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Salam Shabab: Views and Voices of Iraqi Youth

Summary

- *Salam Shabab* (Peace Youth) is a unique reality TV series filmed in Iraq that brought together youth from six provinces of Iraq to compete for a chance to become youth “Ambassadors of Peace.” The views of young Iraqis participating in *Salam Shabab*, along with new surveys on youth perspectives, have begun to create a potential profile of the next generation of Iraqi leaders.
- Many Iraqi youth express conflicting views on politics and youth participation in Iraq. They are disappointed about not having their voices heard by political and civil society leaders, yet optimistic about their role in shaping the future of their country.
- Iraqi teenagers express tremendous pride in their local communities, which they associate with peace, unity and coexistence. Yet, the same youth often cannot clearly define what national identity means to them.
- Regarding their perceptions on building peace, Iraqi youth indicate that peace in Iraq can be achieved through unifying factors such as cross-cultural dialogue. According to them, the similarities among diverse people are more powerful in building peace than their differences.
- If given the opportunity, a vast majority of Iraqi youth are willing to take on a peacebuilding role, in part by connecting with other youth in Iraq and internationally.

“According to the USIP survey of Iraqi teens, 74 percent expressed their belief that youth their age can play a significant role in building peace. One boy from Tikrit told us during the filming, ‘Salam Shabab changed me. I was isolated before, but I overcame this. I want to spread peace in Iraq and to other countries that have a bad opinion of us.’”

Introduction

“I was isolated before, but I overcame this. I want to spread peace in Iraq and to other countries that have a bad opinion of us.” Boy, 17, Tikrit

“I now know I have the power to create change. I have my own style. I am good with speeches and good at talking. But now I will seek more information and find out the truth before going into a discussion. I will have evidence before talking with my brother.” Girl, 16, Baghdad

“I was shy and had no respect for responsibility. I was afraid to be social. Now I’ve changed 180 degrees. Now I know how to mix with others, and I respect people and accept responsibility for how I use my time.” Girl, 17, Basra

More than fifty Iraqi teens told us about their experiences while participating in the filming of the *Salam Shabab* reality TV show. During a four-week span in July, Iraqi youth from six different governorates gathered in Erbil to get to know each other, exchange views on peace in their country, and compete in a series of challenges designed to appeal to a TV audience consisting of their peers. The youth participants (ages 14–18) began by choosing captains for their teams and

then faced off in the sport challenges despite the summer heat. They matched wits and creativity in the mental challenges. Finally, they presented their short films and performances in front of a live studio audience that voted for the winners. Each winning team would then compete in the championship round for a chance to become youth “Ambassadors of Peace.” The Salam Shabab TV show, produced by talented Iraqi filmmakers with USIP support, is part of a multimedia peacebuilding program that also includes a pilot documentary and a social networking website. The reality show will be broadcast as a 10-episode series over a network of Iraqi satellite channels beginning in early 2011.

Though we worked with Iraqi educators and youth organizations to design a peacebuilding curriculum as the backbone of the television program, we still had little idea of how the youth would respond on camera when the filming started. We were struck by how eagerly the youth took the chance to express some of the key elements that shaped their perspectives on peace: citizenship, respect for diversity, civic action, and self-confidence. They were disappointed about not having their voices heard, yet optimistic about their role in shaping the future. They wanted to vote, but didn’t trust political leaders. They had tremendous pride in their local communities, yet couldn’t clearly define what national identity meant to them. We knew that we had to understand why these dynamic youth had such wide-ranging, and sometimes contradictory, perspectives if we wanted to reach out to as many Iraqi youth as possible through the program. By conducting our own research, reviewing what limited data exists on Iraqi youth, and listening to the youth themselves, we began to see a potential profile of the next generation of Iraqi leaders.

Politics and Participation

Nearly half of the Iraqi population is under 19 years old¹—young people who are growing up during a time of seemingly constant change, insecurity, and uncertainty. Their parents’ generation—still the decision-makers of today—survived war during the relative stasis of a closed regime under Saddam Hussein. This contrast has widened the generation gap that has resulted in the youth feeling dissociated and neglected by political and civil society actors. Many young Iraqis believe that nobody listens to them and hence their needs remain unaddressed by their leaders. This sense has led to defeatism and distrust of politics, in general, as shown in an Iraqi Government study that indicates that 41 percent of youth do not trust politics, and only 34 percent believe that political parties are important in public life.² In a USIP commissioned study on political identity among Iraqi youth, 93 percent of the young Iraqis surveyed prefer to be independent as opposed to affiliated with political parties.³

Yet while Iraqi youth are disappointed with politicians and their own lack of influence in the current national reconstruction process, they remain optimistic about their future roles and power to create change. Over 86 percent of them plan to participate in future national elections, and 72 percent agree that it is their right as citizens to participate in the political process. This optimism is also evident at the community level where 74 percent feel they can effect positive change within their communities,⁴ and 60 percent agree that their children will have significantly better lives than their own generation.⁵

Despite the dismay felt by the youth regarding the current political environment, they appear to be looking forward with positive determination. One *Salam Shabab* participant told us of his desire to “ask the Baghdad provincial council about a place for art.” He speculated that, “Maybe we can use an empty urban space—we don’t have many places for art.” This seems to indicate that if given the chance, Iraqi youth could take action to improve the future of their country.

Local Pride, National Confusion

Since the fall of Saddam in 2003, many Iraqi youth have not traveled outside their hometowns due to perilous security conditions. They have been facing new hazards as the locus of danger shifted from an internal threat (such as anyone opposing the former regime) to more external and undefined threats (such as cross-border terrorism). In periods of crisis such as this, people in general are drawn to what they know best—their communities and their family units. For Iraqi youth, in particular, identifying with their local roots forms the basis of their strongly positive and carefully articulated feelings for family and community. *Salam Shabab* participants said in varying forms that they came from “peaceful” communities where they were “raised with respect and love.” One teenage boy told us he was “happy to be from Tikrit where people cooperate and support each other.”

These impressions contrast with how Iraqi youth feel about their national identities. Many *Salam Shabab* participants were unable to express what it meant to be Iraqi with the same clarity that characterized the understanding of their local affiliations. Several noted that “Iraq is a big word” which leads to identifying as Iraqis in broad, idealistic terms. A USIP survey of Iraqi teens revealed the fault lines between local and national identities. When asked how they felt about being Iraqi citizens, many noted that they were proud, happy, or satisfied largely due to their regional origins. Many felt misunderstood, confused, or angry at the same time in the larger context of being an Iraqi. Meanwhile, half of those surveyed responded to the term “love of country” by saying that it was “no more than just words.”⁶

The values that Iraqi youth associate with the national political arena largely contradict the values they link to their local and community roots. While they appear to have inculcated qualities they have seen in their communities—tolerance, communication and coexistence—they distance themselves generally from self-serving individuals in pursuit of money and power. One girl from *Salam Shabab* said that she valued honesty above all else, and that she “hates gossip and false judgment and that 80 percent of people in Iraq have false judgment.”

Perspectives on Peace

How does all this translate into youth perspectives on building peace in Iraq? Youth surveyed after watching the pilot documentary for *Salam Shabab* indicated that the future of Iraq depends on building peace and that a peaceful Iraq will take the form of a unified Iraq. This does not necessarily mean that the desire for a unified country can be equated with national pride. Instead, the youth consistently identified the need to overcome sectarianism and ethnic differences in order to achieve unity and peace. When asked whether similarities or differences were a stronger force, 52 percent of Iraqi youth indicated that similarities would be more effective in building peace, while only 25 percent thought that differences exerted a more powerful influence. Taking it a step further, they expressed their desire to respect diversity in Iraq and initiate cross-cultural dialog among youth groups. Fully, 64 percent of youth agreed that a broad acceptance of cross-cultural dialog among the different groups that make up Iraqi society would constitute an important step in building a peaceful Iraq.⁷

Based also on the formative research conducted around the pilot documentary, Iraqi youth clearly recognized their role in the peacebuilding process. They stressed that they would take center stage in building peace with all they have to offer. “Youth are the foundation of the society, and we have new ideas for building a peaceful Iraq with an open-minded and tolerant society,” was a common remark among the teens surveyed. According to the USIP survey of Iraqi teens, 74 percent expressed their belief that youth their age can play a significant role in building peace.⁸

One boy from Tikrit told us during the filming, “*Salam Shabab* changed me. I was isolated before, but I overcame this. I want to spread peace in Iraq and to other countries that have a bad opinion of us.”

Building a Community for Peace

While Iraqi youth perspectives are far more complex than what is presented above, the teenage participants of *Salam Shabab* have offered us a unique glimpse of their collective mindset. Just as these youth perceive local identity to be very different from national identity, they also have divergent views on the present state and future possibilities for their country. Their hopes for a unified Iraq are largely based on the values they observe in their communities. They often take pride in their belief that these communities are characterized by unity, peace, love, tolerance and coexistence. Ultimately, Iraqi youth appear to want to shape Iraq in the image of their familiar local environments so that they feel connected and influential.

Salam Shabab attempts to build this kind of community—via television and the Internet—by connecting Iraqi youth and empowering them to become confident, responsible, and participatory citizens. Why through the media? 16 million Iraqis watch television on a daily basis and 58 percent reported that they watch for more than 45 minutes per day.⁹ While television is the clear medium of choice in Iraq, *Salam Shabab* also includes a social networking website (<http://salamshabab.com>) as an online community for the youth to share their peacebuilding experiences. Although only 13 percent of Iraqi youth currently use the Internet,¹⁰ this number is growing rapidly,¹¹ and many Iraqi teens are avid users of online social networks such as Facebook. Between satellite television and the Internet components of the program, the potential audience for *Salam Shabab* extends well beyond the borders of Iraq.

In fact, the multimedia nature of *Salam Shabab* reflects the desire of Iraqi youth to connect with each other in Iraq and internationally. 79 percent of young Iraqis surveyed believe that it is important or very important to be connected to other youth in different parts of Iraq, while 81 percent think it is just as important to be linked with a global community of youth.¹² And if given a forum for their views, most Iraqi youth would discuss issues like human rights and peacebuilding with their friends and family, since these topics are not readily available in schools. For those youth without regular access to media, USIP staff in Iraq will work with local partners to arrange *Salam Shabab* screenings and group discussions in up to eight provinces. To partly address the need for peacebuilding material in Iraqi schools, USIP will meet with relevant officials in the national and provincial governments to consider how to use the *Salam Shabab* program and curriculum as an educational tool. In short, *Salam Shabab* has the potential to reach youth not only through media, but also through community outreach and the classrooms of Iraq.

So how can Iraqi teenagers begin to take action as part of the *Salam Shabab* community and as the next generation of Iraqi peacebuilders? Those who participated in the challenges of the reality TV show worked together in diverse teams and learned to take on more responsibility as individuals and citizens. They, in turn, could teach other youth watching the reality show or participating in the online community. So *Salam Shabab* can become a channel for building a participatory culture among Iraqi youth. This participatory culture can fuel their optimism to create change, heighten their desire to participate in the political process, and reflect their deeply engrained respect for Iraqi diversity. Enabling the youth to decide when and how they can put their thoughts to action is crucial, even if the action starts small.

“As a group, we can spread peace by talking to people and through simple activities. I would stop a person from throwing a bottle in the street. Start with simple things.” Boy, 17, Baghdad

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This report was written by Theo Dolan, Senior Program Officer, and Alexis Toriello, Research Assistant, at the Center of Innovation for Media, Conflict and Peacebuilding. It is a unique collection of Iraqi youth perspectives based on recent research as well as firsthand views of Iraqi youth participating in the filming of the *Salam Shabab* (Peace Youth) reality TV series.

Endnotes

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