



TRANSCRIPT - THE 966 INTERVIEWS ABDULLAH ALHASSAN

Opening Excerpt: Abdullah Hassan ([00:00](#)):

I would say one thing, those who work on the G20, which many of them by the way are youth. This is the human capital that will be left, that's already been left, after the G20 that will continue to sharpen their skills in terms of policy, negotiation, event planning, and so forth. This is the long-lasting policies, because those people who work at the G20, now they are in a different part of the government, executing the government's vision for the future, Vision 2030. So those people, they acquire unique international skills that now they are able basically to put it into place in order to execute domestic policies that will take the country to a higher level in the future.

Lucien Zeigler ([01:17](#)):

Today we've got an excellent interview with Abdullah Hassan. He served as a Sous-Sherpa and Executive Director for Policy for Saudi Arabia during the G20 meetings.

Richard Wilson ([01:28](#)):

I'm looking forward to this conversation, Abdullah's a bright guy. He was an economist at IMF. They swooped in and took him over to help with G20. He's now back at the IMF. The G20 is a big deal. Members represent 90% of global GDP, 80% of world trade, two-thirds of the world's population. It's a showcase opportunity for Saudi Arabia and they really had to develop everything from scratch. One of the interesting things is the origins of the G20 were finance oriented. And a lot of the organizing entities in each country are based in government financial administrations.

Richard Wilson ([02:14](#)):

But the fact is that G20 encompasses a whole array of things beyond finance including civil, political, et cetera. The thing that's interesting for both of us and one of the things we want to get at, is what was left behind. I mean, when you have to create this out of whole cloth and go from zero to a hundred, it was really a masterclass for Saudi Arabia, a whole generation of Saudis in terms of policy development and best practices, how to run a meeting, any number of things that are really valuable skills that now a great number of young Saudis have as a result of the G20.

Lucien Zeigler ([02:56](#)):

Yeah, it's really cool. It's the first G20 to be hosted in the Arab world. The first to be hosted during a pandemic, the first that ultimately had to go all virtual. I think it's just a really interesting interview we got. So, without further ado, here it is, our interview with Abdullah Hassan.

Richard Wilson ([03:19](#)):

Delighted you're with us today. I'm really excited talking about the G20. Just for our listeners, I wanted to provide a little context to the G20, and not everybody's a G20 expert, including myself, but this is a special group. They're put together in 1999. I think the first actual forum summit as it were, was in '08. Saudi Arabia is the only Arab country in the G20.

I think of the 15 or so meetings, this last one being the 15th, most of them were major global capitals. This was a new thing. It's a massive showcase for the country, the host country. So, it's a big deal. It's a big deal if it's the United States, it's a big deal for UK or Australia, whomever. France, they've all hosted it. Can you give us a context of why this opportunity was especially meaningful to Saudi Arabia?

Abdullah Hassan ([04:25](#)):

Indeed. I mean, when Saudi Arabia requested to host the G20, that was during the Chinese presidency in 2016, when the Crown Prince, HRH Mohammed bin Salman, was at the dedication and expressed an interest to hold the G20 presidency. So, the year after, during the Germany presidency, the G20 members, they agreed to have it, and since then the work started and the Saudi leadership wanted to achieve a few objectives hosting the G20 presidency.

One, as you indicated, I mean, like any other country, you want to showcase the country to the rest of the world. So, in our case also to show Saudi Arabia as an investment destination, as a tourist destination, given its geographical basis across three continents.

Second, is to lead the global agenda, which is fairly ambitious in order to tackle that 21st century challenges. And finally, to highlight the Saudi role in addressing timely and topical topics, such as climate change, energy, woman empowerment, job creation and so forth.

Richard Wilson ([06:17](#)):

And the timing of course was, I'm not going to say auspicious, it was difficult. I mean, if the first meetings were prompted by the financial crisis of 07/08, we're right in the middle of a global pandemic, tremendous financial hardship across the world. So, you've got challenges upon challenges. Now, when I first met you, you were a quite capable economic wonk over at IMF, which you are now, you've returned. You're like Superman, you jumped into a phone booth and put on your cape for the G20. And now you're back at your normal gig at the IMF. How did you get involved with the Saudi secretariat, the G20 Saudi secretariat?

Abdullah Hassan ([07:10](#)):

This basically dated back to May 2018 when His Excellency, Dr. Fahad Mubarak, was in DC for a business visit, and he was meeting with international organizations. So, when he dropped by the IMF, he met with the Saudi staff and during the discussion, he presented the ambition of the Saudi leadership in hosting the G20. So, in a month or so, I was in Saudi Arabia, as you would want to do during the summertime and I visited the Saudi G20 secretariat, where I pretty much spent the whole day attending the meeting, interacting with the staff and so forth. And what I noticed during that day was a very open, very well

structured, very diversified environment. So, pretty much at the end of that day, I felt it's like a national duty. You want to be part of this national mission, which is entrusted and empowered to host the presidency.

So, I came back to DC in late July, and then I applied for a sabbatical from the IMF, and I spent those two years with the Saudi presidency. I initially joined as a senior policy advisor, and then I was promoted until I was a G20 Sous-Sherpa and the Executive Director of Policy. And these are basically two jobs. I mean, as a director of policy, you are building the policies, coordinating with at least 12 government entities on a day-to-day basis, trying to execute the presidency agenda.

And then as a Sous-Sherpa, it was more political engagement with other Sherpa offices to ensure that they can reach consensus and create the issues where needed. So, you have one position, more about communicating the aspect, and then one position about the following and executing the vision.

Richard Wilson ([09:35](#)):

The Sous-Sherpa role, that entails, and we'll get to it at the end possibly, but you've got to interact closely with your predecessors, right? The Japanese secretariat who hosted the G20 the year previous, is that correct?

Abdullah Hassan ([09:52](#)):

I mean, interacting with the Troika, which is basically the predecessors and also the future presidency, the Italians, but also at the same time, interacting with all other Sous-Sherpas, not only of the G20 members, but also the invited countries, plus other stakeholders such as international organization, think tanks, academia and so forth.

Richard Wilson ([10:22](#)):

So, you had both the external part, the Sous-Sherpa role, but also you were Director of Planning. How did you go about developing that agenda?

Abdullah Hassan ([10:37](#)):

I mean, first of all, when you have the G20 presidency, it comes to you as a country, there is no textbook that you can go to, to say, this is the way that I'm going to develop my presidency agenda. And we felt that this gave us more space as there is a first time for everything. So basically, I can bracket them into three.

One of them is a knowledge tool. And these, they were done by Dr. Fahad before I joined, where he visited Australia, Turkey, China, and Germany. And he spent a couple of days in each country, trying to understand how they prepare for their own presidency, how they executed their presidency agenda. And then what are the lessons that they learned from the presidency. And each country, it has its own way of doing it. So sometimes we would find that things are centralized and sometimes you would find it more delegated in a global effort. So at least that gave a concept to the Saudi, how they should go about establishing the G20 secretariat and then building their own agenda and then implementing that.

Richard Wilson ([12:14](#)):

Let me interrupt just briefly. Was there an approach that the Saudis found most fitting to what you wanted to do? In other words, did some country do it in a manner that you thought was especially appropriate to what you wanted to do?

Abdullah Hassan ([12:34](#)):

Yeah. I mean, we had a mixed approach basically. So, we have in terms of the implementation and the day-to-day, these are basically managed by the work in a group and so forth. And then you have the presidency agenda basically is centralized at the G20 secretariat, but definitely there is a daily interaction with all parties, not only inside Saudi Arabia, but outside.

The second is what we have done internally, what I call in-house. So, we pretty much, because it's for the first time for us to host the G20, we are new to it. We did basically a very deep dive in each of the topic of the G20, from trade, health, finance and so forth. and we looked into the history, what has been done in the G20, what are the controversial issues and so forth.

Abdullah Hassan ([13:34](#)):

So pretty much you can think of it in academia, having done an extensive literature review of the issues since the establishment of the G20 in 1999. So pretty much over a two-decade analysis. And then, from a leadership perspective, we also, as I mentioned at the beginning, our objective was to tackle the 21st century challenges. So, we looked into what are the key challenges and the policy recommendations that have been published by the international organization, by the consultants, by the think tanks and so forth. Third, we had a deep consultation with our regional partners, such as the Arab Monetary Fund, The Islamic Development Fund and so forth, because as I said at the beginning, this is the first time for the G20 to come into the region. And we wanted to bring those regional aspects. And this is in line with the previous presidency.

Abdullah Hassan ([14:36](#)):

For example, the Argentinians, they focused on agriculture. In our case, we want to focus on regional challenges, such as water scarcity, youth, and so forth. And finally, you inherit something from the previous presidency, which is the Osaka summit that you need to take forward, because the leaders agreed on commitments and then we need to move forward.

So, all of these, they have been done in-house, but that was not sufficient for us. We went outside then, and we have done extensive outreach activities. We invited pretty much all the international organizations, nine of them, to Saudi Arabia to give us their perspective on the issues. We also attended conferences and round tables in 2018 and 2019, such as the World Government Summit, Global Solutions and so forth. And we held a slide discussion with selected speakers, because we wanted to solicit ideas in terms of the global challenges and policy solutions.

Abdullah Hassan ([15:46](#)):

And then also, we held a regional policy workshop in Singapore, where we invited think tanks, academia, private sector, financial sector, government official from the Asia region. And we always ask them the same questions. What do you think are the global challenges and what are the policy recommendations? In all, Richard, I have to say, what we got is one message from all of them, other than the policy discussion. They indicated that the way that the Saudi Arabia approached the G20 was a very inclusive in terms of developing the presidency agenda.

Abdullah Hassan ([16:27](#)):

And we truly believe in this, because we as a Saudi, we think of a G20, it's like a train. You take it from one station to another. It just happened that Saudi Arabia is basically driving that train in that year. And therefore, we really wanted to be inclusive by consulting with the G20 members, but also, we wanted to

consult with non-governmental officials, because the policy commitment that the leaders make, it would have a wider implication on the global communities, not only the G20, but also the non-G20 members. So, in a nutshell, these are the three things that we worked on during 2018 and '19. And so, we reached a presidency agenda that we were able to put on the table.

Abdullah Hassan ([17:26](#)):

I would say one final thing here, Richard. As we developed our presidency agenda, we ended up with a lot of issues and priorities, close to 150, but we cannot discuss all of these. We had to limit them to 20 or 30, and we need to have a specific criterion in order to be able to filter those. And we consulted with outsiders on those criteria. But also, we focused on what is the value added that we can provide during our presidency. Because as you know, there are many issues that are usually discussed by the national organization, other conferences, other round tables, but we said, what can G20 add?

Abdullah Hassan ([18:27](#)):

And second is the acceptance. Will we be able to reach a consensus? And that was a really difficult issue, because as you know, if you said, I want to reach a consensus and they have it as a pre-condition, then that might lower your ambition. Then you don't seek a more ambitious target, and you will be able to achieve it. But if you're in the internal discussion, we said, we will have an ambitious agenda, and we will engage all the members throughout the whole process so that we will be able to reach a consensus that is highly, highly ambitious. And finally, will it be implementable?

Richard Wilson ([19:17](#)):

The G20 came out of the financial concerns, but as you've noted before when we spoke, there's so many other issues and corollary aspects of it. So, for example, the G20 engagement groups, there were eight of them, and I'll read them off, labor, science, urban, civil society, youth, women, business, think tanks. The scope of this is tremendous. Were you on top of all these things? I know you had a tremendous, a large team, but it's so much more than just the financial state of the world at this point in time. Can you talk about some of these engagement groups a little bit?

Abdullah Hassan ([20:08](#)):

Absolutely. I mean, the engagement groups are representative of the civil societies. They are independent, they have their own meetings, they have their own agenda, and then they have their own summits and declaration, like any other G20 presidency, they submitted their recommendations to the leaders for consideration. What we did is that at the beginning of the presidency, after we finished our program, we presented it to them so that they knew exactly what was going to be discussed across the areas - labor, trade and so forth, and women.

Throughout the whole process they are independent. I mean, we cannot interfere with their business, but we also, we want to hear their own perspective. So, during the official meetings in the working group, they would have a short time where they would come, present their perspective to the government officials, and then they would leave the meeting.

So, in this case, there is a close interaction between the G20 community and then between the engagement group. So, this is the way that we wanted to do it. And one of the objectives was also to show civil society institutions and engagement with the international community. What we heard from many, many countries was that our civil societies were actively engaged with other members. That was positive feedback.

Richard Wilson ([22:10](#)):

So, as part of the Saudi-US Trade Group we do a daily newsletter which is widely read as well as a lot of digital media, social media and that sort of thing. And so, we were paying close attention to this event. Obviously the G20, as I said, is a big thing and we published a G20 series in the run-up to the leader summit. Each of these engagement groups in turn presented their findings so you had a whole series of presentations, very well-choreographed. And we did a feature article on each one, Lucien put these together. And so, we got to know the G20 much better than ever before.

One of the striking things about the G20 is when you talk about some of the important emphases of the event - empowering people, safeguarding the planet, shaping the new frontiers - I don't know that any host country has ever had anything that coincides so closely with what they're trying to do as a country in the first place. When you look at Vision 2030, when you look at the three things that the major tenants of that program and that vision, it lines up very closely. I thought that the synchronization was striking. And I don't know if that was something that the secretariat was aware of, but there was a great deal of consistency between what Saudi Arabia has put out as goals for themselves as a country, and a lot of the discussion ongoing in terms of this particular G20 leaders' summit.

Abdullah Hassan ([24:21](#)):

Okay. No, it's a pretty good question. I mean, we have done this analysis at the end after we finished our presidency agenda, and we did find that there is a large alignment between Vision 2030 and the Saudi G20 presidency. And this is not surprising, because the global challenges pretty much are similar in many countries. You want to create jobs. You want to ensure access to opportunities. You want to bring people to the financial system, through financial inclusion. We need to basically ensure sustainability by safeguarding our planet. What is the energy mix that you need? And we are also affected by the technologies every day.

And many countries are building smart cities. In our case, in Saudi Arabia, it's a NEOM and so forth, infrastructure, is really affected by the technology and so forth. Therefore, finding a close alignment between the Vision 2030 and what we put on the table as a presidency agenda, it was not surprising, because I mean, the Saudis, they face the same challenges as other capitals in the G20 and non- G20 countries. You want to create jobs, you want to ensure sustainable environment, and you want to utilize and harness the technologies for the benefit of the people.

Lucien Zeigler ([26:07](#)):

Abdullah, I'm curious about, as you guys were organizing the G20 in March, the world was hit with a global pandemic, and as if it weren't enough to manage such a large undertaking alone, early March things started shutting down. There was a lot of uncertainty. Could you talk a little bit about how the pandemic effected your ability to organize and the decision to go ahead and hold the summit virtually?

Abdullah Hassan ([26:36](#)):

Absolutely. I mean, the World Health Organization, declared COVID-19 as a pandemic just before middle of March. We moved swiftly, and His Majesty King Salman, invited the G20 countries for an extraordinary summit that was held on March 26. So, during the summit, the leaders were really committed to addressing both the health and the economic crisis, and at that summit, they sent pretty much two messages. I can summarize them.

One, protecting life and livelihoods. This is a top priority. And second, ensuring that the economy can get back on its feet over the short term, but also ensuring having a stronger recovery over the medium term. So, these are the two messages that came out of the March 26 summit.

Abdullah Hassan ([28:07](#)):

So basically, the leaders, they injected \$5 trillion at that point of time in March into the global economy. They pretty much also injected \$21 billion to fight the pandemic, including for the development of the vaccine. And here I can mention that Saudi Arabia also took the lead by immediately contributing \$500 million to WHO. And then third is basically sending a strong message to ensure the smooth flow of vital medical supplies and agricultural products across countries. And finally, not forgetting their role as a G20 to support the low-income countries. They agreed on a debt service suspension initiative, which basically helped as you know, 73 countries for almost \$14 billion in order to ensure the availability of the resources to support the health and the financial need of those countries.

Richard Wilson ([29:25](#)):

It's actually quite striking when you outline it that way, because I felt like Saudi Arabia pivoted quickly to the new circumstance. It's going to be virtual, and obviously with the pandemic, but when you outline what came out of those initial meetings that had the G20 format as the anchor, it's something to be quite proud of.

Abdullah Hassan ([29:51](#)):

It was not easy by the way, to switch to virtually, because as you know, G20 is used to having in-person meetings, you would then negotiate a declaration. So, it was for us for new territory. How can you negotiate a leader declaration virtually? And that basically was a challenge at the beginning. And it helped us to actively engage bilaterally with the countries. So pretty much you would spend a lot of your day over the phone, given the time difference. So, you will be having calls in the morning with the Asian countries, and during the middle of the day with the Europeans. And then on the evening, you have a call with the Western hemisphere countries in order to try to basically to narrow the differences among the countries.

So, when you have a meeting, you only discuss the few remaining issues. And throughout the whole process, in order to narrow down the issues, you really need to act as an honest broker. And that, basically we continued from the beginning of the presidency, trying to narrow the differences among the countries and only call for the meeting to just resolve the few remaining issues. So, this is one of the challenges that we faced, and after we had a very successful leader summit, the remaining ministerial meetings, and also the leader summit meeting in November, we learned a lot from that experience in March 26.

Richard Wilson ([31:40](#)):

What was the most difficult issue on which to reach agreement among all your G20 participants? But if that's a plural, which I suspect it is, you can answer all of them. But if there's one that stands out in particular.

Abdullah Hassan ([31:58](#)):

I mean, first of all, the year of 2020, it was a very challenging year globally. You have a healthcare crisis; you have an economic crisis. We also elections happening in many countries. So, there are lots of moving parts at the same time, but what you have, you have a commitment from the G20 countries to deal with

the issues. Yes, there are some easier issues than another, but as long as you continue to have the dialogue among the G20 countries, you are able to reach a consensus.

So, for example, I mean, climate is not an easy issue for many, many, many countries. And in the previous years, for example, when it comes to the climate, you would also find some divergent views when it comes to agreeing on a language for a Paris Agreement and so forth.

Abdullah Hassan ([33:04](#)):

In our presidency, during the act of engagement from all countries, because they really felt this was a critical issue, and they wanted to reach a consensus. We were able to reach one consensus paragraph that is related to the Paris Agreement that shows the commitment for all countries to it. Yes, so there are difficulties that happen through the process, but at the end of the day, the commitment of the countries to reach a consensus, that's what helped us a lot to reach the end point.

Richard Wilson ([33:42](#)):

So, you talked about, Riyadh being a stretch of the track between Osaka and Italy. What advice would you give to your Italian counterparts as they prepare for their G20 summit in October next month?

Abdullah Hassan ([34:05](#)):

I mean, some of the countries in the G20, they have been holding presidencies before, especially the G7, but what we have promised from the beginning, even before all the presidencies, and at the beginning of our conversation, I said, there is no textbook. What we have done basically, not only with the policy aspects, but also with the operational aspects, with the logistics, with the media, we have basically all the knowledge that we accumulated along with all the analysis that was done over the history of the G20. We accumulated all of these in a handbook, and basically, we give it to the future G20 presidency. This is what we have done. We felt it's our responsibility. We have accumulated so much knowledge, and we really want to pass it to the next presidency.

Richard Wilson ([35:08](#)):

And domestically at home, what's the legacy for Saudi Arabia, as you said at the very beginning, you essentially went at this with a blank slate. So, you built it all from scratch. What's left behind?

Abdullah Hassan ([35:30](#)):

I would say one thing, those who work on the G20, which many of them, by the way, are youth. This is the human capital that will be left, that's already been left, after the G20 that will continue to sharpen their skills in terms of policy, negotiation, event planning, and so forth. This is the long-lasting policies, because those people who work at the G20, now they are in a different part of the government, executing the government vision for the future, Vision 2030. So those people, they acquire unique international skills that now they are able to put it into place in order to execute domestic policies that will take the country to a higher level of the future.

Lucien Zeigler ([36:34](#)):

How do you feel like you personally grew from this experience? I mean, you left the IMF, you came back to the IMF, there was this period there where you did a patriotic duty, frankly, for your country. What is one thing that you would take away from the experience personally, that you really liked and that will live with you forever?

Abdullah Hassan ([36:56](#)):

That the world is more complex than you think. Yes, I mean, economics is a fascinating area. It helps you to know lots of issues, but when you get into the G20, it's not only about economics. You would find lots of emphasis on two things. One, in the social economic issues - health, employment, jobs, the climate, and all of that. So, this basically helps you to nurture yourself and to be able to deeply understand how issues are really interconnected.

And second is the political aspect and the commitment of the members to discuss the issues openly, to debate them, and then to reach an agreement. This journey is pretty fascinating. I thoroughly believe that those who engage in the G20 experience a unique experience in their life, because it's likely to happen once in your lifetime or in your career and it's really worth it.