

## HASSAN DIAB – INTERVIEW WRITE-UP

Hassan Bahaeddine Diab is a Lebanese academic, engineer, educationalist, professor, executive, and politician who was appointed by President Michel Aoun on December 19, 2019, to serve as the 26<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister of Lebanon. While his premiership was relatively brief (January 2020 to September 2021) he strived throughout his term to lead Lebanon towards achieving positive change based on national interest principles and ethical governance. Prior to his premiership, he also served as the Minister of Education and Higher Education (June 2011 – February 2014).

Amid civil unrest following the Port of Beirut explosion in 2020 and due to his sense of ethical responsibility, Hassan resigned as Prime Minister. However, given the deep political divide and politicians' inability to promptly form a cabinet due to the grave economic and social conditions prevailing in the country, he continued to serve as caretaker Prime Minister for over 13 months (a record time in Lebanon's history at the time) until Najib Mikati formed a new government on September 10, 2021.

### LEADER ADMIRE

*'Focus not on ego but on what can be achieved.'*

Nelson Mandela, his drive for peace, forgiveness, freedom and his five lessons for change, i.e., 'Passion produces perseverance', 'Expect change to be messy', 'Forgiveness is key to focusing forward', 'End 'right' versus 'being right'; and the fifth lesson, 'Change begins from the inside-out', being especially meaningful. What truly counts emphasized by Mandela as 'being the change' and making a difference to the lives of others. His reminder that the world can be a better place, but only if we work together, resonating as a call for global leadership learning and action.

### UNDERSTANDING EQ

*'There is a need to change from 'inside out' and be human before anything else.'*

An understanding of EQ was referenced by the four core competencies defined by Daniel Goleman: Self-awareness, Self-management, Social Awareness and Relationship Management. These attributes require an understanding and management of your own emotions, as well as recognition of and influence on the emotions of those around you. According to Hassan, the requirements for 'entry level' executive position is having not only sufficient intellectual and technical ability, but also a high degree of emotional intelligence.

### SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP TRAITS

*'Effective leadership means having moral authority rather than formal authority'*

The paramount influence of effective leadership is having moral authority, rather than formal authority over others. The traits of a powerful and successful leader highlighted by Hassan are the following:

- Having a clear vision to achieve one's purpose
- Prioritizing goals and being accountable for their achievement
- Acting strategically to achieve long term benefit
- Being an effective communicator – judging when to talk and when to listen
- Managing complexity and problem solving in rapidly changing circumstances
- Fostering creativity and innovation

## **HASSAN DIAB – INTERVIEW WRITE-UP**

- Promoting and building effective teamwork
- Having learning agility in changing circumstances, and seizing opportunities within differing contexts

Recognizing that people are hardwired as both rational and emotional beings, an important point of emphasis was noted to use the power of emotions constructively. Moreover, the increasing relevance of multi-cultural environments requires a leadership ability to cross divides and have an understanding of differing perceptions.

### **EQ LEADERSHIP ABSENCE – NATIONAL & GLOBAL**

*'The world is dehumanizing humanity'*

Hassan's shared reflection "*I believe that much of humanity needs re-humanizing as I feel many people have lost the core values of humanity, mainly loving and extending our understanding and compassion to others that are different from us*", resonates with the core values of emotional intelligence and its significance to being an effective leader. What was also noted is that while globalization has several positives in many ways, it threatens the dilution of cultural richness and that cultural intuition across divides is needed for effective leadership.

While it's never been more central to the cultural discussion, inspiring and emotionally intelligent leadership was referenced as being mostly absent in both national and global politics. Leaders' primary role requirements of conveying a compelling vision, managing complexity, promoting teamwork, and having learning agility, were however noted as being diluted by several leaders relating to their moral authority because they had limited EQ.

### **THE DISASTER OF LEADERSHIP MISMANAGEMENT**

Lebanon was cited as being a small country with huge challenges that had been subjected to crises and disaster resulting from decades of mismanagement (1990-2020), with these mishandled years preceded by 15 years of civil war (1975-1990). Hassan took over as an independent Prime Minister in December 2019 when Lebanon had reached breakdown point at the financial, economic, social, as well as political levels, and when many of its problems that were later transparently exposed by Hassan's cabinet, had been hidden or carefully concealed by previous administrations.

The need for a national recovery plan was paramount, including dealing with a 'black hole' of missing dollars, starting with \$69 billion in the central bank, requiring banking system reform and a restructuring of unprecedented national debt (\$93 billion in January 2020). Escalating unrest influenced by social media, the exponential rise in unemployment, the 50% of Lebanese families in poverty, and the two million plus displaced Syrian and Palestinian refugees being other significant political factors that needed forward-looking reform. Political leadership and management and the national scenario were, however, compounded by the unprecedented deep vertical political divide between political parties during 2020 and 2021, which crippled the approval by parliament of many draft laws submitted by the cabinet such as capital control, lifting banking secrecy, anticorruption laws, etc.

## HASSAN DIAB – INTERVIEW WRITE-UP

### THE PRIME MINISTER IS THE COUNTRY'S CEO

*'My independence scared politicians on either side.'*

Hassan defined that being Prime Minister is comparable with being a country's Chief Executive Officer and means having the accountability which goes with the role. Accordingly, Hassan accepted the role as it was an opportunity to take an active part in tackling the significant issues that his beloved country was facing. His independent stance was however seen as unnerving by other politicians on both sides of the political fence, including the establishment of the first truly technocrat cabinet, especially when he intensified his war on anticorruption.

Although Hassan was aware of a degree of corruption as well as the different social and financial issues that Lebanon faced, on becoming Prime Minister, *'Pandora's box'* opened, described by Hassan as *'having a multiplication of problems that exploded in my face!'* And while Lebanon's numerous religions and many ethnicities were noted as resulting in a richly multicultural society, this multiculturalism was, unfortunately occasionally exploited by some politicians to the country's detriment.

*'Focus on national best interest.'*

Hassan's lengthiest experience of being in government was in his role as Minister of Education and Higher Education (2011-14), a role that supported his unwavering passion for and belief in the importance of education. The only reason for taking on the additional responsibility involved by becoming Prime Minister was seeing the opportunity to play an active role and have a wider influence towards achieving benefits for his country, at a time when the October 2019 revolution was calling for an independent technocrat prime minister.

Despite some politically-driven protest at his appointment, Hassan's speech as Prime Minister designate referenced the conscience of the country with a plea for betterment, stating *'I call on Lebanese in all squares and all areas to be partners in a national workshop of reform.'* While others in the government's ruling elite knew more about what was going on, Hassan underlined that he felt strong by not posing a threat to others because he didn't want anything for himself but wanted everything for his country; his focus being not on geographical, religious, or other political dimensions but on national best interest. And while some may not have liked him because he was not *'obedient'*, not being a millionaire or driven by financial gain, meant that he didn't have pecuniary rivals.

The cabinet that Hassan formed, intentionally had no ministers with political party affiliation, and 50% of his cabinet were academics and all were technocrats. He also referenced that his Deputy Prime Minister and one third of his cabinet was female, for the first time, not only in the history of Lebanon but the region, which spans 22 countries. The inevitable challenges to the changes Hassan promulgated with his betterment agenda, meant that change was described as *'messy'*. Despite some hoping for his resignation after less than a month, Hassan maintained focus on his national best interest agenda. It was, nevertheless, described as being an extremely tough period that faced an unprecedented number of crises.

Engagement with Hassan inevitably referenced the devastating explosion on August 4, 2020 during his time as Prime Minister, when a large amount of ammonium nitrate stored at the Port of Beirut seven years before that date exploded causing catastrophic and tragic outcomes of widespread death and destruction. While Hassan had no responsibility for

## HASSAN DIAB – INTERVIEW WRITE-UP

what happened as the explosion was the result of the long term (seven years) unthinkable egregiously mismanagement that preceded it, mounting political pressure and anger against the Lebanese government meant that being the country's Prime Minister he felt that ethically he should resign. The unprecedented number of crises that Hassan's government faced in 6 months of its full-fledged rule was followed by another 13 months in a caretaking capacity after his resignation; an unprecedented number of political tsunamis and social tornadoes in Lebanese, and even global, history. This included deep vertical political divide, Eurobond payment default, escalation of Lebanese/US dollar exchange rate (from 1,515 to around 40,000) which devalued the Lebanese Lira by over 85% in less than a year and a half starting August 2019, financial and banking system breakdown, the need for restructuring national debt, the need for restructuring the Lebanese banking system, the need for restructuring the Lebanese Central Bank, the need for a rescue reform national plan, social upheaval, record high unemployment rate, record high poverty rate, COVID-19 pandemic, Beirut Port explosion, etc.

### EDUCATION IS MY PASSION

*'The world speaks of peace, but we educate for negative competition which is the beginning of all wars.'*

Hassan's belief in and commitment to education was underlined, with emphasis on education being at the heart of progress of societies not only at the technology level but more importantly at the social level. His fervent belief is that education should develop graduates that become leaders and instill positive change by indoctrinating for cooperation and helping others, for solidarity and educating for peace.

*'Develop global citizens with both soft skills and technical expertise.'*

Hassan referenced his philosophy by stating that education goes beyond career development to the development of students' mental capacities. These capacities include:

- Distinguishing facts from opinions
- Being creative and critical
- Appreciating diversity
- Believing in equality
- Embracing others

Accordingly, education should not only provide pedagogical instruction but also influence attitudinal reform. It should connect language, culture, and moral values to reshape the learner's identity, encourage free thinking and responsible citizenship, thus facilitating social unity and preparing the new generations for the social, political, and economic development of their countries. Hassan's citation also noted that new teaching methodologies are no longer only about transferring knowledge. They are about promoting analysis, synthesis, entrepreneurship, and innovation skills. They are about creating global citizens that have the necessary "breadth" (or soft skills) as well as "depth" (or hard skills) in specialization in a dynamic rapidly changing world and emerging markets.

Transformation of education as the enabler of change in our social systems, not only with respect to technology but also to produce global citizens that promote multi-cultural and multi-religious tolerance, was stressed by Hassan as perhaps being one of many parameters that will influence the future of our world. Equally important, developing and

## HASSAN DIAB – INTERVIEW WRITE-UP

maintaining a country's wealth and empowering the youth to achieve prosperity and peace lie in staying and building their country's future.

### **BUILDING INTERDEPENDENCE**

*'Individual prime ministers' personalities, leadership styles and political skills matter and make a difference.'*

Hassan referenced that his cabinet, unlike previous others, had excellent relationships between its members and that interdependence was a key element of this. Lebanon's politically unique multi religious, ethnically and multiculturally diverse and rich society had however unfortunately been occasionally misused by some politicians to the detriment of the country. His aim when Prime Minister was to steer away from political concerns and seek to develop solutions, having a 'door always open' policy for others to connect and engage in meaningful debate. A particular test of leadership noted being the relevance of how you treat colleagues that disagree rather than agree with you and the importance of avoiding "sheep" mentality.

Interdependence, or mutual dependence, was noted by Hassan as being part of our lives in every respect including in the context of political leadership. He also highlighted that interdependence is ubiquitous and often central across comparative politics. Ways to effectively manage international teams were suggested as requiring the following:

- Openly acknowledge and build on cultural differences by promoting diversity initiatives and leveraging a diverse skill set
- Transparent and recurrent communication
- Establish trust and delineate core team values
- Ensure inclusion and engagement
- Build trust among team members

Hassan referenced his use of intuition as a leader, with a belief that this happened on many occasions. While change is messy, he noted that with EQ, negative impact can be reduced, and fewer mistakes are likely to be made. His personal experience of political leadership has been exponential; focused decision-making means however that once a decision is made, it's important to go ahead.

### **ADVICE TO YOUNGER SELF**

*'Two things will define you in life: your determination when you have nothing and your attitude when you have everything.'*

- Look for four things in a person: intelligence, energy, loyalty and integrity. If they don't have the last two, don't even bother with the first two.
- Include EQ development for leaders in the education system.
- Equip young people to become leaders and change agents.

A final thought reiterated Hassan's 'Education is key' conviction, and reference to leadership being about 'Creating leaders not followers.'