



THE G20 SUMMIT IN RIYADH

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On November 21, Saudi Arabian aircraft flew over Riyadh to mark the start of the G20 Leaders' Summit. For the Kingdom, hosting this year's summit- the first by an Arab nation- was supposed to be a white wash event- a release from the shadows cast by denunciations of Jamal Khashoggi's murder in 2018 as well as various human rights accusations over the years. However, due to the ongoing Covid-19 contagion, the summit was limited to a virtual two-day showcase of digital diplomacy. This was the second online G20 summit under the Kingdom's presidency following an emergency summit held in March.

The Group of 20 nations was formed in 1999 in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008/2009. The G20 member states are Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States and the European Union (EU). The organization's presidency circulates among five groups of countries, with one country in each group holding the position at a time. Saudi Arabia – which is grouped with Canada, Australia and the United States, was named president in December 2019.

In addition to the G20 members, guest nations are also invited to partake in the summit. This year, the meeting was attended by Spain, Jordan, Singapore and Switzerland. Multilateral Organizations which are partners to the G20's work also attend the meeting. Examples include the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Labor Organization (ILO), the International

Monetary Fund (IMF), the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank Group (WBG). This year, regional organizations including the Arab Monetary Fund (AMF), the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), and the United Arab Emirates the Chair of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) were also present.¹ In tandem, the members of G20 make up almost 80% of global economic output, approximately 75% of all global trade, and nearly 67% of the world's population.²

This year's G20 theme was 'Realizing Opportunities of the 21st Century for All'. The virtual meet was dominated by calls to end Covid-19 and stop an economic crisis. Environmental issues were also high on the list. Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdul Aziz's inaugural address centered on the impacts of the coronavirus. He called 2020 an 'exceptional year' in which the world has encountered an 'unprecedented shock'. King Salman appealed to the leaders to not only increase their efforts to provide uninhibited access to Covid-19 treatments but also support economies of developing nations which had been beset by the economic consequences of the virus.³ In conjuncture with the main summit, a side event called 'Pandemic Preparedness and Response' was also held where the G20 leaders restated calls for concerted efforts to counter the effects of Covid-19.

The final communique presaged G20 achievements which included an offer of providing debt relief to developing nations along with a commitment to ensure equitable access to coronavirus treatments. It also indexed the difficult challenges which economies were now up against. The leaders of the Group of 20 nations said that they would communally spend more than \$5 trillion towards safeguarding the global economy from the bearings of the pandemic and help hasten a revival. The pledge was the largest the G20 partners have made since the global economic crisis of 2008 and 2009.⁴

G20 leaders also said they were dedicated to fulfill the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) including its continuation through June 2021. This would freeze bilateral debt payments and thus allow poor countries to focus their assets towards combating the effects of the virus as well as upholding the livelihoods of millions of vulnerable people. The G20 debt relief initiative - launched in

¹ "G20 Participants", *G20 Riyadh Summit*. <https://g20.org/en/about/Pages/Participants.aspx>

² "What is the G20?", *G20 Riyadh Summit*. <https://g20.org/en/about/Pages/whatis.aspx>

³ "Full transcript of Saudi Arabia's King Salman address to the G20 Riyadh Summit", *Al Arabiya*, November 21, 2020. <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2020/11/21/Full-transcript-of-Saudi-Arabia-s-King-Salman-address-to-the-G20-Riyadh-Summit>

⁴ "Full text of the G20 leaders final communique at the end of the G20 Riyadh Summit", *Al Arabiya*, November 22, 2020. <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2020/11/22/Full-text-of-the-G20-leaders-final-communique-at-the-end-of-the-G20-Riyadh-Summit>

May, 2020 - has so far helped 46 of 73 eligible countries, suspended \$5.7 billion in 2020 debt service payments, and freeing up funds for countries to fight the pandemic and sustain their economies.⁵

All G20 governments also conscripted to the proclamation's approach regarding supporting multilateral trading arrangements, commitments to pursue an agreement on international taxation of multinationals in the first six months of 2021, and pledges to work to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss.

However, the absence of both entreaties presented by UN Secretary General, António Guterres, a day prior to the summit, from the final declaration highlights areas where the G20 has fallen short. At a news conference, the Secretary General had highlighted that almost \$28 billion critical funding is needed including \$4.2 billion before the end of the year to ensure mass manufacturing, procurement and delivery of the Covid-19 vaccine. He also said that debt relief being offered by the G20 should be extended to middle-income countries which are in dire need of assistance.⁶

US President Trump's clear indifference during the meeting cast a pall on proceedings since he offered no commitment to expand availability of US vaccines. He also waved off global climate change efforts citing these were intended to 'kill the American economy'.⁷

All in all, the communiqué showcased little breakthroughs beyond the usual calls for global cooperation. The summit also highlighted how, unless all countries are on board, lack of coordination prevails and creates difficulties in carrying out various agendas.

The Saudi Crown Prince in his concluding remarks asserted that appertaining to the success of the Saudi experience in hosting summits in both March and November, two annual G20 meets should be held from now onwards.⁸ The next G20 summit will now be held in Italy.

⁵ "G20 receives 46 debt relief applications as countries fight Covid-19 pandemic", *The National*, September 26, 2020. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/g20-receives-46-debt-relief-applications-as-countries-fight-covid-19-pandemic-1.1083558>

⁶ "Press Conference by Secretary-General prior to G20 Summit," *UN Audiovisual Library*, November 20, 2020. <https://www.unmultimedia.org/avlibrary/asset/2584/2584837/>

⁷ "At G-20 Summit, Trump Says Paris Climate Accord Was 'Designed To Kill U.S. Economy'", *Forbes*, November 22, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sarahhansen/2020/11/22/at-g-20-summit-trump-says-paris-climate-accord-was-designed-to-kill-us-economy/?sh=415895b03f12>

⁸ "G20 Riyadh Summit: Closing Remarks of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud," *G20 Riyadh Summit*, November 22, 2020. https://g20.org/en/media/Documents/G20%20Riyadh%20Summit_Closing%20Remarks_EN.pdf