

Oil-reliant Saudi Arabia faces questions over 'net zero' pledge

October 24 2021, by Mohamad Ali Harissi



Saudi Aramco's Dhahran oil plants, pictured on February 11, 2018—the kingdom is the world's biggest oil exporter.

Saudi Arabia's pledge to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2060 must go hand-in-hand with a plan to phase out fossil fuels, experts said on

Sunday.

They questioned plans by the world's top oil exporter to raise its production capacity despite the pledge, and Greenpeace raised doubts over the timing of Saturday's announcement.

The watchdog accused Saudi Arabia, one of the world's biggest polluters, of trying to divert criticism at next week's COP26 climate-change summit in Glasgow.

With increasing global urgency to limit global warming, COP26 aims to set the world on a path to net zero by mid-century.

"We question the seriousness of this announcement, as it comes in parallel with plans for the kingdom to increase its oil production," Greenpeace MENA campaigns manager Ahmad El Droubi said in a statement.

Saudi state oil firm Aramco said this month it plans to increase production capacity from 12 million to 13 million barrels a day by 2027.

Riyadh's net zero pledge "seems to simply be a strategic move to alleviate political pressure ahead of COP26", El Droubi said.

For Ben Cahill, senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the kingdom "will have to make a massive push on energy efficiency and decarbonising the power sector."

Saudi Arabia also said it would join a global effort to cut emissions of methane—another planet-warming gas—by 30 percent by 2030, while Aramco committed to being a carbon net zero enterprise by 2050.

The United Nations says more than 130 countries have set or are

considering a target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by mid-century, an objective it says is "imperative" to safeguard a liveable climate.

Carbon neutrality is a balance between emitting carbon and absorbing carbon from the atmosphere.

Saturday's Saudi pledge came after neighbouring United Arab Emirates, also one of the world's biggest oil exporters, said it was targeting carbon neutrality by 2050. Bahrain, which exports refined petroleum, made a promise similar to Saudi on Sunday.



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman delivers a speech during the opening ceremony of the Saudi Green Initiative forum on October 23, 2021, in the Saudi capital Riyadh.

Oil for water

Saudi Arabia, the largest crude producer in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, also draws heavily on oil and natural gas to meet its growing power demands and desalinate its water.

The sun-drenched desert kingdom, population 34 million, is estimated to belch about 600 million tonnes of carbon dioxide per year—more than France (population 67 million) and slightly less than Germany (population 83 million).

Crown prince and de facto ruler Mohammed bin Salman, who made Saturday's announcement, in 2016 announced his Vision 2030 to end Saudi Arabia's addiction to oil by diversifying the economy through foreign investments, business opportunities and other measures.

But the wide-ranging initiative has been further complicated by the coronavirus and falling crude prices, and oil still makes up more than 70 percent of the kingdom's export value.

In its announcement on Saturday, Saudi Arabia also said it plans to invest in "new energy sources, including hydrogen".

However, hydrogen "maintains the status quo of dependency on fossil fuels", which are used in its production, said El Droubi. He urged the Saudis to "prioritise phasing out fossil fuels and replacing them with renewable energy".

Waiting for detail

In his announcement, the crown prince targeted reducing carbon

emissions by 278 million tonnes annually by 2030, and said more than 450 million trees would be planted in the first phase of a plan to grow billions in the coming decades.

Aramco's goal of carbon neutrality by 2050 only includes emissions from its own operations. According to Bloomberg, more than 80 percent of the company's total emissions come from customers burning its fossil fuels.

The Saudi announcements were hailed by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the COP26 host.

He said the "landmark pledge to reach net zero emissions by 2060 is a major step forward".

COP26 president Alok Sharma also welcomed the news, adding: "I look forward to the detail."

Cahill, of CSIS, was more cautious.

"Direct crude burn in power generation will have to be phased out, and renewable energy will have to gradually displace gas," he told AFP.

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