

# Beehive

Middle East Social Media



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## **G20 in Riyadh: Saudi Arabia's Global Moment**

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Last November, Saudi Arabia hosted the fifteenth summit of the Group of Twenty (G20). The G20 is an important international economic forum, in which 19 governments and the European Union participate. This year, the summit was for the first time hosted in an Arab capital, and Riyadh saw it as a unique opportunity to present itself to the world. Despite this, the event was overshadowed by the global Coronavirus pandemic and criticism of Saudi Arabia's poor human rights record. Moreover, the current presidential transition in the US, following Joe Biden's

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victory in the recent elections, added an additional layer of complexity, in light of the potential implications of a Biden Administration for US-Saudi relations.

The summit, which took place during November 21-22, was heavily affected by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, both in its format and substance: for the first time, the summit was held virtually, instead of physically. The Saudi Kingdom undoubtedly awaited the opportunity to host the summit in person and showcase the new Riyadh under Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman to the world, but notwithstanding this logistical constraint, some Saudi social media users hailed the event and commended the country for hosting it under these difficult circumstances. For instance, one Saudi academic described it as an exceptional summit, “successfully organized by an exceptional country during an unprecedented pandemic,”<sup>1</sup> while another Saudi female user tweeted: [I am] “proud to be Saudi.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, many Saudis considered the summit as an opportunity to present their vision of today’s Saudi Arabia to the world. As part of this effort, social media accounts in English and Arabic promoted the hashtags “We inspire the world.”<sup>3</sup> In one popular tweet, the Saudi commentator Ali al-Harbi stated that “#WeInspireTheWorld with our vision for the future, our wise leaders, and the ambition of our nation.”<sup>4</sup> Following the conclusion of the summit, the Saudi journalist Muhammad al-Rashed claimed that “today every Saudi man and Saudi woman has the right to say yes, s/he inspired and dazzled the world.”<sup>5</sup> This message, which included the Arabic-language hashtag “we inspired the world in our summit,” was retweeted more than 900 times.

In addition to the above-mentioned international focus, which aimed to stress the country’s vibrancy to a global audience, the online discourse on the summit was

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<sup>1</sup> [@bajammal](#), *Twitter*, 21 November 2020; accessed 20 December 2020.

<sup>2</sup> [@aqua\\_madam](#), *Twitter*, 22 November 2020; accessed 20 December 2020.

<sup>3</sup> [https://twitter.com/hashtag/بقتنا\\_العالم\\_نلهم](https://twitter.com/hashtag/بقتنا_العالم_نلهم); <https://twitter.com/hashtag/WeInspireTheWorld>, *Twitter*; accessed 20 December 2020.

<sup>4</sup> [@alialharbi60](#), *Twitter*, 21 November 2020; accessed 20 December 2020.

<sup>5</sup> [@mohd\\_al\\_rashed](#), *Twitter*, 22 November 2020; accessed 20 December 2020.

also another instance to express Saudis' nationalist sentiment and their allegiance to and pride in the country's leadership by Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman. As part of this trend, one Saudi account commented during the last day of the summit "We lead the world."<sup>6</sup> Posting in Arabic, one popular tweet thanked King Salman and Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman, asking Allah to preserve the two leaders.<sup>7</sup> Another Saudi user posted a photo of King Salman with the logo of the G20 summit and the phrase "our leadership inspires the world,"<sup>8</sup> while another posted images of the King and the Crown Prince and professed his love for God and afterwards for his country.<sup>9</sup>



"Our leadership inspires the world" (see note n. 8).

<sup>6</sup> [@wfuzaiia](#), *Twitter*, 22 November 2020; accessed 20 December 2020.

<sup>7</sup> [@mmuhanad197](#), *Twitter*, 23 November 2020; accessed 20 December 2020.

<sup>8</sup> [@inspirethewld](#), *Twitter*, 23 November 2020; accessed 20 December 2020.

<sup>9</sup> [@AFS\\_alzahrani](#), *Twitter*, 22 November 2020; accessed 20 December 2020.

Besides this discourse of praise, the event was also criticized by Western commentators and human rights groups for legitimizing Saudi Arabia's human rights violations. The day before the summit started, human rights activist Rebecca Vincent criticized the Saudi government's attempt to brand the summit as inspiring to the world, recalling the killing and dismemberment of Saudi journalist and regime critic Jamal Khashoggi, which Muhammad Bin Salman is widely considered responsible for the jailing of journalists, as well as the Kingdom's low ranking in the World Press Freedom Index.<sup>10</sup> In the same vein, Human Rights Watch called on Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to challenge Saudi Arabia at the summit over "its staggering rights abuses;"<sup>11</sup> and Amnesty International similarly called on the British government to pressure Saudi Arabia for releasing female human rights activists jailed in the Kingdom.<sup>12</sup> While some of these messages were retweeted and "liked" hundreds of times, they seem to have had little impact on the more general conversation on social media on the summit.

The G20 summit occurred in a delicate moment for Saudi Arabia, as the Kingdom, the region, and the world continue to deal with the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, and as President Trump's term comes close to its end. Given this context, Riyadh's hosting of the event aimed to show that Saudi Arabia can play an active role in world affairs; that the Kingdom can work with President-elect Biden on issues of mutual concern. While the summit faced an expected backlash from human rights groups and activists, the enthusiastic responses by Saudi users on social media showed the excitement among large parts of the Saudi public regarding the event. Social media discourse in the Gulf is considered to be heavily manipulated by state-run bots, including by Saudi Arabia. According to a New York Times report from 2018, the Kingdom has created its own Twitter army to harass critics and censor public debate critical of the country.<sup>13</sup> This has only worsened

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<sup>10</sup> [@rebecca\\_vincent](#), *Twitter*, 20 November 2020; accessed 20 December 2020.

<sup>11</sup> [@hrw](#), *Twitter*, 18 November 2020; accessed 20 December 2020.

<sup>12</sup> [@AmnestyUK](#), *Twitter*, 20 November 2020; accessed 20 December 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Katie Benner, Mark Mazzetti, Ben Hubbard and Mike Isaac, "[Saudis' Image Makers: A Troll Army and a Twitter Insider](#)," *The New York Times*, 20 October 2018; accessed 20 December 2020.

since the start of the Gulf Crisis (2017-present), during which various Gulf regimes have used social media to spread propaganda and tarnish their regional rivals.<sup>14</sup> However, even if some of the fanfare around the event was created by bots, genuine enthusiasm by the Saudi public over the Kingdom's hosting of the G20 should not be dismissed out of hand.

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<sup>14</sup> Andrew Leber and Alexei Abrahams, "[A Storm of Tweets: Social Media Manipulation During the Gulf Crisis](#)," *Review of Middle East Studies*, vol. 53, no. 2 (December 2019), pp. 241-258; accessed 20 December 2020.