacity to house 60. However, the Council does not have sufficient funds or staff to take care of that many people at present. The refugees, families or separated children, will be allowed to stay up to one year. At present, no staff member is sure what will happen to those who eventually reach the time limit of their stay.

Nabil cannot leave Greece on his temporary residence card while he is waiting for a decision on his asylum application which can take between two to six years to process. His mother has the legal right to live in Germany, but not his brother and sister. Nabil says that he cannot go to Germany legally and anyway, he doesn't really want to join them. He prefers living on his own. He is happy to live in the hostel, "I'd like to spend my life here. The people at Melathron are my family. I don't feel alone. My life here is not ordinary. It's beautiful. We play football. We have dancing lessons, learn Greek. We do things." He is quite confident of his mental abilities. "I'm clever. Learning Greek is easy." Nabil would like to resume his schooling.

When asked if he missed anything about his home place, Nabil replied, "Very little. I remember nothing happy. In Iraq, there is no democracy. If one person has a problem in the family, everybody will have a problem. My father is harassed a lot. He wants to leave. They don't like the fact that he let his family leave the country. My father had to go back because he had unfinished business there. I don't know why he went back. I was only 11 years old. But something important made him go back.

“Apart from my father, I have no one to go back to. I saw some of my Iraqi friends in Athens when I got here.

“In Iraq, the streets aren’t safe. There are always soldiers around asking you for your military service card and getting money out of you. If I was told to leave here to return to Iraq, I would run away and hide”. The Iraqi translator who only left his country a few months ago volunteered the following information, “In the past six months, the Iraqi Government has set up new conscript units. They come to you and say, ‘You have kids. We’re taking two into the army’. Or they go to the schools and universities and make the boys train. If you are not in school, they come to your place of work and take you off for three months of training. The government is so invasive that it is difficult to make plans or live a regular life in Iraq”.

Nabil continues, “I would like to prepare for my future. For now, I want to learn Greek, go back to school and then get a job. I feel very safe here. My dream is to live and work here in Greece. I want to have a wife and children. I’m responsible for my future. I want to prepare for it now. But how? In America, they offer their kids everything, but I must make my own way”.