

How the world's first deal to ditch fossil fuels was forged at COP28

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It was an improbable scene in Dubai as a top oil executive basked in a standing ovation from hundreds of diplomats tasked with fighting

climate change. Sultan Al Jaber, head of the United Arab Emirates' state-owned oil company, had just presided over the two-week COP28 summit that led to the world's first agreement to move away from fossil fuels. There were tears, hugs, and claps on the back as exhausted delegates celebrated a milestone in the battle against global warming.

It was a remarkable turnaround from just two days earlier, when negotiations had become so fraught there were fears they might fall apart. That would have been a disaster for Al Jaber and his army of hired consultants, who had spent months crisscrossing the globe to build support for a deal. And it would signal that the Paris Agreement to stem [greenhouse gas emissions](#) was unraveling—catnip for climate-denying populists like Donald Trump.

With the planet baking in the hottest year on record, many nations were determined that this time the world would finally pledge to eradicate—or "phase out"—all [fossil fuels](#). While they had agreed in Glasgow in 2021 to cut some coal, an alliance including the U.S., European Union and vulnerable island nations wanted this COP to tackle oil and gas as well.

The annual climate negotiations have become increasingly complex since the 2015 breakthrough in Paris. Nations now need to agree on concrete steps needed to keep global temperature rise within 1.5C, forcing delegates to grapple with thorny issues that will directly impact their economic prospects.

The positions that countries take have become "more vague," said Marina Silva, Brazil's environment minister. "There are allies good for one paragraph, but not for another paragraph."

This account of how the Dubai agreement came together is based on interviews with a dozen negotiators from different countries, some of whom asked not to be named discussing private talks.

COP28 started promisingly with a flurry of announcements that included billions of dollars for green solutions and vulnerable communities. Nations agreed ahead of time on how to run a fund to compensate [poor countries](#) for climate damages, resolving an issue that could be a major stumbling block. Al Jaber got more than 50 major oil and gas companies to promise to stem methane emissions.

But then the wheels threatened to come off.

Saudi Arabia's energy minister, Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman, said on the fifth day that his country would "absolutely not" agree to phase down fossil fuels. The head of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, which includes the UAE, days later urged members to reject any language that called for reducing fossil fuel production. Because COP decisions are made by consensus, a single country could block a deal.

Meanwhile Al Jaber was facing a crisis of confidence. Just before COP28 kicked off, a story by the Centre for Climate Reporting alleged he planned to use his position to lobby for oil and gas deals. A video uncovered by The Guardian days later showed he had questioned if fossil fuels need to be phased out to keep global warming to 1.5C.

Al Jaber, who had hired dozens of public relations officers to manage the summit's media coverage, was visibly angry when he was asked about the CCR report at his first press conference. He flatly denied any inappropriate conversations. When the second scandal broke, it took aides a full day to persuade him to clarify his comments.

The revelations ratcheted up the pressure on Al Jaber to deliver something on fossil fuels. "He was accountable for the result" and "this is a very important incentive," said Teresa Ribera, Spain's environmental transition minister. "He insisted that fossil fuels should be part of the

agreement."

On Monday, that goal looked further away than ever. With just two days to go before COP28 was due to end, Al Jaber's team released a draft that proposed nations "could" employ a menu of options, including ramping up renewable energy and cutting fossil fuels. The language was so weak it angered countries who had been pushing for progress, while the Saudis and their allies wanted to avoid mentioning oil and gas altogether.

"Nobody was happy with it—one sector because of some reasons, and another sector because of opposite reasons," said María Susana Muhamad, Colombia's environment minister. "That created pressure on both sides to start bridging."

Negotiators gathered for a closed-door meeting where, turn by turn, they detailed flaws with the proposal.

"What we have seen today is unacceptable," said John Silk, head of the Marshall Islands' delegation and chair of a bloc of climate-vulnerable island states. "We will not go silently to our watery graves." A representative from Australia assured him the country would not "sign their death certificates."

The draft was so universally unacceptable that it ended up bringing countries together, a senior U.S. State Department official said. Whether or not that was Al Jaber's intention, it empowered his team to push for a stronger agreement or risk a full-scale collapse.

Dozens of bilateral meetings between opposing factions took place on Tuesday, with the U.S., China and the European Union helping to barter concessions alongside the COP presidency.

"We worked day and night to listen to our allies in developing countries,

working with shuttle diplomacy with countries like Brazil, the United States, South Africa—everyone," said Jennifer Morgan, Germany's special representative for climate.

John Kerry, the U.S. climate envoy, and his Chinese counterpart, Xie Zhenhua, were central figures in bringing countries together after having reached consensus themselves at a meeting in California last month. The special relationship between the veteran diplomats, developed after years of sitting across from each other at the negotiating table, has been a key factor in global climate progress over the years.

It might be the last time the two form the power center of COP talks. Xie is set to retire and it's unclear if Kerry, who turned 80 earlier this week, will remain in his role. Their numerous meetings in Dubai included birthday festivities, where Xie presented Kerry with a framed series of photos of them together and his grandson gave the U.S. envoy a card.

Kerry recalled how emotions were running high on Tuesday. "You can't ask us to commit economic suicide," Kerry said a minister from a fossil fuel producing country told him. European negotiators had at least two difficult meetings with the Saudis. Al Jaber's team met with a host of countries as techno music blared from a nearby Turkmen restaurant.

Negotiators worked into the night on Tuesday, fueled by chicken dinners with tiramisu, tweaking the language to try and please all parties. That included coal-dependent India and top oil and gas producers such as Iraq. Developing nations, especially in Africa and South America, wanted commitments to come with financial support and to make sure their economic circumstances were taken into consideration.

Earlier international meetings served as building blocks. Inspiration for three key words—to "transition away from" fossil fuels rather than

"phase out" or "phase down"—came from a recent Pacific Island Forum communique. Language compelling countries to lay out ambitious and expansive climate pledges for 2035 was drawn from a joint statement released after Xie and Kerry met in November.

Adnan Amin, COP28 chief executive officer and one of Al Jaber's top lieutenants, offered the first sign of hope around 8 p.m. on Tuesday. Delegates were on the cusp of a deal, he said, as he popped out of the U.N. climate body's offices for a brief moment. But he quickly added "Inshallah"—or "God willing" in Arabic.

Abdulaziz bin Salman, the Saudi minister, emerged as an unlikely helper. He swept into the talks just after midnight. After his intervention earlier in the COP, many attendees saw the prince as climate enemy No. 1. Now, here he was, trying to get a text over the line. He convinced a group of developing countries, which includes heavyweights India and China, that this was an agreement the skeptics could accept.

The result was a document gaveled through on Wednesday that wasn't what anyone wanted, but one everyone could live with for now.

The oil industry had managed to secure two main priorities, with the deal leaving room for some natural gas and highlighting carbon capture as a climate solution. The expensive technology would, in theory, allow for the continued burning of fossil fuels without emissions, though some experts warn it's a long-shot distraction from cutting consumption.

Little progress was made on securing finance for developing countries and the Alliance of Small Island States warned that the pact was far from adequate to meet the climate crisis. "We have made an incremental advancement over business as usual when what we really needed is an exponential step-change in our actions and support," said Anne Rasmussen, the bloc's lead negotiator.

Still, the outcome is vindication for Al Jaber, who pitched his ties to the fossil fuel industry as an asset and staked his reputation on being able to bring oil-rich nations along. Pulling off the largest-ever COP summit, with more than 100,000 attendees, marks a diplomatic high point for the UAE. Experts have already pointed out many flaws that will have to be addressed at COP29 in Azerbaijan, but also acknowledged the hurdles Al Jaber had to be overcome.

"I don't think that anybody else could have been in the position of doing that," said Muhamad, the Colombian minister. "In a very paradoxical way, having the COP here in the oil-producing heart of the world ended up producing the result that we accept the transition from fossil fuels."

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