

## scenes from the middle east

# YLS students in the iraqi refugee assistance project

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### photo diary • Amman



A view of an Amman neighborhood with a large Iraqi refugee population.



Since the beginning of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, close to 5 million Iraqi civilians have been displaced, with estimates of up to 100,000 Iraqi refugees fleeing to Syria and Jordan each month. Those lucky enough to escape the country often end up living in exile in host countries where they are denied legal status and relegated to poverty.

Two years ago, two students at Yale Law School started a student organization with the goal of helping Iraqi refugees. Today that group—the Iraqi Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP)—has expanded to seven additional U.S. law schools and has helped establish the first clinical legal education program in Jordan. Under IRAP, American and Jordanian students are providing direct assistance to refugees both in the United States and the Middle East and are advocating to develop policy on complex refugee issues.

When IRAP co-founder Becca Heller '10 speaks of the organization's beginnings, she describes it as something that "just happened."

"There was no grand plan," she says. "We didn't set out to help start clinical legal education in Jordan."

In the summer of 2008, fresh off her 1L year at Yale Law School, Heller was in Tel Aviv completing an internship when she heard about the plight of Iraqi refugees living in Jordan. Curious about what work was being done to help the refugees, Heller decided to head to Jordan to see for herself.

She met with six families that summer, all of whom needed legal assistance. At the time, the trip was a sidebar to her summer—but it soon became something larger.

When she returned to New Haven, Heller teamed up with Jonathan Finer '09, who had been a reporter embedded in Iraq for the *Washington Post*. Finer was working to extricate and help resettle Iraqi interpreters with whom he had worked. He had already begun working on a framework for a refugee assistance project and so it seemed natural for Finer and Heller to join forces.

Now, two years later, IRAP is a Law School seminar associated with the Schell Center and a student organization. Student-founded, student-led, and student-driven, the organization has a deceptively simple-sounding mission statement: to help those forced from their homes by the Iraqi War. IRAP represents Iraqi refugees seeking resettlement in the United States and Europe, provides direct assistance to Iraqis struggling to make a new home in the United States, and engages political leaders, government agencies, and international organizations on behalf of displaced Iraqis. Legal assistance for refugees includes help registering as a refugee with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), navigating the UNHCR referral process, applying directly to the International Organization for Migration or U.S. Embassy for Special Immigrant Visas or P-2 Status, and making referrals

for Iraqis already in the U.S. seeking to apply for asylum. Professors Michael Wishnie '93 and Muneer Ahmad oversee the students' work as IRAP's faculty advisors.

Michael Breen '11, who served in the Middle East as a U.S. Army captain prior to enrolling at YLS, now heads up IRAP's policy advocacy. The work that the organization does, he says, is unique in that it draws from experiences doing direct legal assistance work with refugees.

"We have seen the process through the refugees' eyes—we have a sense of what's wrong with the process and what kind of procedural changes can be made to significantly impact refugees' lives," he says.

Often people don't receive resettlement services not because they're unworthy, but because the procedural hurdles can seem insurmountable. "Getting a signature from Tikrit to Nebraska can seem impossible," Breen explains. "So we're really focusing on working on those types of procedural changes that can make the process more efficient and easier to navigate."

"Legal work in resettlement cases is an evolving beast," Heller says. "There aren't provisions for lawyers to assist in these cases. One of our goals is to change that and to create procedural guarantees for refugees."

IRAP also does direct services work with more than thirty refugee families in New Haven. Student co-director Kate Brubacher '10 headed up that arm of the organization this past year, leading YLS students and Yale undergrads in an effort to help families resettle in the U.S. IRAP volunteers helped refugees with everything from applying for benefits to signing up for ice skating lessons and helping with college counseling.

IRAP has undeniably made great strides in two years—but their next step, Heller hopes, will be a giant one backward. Heller recently won a Skadden Public Interest Fellowship, a two-year, fully paid fellowship that enables academically outstanding law school graduates and judicial clerks to work full time providing legal services to underserved groups in the United States. Heller will work at the Urban Justice Center, establishing IRAP as a separate organization under the Center's umbrella. She will also be co-teaching the Law School's IRAP seminar with Professor Wishnie in the upcoming academic year. Heller hopes to take some time to consider IRAP's framework, and to make sure that the organization is structured in such a way that it can continue to expand to additional law schools and to do work in more countries. Among IRAP's goals: to keep a toehold in the policy advocacy arena, to create a board, and to have full-time lawyers in both Damascus and Amman.

IRAP is looking for supervising attorneys to help with cases. For more on the project, visit [www.iraqirefugee.us](http://www.iraqirefugee.us).

### IRAP Winter 2010 Trip

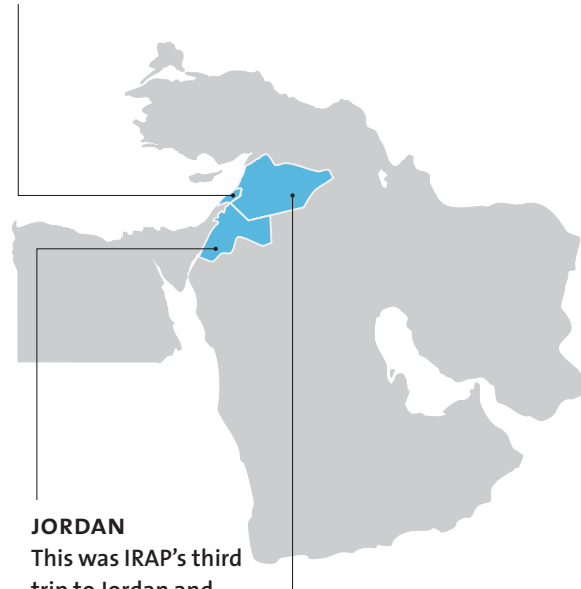
During Yale Law School's winter break, IRAP members from Yale, Stanford, and Columbia traveled to Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria to meet with Iraqi refugees, UN officers, NGOs, and members of Parliament.

IRAP's trip was made possible by a grant from the Oscar M. Ruebhausen Fund.

IRAP's trip included visits to:

#### LEBANON

IRAP does not yet have any cases in Lebanon, but the group used the trip for fact-finding. The country has harsh detention policies for refugees, despite the fact that it draws people who are seeking jobs and those who are religious minorities.



#### JORDAN

This was IRAP's third trip to Jordan and marked the first joint training with U.S. and Jordanian students.

#### SYRIA

A subgroup of students on the latest IRAP trip ventured to Syria where the organization plans to have a full-time person on the ground this year. The country has heavy security and Syria is, according to Heller, "important but tricky." Half of Iraq's refugees have fled to Syria and they tend to be the most destitute and most needy of Iraqi refugees. By the end of the January 2010 trip, IRAP had taken on a total of twenty-eight cases in Syria, some of which were referrals to IRAP from UNHCR.

## the iraqi refugee assistance project

### training, policy



#### Jordanian Law Students

IRAP Policy Director Michael Breen '11 (center) listens with a group of Jordanian law students as an Iraqi refugee their own age explains his experience fleeing Iraq and applying for resettlement in Amman, Jordan.



#### IRAP Leaders

IRAP leaders from Stanford, Yale, and Columbia law schools meet with the staff of Frontiers-Ruwad, a Lebanese organization that advocates on behalf of refugees in Beirut.



#### UJordan Training

YLS 3Ls (from left to right) Lauren Chamblee, Nabiha Syed and Laurie Ball organized and directed a two-day training of Jordanian law students participating in the Kingdom of Jordan's first pilot clinical legal education program, as part of a collaboration between YLS-IRAP and the law school at the University of Jordan. Jordanian law professor Lina Shabeeb (back center) supervises the training.



#### Mock Interview

Sean Joseph Byrnes Franzblau, one of the directors of the IRAP chapter at Stanford Law School, works on a mock legal interviewing exercise with a law student at the University of Jordan.

## the iraqi refugee assistance project

## direct legal services

**An Iraqi Family Meal**

Although all of the families IRAP works with live in extreme poverty, their generosity is unending. This family of seven, who live in a two-room apartment, prepared an enormous meal for the IRAP students who came to visit them.

**Refugees by Candlelight**

A single Iraqi woman and her children meet with IRAP members by candlelight because she cannot afford electricity.

**Direct Legal Services**

Stephen Poellot '11, one of IRAP's legal directors, works through an interpreter to help prepare a family for their upcoming interview with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

**Awaiting Resettlement**

This young Iraqi girl was kidnapped from her classroom, after her teacher was killed in front of her. Militias brought her and twenty other children to a junkyard, where they slit their throats and left them to die. She survived long enough to be rescued by U.S. forces and brought to a hospital. Now her family awaits resettlement.

**Torture Victim**

An Iraqi man who was kidnapped by militias sits in his living room in Syria. For three months, his captors tortured him, knocking out all of his teeth and burning him with cigarettes. They released him only after he had a heart attack and they thought he was dead. He is waiting for a response from the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to his application for resettlement.

**A Case of Humanitarian Parole**

Mohammed, center, suffers from a rare form of spina bifida that has left him partially paralyzed and may lead to his death within months if not operated upon. IRAP students at NYU and Yale Law School have arranged for a surgery to take place with donated funding at Boston Children's Hospital and are currently working on Mohammad's application for humanitarian parole.

## fact-finding

**Byblos, Lebanon**

IRAP members (from left to right) Saned Raouf (Yale College '10), Michael Breen '11, Kate Brubacher '10, Becca Heller '10, Zachary Carpenter (Stanford Law School '11), and Stephen Poellot '11, take the morning off to visit Byblos, thought to be the oldest continually-inhabited city in the world, outside of Beirut.

**Old Damascus**

IRAP co-founder Becca Heller '10 walks through old Damascus with a member of IRAP's Columbia Law School chapter.