Cop28 host UAE has world's biggest climate-busting oil plans, data indicates

State oil company's huge expansion plans make its CEO's role as president of UN climate summit 'ridiculous', say researchers

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The Ruwais refinery and petrochemical complex, operated by Adnoc in the United Arab Emirates. Photograph: Bloomberg/Getty Images

The state oil company of the United Arab Emirates, whose CEO will preside over imminent UN climate negotiations, has the largest net-zero-busting expansion plans of any company in the world, according to new data.

Sultan Al Jaber is the chief executive of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (Adnoc) and president of the Cop28 summit, which begins on 30 November. The researchers behind the new data said Adnoc's huge planned expansion of oil and gas production was a clear conflict of interest and they said his position was "ridiculous".

At Cop28, nations will attempt to agree to cut fossil fuel use and triple renewable energy. The summit comes at the end of a year in which global temperatures have soared, intense impacts of extreme weather have wrecked lives and there have been repeated warnings that the world already has plans to exploit far more fossil fuel reserves than can safely be burned.

The president of the upcoming COP28 climate change summit, Sultan Al Jaber. Photograph: Ryan Lim/AFP/Getty Images

The data is from the Global Oil and Gas Exit List (Gogel), a public database detailing the activities of more than 1,600 companies representing 95% of global production. The data shows that almost all companies are ignoring warnings from climate scientists that new oil and gas fields cannot be developed if global temperature rise is to be kept to the internationally agreed 1.5C limit. It also shows that:

- $140bn has been spent by the industry on exploration for new oil and gas reserves since 2021.
- 96% of the 700 companies that explore or develop new oil and gas fields are continuing to do so.
- More than 1,000 companies are planning new gas pipelines, gas-fired power plants or liquified natural gas (LNG) export terminals.

The UN warned last week that fossil fuel producers were planning expansions that would blow the planet's carbon budget twice over. Experts called the plans "insanity" and said they "throw humanity's future into question". A long

series of scientific studies has concluded that most existing oil, gas and coal reserves need to remain in the ground to tackle the climate emergency but major fossil fuel companies and petrostates have yet to stop exploring for more.

Revealed: the ‘carbon bombs’ set to trigger catastrophic climate breakdown

“The magnitude of the industry’s expansion plans is truly frightening,” said Nils Bartsch, head of oil and gas research at the NGO Urgewald, which produces Gogel along with partners. “To keep 1.5C alive, a speedy, managed decline in oil and gas production is vital. Instead, oil and gas companies are building a bridge to climate chaos.”

Bartsch criticised the dual role of Al Jaber. “I think it’s ridiculous. I’m not sure how a person that’s responsible for this kind of oil and gas expansion is fit to lead the climate negotiations. It is the most obvious conflict of interest there can be,” he said.

An Adnoc spokesperson said: “The data and assumptions in this report about Adnoc are incorrect and misleading.” The company did not provide its own figure for its planned expansion of oil and gas production.

The spokesperson said: “With a growing global population seeking universal access to energy, all current energy transition scenarios, including by the IEA

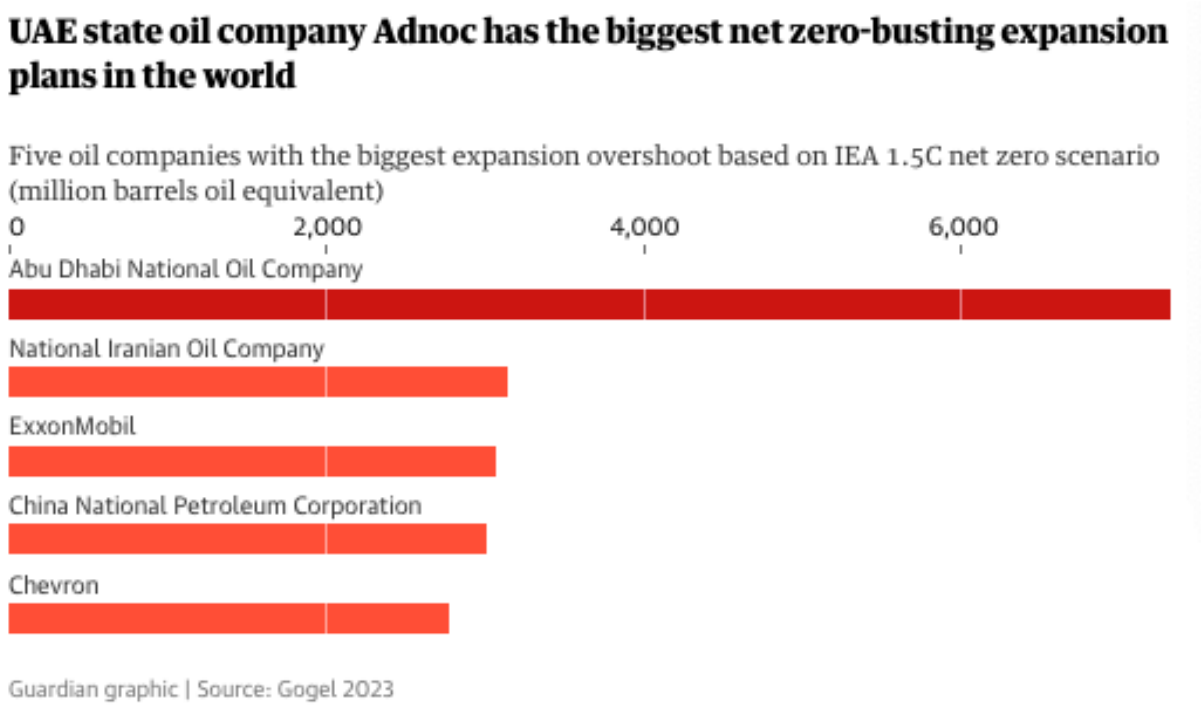
[International Energy Agency], acknowledge that oil and gas will be needed to meet future energy demand. Adnoc produces some of the world's least carbon-intensive oil and gas."

Al Jaber is also the chair of the UAE's renewables company Masdar and is the nation's climate envoy. His appointment to run Cop28 has been criticised by politicians and campaigners. Some figures have supported him, including the US climate envoy, John Kerry, and Al Jaber has said his knowledge of the energy business is an advantage. The Cop28 office did not respond to a request for comment.

'I wasn't the obvious choice': meet the oil man tasked with saving the planet

The Gogel database is built using information from Rystad, the industry standard data provider. The researchers used the latest net zero scenario from the IEA to calculate the overshoot in each company's oil and gas expansion plans.

The IEA scenario sets out a feasible path to net zero emissions by 2050 that is consistent with keeping global heating to below 1.5C. No new oil and gas production can occur after 2023 in this scenario, so plans for production after this date overshoot the scenario. On this basis, Adnoc has the biggest expansion plans that are incompatible with the 1.5C limit.



Previous analysis, revealed by the Guardian in April, showed Adnoc having the third biggest net-zero-busting plans, after Saudi Aramco and QatarEnergy. That was based on an earlier IEA scenario.

Adnoc has more planned expansion due to be approved after 2023 than other companies and is therefore top in the updated analysis.

Politico revealed recently that Adnoc was delaying a competition for drilling leases until after Cop28, according to a leaked internal document.

The other companies in the top three for overshoots of 1.5C are the National Iranian Oil Company and ExxonMobil.

The IEA's new 2023 scenario requires a sharper annual fall in oil and gas production than before and also includes future stranded assets for the first time, ie oil and gas facilities that have to be shut down before the end of their economic lifetime in order to meet climate goals.

The companies that spent billions of dollars from 2021 to 2023 on exploration were led by China's CNPC and CNOOC, followed by Saudi Aramco and Pemex, Mexico's state-owned oil company.

The Gogel database also shows companies are planning to increase global LNG export capacity by 162%, despite analysis suggesting the fuel may be more polluting than coal. The expansion is led by the US, with 21 new LNG export facilities planned along the Gulf coast accounting for 41% of global LNG export expansion. Much of the gas will come from fracking in the Permian Basin.

Capturing Cop28 chief's oil firm emissions would take centuries – study

Analysis deems technology promoted by Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber 'dangerous red herring'

Matthew Taylor

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Campaigners are concerned Al Jaber will use Cop28 to promote technical solutions instead of pushing for rapid reductions in emissions. Photograph: Ryan Lim/AFP/Getty Images

Climate-wrecking emissions produced by the oil company of the Cop28 president, Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber, would take hundreds of years to remove using the carbon capture technology he has been promoting.

With just weeks to go until the crucial Cop28 climate summit, Al Jaber, who is the boss of United Arab Emirate oil company Adnoc, has been backing carbon capture as one solution to the climate crisis.

But analysis by Global Witness has found it would take the company 343 years to capture all the CO2 emissions it will produce in just the next six years.

Jonathan Noronha Gant from Global Witness said the findings proved carbon capture was “a dangerous red herring” that would do nothing to tackle the climate crisis.

“Sultan Al Jaber’s Cop is shaping up to be the Cop of false solutions, inundated by fossil fuel lobbyists pushing empty promises. If Al Jaber is serious – if we are serious – we must immediately reject the CCS [carbon capture and storage] false solution and tackle the existential oil and gas problem head on.”

The research, based on production data from industry analysts Rystad, found that between 2023 and 2030 Adnoc’s oil and gas would produce an estimated 3,430m tonnes of carbon, including emissions from producing and burning fossil fuels.

By 2030, the company has pledged to increase the amount of carbon it captures to 10m tonnes per annum – a big jump from its current level. But even if it reaches that target, it would still take the company more than 340 years to capture the carbon it produces between now and 2030.

Noronha Gant said: “Carbon capture is a dangerous red herring, and Al Jaber need to look no further than his own oil company for proof.”

Campaigners are concerned that Al Jaber is going to use the Cop28, which starts next month in the United Arab Emirates, to promote technical solutions instead of pushing for large and rapid reductions in fossil fuel production and emissions.

In May this year he said: “If we are serious about curbing industrial emissions, we need to get serious about carbon capture technologies.”

Earlier this year, the Guardian revealed that the United Arab Emirates has the third biggest expansion plans for oil and gas in the world – surpassed only by Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

And as the climate crisis accelerates, with 2023 on course to be the hottest year on record, there has been widespread criticism of UAE as the host nation for Cop28 and of Al Jaber as president.

Greta Thunberg called it “completely ridiculous” for him to take the role. A fellow youth climate justice organiser, Eric Njuguna from Kenya, called it “a stab in the back for poor countries to have a fossil fuel CEO on top of efforts to constrain the climate crisis”.

Campaigners have long rejected CCSas a climate solution, arguing it is being used by fossil fuel companies to claim they are cleaning up their act, while expanding their fossil fuel operations and pumping millions of tonnes of carbon into the atmosphere with devastating consequences.

In the US, a large percentage of CCS projects have failed, and a study in 2021 found that even among those that were successful, 81% of the carbon captured was actually used to produce more fossil fuels, as it was pumped underground to force out oil and gas.

In response to today’s findings, Adnoc said it had “taken significant steps to decarbonise” its operations.

The company also said that CCS was a “critical tool in holding back emissions” and that the International Energy Agency and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change said CCS would play an “important and diverse role” in meeting climate goals.

Cop28 host UAE breaking its own ban on routine gas flaring, data shows

Exclusive: Fields run by climate summit host have burned gas near daily despite 20-year-old pledge, satellite monitoring reveals

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Flaring is the burning of extracted gas that is not captured and sold. Photograph: Alexey Solodov

State-run oil and gas fields in the United Arab Emirates have been flaring gas virtually daily despite having committed 20 years ago to a policy of zero routine flaring, the Guardian can reveal.

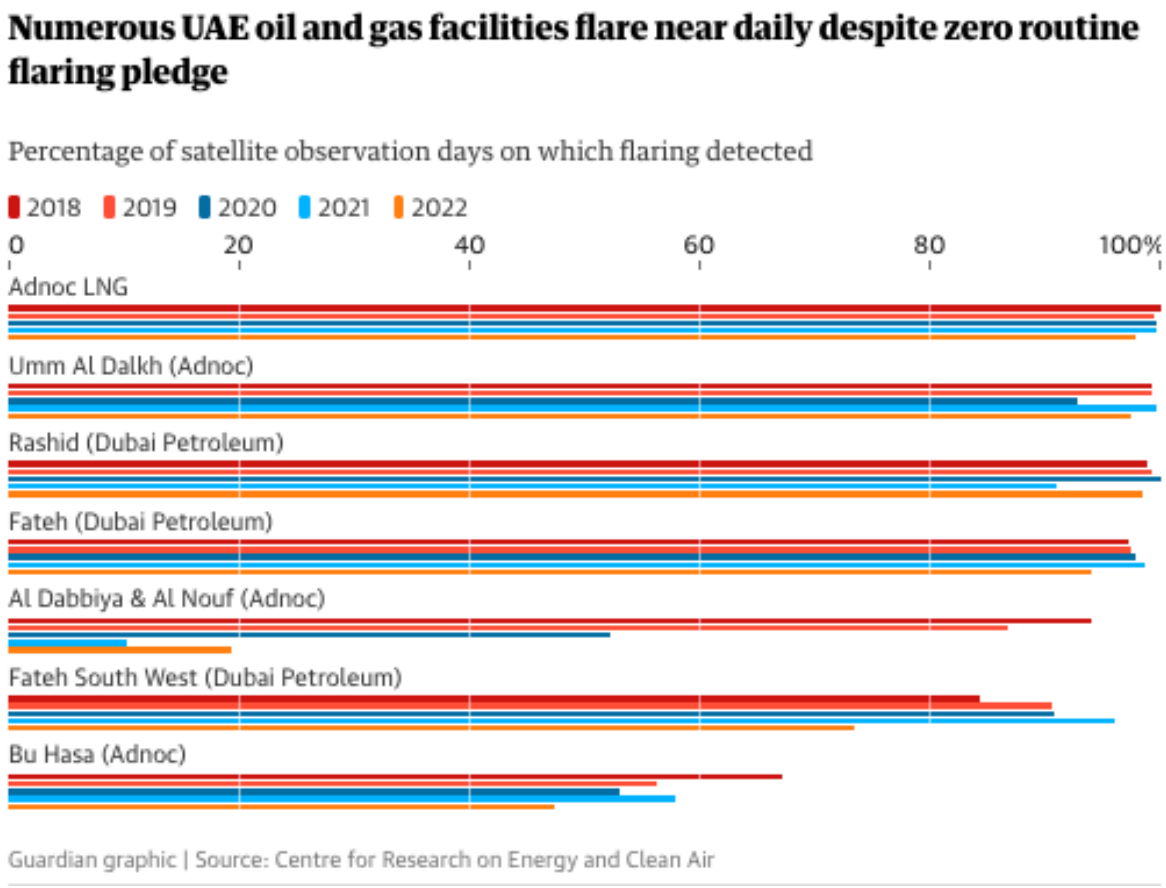
The UAE is hosting the UN Cop28 summit, which starts on 30 November, and Sultan Al Jaber, the CEO of the state oil company Adnoc, will preside over the international negotiations to urgently tackle the climate crisis.

Flaring is the burning of extracted gas that is not captured and sold, and it has been called "wasteful and polluting" by the World Bank. Flaring occurs when no equipment has been installed to capture it or when gas has to be unexpectedly released for safety reasons. Flaring also allows the escape of some unburned methane gas, which is a powerful greenhouse gas.

One field, Adnoc LNG, flared gas on more than 99% of the days monitored by satellite from 2018 to 2022, according to data produced for the Guardian by the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (Crea). One expert said this was routine flaring "by any normal definition".

The analysis assessed flaring in 32 oil and gas fields in the UAE, 20 of which are run by Adnoc. It shows four fields flared on at least 97% of the days for which data was available, which was most days as measurements were interrupted by cloud cover on only one day in five.

The World Bank runs an initiative to achieve zero routine flaring by 2030. The UAE and Adnoc are not members, though nearby states and companies are, including Bahrain and Saudi Aramco.



A spokesperson for Adnoc said the data was “misleading as satellite images may not distinguish between flaring or having a pilot flame ignited as part of normal operations”. However, several experts said pilot flames were unlikely to explain the near daily flame detections. Adnoc did not respond to a request for data on the company’s use of pilot flames.

“You wouldn’t normally see pilot flames from space,” said Dr Paul Balcombe, of Queen Mary University of London, who was not involved in producing the Crea data. “A pilot flame would have to be really big to be seen, in which case we still have a problem with large and unnecessary emissions.”

All fields will have pilot flames for safety reasons and most UAE fields do not show near daily flaring.

“Flaring of gas has a massive impact, about 1-2% of total global greenhouse gas emissions, and the vast majority of it is avoidable,” Balcombe said. “We have the technology to reduce all flaring and we can pretty much eliminate non-emergency flaring at moderate cost. The positive side is that our satellite capability for monitoring flaring and methane emissions is improving, so we are more able to hold companies to account.”

Hubert Thieriot, of Crea, who produced the flaring data, said: “As the host of the upcoming Cop28, it is critical that UAE further strengthens and respects its commitments if it wants to play a leader’s role in reducing flaring.”

Pascoe Sabido, of Corporate Europe Observatory and a co-coordinator of the Kick Big Polluters Out coalition of more than 450 organisations, said: “This data shows how meaningless oil and gas company commitments are when they’re voluntary and self-reported. The industry cannot be trusted as a partner in phasing out fossil fuels, which is why it should not be allowed into the climate talks, let alone chairing them.”

‘First mover’

Adnoc stated previously on its “minimising flaring” webpage that “implementation of a zero routine gas flaring policy, in the early 2000s, was a major milestone on our path to eliminate flaring”. The webpage stopped providing any content sometime in July or August, although the claim was repeated in a 2022 press release that is still live. Al Jaber said earlier this year that Adnoc had been a “first mover in zero routine flaring”.

Some of the UAE fields with frequent flaring are run by another state-owned company, Dubai Petroleum, which says it is committed to an aim to “minimise flaring”. Flaring usually burns gas released while drilling primarily for oil. It can also occur at LNG plants, which compress gas into a liquid for export.

Sultan Al Jaber is the Adnoc CEO and Cop28 president. Photograph: Karim Sahib/AFP/Getty Images

The data shows flaring on at least 97% of days from 2018 to 2022 from Adnoc’s LNG and Umm Al Dalkh fields, and from Dubai Petroleum’s Rashid and Fateh fields. Flaring took place on more than 50% of days in three places: Adnoc’s Al

Dabbiya and Al Nouf fields, which are close together, Adnoc's Bu Hasa field and Dubai Petroleum's Fateh South West field. All seven of these sites were in the top half of fields ranked by the volume of gas flared.

Satellite data for 2023, running to 12 October, shows a reduction in the frequency of flaring. The sites previously flaring on 97% of days dropped to flaring on 65-75% of days. For the other three fields, the decline in flaring frequency began in 2020 or 2022.

An Adnoc spokesperson said: "Adnoc's zero routine flaring policy, established over 20 years ago, is strictly focused on eliminating routine flaring. Non-routine and safety flares are essential to maintain facility integrity, ensure safe operations and prevent uncontrolled emergencies. We are committed to continuous improvement as we progressively retrofit our legacy facilities and deploy the latest technologies to further enhance our flaring performance."

'Extremely woolly'

The World Bank's definition of routine flaring is "flaring during normal oil production operations in the absence of sufficient facilities or amenable geology to re-inject the produced gas, utilise it on site or dispatch it to a market".

Two experts on flaring said the definition was "extremely lax" and "extremely woolly". One, who asked not to be named, said: "The UAE may claim they are not doing routine flaring but the data does not support their claims. By any normal definition, it is routine flaring."

The second expert said: "Effectively a company can justify whatever practice they had already within the definition. That is ridiculous."

Zubin Bamji, of the World Bank, said: "With [satellite] data we can say, with a high degree of confidence, when any of the more than 10,000 flares worldwide are active. However, typically only the operator or regulator on the ground can establish whether flaring is routine, non-routine or safety-related." He said the European Commission used the same definition of routine flaring.

Overall, the UAE has relatively low levels of flaring for a fossil fuel-producing state, ranking 27th in a World Bank list of countries ranked by flare volume from 2018 to 2022. The World Bank data shows no significant change in annual flare gas volumes in the UAE over the last decade.

Mark Davis, of Capterio, a flare gas recovery company, said: "It is excellent to see the good progress the UAE has made on flaring reduction – from 15bn cubic

metres in the 1970s to 1bn today. But within the UAE there are doubtless many opportunities to reduce flaring and improve operational performance."

Reporting failure

The UAE site flaring the most gas from 2018 to 2023 was Adnoc LNG, which led to about 2.5m tonnes of carbon dioxide entering the atmosphere. Adnoc said in 2022 that it aimed to almost double its LNG export capacity. The Guardian revealed in August that the UAE had failed to report its emissions of methane to the UN for almost a decade.

Hosting the Cop28 climate summit has focused attention on the country's environmental performance. Al Jaber recently told the 196 countries attending Cop28 that "the phasing down [of] demand for and supply of all fossil fuels is inevitable and essential". The Cop28 office and Dubai Petroleum did not respond to requests for comment on the flaring data.

Scientists are clear that exploitation of new oil and gas fields is incompatible with keeping global heating to below the 1.5C target and that most existing reserves need to stay in the ground. Data published on Wednesday shows that the UAE has the biggest net-zero-busting expansion plans of any company in the world. The Guardian revealed in June that the Cop28 office's emails were sent via Adnoc servers and had therefore been visible to the company until the Guardian raised the issue.

The Crea data was produced using publicly available data collected by the visual and infrared radiometer suite of instruments mounted on the Suomi NPP satellite. The instruments detect points of intense heat from flares.

This data was converted into flare gas volumes using a published methodology that is also used in World Bank analyses. The results were cross-checked against annual flare volume data produced by the World Bank and were in close agreement.