

COP28 clashes over fossil fuel phase-out after OPEC pushback

By Kate Abnett, Valerie Volcovici and Yousef Saba

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People walk at the Dubai's Expo City during the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, December 9, 2023. REUTERS/Thomas Mukoya [Acquire Licensing Rights](#)

- Summary
- Some members balk at fossil fuel phase-out inclusion Saudi Arabia and Russia push for focus on emissions,

not fuels Nations most affected by climate change demand its inclusion

DUBAI, Dec 9 (Reuters) - Countries clashed on Saturday over a possible agreement to phase-out fossil fuels at the COP28 summit in Dubai, jeopardising attempts to deliver a first-ever commitment to eventually end the use of oil and gas in 30 years of global warming talks.

Saudi Arabia and Russia were among several countries insisting that the conference in Dubai focus only on reducing climate pollution - and not on targeting the fossil fuels causing it, according to observers in the negotiations.

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On the other side, at least 80 countries including the United States, the European Union and many poor, climate-vulnerable nations are demanding that a COP28 deal call clearly for an eventual end to fossil fuel use.

COP28 President Sultan al-Jaber told nations late on Saturday to speed up their work to find a final deal, saying there were "still more areas of divergence than agreement".

"The window is closing to close the gaps," he told the summit.

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OPEC Secretary General Haitham Al Ghais earlier said in comments read out to the summit delegates by an official: "We need realistic approaches to tackle emissions. One that enables economic growth, helps eradicate poverty and increases resilience at the same time."

Earlier this week, the oil producer group sent a letter urging its members and allies to reject any mention of fossil fuels in the final summit deal, warning that "undue and disproportionate pressure against fossil fuels may reach a tipping point".

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It was the first time OPEC's Secretariat has intervened in the U.N. climate talks with such a letter, according to Alden Meyer of the E3G climate change think tank. "It indicates a whiff of panic," he said.

EU climate commissioner Wopke Hoekstra criticised the letter as "out of whack" with climate efforts.

"By many, including by me, that has been seen as out of whack, as unhelpful, as not in tune with where the world stands in terms of the very dramatic situation of our climate," he said.

Saudi Arabia is the top producer in OPEC and the de facto leader of the organization and Russia is a member of the so-called OPEC+ group.

By insisting on focusing on emissions rather than fossil fuels, the two countries appeared to be leaning on the promise of expensive carbon capture technology, which the U.N. climate science panel says cannot take the place of reducing fossil fuel use worldwide.

Other countries including India and China have not explicitly endorsed a fossil fuel phase-out at COP28, but have backed a popular call for boosting renewable energy.

China's top climate envoy, Xie Zhenhue, described this year's climate summit as the hardest in his career.

"I have participated in these climate negotiations for 16 years," he told journalists. "The hardest meeting is this year's. There are so many issues to settle."

He said there was little chance the summit would be called a success if nations could not agree to language on the future of fossil fuels.

India's environment minister, Bhupender Yadav, demanded "equity and justice" in any deal, holding that rich countries should be leading global climate action.

Broader diplomatic grievances were also aired at the podium on Saturday, clouding the focus on global warming.

A Russia representative said in a speech that Moscow was looking into whether some of the roughly \$300 billion in gold reserves frozen by the West after Russia invaded Ukraine could be used for a climate damage fund for developing countries.

Meanwhile, China complained about what it said was unacceptable talk about Taiwan's participation in the talks. And a Palestinian representative denounced Israel's war in Gaza, saying the conflict made it difficult to focus on climate change efforts.

'CRITICAL STAGE'

With the summit's scheduled to end on Tuesday, government ministers from the nearly 200 countries at the Dubai summit have joined in trying to resolve the fossil fuel impasse.

Climate-vulnerable countries said a rejection of a fossil fuel mention at COP28 would threaten the entire world.

"Nothing puts the prosperity and future of all people on earth, including all of the citizens of OPEC countries, at greater risk than fossil fuels," said Marshall Islands climate envoy Tina Stege in a statement.

The Marshall Islands, which faces inundation from climate-driven sea level rise, currently chairs the High Ambition Coalition group of nations pushing for stronger emissions-cutting targets and policies.

To meet the global goal of holding climate warming to within 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial temperatures, the coalition "is pushing for a phase out of fossil fuels, which are at the root of this crisis," she said. "1.5 is not negotiable, and that means an end to fossil fuels."

The latest version of the negotiating text, released Friday, shows countries were still considering a range of options - from agreeing to a "phase out of fossil fuels in line with best available science", to phasing out "unabated fossil fuels", to including no mention at all.

Germany's climate envoy Jennifer Morgan said countries were "moving into the critical stage of negotiations".

"It is time for all countries to remember what is at stake," she said. "I am concerned that not all are constructively engaging."

Asked about the OPEC letter, COP28 Director General Majid Al Suwaidi avoided the term "fossil fuels" but said the United Arab Emirates, as president of the summit, wanted a deal to get the world on track to limit warming to 1.5 C.

"Our COP president ... clearly wants to see an outcome that is as ambitious as possible, and we believe we are going to deliver it," he told a news conference.

Speaking on behalf of the Alliance of Small Island States, Samoa's environment minister, Cedric Schuster, worried that this year's talks were getting bogged down by disputes.

"We are extremely concerned about the pace of negotiations given the limited time we have left here in Dubai," he told the summit from the main stage on Saturday.

"A target for renewables cannot be a substitute for a stronger commitment to fossil fuel phase-out and an end to fossil fuel subsidies," he said. "COP28 needs to deliver both."

Azerbaijan looks set to host next year's COP29 climate change summit after winning backing from other Eastern European nations, unblocking a geopolitical deadlock over the next global gathering to address climate change.

For daily comprehensive coverage on COP28 in your inbox, sign up for the [Reuters Sustainable Switch newsletter here](#).

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EU condemns 'out of whack' OPEC attempt to block COP28 fossil fuel deal

By Kate Abnett and Mohammed Benmansour

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Delegates use their mobile phones to record the projections at the Al Wasl Dome at the Dubai's Expo City during the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, December 9, 2023. REUTERS/Thomas Mukoya [Acquire Licensing Rights](#)

DUBAI, Dec 9 (Reuters) - The European Union's climate chief on Saturday heavily criticised an attempt by OPEC to derail a COP28 deal on phasing out fossil fuels, calling the move by the oil producers' club "unhelpful" and "out of whack".

Nearly 200 countries [meeting in Dubai](#) for the U.N.'s COP28 climate summit are debating whether to agree, for the first time, to eventually end the world's use of fossil fuels, the main cause of climate change.

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In an unusual intervention, OPEC Secretary General Haitham Al Ghais this week [urged countries](#) in the OPEC+ group to reject any COP28 deal targeting fossil fuels, in a letter seen by Reuters.

"By many, including by me, that has been seen as out of whack, as unhelpful, as not in tune with where the world stands in terms of the very dramatic situation of our climate," EU climate commissioner Wopke Hoekstra said of the OPEC letter.

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"We're here not to basically pay attention to our narrowly defined national or financial interests ... we're here to do what is right for the future of the world," Hoekstra told Reuters in an interview.

At least 80 countries including the 27-member EU, the United States and climate-vulnerable island nations are demanding a COP28 deal to phase out fossil fuels, as scientists urge ambitious action to avert the worst impacts of climate change.

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"This should be the beginning of the end of fossil, and we all have to acknowledge this, whether we produce oil, consume oil, or not," Hoekstra said.

He said it would be a "scandal" if COP28 failed to produce a deal that would give the world a chance of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius - the limit scientists say would avoid its most disastrous impacts.

A former Dutch foreign affairs minister, Hoekstra began his own career with a three-year stint at oil major Shell (SHELL).

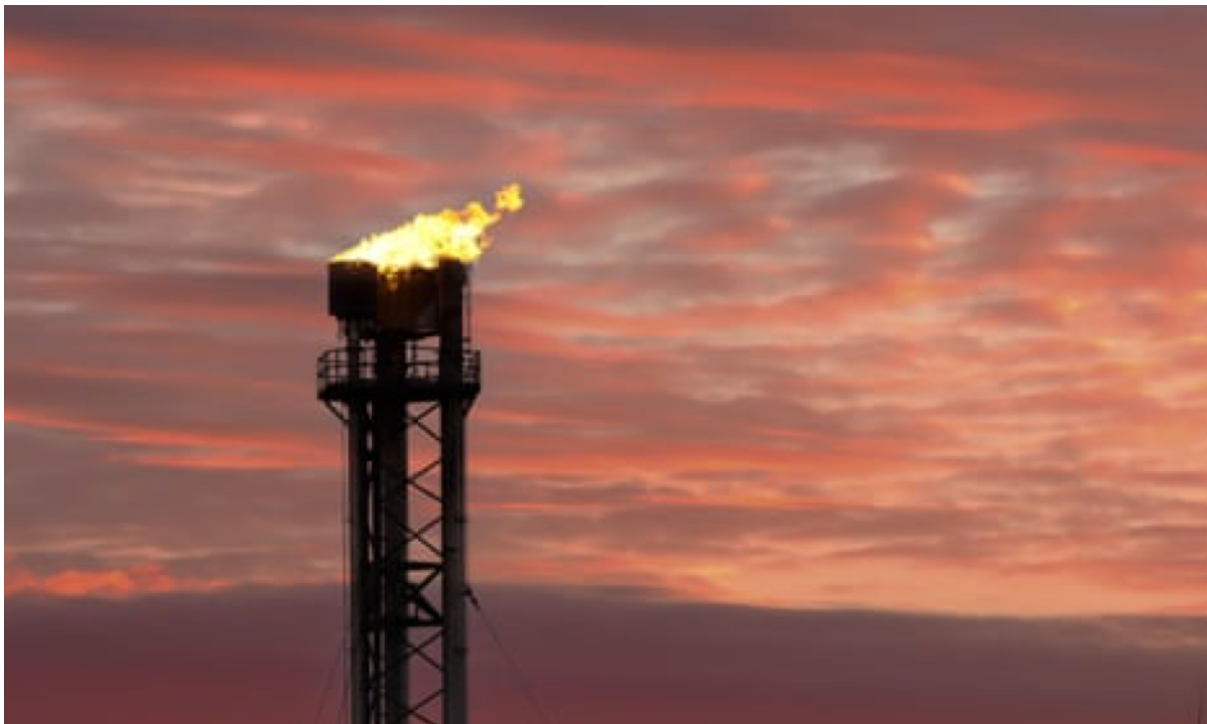
Observers and negotiators at COP28 said countries including Saudi Arabia and Russia - members of OPEC and OPEC+, respectively - have been the strongest opponents of a fossil fuel phase-out deal at COP28.

Coal, oil and gas account for more than 75% of global greenhouse gas emissions, which are fuelling worsening climate impacts including fatal heat, drought and rising sea levels.

Burning fossil fuels has served as the engine of modern life, and developing countries at the U.N. climate talks are demanding far more financial support to help them invest in clean energy.

Even with the growth of renewables, fossil fuels produce around 80% of the world's energy.

Alden Meyer, a COP28 delegate with think-tank E3G, said it was the first time OPEC's Secretariat has intervened in U.N. climate talks with a letter like the one it sent this week. "It indicates a whiff of panic," he said.



The 13 Opec members own 80% of global oil reserves. Photograph: Alexisaj/Alamy

Cop28

Opec rails against fossil fuel phase-out at Cop28 in leaked letters

Oil cartel warns 'pressure may reach a tipping point' and that 'politically motivated campaigns put our prosperity' at risk

Damian Carrington

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Fri 8 Dec 2023 17.52 GMT

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The Opec oil cartel has warned its member countries with “utmost urgency” that “pressure against fossil fuels may reach a tipping point with irreversible consequences” at Cop28, in leaked letters seen by the Guardian.

The letters noted that a “fossil fuels phase out” remains on the negotiating table at the UN climate summit and urges the oil states to “proactively reject any text or formula that targets energy, ie fossil fuels, rather than emissions”.

The news agencies Bloomberg and Reuters also reported the news on Friday, saying multiple independent sources had confirmed the documents were genuine, and that Opec had declined to comment. The Guardian has not confirmed the authenticity of the documents and Opec did not respond to the Guardian’s request for comment.

The letters suggest the depth of Opec’s fear that Cop28 could provide a turning point against oil and gas, which they say “put our people’s prosperity and future at risk”.

Identical letters dated 6 December and signed by Haitham al-Ghais, the Kuwaiti oil executive and Opec secretary general, were sent to the 13 members of Opec, which include Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq and Nigeria. These countries own 80% of global oil reserves and produced about 40% of the world’s oil over the last decade.

“These letters show that fossil fuel interests are starting to realise that the writing is on the wall for dirty energy,” said Mohamed Adow, of the NGO and thinktank Power Shift Africa. “Climate change is killing poor people around the globe and these petrostates don’t want Cop28 to phase out fossil fuels because it will hurt their short-term profits. It’s shameful.

“The reality is, if the world is going to save itself, it cannot be held back by a small band of countries that control the world’s oil supply. As well as saving us from climate change, a renewable-powered world is also one where energy is dispersed and democratised. Fossil fuels keep power in the hands of the few that happen to have them.”

The letter was also sent to the United Arab Emirates, another Opec member, which is hosting Cop28. More than 100 countries want the final Cop28 decision

to call for a phase-out of fossil fuels. Such a move would be a strong signal that the end of the era of coal, oil and gas has arrived and would help drive the urgently needed cuts scientists have made clear are required.

Carbon emissions from the burning of fossil fuels are the overwhelming driver of the climate crisis. Emissions are still rising but must fall by almost half by 2030 and to net zero by 2050 to have an even chance of keeping global heating to the internationally agreed 1.5C limit. Supercharged extreme weather is already claiming lives and livelihoods today and would rapidly worsen above 1.5C.



Identical letters were signed by Haitham al-Ghais, the Opec general secretary, and sent to member states. Photograph: Ahmad Gharabli/AFP/Getty Images

The letter was also sent to 10 Opec allies, known as Opec+ countries, and including Russia and Mexico. It said: “While Opec [and Opec+] countries are taking climate change seriously and have a proven record on climate actions, it would be unacceptable that politically motivated campaigns put our people’s prosperity and future at risk.”

The petrostates prefer to focus on emissions, rather than the fossil fuels themselves, saying that carbon capture and storage (CCS) technology could stop the CO₂ reaching the atmosphere.

However, Fatih Birol, head of the International Energy Agency, said recently that CCS technology will never scale up to cover the emissions of the oil and gas sector if they carry on with business as usual: “It’s a fantasy, an illusion.”

Heavy dependence on CCS to reach net zero targets around 2050 would also be “highly economically damaging”, costing at least \$30tn more than a renewable energy route, according to a report published on 4 December by University of Oxford researchers.

The Guardian revealed on Sunday that Sultan Al Jaber, the Cop28 president and CEO of the UAE’s state oil company, said shortly before the summit that “there is no science out there that says that the phase-out of fossil fuel is what’s going to achieve 1.5C”, a statement rejected by many scientists.

Al Jaber fiercely defended his views at an emergency press conference a day later, saying: “I have said over and over the phase-down and the phase-out of fossil fuel is inevitable. In fact, it is essential.” He said his comments had been misinterpreted.

Katrin Ganswindt, at the German NGO Urgewald, said: “Opec’s plea is a desperate cry from an industry addicted to a one-track expansion business model that has no place in a 1.5C-aligned world. Countries should reject their proposition and deliver the historic step we have been waiting for: a speedy fossil fuel phase-out and a just transition to renewable energy without ifs and buts.”

Harjeet Singh, head of global political strategy at Climate Action Network International, said: “This is a desperate attempt to halt the global momentum towards phasing out fossil fuels. The world is no longer swayed by tactics of denial and misinformation. The voices demanding climate justice are growing increasingly more resounding, leaving no room for the fossil fuel industry to employ its underhand tactics to delay action.”