

Obituary

Dr. Jamal Barzinji: 1939-2015

It is with deep sadness that the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) announces the passing of Dr. Jamal Barzinji, its president and founding member, on Saturday, September 26, 2015, after a long-standing illness.

“Among the believers are men [and women] who have been true to what they have vowed before God” (Qur’an, 33:23).

Dr. Jamal was born on December 15, 1939, in Mosul, Iraq. On the night of his birth his father, Imam Muhammad al-Barzinji, made the following entry in his diary: “It was a bitterly cold night, and a son was born to me. I have named him Jamal al-Din.” His father instilled in his young son a deep and abiding love for Allah and Islam, a profound appreciation for Arabic, and a heartfelt respect and devotion for truth and values – and young Jamal carried these passions with him throughout his life, translating the strength of his convictions into action until the very last day of his life.

Despite his acute and protracted illness Dr. Barzinji continued to display his usual unwavering commitment, as well as his strength of will and dedication, in whatever project he was involved. Withstanding chronic pain he would come to the office; when unable to do so he would work from home. He met with colleagues, oversaw IIIT work, and remained engaged with the Institute until his final hours. So engrained were these practices that the thought of not welcoming those scholars and students who participated in the annual IIIT Summer School and Institute for Scholars never entered his mind.

This life-long proponent of serving Islam expanded his work as the years passed. He used his exceptional organizational talents and skills to help found many major Muslim institutions, among them

IIIT, where he was both a trustee and a former vice president for the Department of Research and Publications; the North American Islamic Trust (NAIT), where he was the founding general manager; and a founding member of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS) as well as the Association of Muslim Scientists and Engineers (AMSE).

Dr. Taha Jabir Alalwani, another founding member of IIIT and longtime colleague, wrote: “No one who knew him could help but love him. We used to differ on many issues, and when occasionally I would raise my voice and use harsh words he would smile while I was talking and wait until I was done. Then, still smiling, he would ask politely, ‘Would you like tea, coffee, or something else?’ It was as simple as that. Then, we would sit down and continue discussing the matter without any negative feelings toward each other.”

Dr. Barzinji worked according to the highest standards and a powerful moral basis, upholding excellence in everything he did with an eye on the final outcome and getting results. He demanded this from others, especially his IIIT colleagues, whose ethos and activities were to reflect his own work ethic. A hard-working and fair person, he valued this quality in others. And yet he was also forgiving of other people’s shortcomings and understood their limitations.

A lover of literary competence, he appreciated the correct usage of language and especially enjoyed beautiful Arabic and English linguistic expressions. He would often repeat phrases or expressions that he found particularly eloquent. Dr. Alalwani remembers that “Jamal had, among all of IIIT’s founders, the ‘language of balance.’ [This Arabic expression corresponds to “voice of reason” in English.] He was the most strongly motivated person among us, the most assiduous and most ready to contribute and give. He had natural leadership qualities, as if he was born to be a leader. I often used to say to myself: ‘Allah has granted me the blessing of many brothers, but the most prominent among them is Jamal Barzinji.’”

Out of his deep commitment to reforming Islamic thought and pursuing interfaith education and relations came his belief that faith communities must provide spiritual answers to modern challenges. To that end, he was instrumental in IIIT decisions to commit re-

sources to interfaith programs at Hartford Seminary (Hartford, CT), Nazareth College (Rochester, NY), Huron University College at Western University (London, ON, Canada).

In his capacity as a senior scholar at IIIT, he helped establish endowed chair positions and centers in Islamic studies at various institutes of higher learning, among them Georgetown University (Washington, DC), Harvard University (Cambridge, MA), George Mason University (Fairfax, VA), and several others. He also oversaw the sponsorship of thousands of educational scholarships for deserving and committed students regardless of race, gender, or faith.

While speaking in a IIIT documentary video, Dr. Barzinji urged Muslims to examine “what collective moral responsibility we have, as a community of faith, to build a better America, build a better nation – a caring and gentle nation – which is, really, the Founding Fathers’ vision for America ... There is also a big responsibility for people of faith to come together; to develop and articulate their position; and to ‘sell’ their product of love, of affection, [of] good neighborliness to society at large to build that better society and better community.”

A man of boundless energy, he also held executive positions in several organizations over the years: president of the Muslim Students Association (MSA) in its initial days, member of MSA’s Planning and Organization Committee, and member of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) Majlis Al-Shura (Board). He also helped establish various organizations: Mar-Jac Poultry, Safa Trust, Amana Mutual Funds, the SAAR Foundation, Bank Islam Malaysia, NAIT, and the International Islamic Charitable Organization (IICO). In addition to all of these tasks and duties, he also served as the dean of the Faculty of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, the International Islamic University Malaysia, where he worked tirelessly for the cause of Islamic education.

In addition, Dr. Barzinji offered his time as an advisor and consultant to a whole series of educational, charitable, and professional organizations. He was a frequent speaker and author of articles on topics relevant to the Muslim American community. All of these activities earned him many honors, among them ISNA’s Dr. Mahboob Khan Community Service Award (2008) and CAIR’s Lifetime Achievement Award (2012).

Dr. Barzinji earned a PhD and MSc in chemical engineering, with a minor in management (Louisiana State University, USA, 1974), and a BSc in chemical engineering & fuel technology (University of Sheffield, UK, 1962).

A long-standing illness, which he fought valiantly for years, finally caused him to breathe his last during the early hours of Saturday, September 26, 2015. He is survived by his wife, six children, and thirteen grandchildren, not to mention innumerable friends, colleagues, and loved ones whose lives he had touched in one way or another. His death is an immense loss for the global Muslim community and humanity at large.

His personal vision was very broad. In his own words, he sought throughout his career and his life, along with many others, “to guide the Muslim ummah into a better future, to guide the Muslim ummah to find its place in the world scene today.” One element of this was his direct participation in interfaith activities, which he viewed as “a powerful way to reach out to other faith communities to tell them how much there is in common [among all of us],” as well as intrafaith activities. This is the caliber of the man who has gone to his eternal reward. A personification of the old Arabic maxim that describes a remarkable person as “a nation in a man,” he will not be easily replaced.

We extend our heartfelt condolences to his family members and pray that Allah grants them, along with his friends and colleagues, patience and strength during this time of trial. May Allah be pleased with Dr. Jamal Barzinji and shower His blessings and mercy upon him, thereby making it easier for those he has left behind to bear the sorrow of his absence.

To God we belong and to Him we return. *Ameen.*

IIIT Family