

Football Ignites The World

How Saudi Aramco and FIFA
are driving the climate crisis



badvertising

FairSquare



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Executive summary

This report explains how football, the world's most popular sport, is being used as a branding vehicle for Saudi Aramco, the world's biggest corporate polluter; why this poses a serious threat to the planet; and what can be done about it.

Aramco is a uniquely dangerous organisation. As the commercial engine of the state of Saudi Arabia, it is able to draw on virtually unparalleled financial muscle and huge geopolitical influence, and its vast fossil fuel reserves mean it has the potential to singlehandedly undermine efforts to prevent a global climate catastrophe.

Fossil fuels are being progressively undercut as the world's key sources of energy. Investment in and use of renewable energies is increasing steadily, and the twin processes of clean energy generation driven by renewable technologies, and electrification are fundamentally changing the structure of global energy systems. Falling demand for oil has the potential to strip the Saudi Arabian state of its wealth and influence, and reversing this trend is to a large extent an existential issue for the ruling Al-Saud family. Saudi Arabia and Aramco work hand in glove, and they have made their intentions very clear: Aramco's CEO has said that the world should "abandon the fantasy of phasing out oil and gas", and Saudi Arabian officials have acknowledged that stimulating demand for oil is one of their main objectives.

Football's world governing body, FIFA, seems all too willing to assist in this climate-wrecking endeavour. The sponsorship deal that Aramco signed with FIFA in 2024 attaches the Aramco brand to the global cultural force that is football, ensuring that its logo will be beamed into billions of homes around the world when the FIFA men's World Cup begins in June 2026.

The deal serves as a further example of how FIFA has become an increasingly dangerous organization in its own right in recent years. Its flimsy and out-dated governance structure has rendered it entirely unequipped to responsibly manage the colossal sums of revenue that it generates from World Cup tournaments, making it easy prey for those who want to harness the cultural, social and political power of football for their own ends. Saudi Arabia's ruler, Mohammed bin Salman, is one of numerous authoritarians who has identified how FIFA can enable his goals, and he wants to use FIFA's reach and influence to keep the world hooked on Saudi Aramco's oil.

Advertising has a unique power to stimulate demand for even the most harmful products, and advertising through sport, as the tobacco industry demonstrated,



can turbo-charge this process. Aramco's deal with FIFA constitutes arguably the most dangerous example of fossil fuel advertising and sponsorship the world has ever seen.

The report is based on detailed and authoritative research, established scientific facts, and expert legal analysis. It first outlines the unique dangers that Saudi Arabia and Aramco pose to the climate, with reference to Aramco's reserves, business model and practices, and Saudi Arabia's obstruction of climate negotiations and attempts to artificially stimulate demand for oil. It next details the pernicious role that fossil fuel advertising plays and how sport and sponsorship can increase advertising's harmful potential. In its third section, the report examines how FIFA's exploitative business model and dysfunctional governance models have led the organisation to become a tool for authoritarian states. It examines the various ways in which Saudi Arabia is exerting influence over FIFA and through FIFA, with the Aramco sponsorship serving as the most visible link and one that can be effectively challenged. The report's final section addresses how fossil fuel advertising bans can prevent polluters from harnessing the influential power and reach of sport, outlines the role that the European Union, in particular, could play and examines the various legal tools at the EU's disposal to make this a reality.

Aramco - a uniquely dangerous organisation

Aramco's oil reserves are vast and its business practices are among the worst in the sector. Moreover, it is the commercial arm of a state that has done more than any other to wreck climate negotiations, and is aggressively pursuing new markets for its fossil fuels. Analysts have calculated that if fully extracted and burned, Saudi Aramco's 267 billion barrels of oil reserves would put a major dent in the world's global carbon budget – the maximum amount of CO₂ that can be released into the atmosphere to keep global warming below agreed limits.

In terms of actions taken to ensure alignment with the Paris Agreement, an international commitment to keep global warming below these same limits, Saudi Aramco is far from the only bad actor in the global fossil fuel industry, but it is one of the worst performers. In 2024, the financial think-tank Carbon Tracker ranked Saudi Aramco 23 out of 25 oil and gas companies, based on the alignment of various metrics with the Paris Agreement and 25 out of 27 companies in terms of its performance on emission targets. Reclaim Finance and Climate Action 100 offered dismal assessments of Saudi Aramco's failure to disclose information on its emissions or its decarbonisation plan. In 2023, the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights raised serious concerns with Aramco about its activities – the first time that an oil and gas company has been the subject of such an intervention. ClientEarth, which initiated the

complaint, accused Saudi Aramco of “the world’s largest climate-linked breach of human rights law by a business.”

Saudi Aramco and the Saudi Arabian state work in tandem to achieve their aims, one of which is to obstruct progress on climate negotiations. The Climate Social Science Network has identified Saudi Arabia as the country that has done more than any other to obstruct progress at the UN Conference of the Parties (COP) negotiations, describing “a thirty-year record of obstruction and delay, protecting its national oil and gas sector and seeking to ensure UN climate talks achieve as little as possible, as slowly as possible.” Saudi Arabia is simultaneously seeking to generate demand for oil and gas. As revealed by the Centre for Climate Reporting (CCR), Saudi Arabia has instigated a “sweeping global investment program designed to counteract the world’s efforts to reduce demand for oil and tackle climate change.” Saudi Arabia’s Oil Demand Sustainability Program, which involved Saudi Aramco and many other arms of the Saudi state, is “aimed at embedding a high-carbon, fossil fuel-dependent development model in countries across Africa and Asia”, said CCR.

How sports sponsorship drives emissions

There is a large and growing body of credible research that links fossil fuel advertising to increased emissions, and that demonstrates that sport can exacerbate advertising’s capacity to stimulate demand.

Research in consumer psychology from 2023 concluded that corporate image advertising affects not just attitudes toward the company in question but attitudes toward the category of products or services the company represents. Thus, fossil fuel advertising and sponsorship contributes to an environment in which fossil fuel consumption is normalised. Research has also demonstrated that advertising has an obstructive effect on progressive climate policy. In 2022, the International Panel on Climate Change explicitly identified the regulation of fossil fuel advertising as one of the mitigation strategies available to governments, stating that “fossil fuel industries have unique access to mainstream media via advertisements, shaping narratives of media reports, and exerting political influence.” A further pathway from advertising to emissions is the contribution of corporate image advertising to what economists call fossil fuel “lock-in”: a self-reinforcing dynamic by which existing fossil fuel infrastructure, regulatory regimes and social norms perpetuate fossil fuel dependence even in the face of technically viable alternatives and unignorable impacts of climate breakdown.

The use of sport in advertising has been proven to be particularly effective in stimulating consumer demand. Social psychology research has shown

that advertising in sport increases the effectiveness of associative brand communication. The tobacco industry explicitly documented this strategic logic: internal tobacco industry documents cited by researchers showed that Marlboro's move into Formula 1 sponsorship was described internally as building a "credible and authentic" extension of the brand by exploiting the sport's associations with speed and adventure. Today, fossil fuel and high-carbon companies pursue the same objective. Sports sponsorship is truly global, meaning that fossil fuel companies can reach audiences in jurisdictions where other forms of advertising face tighter restrictions.

Sports institutions are often a source of trust and legitimacy, which is transferred to their sponsors - research has shown that being associated with leading sports brands confers significant "tangential brand-building benefit", and Industry surveys consistently rank sports sponsorship as one of the top three "most trusted channels" for advertising. A multi-year sponsorship deal produces repeated exposure across hundreds of broadcast events, providing the kind of long-term, passive normalisation that is most effective at shifting the baseline of public expectation. Unlike an advertising campaign that runs for a season, a sponsorship relationship becomes part of the accepted furniture of a sport, expected and maximally effective at communicating that the sponsor's presence is both normal and legitimate.

Set in this context, Saudi Arabia's investments in sport and Aramco's visibility in this process should be of profound concern. In 2024, the New Weather Institute found that fossil fuel companies invest at least USD 5.6 billion annually across 205 active sports sponsorship deals globally, with Saudi Aramco (USD 1.3 billion) by far the biggest spender. A 2024 dataset published by Play The Game identified 910 Saudi sponsorships in sports worldwide. Saudi Aramco's 71 sponsorship deals are the most high profile in this vast portfolio. Saudi Aramco is a leading sponsor of Formula 1 motor racing, and is the "title partner" of the Aston Martin Formula 1 team, as well as leading sponsor of the International Cricket Council (ICC). However, the sport with the greatest power to help Saudi Arabia stimulate demand for Aramco's products is the world's most popular sport - football.

FIFA, Saudi Arabia and Aramco sponsorship

Football's world governing body, Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), comprising 211 member associations, has been beset by governance scandals for decades, most notably in 2015 when the US Department of Justice charged numerous senior FIFA officials with corruption and racketeering in the context of a "long-running investigation into bribery and corruption in the world of organized soccer".

In February 2016, the FIFA Congress adopted a proposed reform package and elected Gianni Infantino as FIFA President. “We will restore the image of FIFA and the respect of FIFA. And everyone in the world will applaud us,” Infantino said. Unfortunately, this has not proven to be the case. FIFA under Infantino has proven just as resistant to reform as it was under previous leaders. The problems at FIFA relate to organisational structure not individual failings. FIFA’s senior officials and a critical mass of its member associations are locked into a mutually dependent system of patronage that makes the organisation structurally resistant to internal reform. FIFA provides vast amounts of development money to its 211 member associations as a means of securing the loyalty of a majority of these associations, each of whom has one vote at the FIFA Congress and thus control who holds the levers of power. Until this patronage system is broken up - and this will likely require external intervention - FIFA will primarily concern itself with the accumulation and distribution of revenue, rather than the sustainable and ethical governance of the game it controls. Moreover, under Gianni Infantino’s leadership, the organisation has begun to align itself very closely with authoritarian leaders around the world.

Saudi Arabia has exploited FIFA’s structural vulnerabilities, pouring millions of dollars into the organisation both directly and indirectly. A USD 1 billion broadcasting deal that saved FIFA’s inaugural expanded Club World Cup in the summer of 2025 from being an embarrassing commercial failure is widely reported to have been financed by Saudi Arabia, and the Public Investment Fund sponsored the tournament and will be a tournament sponsor for the 2026 men’s World Cup. FIFA did not reveal the value of these deals. FIFA struck the aforementioned Club World Cup broadcasting deal one week before it awarded the hosting rights for the 2034 Men’s World Cup to Saudi Arabia, after a bidding process that appeared to have been tailored to ensure that Saudi Arabia was the only bidder and that its bid avoided any serious scrutiny, despite the potential for the types of serious human rights abuses that accompanied preparations for the Qatar 2022 Men’s World Cup. The infrastructure and construction developments required to make this tournament possible, which include a significant expansion in Saudi Arabia’s airport capacity – they plan to increase the combined capacity of five airports from 95.1 million annual visitors in 2023 to 240 million in 2030 – will generate vast amounts of carbon emissions. All of this will be paid for with Saudi Aramco oil and gas revenue. Moreover, Saudi Aramco will in all probability serve as the tournament’s main sponsor.

In April 2024, FIFA confirmed that Saudi Aramco would be one of its primary sponsors, in a deal that will run until 2027, and is reported to be worth USD 100 million annually.

FIFA has been made fully aware of the implications of the Aramco deal. In September 2025, a coalition of NGOs, including Human Rights Watch, wrote

to FIFA to express concerns. Their letter alleged that the partnership with Aramco “risks FIFA contributing to the undermining of international agreements on climate change and its resultant human rights impacts”, and that by accepting sponsorship money from Aramco “FIFA provides a platform for a company committed to expanding crude oil production and resisting the commitment to transition away from fossil fuels.” FIFA’s failure to respond to this letter is a further indication that the organisation prioritises money over all else, and in the commercially driven world of sport, FIFA is not alone in this regard, underscoring the need for legislative action to prevent polluters from harnessing the power of sport.

What the EU can do

The fact that more than 50 cities in Europe have introduced bans on fossil fuel advertising in recent years is ample evidence of the increasing willingness to ban fossil fuel advertising. As the impact of global warming becomes increasingly evident and harmful, there will be increasingly persuasive calls to complement localised city bans with national and international legislation. In view of its competences and its transnational reach, the European Union is one of the organisations best placed to neuter the capacity of polluters like Aramco to exploit the power and reach of sport.

Comprising 27 Member States, the EU is the best integrated regional organisation in the world. It has well-established mechanisms for policy making and robust enforcement mechanisms. The EU has also built a strong reputation for being an effective environmental regulator, and the EU has left a significant regulatory mark in the field of sport. Consequently, the intersection of environmental and sporting concerns that defines the issue of fossil fuel advertising in sport – as well as the underpinning questions of economic regulation, another key area of EU activity – make the Union a particularly well-suited institution to respond.

There are three ways in which it could feasibly act. A bespoke fossil fuel advertising and sponsoring ban, which could be modelled on existing legislation such as the EU’s 2003 Tobacco Advertising Directive, would be an obvious first option. A new Fossil Fuel Advertising Directive could restrict advertising of fossil fuel products in the press. It could ban radio advertising and sponsoring by companies active in the sector. Where sport is concerned, it could also prevent the sponsoring of events with a cross-border dimension.

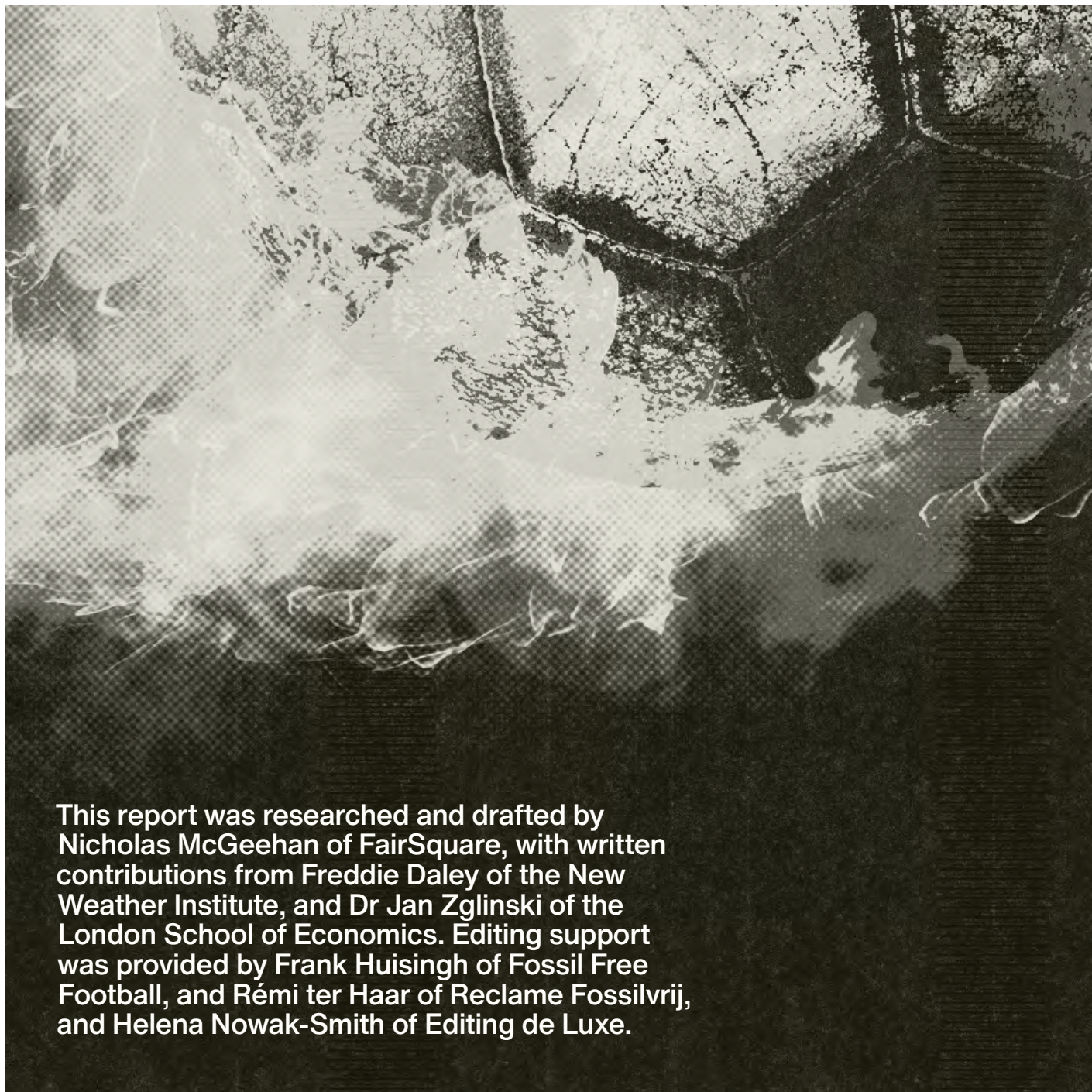
A second option would be to adopt sport-specific legislation with provisions on fossil fuel advertising and sponsoring. A European Sports Act, such as the one recently proposed by academics Jan Exner, Stephen Weatherill and Jan Zglinski would lay down binding minimum standards for sports governing bodies

and competition organisers, to be enforced by a dedicated EU Sports Agency and national counterparts. This (or similar) proposals could be complemented with special provisions on fossil fuel advertising although the substantive scope would be narrower than a Fossil Fuel Advertising directive, since it would only address sport.

A third option is to use or amend existing EU legislation, namely the Audiovisual Media Services (AVMS) Directive. The Directive establishes a regulatory framework for television broadcasters and on-demand providers in the EU, and in its present form it already tasks Member States with ensuring that “behaviour grossly prejudicial to the protection of the environment” is not encouraged. There is an argument to be made that fossil fuel advertising falls into this category, as it is, indeed, grossly prejudicial to the environment for the reasons explained, although the precise meaning of that phrase has not yet been clarified. The rules regarding tobacco are stronger and could, once again, serve as an inspiration. The Directive has three provisions that categorically prohibit tobacco-related advertising. A similar set of requirements could be adopted for fossil fuel products and companies. The greatest advantage of this solution is its simplicity: existing rules in an existing directive would merely have to be copied and transposed to another sector.

As the report outlines, all three options come with political and legal challenges, and none can be considered perfect solutions to the problem of fossil fuel advertising. However, each would constitute a significant step towards the blanket ban on fossil fuel advertising that is so urgently required. Aramco’s deal with FIFA provides the best and most alarming example of the need for such a ban. Aramco’s increased visibility and prominence in global sport has little to do with advancing the interests of sport, athletes, teams or supporters. On the contrary, these investments largely serve to advance profoundly regressive and destructive interests. Football is where the risk is greatest, since the global appeal and popularity of the game allows Aramco to shape perceptions in a manner favourable to oil and gas extraction and consumption at a time when we are developing the technologies that make transition to cleaner energies politically and economically feasible. Saudi Arabia wants to obstruct this process, and it wants FIFA’s help in ensuring that it can extract every last barrel of its vast oil and gas reserves. This eventuality would be disastrous for the planet and must be resisted with all the tools at our disposal.

About this report



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1. Saudi Aramco: A uniquely dangerous organisation



1.1 Genesis and growth

The modern state of Saudi Arabia was formed in 1932 – after the end of the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire – when Abd al-Aziz Al Saud, known as Ibn Saud, unified various distinct regions and tribes from across the Arabian Peninsula.¹ A year after the state's independence, Ibn Saud signed an agreement with the American firm Standard Oil Company of California (Socal), receiving USD 1 million in gold bullion in return for the rights to any oil and gas that Socal could find in 360,000 square miles of the eastern Saudi desert.² The company now known as Saudi Aramco was formed in 1933 and was originally called the American-Arabian Oil Company. At its inception it was a joint venture between four American companies: Socal (later Chevron), Texaco, Standard Oil of New Jersey (later Exxon) and Standard Oil of New York (later Mobil). In March 1938, Socal geologists and engineers succeeded in extracting oil at a prodigious rate at the Dammam No. 7 oil well.³ As energy and geopolitics expert Jim Krane writes: "Socal's concession would turn out to be worth upward of \$1 trillion. It was becoming clear that Saudi Arabia stood at the absolute apex of the oil-producing world, a crucial cog in the global economy."⁴

Despite being technically independent of the incipient Saudi Arabian state, Saudi Aramco played a key role in the social development of Saudi Arabia. It helped to eradicate diseases and built key infrastructure, and its presence "shaped governance and institutional design, particularly in the kingdom's newly founded Eastern Province".⁵ There were downsides too. Robert Vitalis, in his seminal book on the role of the United States government and private sector in setting up and shaping Saudi Aramco, detailed how the company operated racially discriminatory and abusive labour systems imported from the United States.⁶

In the 1960s, Saudi Arabia co-founded the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) with Iran, Iraq, Kuwait and Venezuela. OPEC membership increased in the 1970s as decolonisation led newly independent countries to take control of their oil and gas reserves.⁷ Since its inception,

1 Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

2 Jim Krane, 'Energy Kingdoms: Oil and Political Survival in the Persian Gulf', (Columbia University Press, 2021), p. 31.

3 *Ibid.* p. 32.

4 *Ibid.* p. 33.

5 *Ibid.* p. 37.

6 Robert Vitalis, "America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi oil frontier", Verso Books, 2009, p. 22.

7 Roger Owen, 'The Arab Economies in the 1970s', Middle East Research and Information Project, (23 November 1981).

Saudi Arabia has always been the most dominant force within OPEC as a swing producer and has shaped OPEC's decisions to either cut or increase oil output in order to influence global prices and pursue geopolitical ends.⁸

A Saudi Arabian-led oil embargo in 1973 – a response to anger over US military support for Israel – led to a quadrupling of oil prices and firmly established Saudi Arabia as a major geopolitical actor.⁹ That same year, the Saudi Arabian state purchased a 25 percent stake in Saudi Aramco. In 1974, it increased that stake to 60 percent, and in 1980 took full control of Saudi Aramco.¹⁰ In 2019, Saudi Aramco sold off 1.5 percent of the company to private investors in an initial public offering that initially valued the company at USD 1.88 trillion.¹¹

1.2 Emissions and reserves

Data collected by the climate think-tank InfluenceMap places Saudi Aramco as the third highest carbon-producing entity in history, behind the former Soviet Union and China Coal.¹² Researchers from Zurich's Institute for Atmospheric and Climate Science estimated in a 2025 paper that more than half of the increase in global warming since 1900 – calculated as an increase of 1.3°C in global mean surface temperature (GMST) – could be attributed to carbon majors (fossil fuel and cement producers) and half of this could be attributed to the top 14 carbon majors, of which Saudi Aramco is the third biggest contributor.¹³ In their research paper analysing the “quantitative linkages between individual emitters and particularized harms”, climate scientists Christopher Callahan and Justin Mankin write that the extreme weather events that can be linked to these man-made increases in global temperatures, much of which can be attributed to carbon majors like Saudi Aramco, include “floods, droughts, extreme heat and more” and that these “upend lives, undermine livelihoods

8 Bassam Fatouh, “Saudi Oil Policy: Continuity and Change in the Era of the Energy Transition”, Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, January 2021. A swing producer refers to a producer with high spare capacity that is able to increase or decrease production to stabilise prices and balance global supply.

9 Roger Owen, ‘The Arab Economies in the 1970s’, Middle East Research and Information Project, (23 November 1981).

10 See Aramco website ‘[Our History](#)’, accessed 23 February 2026.

11 Natasha Turak, ‘[Saudi Aramco shares surge 10% as historic IPO begins trading](#)’, CNBC, (11 December 2019).

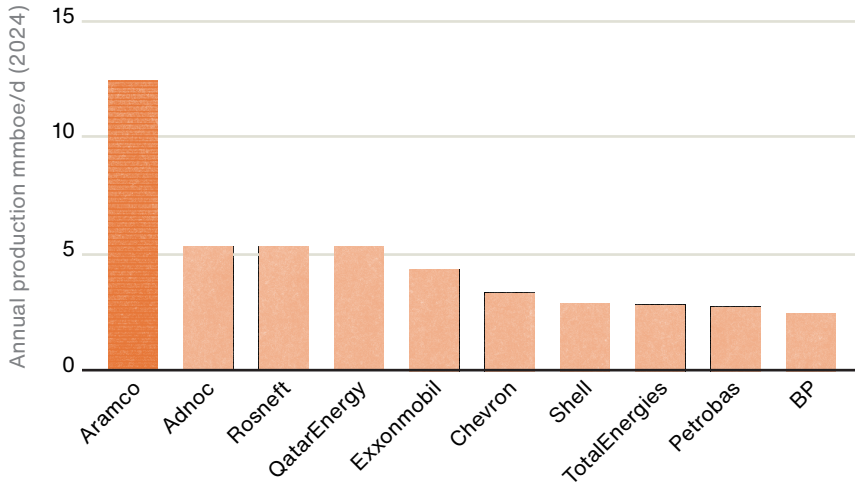
12 ‘[Carbon Majors: 2023 Data Update](#)’, InfluenceMap, (March 2025). InfluenceMap has tracked the global emissions of the corporations involved in coal, oil, and gas production and the cement industry. Their database traces 1,388 GtCO_{2e} of cumulative historical emissions from 1854 through the end of 2023.

13 Yann Quilcaille, Lukas Gudmundsson et al. “[Systematic attribution of heatwaves to the emissions of carbon majors](#)”, Nature, (10 September 2025).

and damage property.” Put simply, the causal link between carbon emissions and climate change-related harms, which include deaths, is easily drawn and empirically proven.¹⁴

In terms of contemporary emissions, InfluenceMap data shows Saudi Aramco to be the biggest corporate emitter of carbon dioxide (CO₂) globally.¹⁵ The financial think-tank Carbon Tracker (formerly the Carbon Tracker Initiative) describe Saudi Aramco as operating “the largest single hydrocarbon network in the world”, producing 10.7 mmbbl/d (million barrels of liquids per day) and 12.8 mmeob/d (million barrels of oil equivalent per day) of oil and gas in 2023.¹⁶ In 2024, Saudi Aramco’s annual production far exceeded any other oil and gas company in the world, based on the data that oil and gas companies publish on their output.¹⁷

Top ten oil and gas companies by production (2024)



14 Christopher Callahan and Justin Mankin, [“Carbon majors and the scientific case for climate liability”](#), Nature, (23 April 2025).

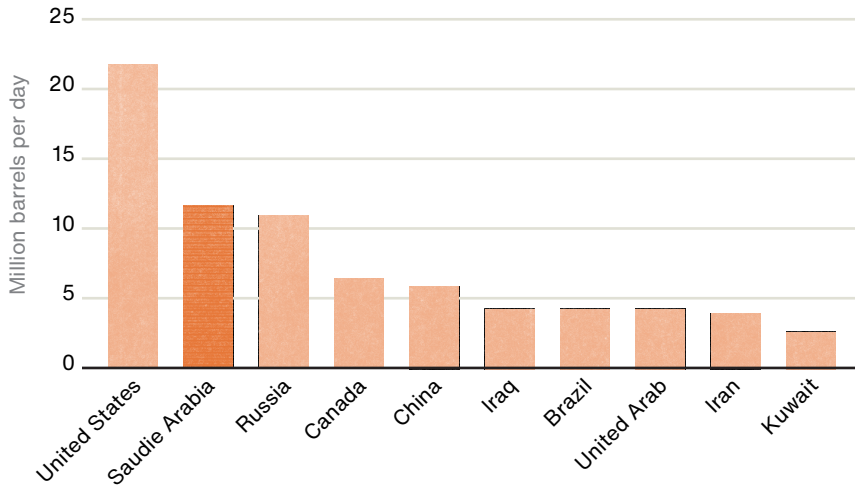
15 [“Carbon Majors: 2023 Data Update”](#), Influence Map, (March 2025).

16 [“Oil and Gas Company Profile: Saudi Aramco”](#), Carbon Tracker oil and gas team, (April 2024).

17 Data for Aramco from [“Results and Performance”](#), (March 2025). Adnic does not publish details of its production so data is for UAE as a whole and for 2023 and comes from [“OPEC Annual Statistical Bulletin”](#), (July 2025). Data for Rosneft from [“Sustained Excellence: Annual Report”](#), (27 June 2025). QatarEnergy does not publish details of its production so data is for Qatar for 2023 and comes from [“OPEC Annual Statistical Bulletin”](#), (July 2025). Data for ExxonMobil from [“ExxonMobil announces 2024 results”](#), (31 January 2025). Data for Chevron from [“Chevron 2024 Annual Report”](#), (8 April 2025). Data for Shell from [“Annual Report and Accounts”](#), (20 May 2025). Data for TotalEnergies from [“Universal Registration Document 2024 including the Annual Financial Report”](#), (17 April 2025). Data for Petrobras from [“Petrobras reaches 2024 annual production target”](#), (27 January 2025). Data for BP from [“bp Annual Report”](#), (6 March 2025).

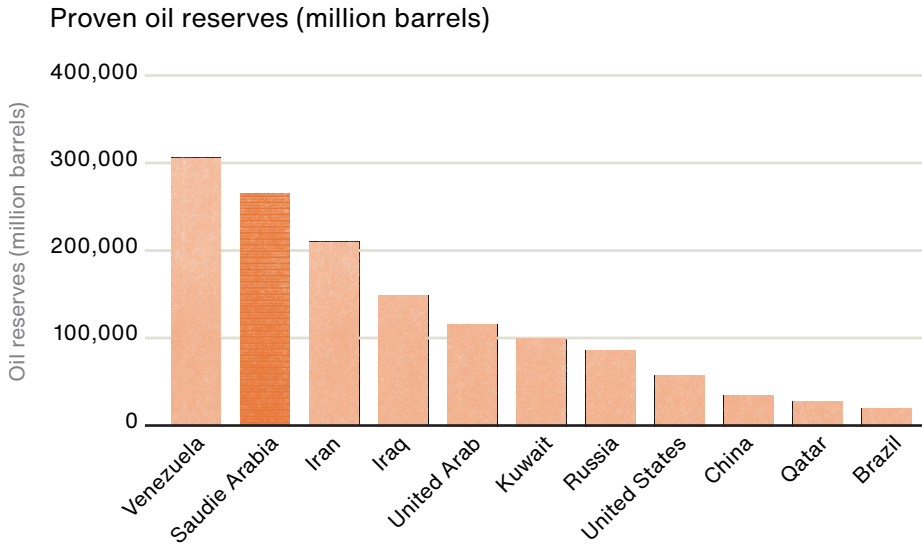
Since Saudi Aramco has a monopoly in Saudi Arabia’s oil and gas sector, its production levels and reserves can be compared to country data as well as corporate data, and on this metric Saudi Aramco ranked second only to the United States in annual production in 2023.¹⁸

Top ten countries by oil and gas production (2023)



Oil and gas production levels have soared in the United States in the last decade due to technological advances that have enabled the extraction of shale gas through a method known as hydraulic fracturing or “fracking”.¹⁹ However, most oil production in the United States comes from what the International Energy Agency (IEA) describes as “fast declining unconventional sources”, unlike in the Middle East and Russia where most oil is produced from “slowly declining conventional supergiant fields”.²⁰

18 [“Total oil \(petroleum and other liquids\) production”](#), U.S. Energy Information Administration, (11 April 2024).
 19 See Bethany McLean, “Saudi America: The Truth About Fracking and How It’s Changing the World”, (Columbia Global Reports, 2018).
 20 [‘The Implications of Oil and Gas Field Decline Rates’](#), International Energy Agency, (16 December 2025).



Saudi Arabia's proven oil reserves (267 billion barrels) are second only to Venezuela's, and the consequences of Saudi Aramco extracting all of its proven reserves would be drastic.²¹ A key factor determining the extent of global warming is the cumulative amount of CO₂ emissions over time. There is therefore a maximum cumulative amount of CO₂ that can be emitted if global warming is to be kept within any particular limit – this is known as the world's "carbon budget". Climate and energy researchers Gregg Muttit and Hannah McKinnon have noted that "if fully extracted and burned, Aramco's reserves would [...] amount to one seventh of a 2°C global carbon budget, and one third of a 1.5°C global carbon budget."²² Muttit and McKinnon conclude that, for Saudi Aramco's entire reserves to be viable under climate commitments, all other oil and gas companies globally would have to immediately stop exploring for and developing new reserves.²³ This has not happened.

Saudi Aramco is not only the world's biggest corporate polluter today: its vast reserves mean it has the power to singlehandedly undermine international efforts to prevent climate catastrophe. And as the following section makes clear, its actions as a company are directly at odds with keeping global warming within the limits defined by the international community.

²¹ "[OPEC Annual Statistical Bulletin](#)", Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries", (July 2025).

²² Gregg Muttit and Hannah McKinnon, "Overheated Expectations: Valuing Saudi Aramco's IPO in light of climate change", Oil Change International, (August 2017).

²³ Ibid.

1.3 Misalignment with Paris Agreement

The Paris Agreement is a legally binding international treaty on climate change, with a central goal to hold “the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels” and to pursue efforts “to limit the temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.”²⁴ It was adopted by 195 states at the 2015 UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris, in December 2015. Recent scientific research has proven that the goals of the Paris Agreement are unachievable without a rapid and managed phase-out of global fossil fuel production.²⁵

Four months after states signed the Paris Agreement, Saudi Arabia’s Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), at the time serving as both the country’s defence minister and Chairman of its Council of Economic and Development Affairs, announced Saudi Arabia’s “Vision 2030”: a blueprint for the economic, social and cultural development of the country.²⁶ The communications that accompanied its release suggested Vision 2030 was aligned with Saudi Arabia’s commitment to the Paris Agreement. On announcing the plan, MBS said that “the Kingdom [of Saudi Arabia] can live in 2020 without any dependence on oil” and that “the Saudi addiction to oil has disturbed the development of many sectors in past years.”²⁷

However, the plan did not say that Saudi Arabia would reduce its production of oil and gas, rather that it would pursue other streams of revenue in addition to oil and gas, in order to diversify its economy. It was also clear that oil and gas revenues would fuel and drive Vision 2030, as well as the planned diversification away from oil and gas revenues.

“We will develop further the sophistication of our investment vehicles, particularly after transferring the ownership of Aramco to the Public Investment Fund, which will become the largest sovereign wealth fund in the world. We will increase the efficiency of the fund’s management and improve its return on investment, with the aim of diversifying our government resources and our economy.”²⁸

Saudi Arabia actually planned to *increase* its production of oil and gas, as noted

24 [Paris Agreement](#), U.N. Doc. FCCC/CP/2015/L.9/Rev/1, entered into force 12 December 2015.

25 Ploy Achakulwisut, Peter Erickson et al., “[Global fossil fuel reduction pathways under different climate mitigation strategies and ambitions](#)”, Nature Communications, (13 September 2023).

26 “[Vision 2030 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia](#)”, (April 2016).

27 “[Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 reform plan announced](#)”, Public Investment Fund, (25 April 2016).

28 Vision 2030, p. 42. In actual fact the Public Investment Fund only owns 8 percent of Saudi Aramco. See “[HRH Crown Prince Announces Completion of the Transfer of 8% of Saudi Aramco’s shares to PIF’s Fully Owned Companies](#)”, Public Investment Fund, (7 March 2024).

by the Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, which noted that Saudi Arabia's National Transformation Programme, introduced a few months after Vision 2030 with the aim of turning its high-level aims into reality, targeted an increase in gas production from 12 bcf/d (billion cubic feet per day) to 17.8 bcf/d by 2020 and an increase in refining capacity from 2.9 mmbbl/d to 3.3 mmbbl/d by 2020.²⁹

Writing in 2017, Muttit and McKinnon noted that: "The different production strategies of Saudi Aramco and of International Oil Companies (IOCs) are not compatible with achieving the Paris Agreement goals."³⁰ Saudi Arabia has not changed course since.

It should be noted that many powerful states, notably the United States, as well as IOCs from the Global North, are operating in such a way as to undermine the goals of the Paris Agreement and hasten dangerous levels of global warming. However, Saudi Aramco is consistently identified in research by academics and climate groups as one of the worst offenders in undermining the goals of the agreement.

In 2024, Carbon Tracker issued a report assessing 25 oil and gas companies' alignment with the Paris Agreement.³¹ The *Paris Maligned* report was scathing of oil and gas companies' performance, noting that "the world's largest oil and gas companies are still not aligned with the goals of the Paris Agreement, despite corporate messaging on supporting a low-carbon future." The report gave each company a grade, from A to H, based on the alignment of its investment options, production plans, emissions targets and executive remuneration policies. Saudi Arabia scored a G and ranked 23rd out of 25, with only Pioneer (now part of ExxonMobil) and Conoco Philips ranked lower.³² Carbon Tracker also conducts comparative analysis of oil and gas companies' performance on emissions, and in 2024 ranked Saudi Aramco 25th out of 27 companies in terms of its performance on emission targets.³³

29 "[Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, Oil Policy and the Evolution of the Energy Sector](#)", Oxford Institute for Energy Studies", (July 2016).

30 Gregg Muttit and Hannah McKinnon, "Overheated Expectations: Valuing Saudi Aramco's IPO in light of climate change", Oil Change International, (August 2017).

31 Maeve O'Connor, "[Paris Maligned II](#)", Carbon Tracker, (March 2024).

32 Ibid.

33 Olivia Bisel, Rich Collett-White, and Mike Coffin, "[Absolute Impact 2024](#)", Carbon Tracker, (November 2024). In order to potentially be considered to have emissions policies aligned with the Paris Agreement oil and gas companies had to 1) Cover full lifecycle GHG emissions, including scope 1, 2, and end-use 3 emissions 2) Target net-zero GHG emissions by 2050, with interim absolute reductions, across full lifecycle emissions 3) Cover GHG emissions from production and global product sales on a full equity share basis (including Downstream product sales produced using third-party crude), and 4) Target near-zero methane by 2030 on a full equity share basis across Upstream activities, as well as Midstream gas assets where applicable.

In December 2023, the research and campaigning NGO Reclaim Finance examined the performance of 12 oil and gas companies against the IEA's Net Zero Emissions by 2050 Scenario (NZE Scenario).³⁴ Reclaim Finance noted, among other things, that "Saudi Aramco does not provide sufficient information on its decarbonization plan to allow investors and other financial stakeholders to correctly assess its capacity to align with a 1.5°C pathway". It was also critical of Saudi Aramco's failure to report its scope 3 emissions (the emissions that relate to the burning of its products rather than those linked to its operations), which means that "it is not possible to project Saudi Aramco's GHG [greenhouse gas] emissions trajectory."³⁵ Reclaim Finance has also noted Saudi Aramco plans to increase its crude oil production capacity from 12 mmbbl/d to 13 mmbbl/d between 2020 and 2027, and its plans to increase its gas production by 50 percent by 2030.³⁶

Climate Action 100+, an investor-led initiative to ensure the world's largest corporate greenhouse gas emitters take necessary action on climate change, published a "Disclosure Framework" that "evaluates the adequacy of corporate disclosure in relation to key actions companies can take to align their businesses with the [...] Paris Agreement goals."³⁷ Its assessment of Saudi Aramco is damning. Saudi Aramco does not meet any of the criteria for alignment in 8 out of the 11 categories, including net-zero greenhouse gas emissions, climate policy engagement and climate-related disclosures.

In 2023, a number of UN Special Rapporteurs and the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights took the unprecedented step of sending a communication to Saudi Aramco and its financial backers, raising serious concerns about the human rights impact of the company's activities.³⁸ The

34 Reclaim Finance, "[Assessment of Oil and Gas Companies Climate Strategy](#)", (1 September 2025).

35 Ibid.

36 Reclaim Finance, "[Assessment of Saudi Aramco's Climate Strategy](#)", (December 2023).

37 "[Saudi Arabian Oil Company \(Aramco\): Company Assessment](#)", ClimateAction100+, (June 2025). The categories are net-zero greenhouse gas emissions; short-term greenhouse gas reduction targets; decarbonisation strategy; capital allocation i.e. whether the company's capital expenditures and/or transition plans are aligned with the Paris Agreement goals; climate policy engagement; climate governance; just transition;

climate related disclosures. In the other remaining three assessment categories – long-term GHG reduction targets, medium-term GHG reduction targets, and historical GHG emissions reductions – ClimateAction100+ considers Saudi Aramco to meet "some criteria" for alignment.

38 [Letter to Amin Nasser](#), Saudi Aramco CEO from the Mandates of the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises; the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change; the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment; the Special Rapporteur on the implications for human rights of the environmentally sound management and disposal of hazardous substances and wastes and the Special Rapporteur on the human rights to safe drinking water and sanitation,

environmental NGO ClientEarth had instigated this intervention two years earlier when they filed a complaint under the UN's Special Procedures complaints process, which issues non-judicial communications to governments, businesses and organisations on allegations of human rights violations.³⁹

“The UN experts have never before taken action about an oil major's human rights responsibilities for climate change, or against its financial backers. We wanted the UN experts to set the legal standard for oil and gas companies' human rights responsibility for climate change,” ClientEarth said in a statement.⁴⁰ They accused Saudi Aramco of “the world's largest climate-linked breach of human rights law by a business.”⁴¹

The subsequent UN Communication conveyed to Saudi Aramco the following serious concerns about the impacts of Saudi Aramco's activities:

- “Through its historic emissions, it is alleged that Saudi Aramco has already significantly contributed to adverse climate change-related human rights impacts. The company's current exploitation of fossil fuels and proposed business plans will continue to cause adverse climate change-related human rights impacts.”
- “Saudi Aramco's business strategy is currently increasing its fossil fuel production [...] diverging increasingly from internationally agreed climate targets, and progressively contributing to climate change-related human rights impacts, including by increasing global consumption of oil and gas.”
- “[...] the ongoing business activities of Saudi Aramco undermine the ability of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to discharge its duties under international law and commitments in the context of the Paris Agreement.”
- “[...] these activities take place in the context of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's particular vulnerability to climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) 1.5°C report found that the Gulf region's population and fragile ecosystems are highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, such as water stress, sea level rise affecting vast low coastal lands, and high temperature and humidity with future levels potentially beyond adaptive capacities.”

(26 June 2023).

39 [Frequently asked questions: UN human rights complaint regarding Saudi Aramco and its financiers](#); ClientEarth, (25 August 2023).

40 *Ibid.*

41 *Ibid.*

- “[...] Saudi Aramco presents misleading information, including the premise that sustainability is a core concern of its business strategy, through widespread marketing and advertising.”
- The company employs “a marketing strategy which misrepresents Saudi Aramco’s overall emissions and the carbon intensity of its crude oil production”. This “greenwashing subverts the Paris Agreement in multiple ways, such as stimulating demand for fossil fuels, undermining public understanding of climate change, normalising fossil fuel activity, and reducing consumer actions to reduce emissions”.

The UN experts also wrote to Saudi Aramco’s financiers that: “The businesses that have helped finance Saudi Aramco’s activities are contributing to climate change-related human rights impacts, contrary to their own human rights responsibilities. According to the information received, these financial institutions include: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund; JP Morgan; Citi; HSBC; SMBC; Crédit Agricole; Morgan Stanley; BNP Paribas; Goldman Sachs; Mizuho; Société Générale and EIG Global Energy Partners.”⁴²

At the time of writing, two years after this communication, Saudi Aramco has not responded to the Working Group’s concerns.

1.4 Obstruction of climate justice

Saudi Aramco has been very open about its intentions. In March 2024, its CEO, Amin Nasser, said that the world should “abandon the fantasy of phasing out oil and gas and instead invest in them adequately reflecting realistic demand assumptions.”⁴³ Nasser has also said that “proponents of the popular energy transition narrative paint a picture of a utopian world where alternatives are ready to replace oil and gas almost overnight”, has castigated investors for believing what he calls the “rhetoric” of energy transition, and has remarked that the “world will continue to depend on oil and gas for the foreseeable future.”⁴⁴

In the context of comments like this from Saudi Aramco’s most senior executive, it is no surprise that Saudi Arabia is widely reported to be the world’s biggest blocker of climate action. Saudi Arabia’s interference has been “blatant and in

42 [Letter to Amin Nasser](#), from the Mandates of the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises et al. (26 June 2023).

43 [“Saudi Aramco chief says world should ‘abandon fantasy’ of phasing out fossil fuels”](#), France24, (27 March 2024).

44 [“Remarks by Amin H. Nasser, Saudi Aramco President & CEO, at the Saudi Capital Markets Forum 2023”](#), Aramco.com, (12 February 2023).

your face”, Harjeet Singh, a climate advocate told CNN. “They’re just blocking everything.”⁴⁵ Singh was speaking in the aftermath of the COP UN climate negotiations in Azerbaijan in November 2024. COP meetings serve two main purposes: to review the implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement; and to “adopt decisions to further develop and implement these three instruments”.⁴⁶ Alden Meyer, a senior associate with climate research organisation E3G who was present at the talks in Azerbaijan, described the Saudi delegation as “a wrecking ball” and as “acting with abandon”.⁴⁷ *The Guardian’s* environmental correspondent’s statement in 2025 that Saudi Arabia “has fought harder than any other country to block and delay international climate action” reflects consensus and is backed up by a large body of evidence collected over decades.⁴⁸

In 2023, the Climate Social Science Network (CSSN), an international network of climate scholars headquartered at the Institute for Environment and Society at Brown University in the US, issued a report on Saudi Arabia’s systematic obstruction of climate negotiations and

identified Saudi Arabia as the country that has done more than any other to hamper the work of the COP process:

*“One nation has had an outsized role in undermining progress at global climate negotiations, year after year: Saudi Arabia. The fossil fuel giant has a thirty-year record of obstruction and delay, protecting its national oil and gas sector and seeking to ensure UN climate talks achieve as little as possible, as slowly as possible.”*⁴⁹

The report describes Saudi Arabia delegations, which have “always been dominated by members of its Ministry of Energy, which in turn is closely associated with Saudi Aramco”, as “extremely successful over decades at slowing the efforts of the world community on climate change to a crawl”, with

45 Laura Paddison, “[Climate progress screeched to a halt this year. One country had its foot on the brake](#),” CNN, (31 December 2024).

46 See [United Nations Climate Change](#) website (accessed 10 February 2026).

47 Lisa Friedman, “[Saudi Arabia Is a ‘Wrecking Ball’ in Global Climate Talks](#),” The New York Times, (18 November 2024).

48 Damian Carrington, “[\\$170,000 a minute: why Saudi Arabia is the biggest blocker of climate action](#),” The Guardian, (15 November 2025).

49 Joanna Depledge, Kari De Pryck and J. Timmons Roberts, “[Decades of Systematic Obstructionism: Saudi Arabia’s Role in Slowing Progress in UN Climate Negotiations](#),” Climate Social Science Network, (November 2023), p. 4.

a focus on stalling progress on both procedure and substance.⁵⁰

On procedure, the report notes that Saudi Arabia is “largely responsible for the absence of any agreed voting rule in the climate change regime”, that its delegates “are well known for being quick to raise procedural objections” and that Saudi Arabia “seeks to present itself as a champion of developing country concerns, associating itself with small countries who genuinely face difficulties in participating”.⁵¹ If its stalling tactics prove ineffective, Saudi Arabia often simply refuses to engage: “Observers of UN talks report that Saudi heads of delegation have frequently blocked an entire text, or significant sections, without stating why.”⁵²

On matters of substance, CSSN notes that “much of Riyadh’s efforts on blocking progress on climate over the decades has been focused on undermining the scientific case for action in the IPCC and the UNFCCC (the COP process)”.⁵³ The Saudi delegation has “regularly tried to weaken wording in IPCC summaries”, including “emphasizing scientific uncertainties, exaggerating the costs of mitigation, diluting statements on the relationship between fossil fuels and warming, seeking to remove strong language on phasing out oil and gas, and insisting on a role for technologies that have yet to be proven to be feasible and economic at scale, and that protect the fossil fuel industry, such as carbon capture and storage (CCS) and carbon dioxide removal (CDR)”.⁵⁴ CSSN describe a range of Saudi interventions in relation to the IPCC’s Sixth Assessment Report, which was finalised in 2023, including climate denial, overstating the future role of abatement technologies such as CCS and CDR, opposing or watering down references to fossil fuel subsidy removal, and blocking net zero references and the need for rapid action. As revealed by Uearthed, Greenpeace’s investigative journalism arm, Saudi Arabia has been at the forefront of moves to foreground carbon capture technologies in place of emissions reductions.⁵⁵ It is not alone in this regard, but as CSSN highlights, Saudi Arabia plays a particularly detrimental role on a multitude of issues.

“It is by no means the only country guilty of crippling UNFCCC talks – the US, Russian Federation and a welter of countries have all had their moments – but Saudi Arabia has by far been the most consistent and vociferous in its attacks. So-called Saudi ‘wins’ are evident. Net zero is not in the Paris Agreement due to

50 Ibid.p. 4.

51 Ibid.p. 7.

52 Ibid.p. 10.

53 Ibid. p. 11.

54 Ibid.

55 Lawrence Carter and Crispin Dowler, “[Leaked documents reveal the fossil fuel and meat producing countries lobbying against climate action](#)”, Uearthed, (21 October 2021).

Saudi blocking. Action on aviation and shipping has progressed at a near glacial pace over the decades because of blocking by OPEC, led by Saudi Arabia.”⁵⁶

1.5 The Oil Demand Sustainability Program (OSP)

Fossil fuels are being progressively undercut as the world’s key sources of energy, even though ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine still present opportunities for super profits and expanded production. Investment in and use of renewable energies is increasing steadily, and the twin processes of clean energy generation driven by renewable technologies, and electrification are fundamentally changing the structure of global energy systems.⁵⁷ According to global research organisation the World Resources Institute, in 2024 more than 90 percent of all new electricity capacity worldwide came from renewable sources such as solar, wind, hydro and geothermal, and since 2015 global spending on clean energy has been higher than investments in fossil fuels.⁵⁸ In 2024, investment into renewables was double the investment into fossil fuels.⁵⁹ Electrification – the process of supplying homes, vehicles and factories with electricity rather than fossil fuels – is also advancing steadily. Electricity now meets around 22 percent of final energy consumption, grew 4 percent in 2024, and supplied 40 percent of the growth in final energy demand – a share that could feasibly reach 100 percent by the end of this decade.⁶⁰

However, if one looks at the total clean energy investment globally, only 1 percent comes from oil and gas producers.⁶¹ Fossil fuel companies and states whose economies are dependent on fossil fuel exports have a strong interest in reversing or at least slowing the trend toward renewables, ensuring that demand for their product remains strong. Low demand for oil and gas will lower the cost of these commodities, reducing revenues and profits, damaging investor

56 Ibid. p. 16.

57 “World Energy Outlook”, [International Energy Agency](#), (24 October 2023). Brad Plumer, “[There’s a New Forecast for Peak Oil Demand. It’s Increasingly Cloudy](#)”, New York Times, (12 November 2025).

“[Record-Breaking Annual Growth in Renewable Power Capacity](#)”, International Renewable Energy Association, (26 March 2025).

58 Serena Li, Joel Jaeger, Neelam Singh and Jennifer Layke, “[The State of Clean Energy, in 10 Charts](#)”, World Resources Institute, (10 December 2025).

59 “[Investment in clean energy this year is set to be twice the amount going to fossil fuels](#)”, International Energy Agency, (6 June 2024).

60 Daan Walter, Kingsmill Bond, Sam Butler-Sloss, “[The electrification imperative](#)”, Ember, (25 June 2025).

61 Christophe McGlade et al., “[The Oil and Gas Industry in Net Zero Transitions](#)”, International Energy Agency, (2023).

confidence, and limiting appetite to engage in costly exploration.⁶² Thus, oil and gas companies need to ensure that demand stays high and that supply can be controlled in such a way as to ensure that prices also remain high enough to return profits.

In November 2023, a six-month undercover investigation by the Centre for Climate Reporting (CCR) revealed that Saudi Arabia was planning a “sweeping global investment program designed to counteract the world’s efforts to reduce demand for oil and tackle climate change.”⁶³

*“The Oil Demand Sustainability Program (OSP) is a vast government program with dozens of projects aimed at embedding a high-carbon, fossil fuel-dependent development model in countries across Africa and Asia. This includes meticulously researched plans to drive a major increase in gasoline and diesel-fuelled vehicles and boost jet fuel sales via increased air travel.”*⁶⁴

The OSP includes “the most powerful arms of the Saudi state”, including Saudi Aramco, the Public Investment Fund, the petrochemicals company SABIC and the Kingdom’s most important ministries under the auspices of the Supreme Committee of Hydrocarbon Affairs.

The CCR investigation was based on secret recordings, documents provided by Saudi officials to undercover reporters and an analysis of regulatory filings.⁶⁵ It revealed:

- a sophisticated strategy to deploy fleets of petrol- and diesel-fuelled vehicles across Asia and Africa so that Saudi Arabia can “capture the increasing gasoline/diesel demand”
- plans to collaborate with an undisclosed global auto manufacturer to develop and produce a cheap car that can be sold in emerging markets to give “an oil uplift for the Kingdom”
- plans to fast-track commercial supersonic air travel, explicitly because it consumes three times more jet fuel than normal aircraft do

62 Amy Myers Jaffe, [“Why unlocking Venezuelan oil won’t mean much for US energy prices”](#), The Conversation, (13 January 2026).

63 Lawrence Carter, [“Cheap cars, supersonic jets and floating power plants: Undercover in Saudi Arabia’s secretive program to keep the world burning oil”](#), Centre for Climate Reporting, (27 November 2023).

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

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- a plan to lobby against government subsidies for electric vehicles in countries around the world
 - plans to encourage the use of toxic heavy fuel oil to generate power in Africa and South Asia.

An undercover reporter working with CCR asked a Saudi official if the aim of the programme was to artificially stimulate oil demand to counter global efforts to reduce oil consumption and tackle climate change. “Yes ... it is one of the main objectives that we are trying to accomplish,” replied the official.⁶⁶ Akindobe Oluwafemi of Corporate Accountability and Public Participation Africa (CAPPA) in Nigeria said that “the Saudi model is a Greek gift that will further sink Africa into climate catastrophe.”⁶⁷

As part of this strategy, it is clear that Saudi Arabia plans to combine the power of advertising with the global popularity of sport to promote its image and sell its oil and gas products.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

2. Fossil fuel advertising and sponsorship



The global advertising and marketing industries play a key role in maintaining the dominance of fossil fuels throughout society. Not only does the promotion of fossil fuels and other high-carbon goods and services increase their consumption and associated emissions, it also normalises fossil fuel production and consumption as a desirable and even aspirational part of everyday life. This is at odds with what the latest climate science tells us. In order to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement and prevent catastrophic climate heating, humanity needs to pursue both deep emissions reductions and a rapid and managed phase-out of fossil fuel production.⁶⁸ The continued dominance of fossil fuel advertising and sponsorship directly contradicts these necessities.

2.1 The scale and reach of advertising and sponsorship by the fossil fuel industry

The fossil fuel industry spends billions of dollars annually on corporate communications, sponsorships and advertising. InfluenceMap's research found that in the three years following the Paris Agreement, the five largest publicly listed oil and gas majors – ExxonMobil, Shell, Chevron, BP and TotalEnergies – invested over USD 1 billion in misleading climate-related branding and lobbying campaigns designed to maintain their social and legal licence to operate.⁶⁹ In 2024, co-operative think-tank the New Weather Institute found that fossil fuel companies invest at least USD 5.6 billion annually across 205 active sports sponsorship deals globally, with Saudi Aramco (USD 1.3 billion), INEOS (USD 777 million), Shell (USD 470 million) and TotalEnergies (USD 340 million) leading this investment.⁷⁰ Beyond sport, Saudi Aramco's own advertising footprint is also substantial: between October 2020 and October 2023, the company spent USD 13 million on advertising with *The New York Times* alone, making it the single largest contributor to the newspaper's more than USD 20 million in ad revenue from the fossil fuel sector over the same period.⁷¹

Fossil fuel companies spend heavily to shape how they are perceived as corporate actors and stakeholders in society, and are increasingly doing so through sporting events.

68 Ploy Achakulwisut, Peter Erickson et al., "[Global fossil fuel reduction pathways under different climate mitigation strategies and ambitions](#)"; Nature Communications, (13 September 2023).

69 "[How Big Oil Continues to Oppose the Paris Agreement](#)", InfluenceMap, (2019). See also "[Big Oil's Real Agenda on Climate Change 2022](#)", InfluenceMap, (2022).

70 "[Dirty Money: How Fossil Fuel Sponsors are Polluting Sport](#)", New Weather Institute, (2024).

71 Amy Westervelt and Matthew Green, "[Readers for Sale: The Media's Role in Climate Delay](#)"; Drilled, (5 December 2023).

Though sponsorship operates somewhat differently from advertising, it serves overlapping strategic purposes. By attaching corporate brands to sporting events, cultural institutions and major public spectacles, fossil fuel companies achieve what advertising researchers call passive exposure – repeated, low-engagement contact with a brand that builds familiarity and positive association without prompting critical reflection. Sponsorship of Formula 1, professional golf and major football competitions, such as the Men’s FIFA World Cup, is particularly valuable because it reaches globally distributed, affluent audiences in an emotionally charged context that is not conducive to critical engagement with the sponsor’s environmental or human records record.⁷²

2.2 Fossil fuel advertising and sponsorship increases emissions

In 2019, Purpose Disruptors (a “network of advertising and marketing professionals dedicated to shifting the industry’s focus toward tackling climate change”) found that advertising in the UK was responsible for approximately 186 million tonnes of CO₂e – nearly half the UK’s total domestic emissions for that year – through the uplift in sales it generated. By 2022, that figure had risen by 11 percent to 208 million tonnes, adding the equivalent of 32 percent to the annual carbon footprint of every person in the UK.⁷³ In the EU alone, adverts for cars and airlines were estimated to generate between 41 and 122 million tonnes of additional CO₂e per year, which is more than the total annual emissions of Belgium.⁷⁴

The direct pathway from advertising to emissions runs through consumer demand. History provides several examples that show that advertising stimulates consumption. Tobacco advertising bans were associated with a 20 percent lower likelihood of current smoking and a 37 percent lower risk of smoking initiation.⁷⁵ Research on a ban on advertising high fat, salt and sugar products

72 Tim Hill, Tobin Canniford, and Gianna Eckhardt, “[The Roar of the Crowd: How Interaction Ritual Chains Create Social Atmospheres](#)”, *Journal of Marketing*, (21 May 2021).

73 “[Advertised Emissions: The Carbon Emissions Generated by UK Advertising](#)” Purpose Disruptors, (2021). A separate 2022 study, conducted by Greenpeace Nordic and the New Weather Institute, applied comparable methodology specifically to advertising for cars and flights, finding that globally, advertising for these two high-emission categories in 2019 could be responsible for between 202 and 606 million tonnes of CO₂e – a range comparable to the entire annual emissions of the Netherlands at the lower bound, and almost twice Spain’s total emissions at the upper bound. “[Advertising Climate Chaos: How Adverts for Cars and Flights Are Fuelling the Climate Emergency](#)”, Greenpeace Nordic and New Weather Institute, (2022).

74 “[Advertising Climate Chaos: How Adverts for Cars and Flights Are Fuelling the Climate Emergency](#)”, Greenpeace Nordic and New Weather Institute, (2022).

75 Christina Saad, Brandon Cheng et al., “[Effectiveness of tobacco advertising, promotion and](#)

in the London Underground estimated that sales of unhealthy food and drinks by households were 7 percent lower after the ban was introduced.⁷⁶

Fossil fuel advertising and sponsorship not only directly increase emissions, they also indirectly contribute to an environment in which fossil fuel consumption is normalised, and in which the implicit message that these companies are responsible and forward looking reduces consumer pressure on those companies to change their practices. Research in consumer psychology from 2023 concluded that corporate image advertising affects not just attitudes toward the company but attitudes toward the category of products or services the company represents: “[...] in the presence of advertising for highly known carbon-intensive brands, communicating a social norm is insufficient to induce relevant behavioral changes towards low-carbon consumption.”⁷⁷

Another pathway through which advertising increases emissions is its obstructive effect on climate policy. The IPCC’s Sixth Assessment Report explicitly identifies regulating fossil fuel advertising as one of the mitigation strategies available to governments, and notes the normalising effect of advertising in driving planet-heating consumption.⁷⁸ It states: “Fossil fuel industries have unique access to mainstream media via advertisements, shaping narratives of media reports, and exerting political influence.” The IPCC also identifies actors representing “vested economic and political interests” as having eroded support for climate policy by generating “rhetoric and misinformation that undermines science and disregards risk and urgency”. This sentiment reached a new peak in 2024, when UN Secretary-General António Guterres urged “every country to ban advertising from fossil-fuel companies. And I urge news media and tech companies to stop taking fossil-fuel advertising”, dubbing fossil fuel companies as the “godfathers of climate chaos”.⁷⁹

[sponsorship bans on smoking prevalence, initiation and cessation: a systematic review and meta-analysis](#)”, Tobacco Control, (13 January 2025), p. 8.

76 Amy Yau, Nicolas Berger et al., “[Changes in household food and drink purchases following restrictions on the advertisement of high fat, salt, and sugar products across the Transport for London network: A controlled interrupted time series analysis](#)”, PLoS Medicine, (17 February 2022).

77 Juana Castro-Santa, Stefan Drews, and Jeroen van den Bergh, “[Nudging low-carbon consumption through advertising and social norms](#)”, Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics, (February 2023).

78 “[Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change – Contribution of Working Group III to the Sixth Assessment Report](#)”, The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, (2022).

79 Oliver Milman, “[Godfathers of climate chaos: UN chief urges global fossil-fuel advertising ban](#)”, The Guardian, (5 June 2024).

Fossil fuel companies have deployed advertising campaigns to influence fiscal or climate policies.⁸⁰ In the UK, oil company Equinor’s “Broader Energy” adverts appeared in the run-up to a major government decision on whether to approve the vast Rosebank oil and gas field in the North Sea, of which Equinor owned 80 percent. In response to a complaint to the UK advertising regulator, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), the Norwegian fossil fuel giant said its ads were aimed “at decision-makers and their influencers, a group that included politicians in government and opposition, as well as advisors and journalists.”⁸¹

A final pathway from advertising to emissions is the contribution of corporate image advertising to what economists call fossil fuel “lock-in”: a self-reinforcing dynamic by which existing fossil fuel infrastructure, regulatory regimes and social norms perpetuate fossil fuel dependence even in the face of technically viable alternatives and unignorable impacts of climate breakdown.⁸² Fossil fuel advertising reinforces the sense that fossil fuels are a normal and inevitable part of modern life, raising the political and psychological cost of decisive action and delaying the tipping points that accelerate transition.⁸³

2.3 Sports sponsorship

Against the backdrop of the evidence of the harms of fossil fuel advertising and sponsorship, sports sponsorship emerges as a particularly effective and widespread vehicle, for reasons that distinguish it from other forms of advertising.

Firstly, engagement with sport is highly emotional and often entails a strong group identity. Social psychology research has shown that such engagement increases the effectiveness of associative brand communication. When audiences are emotionally invested in a sporting contest, they are less likely to engage critical cognitive processes, and brand associations formed in such contexts are more durable and more resistant to counter-messaging.⁸⁴ The tobacco industry explicitly documented this strategic logic: internal tobacco industry documents cited by researchers showed that Marlboro’s move into Formula 1 sponsorship was described internally as building a “credible and

80 Robert Brulle, Melissa Aronczyk, and Jason Carmichael, “[Corporate promotion and climate change: an analysis of key variables affecting advertising spending by major oil corporations](#)”, Climatic Change, (11 December 2019).

81 “[ASA Ruling on Equinor](#)”, Advertising Standards Authority, (20 December 2023).

82 Illona Otto, Jonathan Donges et al. et al., “[Social Tipping Dynamics for Stabilizing Earth’s Climate by 2050](#)”, PNAS, (21 January 2020).

83 Ibid.

84 Tim Hill, Tobin Canniford, and Gianna Eckhardt, “[The Roar of the Crowd: How Interaction Ritual Chains Create Social Atmospheres](#)”, Journal of Marketing, (21 May 2021).

authentic” extension of the brand by exploiting the sport’s associations with speed and adventure.⁸⁵ Today, fossil fuel and high-carbon companies pursue the same objective.

Secondly, sports sponsorship is truly global. One global survey found that 51 percent of the world’s population identify as football fans.⁸⁶ This allows fossil fuel companies to reach audiences in jurisdictions where other forms of advertising face tighter restrictions. Formula 1, golf and international football are among the most globally distributed media properties.

Thirdly, sports institutions are often a source of trust and legitimacy, which is transferred to their sponsors. Advertising researcher Ken Doctor has described this as a “thought-leader exercise”: being associated with leading sports brands confers significant “tangential brand-building benefit”.⁸⁷ Industry surveys consistently rank sports sponsorship as one of the top three “most trusted channels” for advertising.⁸⁸ This transfer of legitimacy makes sports qualitatively different from, and more valuable to, fossil fuel companies than equivalent advertising spend in other formats.

Fourthly, sports sponsorship is both durable and cumulative. A multi-year sponsorship deal produces repeated exposure across hundreds of broadcast events, providing the kind of long-term, passive normalisation that is most effective at shifting the baseline of public expectation. Unlike an advertising campaign that runs for a season, a sponsorship relationship becomes part of the accepted furniture of a sport, expected and maximally effective at communicating that the sponsor’s presence is both normal and legitimate.

2.4 Saudi Arabia and sports sponsorship

In December 2024, Play The Game, a Danish NGO that advocates for better sports governance, published a dataset that revealed the scale of Saudi Arabia’s sports strategy, mapping the key individuals and entities driving its strategy on sports.⁸⁹ These included 910 Saudi sponsorships in sports worldwide.

85 [“Tobacco Industry Targeting Young People”](#), Tobacco Tactics/University of Bath, (15 August 2025).

86 [“Nielsen reveals exclusive new data and insights in annual “Tops of Sports” report”](#), Nielsen, (11 December 2025)

87 Amy Westervelt and Matthew Green, [“Readers for Sale: The Media’s Role in Climate Delay”](#), Drilled, (5 December 2023).

88 [“Sport sponsorships are raising more than just brand awareness”](#), Nielsen, (March 2022).

89 Stanis Elsborg and Karim Zidan, [“Saudi Arabia’s Grip on World Sport”](#), Play the Game, (December 2024).

Karim Zidan, an investigative journalist who focuses on sport, and one of the authors of the Play The Game report, has summarised the reasons behind this investment.

Saudi Arabia's aggressive investments in sports are emblematic of its broader strategy to normalize its image globally, despite ongoing concerns over its human rights record. By pouring significant financial resources into high-profile sports, the Kingdom has managed to position itself as a key player on the global stage, leveraging "checkbook diplomacy" to gain influence and reshape the very fabric of these industries. These investments serve not only to boost Saudi Arabia's economic and geopolitical standing but also to exert control over the narratives surrounding it by shifting global perceptions and mitigating criticism of its actions. In doing so, Saudi Arabia is not just participating in global sport – it is, in many respects, remaking it in its own image.⁹⁰

Saudi Aramco and the Public Investment Fund (PIF) are at the forefront of this strategy. As the watchdog group Human Rights Watch noted in a 2024 report, MBS has centralised power in Saudi Arabia to such an extent that he has "unchecked control" over the estimated one trillion dollars held by the PIF, which is propped up by the revenue that Saudi Aramco generates from the country's oil and gas reserves.⁹¹

Concerns about abusive and unaccountable leaders controlling vast state wealth are further exacerbated when considering the sources of the PIF's recent significant growth. Most of the growth since 2015 has been due to the transfer of other Saudi government assets into the PIF, most notably the transfer of shares of the state-owned fossil fuel company Aramco, along with proceeds from the 2019 Aramco initial public offering, rather than returns from the PIF's investment portfolio.⁹²

Where sport is concerned, the PIF operates as a soft-power slush fund rather than a profit-oriented investment fund, with its aim being to promote Saudi Arabia and Saudi Aramco. The two organisations often work in tandem. Saudi Aramco's chairman, Yasir Al-Rumayyan, is also the governor of the PIF.⁹³

The PIF has more sports sponsorship agreements than Saudi Aramco – the

90 Karim Zidan, "[How Saudi Arabia reshaped the sports world in its image](#)", Sports Politika, (2 December 2024).

91 "[The Man Who Bought The World: Rights Abuses Linked to Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund and Its Chairman, Mohammed bin Salman](#)", Human Rights Watch, (20 November 2024).

92 Ibid.

93 Jacob Whitehead, "[Yasir Al-Rumayyan: A life of power, privilege and risk for golf's most powerful man](#)", The Athletic, (29 March 2023).

PIF sponsors 345 entities, compared to Saudi Aramco's 71 sponsorship deals – but Saudi Aramco's focus is more international and its sponsorship deals are the most high profile in Saudi Arabia's growing portfolio. Saudi Aramco is a leading sponsor of Formula 1 motor racing and is the "title partner" of the Aston Martin Formula 1 team, as well as being the leading sponsor of the International Cricket Council (ICC). The ICC describe this on their website as a "cornerstone of their [Aramco's] broader strategy to be a responsible corporate citizen and contribute to the global community". This includes Saudi Aramco sponsorship of the Men's and Women's Cricket World Cups and the Men's and Women's T20 Cricket World Cups.⁹⁴

However, the jewel in the crown of Saudi Arabia's vast portfolio of sports sponsorships is football's world governing body, FIFA.

94 See <https://www.astonmartinf1.com/en-GB/partner/aramco> (accessed 26 February 2026) and <https://www.icc-cricket.com/about/partners/aramco> (accessed 26 February 2026).

3. FIFA: An increasingly dangerous organisation



3.1 FIFA's governance and business model

FIFA was formed in 1904 by representatives of the nascent national football associations of the Netherlands, Switzerland, Denmark, Belgium, France, Sweden and a Madrid club representing Spain.⁹⁵ FIFA, like many international sports governing bodies, is registered in Switzerland as an association with a non-commercial purpose under the Swiss Civil Code.⁹⁶ Its legal status permits it to conduct commercial operations as long as these are in pursuit of its objectives.⁹⁷

FIFA sits at the top of football's pyramid structure, a hierarchical system of governance constructed in a way that enables the organisation to dictate the rules and procedures to those below, and to determine how the revenue generated by the Men's World Cup, the sport's most lucrative tournament, is distributed. FIFA currently has 211 national member associations, each of which is also a member of one of six regional confederations.

The revenue that FIFA generates and redistributes is significant. At its 2026 annual congress, FIFA announced that it would distribute a total of USD 2.7 billion to its 211 member associations over the next four years.⁹⁸ Each of these member associations has the same voting power within the FIFA Congress, which means that a significant proportion of the voting base for the FIFA presidency is financially dependent on the funds that the FIFA leadership controls. This structural flaw has always been present, but the mutual dependence between the FIFA leadership and the member associations has increased as FIFA has grown wealthier and more member associations have joined the organisation.⁹⁹ The structural conflict of interest defining its decision-making processes, in which regulatory and commercial functions are intertwined, exacerbate the problem.¹⁰⁰

FIFA's senior officials and a critical mass of its member associations are therefore locked into a mutually dependent system of patronage that makes the organisation structurally resistant to internal reform. It is this system that is the root cause of the various scandals that have rocked FIFA over the years, most

95 David Conn, "The Fall of the House of FIFA," (Yellow Jersey, 2017), p 23.

96 [Swiss Civil Code](#), (10 December 1907), articles 60 – 79.

97 *Ibid.*

98 Matt Hughes, "[A money machine and Morocco on the rise: what we learned from Fifa congress](#)" The Guardian, (4 May 2026).

99 John Sugden and Alan Tomlinson, "Football, Corruption and Lies: Revisiting Badfellas, the book FIFA tried to ban", (Routledge, 2017), p. 179.

100 Stephen Weatherill, "[Saving Football from Itself: Why and How to Re-Make EU Sports Law](#)", Cambridge Yearbook of European Legal Studies, (10 October 2022).

notably in 2015 when the US Department of Justice charged numerous senior FIFA officials with corruption and racketeering in the context of a “long-running investigation into bribery and corruption in the world of organized soccer”.¹⁰¹

In February 2016, delegates at FIFA’s extraordinary congress in Zurich adopted a proposed reform package and elected Gianni Infantino as FIFA President.¹⁰² “We will restore the image of FIFA and the respect of FIFA. And everyone in the world will applaud us,” Infantino told the FIFA Congress after his election.¹⁰³ However, FIFA under Infantino has proven as resistant to reform as it was under its previous president, Sepp Blatter, for the simple reason that the central structural flaw at the root of many of FIFA’s governance problems – the deeply problematic power dynamic between the organisation’s executive branch and its member associations – has never been addressed. Infantino pointedly told delegates at the FIFA Congress in 2024 that, “70% of you, of the FIFA Member Associations, would have no football without the resources coming directly from FIFA.”¹⁰⁴

FIFA has repeatedly asserted that it exerts oversight over how these resources are spent by member associations, yet there is no evidence that FIFA is ensuring that these associations undergo regular independent audits to ensure that FIFA development funds are being spent appropriately. FIFA has failed to respond to multiple requests from FairSquare for information in this regard.¹⁰⁵ The system has been described as “a form of institutionalised vote-buying” by the former head of FIFA’s Governance and Audit Committee, Professor Miguel Maduro, who lost his job after he attempted to enforce FIFA’s rules on political neutrality in the run-up to the 2018 Men’s World Cup in Russia: “You generate political allegiance – you reward people for their support but in a way that doesn’t get you into trouble. It is a system of patronage.”¹⁰⁶

101 [“Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch Delivers Remarks at Press Conference Announcing Charges Against Nine FIFA Officials and Five Corporate Executives”](#), United States Department of Justice (Office of Public Affairs), (27 May 2015).

102 [“FIFA congress votes in favour of reform package”](#), Sky Sports News, (26 February 2016).

103 [“FIFA election: Gianni Infantino voted new president”](#), Al Jazeera, (26 February 2016).

104 [“Gianni Infantino emphasises FIFA’s mission to grow football globally in FIFA Congress address”](#), FIFA, (17 May 2024).

105 In the most recent correspondence of December 2025, FairSquare requested “Details of the annual central audits that member associations undergo, including the names of the independent auditors appointed by FIFA to audit member associations accounts, whether they conduct on-site or remote audits, and links to or copies of their reports.” Letter to FIFA President Gianni Infantino from FairSquare, (22 December 2025), on file with FairSquare.

106 Martyn Ziegler, [“Why is Gianni Infantino reversing FIFA’s post-Blatter reforms?”](#), The Times, (16 May 2024).

Where FIFA's business model is concerned, the Men's World Cup, which takes place once every four years, is by far the biggest source of income generation. FIFA actually loses money in three years out of four, largely as a result of the sums it redistributes to its member associations, and thus the commercial success of the Men's World Cup is an organisational priority.¹⁰⁷ Where tournament hosts are concerned, they almost always lose substantial sums of money. Martin Müller, David Gogishvili and Sven Daniel Wolfe at the University of Lausanne have analysed longitudinal data on the major revenue streams and principal sources of costs for the world's three biggest mega sporting events – the Summer Olympic Games, the Winter Olympic Games and the FIFA Men's World Cup – and concluded that while they are very profitable for the games' organisers, FIFA and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), they are “hardly ever” profitable for the host cities and countries.

“The results show that the World Cup and the Olympic Games are not financially viable in and of themselves. In other words, the IOC and FIFA would long have gone bankrupt if they had to shoulder the direct costs of their events from the revenues these events create. If these events still continue today, this is because they receive subsidies external to the event itself, mostly for venue construction.”¹⁰⁸

Not only does FIFA pass on the majority of the costs of World Cup preparations to the host, it also exacerbates the financial burden on hosts by demanding tax exemptions for itself and its partners, despite the fact that it already pays a remarkably low rate of taxation in Switzerland on account of its status as an association.¹⁰⁹

Economists Robert Baade and Victor Matheson have examined how different governments sell the benefits of hosting mega sporting events like the FIFA World Cup to their citizens. Generally speaking, they argue, democratic states are required to engage in “economics chicanery” in order to persuade their populations to support hosting bids and as a result “the benefits are significantly exaggerated and the costs significantly underplayed”.¹¹⁰ In autocratic states where public criticism of the authorities carries with it a high risk, there is less need to engage in such tactics.

107 Keiron O'Connor, “[FIFA World Cup Finances](#)”, Swiss Ramble, (22 November 2022).

108 Martin Müller, David Gogishvili and Sven Daniel Wolfe, “[The structural deficit of the Olympics and the World Cup: Comparing costs against revenues over time](#)”, Environmental and Planning A: Economy and Space, (May 2022).

109 “[Substitute: the case for the external reform of FIFA](#)”, FairSquare, (October 2024), pp 104–110.

110 Robert Baade and Victor Matheson, “[An Analysis of Drivers of Mega-Events in Emerging Economies](#)”, College of the Holy Cross Economics Working Papers, (2015).

3.2 A handmaiden to authoritarians

“Less democracy is sometimes better for organising a World Cup”, said FIFA’s then secretary general, Jerome Valcke, in the run-up to the 2014 Men’s World Cup in Brazil. His comments generated headlines, but they simply reflected the realities of FIFA’s business model. Populations and politicians in democracies are more liable to complain about their governments building stadiums instead of schools and hospitals, they are more likely to push back against the idea of giving FIFA tax exemptions, their construction and hospitality workers are more likely to demand decent pay and conditions – and will withdraw their labour if those demands are refused – and their journalists are more likely to ask FIFA and their hosts tough questions.

Since Gianni Infantino assumed the FIFA presidency in 2016, the organisation has cleaved very closely to the types of authoritarian leaders who will provide FIFA with the guarantees and assurances it requests.

In May 2019, Russian president Vladimir Putin awarded Gianni Infantino the Russian Order of Friendship after the 2018 Men’s World Cup. “I want to thank you for everything that you did for the World Cup in Russia and for your glowing assessment of our efforts,” said President Putin.¹¹¹ Infantino refused to criticise Qatar for serious and widespread human rights abuses linked to the construction of the 2022 Men’s World Cup stadium, and was effusive in his praise of the Gulf state in the tournament’s aftermath – “Happiness, joy, pride, fulfilment; everything that one can dream of when he thinks about the maximum that football can offer to the world happened in Qatar in 2022.”¹¹² The run-up to the Men’s 2026 World Cup has seen perhaps the most flagrant and egregious examples of FIFA acting in the service of an authoritarian leader. In December 2025, FairSquare filed a complaint against Gianni Infantino with the FIFA Ethics Committee in relation to a series of comments he made in support of the political agenda of the US President Donald Trump, and the awarding of a FIFA Peace Prize to President Trump.¹¹³

However, as the following section will show, it is Saudi Arabia, under the authoritarian control of Mohammed bin Salman, which is arguably the most influential state actor in global football, and the commercial deal between Aramco and FIFA is only one of the ways in which it seeks to exert influence.

111 [“FIFA President receives Russian Order of Friendship”](#), FIFA, (23 May 2019).

112 FIFA, [“FIFA President reflects on “unique” and “perfect” FIFA World Cup 2022™ in Qatar”](#), (18 December 2023).

113 [“FairSquare files ethics complaint over FIFA President’s repeated breaches of political neutrality rules”](#), FairSquare, (10 December 2025).

4. Saudi Aramco vs FIFA



Since 2023, Saudi Arabia has invested vast amounts of money into FIFA, both directly and indirectly. From the perspective of football governance, it is helping to financially support the patronage system that is at the root of FIFA's dysfunction. From the perspective of the climate crisis, it is using FIFA as a means of accessing the unparalleled reach and popularity of football to promote Saudi Aramco. These processes cannot be disentangled.

On 16 November 2023, approximately two weeks after Saudi Arabia was confirmed as the sole bidder for the 2034 World Cup, *The Times* announced that Saudi Aramco was set to be FIFA's most lucrative sponsor. *The Times* cited "sources in the marketing industry and those with knowledge of Aramco's plans" and reported that the deal was worth USD 100 million annually.¹¹⁴ On 25 April 2024, Saudi Aramco and FIFA confirmed the deal, which will run until 2027.¹¹⁵

Based on the vast body of research on fossil fuel advertising, Saudi Aramco's practices, its business model, the public statements of its senior leadership and the well-documented efforts of the Saudi Arabian state to obstruct progress on climate change and promote demand for oil and gas, the purpose of this sponsorship deal can be in no doubt. Saudi Aramco and the Saudi Arabian state that controls it want to use FIFA to stoke consumer demand for its oil and gas at a time when renewable energies pose a credible threat to the dominance of fossil fuels. FIFA's sponsorship deal with Saudi Aramco is undoubtedly the most dangerous example of fossil fuel advertising and sponsorship the world has ever seen.

In terms of its short-term impact, a report from the New Weather Institute and Scientists for Global Responsibility, an organisation promoting responsible science and technology, found that FIFA's global partnership deal with Saudi Aramco ahead of the Men's World Cup finals 2026 will induce additional emissions of about 30 million tCO₂e due to increased sales for the fossil fuel company.¹¹⁶ This far exceeds the 9 million tCO₂e expected to be generated by the tournament itself.¹¹⁷ The potential long-term impact is profoundly alarming.

114 Martyn Ziegler, "[Saudi state oil giant to become Fifa's biggest-paying sponsor](#)", *The Times*, (16 November 2023).

115 "[Aramco and Fifa announce global partnership](#)", Aramco, (25 April 2024).

116 "[FIFA's Climate Blind Spot](#)", New Weather Institute, Scientists for Global Responsibility, Environmental Defence Fund, and Cool Down Network, (July 2025). The report's authors calculated that the size of the GHG emissions induced by a sponsorship deal are affected by four main factors: the value of the sponsorship deal; the annual gross revenue of the sponsoring company; the annual GHG emissions (scopes 1, 2 and 3) of the sponsoring company; and a measure of the financial return that the sponsor expects from the deal. They used common economic theory and practice to combine these four variables into an equation to estimate the emissions associated with the sponsorship. See appendix 3 of the report for full details.

117 Ibid.

By combining the phenomenal power of advertising with the global cultural force that is football, Saudi Arabia is using FIFA to help it extract every last barrel of its vast oil and gas reserves, an eventuality that would be disastrous for the planet.

FIFA's business and governance models mean that, in the absence of external reform, the organisation will in all likelihood continue to serve as a key enabler of these efforts. In FIFA's press release announcing the deal, Gianni Infantino stated simply that "Aramco has a strong track record of supporting world-class events, but also a focus on developing grassroots sport initiatives."¹¹⁸ Moreover the Saudi Aramco sponsorship deal is not the only way in which Saudi Arabia is seeking to exert influence on FIFA.

In December 2022, Gianni Infantino confirmed that FIFA planned to significantly expand its annual Club World Cup and transform it into a 32-team tournament held every four years. "It will go ahead, making it like a World Cup," Infantino said.¹¹⁹ This was potentially a hugely significant development, with the aim being to create a new FIFA tournament that could compete with the Men's World Cup in terms of its potential to generate sponsorship and broadcasting revenue. Unfortunately for FIFA, broadcasters displayed little appetite for the new tournament. FIFA had reportedly been seeking to sell the tournament's broadcasting rights for USD 1 billion, but such was the scepticism surrounding the public's interest in the expanded Club World Cup that UK broadcaster ITV reportedly "made a zero pounds bid" to broadcast the competition, believing that FIFA might accept the offer "if it agreed to put games on its main terrestrial channels".¹²⁰ *The New York Times* reported in November 2024 that the lack of commercial interest in the tournament "has led to growing speculation that FIFA will rely on [Infantino's] relationship with Saudi Arabia, which has fast become the biggest spender in international sport, to enable Mr Infantino's project to succeed".¹²¹ *New York Times* journalist Tariq Panja predicted, in a personal Bluesky post, that an entity from Saudi Arabia would rescue Infantino's project:

*"Can not see beyond a huge deal with some random Saudi-backed entity to buy the television rights at the price FIFA needs to balance its books. The tenders have not brought market-driven networks at anywhere near the level FIFA needs. Those rights will likely then be subbed to broadcasters (at a loss)."*¹²²

118 ["Aramco and FIFA announce global partnership"](#), FIFA, (25 April 2024).

119 ["FIFA Announces Plans for Expanded 32-team Club World Cup from 2025"](#), The Athletic, (16 December 2022).

120 Sam Wallace, ["ITV in £0 Bid to Broadcast Club World Cup"](#), The Telegraph, (1 March 2025), available at

121 Ibid.

122 Tariq Panja Bluesky account @tariqpanja.bsky.social , (26 November 2024), available at <https://>

In December 2024, the sports streaming platform DAZN bought the broadcast rights for the inaugural 2025 Club World Cup for a figure that FIFA sources told *The Athletic* was close to USD 1 billion.¹²³ Two months after this deal, a Saudi Arabian sports investment organisation controlled by the PIF announced that it had agreed to acquire a minority stake in DAZN. SURJ Sports Investment was established by Saudi Arabia's PIF in August 2023.¹²⁴ Bloomberg had previously reported that Saudi Arabia intended to make a USD 1 billion investment in DAZN.¹²⁵ According to *Athletic* journalist Matt Slater, "it is widely believed – and not denied – that DAZN founder Sir Len Blavatnik has sold less than 10 percent of the sports streamer to SURJ, the sports arm of PIF, for \$1 billion".¹²⁶ Slater also noted that: "Coincidentally, this is the same amount that DAZN paid FIFA in early December for the global rights to this summer's Club World Cup, which the London-based streamer intends to pump out free of charge."¹²⁷

FIFA struck its deal with DAZN one week before FIFA awarded the hosting rights for the 2034 Men's World Cup to Saudi Arabia, after a bidding process that appeared to have been tailored to ensure that Saudi Arabia was the only bidder and that its bid avoided any serious scrutiny, despite the potential for the types of serious human rights abuses that accompanied preparations for the Qatar 2022 Men's World Cup.¹²⁸ The infrastructure and construction developments required to make this tournament possible, which include a significant expansion in Saudi Arabia's airport capacity – they plan to increase the combined capacity of five airports from 95.1 million annual visitors in 2023 to 240 million in 2030 – will generate vast amounts of carbon emissions.¹²⁹ All of this will be paid for with Saudi Aramco oil and gas revenue, and Saudi Aramco will in all probability serve as the tournament's main sponsor, simultaneously promoting its brand and products, and ensuring FIFA generates the profits it needs to sustain its patronage system.

bsky.app/profile/tariqpanja.bsky.social/post/3lbum45jg2226 (accessed 4 May 2026).

- 123 Dan Sheldon, "FIFA agrees Club World Cup broadcast deal with DAZN", *The Athletic*, (4 December 2024).
- 124 "SURJ Sports Investment Announces Investment in DAZN", SURJ Sports Investment, (17 February 2025)., "PIF Establishes SRJ Sports Investments Company to Elevate Sports Sector in Saudi Arabia and MENA", SURJ Sports Investment, (6 August 2023).
- 125 Matthew Martin, "Saudi Arabia Said to Near at Least \$1 Billion Investment in Dazn", *Bloomberg*, (13 January 2025).
- 126 Matt Slater, "DAZN: Saudi Arabian investment firm buys minority stake in sports broadcaster", *The Athletic*, (17 February 2025).
- 127 Ibid.
- 128 See joint NGO statement "FIFA / Saudi Arabia: Human rights groups, football supporters, worker organisations express "deep concern" at global law firm's flawed World Cup 2034 assessment" (28 October 2024). See also "Underlying Causes: Unexplained migrant worker deaths in Saudi Arabia", FairSquare, (May 2025).
- 129 "Growing Together: The Saudi Arabia FIFA World Cup 2034 Bid Book", (July 2024).
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In November 2025, the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD) and FIFA signed a memorandum of understanding to “allocate up to USD 1 billion in concessional loans for the construction and rehabilitation of sports stadiums and essential surrounding infrastructure in developing countries around the world.”¹³⁰ According to a FIFA press release, the agreement “underscores a shared commitment to support developing nations in strengthening their sports ecosystems” and it will “prioritise developing nations and their respective FIFA Member Associations”.¹³¹ Thus, FIFA will serve as the middle man between Saudi Arabian loans and less wealthy member associations. Developing countries that want to host FIFA World Cups can borrow money from Saudi Arabia, working in tandem with FIFA, to bring their stadiums and infrastructure up to the required standards.

In May 2026, FIFA announced that the Public Investment Fund - which owns 8 percent of Aramco’s shares and whose investments are almost entirely funded by the revenue Aramco generates - would be a tournament sponsor of the 2026 men’s World Cup.¹³² FIFA did not reveal the value of the sponsorship deal, nor the value of a similar deal between the PIF and FIFA for the 2025 Club World Cup.¹³³

In summary, Saudi Arabia is investing oil and gas revenue into FIFA in a variety of ways, all of which underpin a transactional relationship that cements Saudi Arabia’s position as a key and indispensable ally of FIFA. FIFA’s role in this is to help Saudi Arabia achieve one of its main strategic goals, which – contrary to the simplistic narrative it promotes – is not simply a diversification away from oil and gas, but rather the full extraction of its oil and gas reserves as a means of *financing* this diversification and maintaining its power and influence.

From the perspective of the climate crisis, Saudi Aramco’s sponsorship of FIFA is the most obviously problematic link between the Gulf state and football’s world governing body. It is also the one that can be most easily severed.

In September 2025, a coalition of NGOs, including Human Rights Watch, wrote to FIFA to express concerns about the partnership with Aramco, building on the concerns raised with Aramco by the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights in 2023.¹³⁴ A copy of that letter is attached as an annex to this

130 [“Saudi Fund for Development and FIFA join forces to provide financial support for sports infrastructure in developing nations”](#), FIFA, (24 November 2025).

131 Ibid.

132 [“PIF named as Official Tournament Supporter of FIFA World Cup 2026”](#), FIFA, (14 May 2026).

133 [“PIF and FIFA forge partnership for FIFA Club World Cup 2025”](#), FIFA, (5 June 2025).

134 Letter to FIFA from FairSquare, ALQST, Badvertising, European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights, Fossil Free Football, The Green Runners, Human Rights Watch, Middle East Democracy Centre, MENA Rights Group, The Next Test, (15 September 2025). See annex 1.

report. The NGO letter alleges that the partnership with Aramco “risks FIFA contributing to the undermining of international agreements on climate change and its resultant human rights impacts” and that by accepting sponsorship money from Aramco “FIFA provides a platform for a company committed to expanding crude oil production and resisting the commitment to transition away from fossil fuels.”¹³⁵

Having received no response from FIFA and other sports organisations who have taken Aramco sponsorship money, the NGOs filed their own complaint with the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights in February 2026.¹³⁶

The complaint requested that the UN Working Group “consider whether these organisations – which have seemingly engaged in these partnerships without adequate human rights due diligence – may, through their highly influential promotion of Aramco and its business activities, be contributing to serious and adverse human rights impacts, and may be in violation of international human rights law and standards, in comparable fashion to Aramco’s funding partners”.

Should the UN experts act on this complaint, they will add to the pressure on FIFA to drop Saudi Aramco as a sponsor, and as the following section will address, there are also legal avenues that can be pursued to prevent companies from using sport to stoke demand for fossil fuels.

135 Ibid.

136 “Sporting organisations and the business activities of the Saudi Arabian Oil Company (Aramco): An information submission to the UN Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises”, FairSquare, ALQST for Human Rights, Badvertising, European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights, Fossil Free Football, Green Runners, and the Next Test, (26 February 2026), copy on file with FairSquare.

5. How the EU could act



With the dangers of fossil fuel advertising and sponsoring becoming increasingly evident, one question looms large: what can be done – and who can do it?

Various international government bodies, advisory bodies and scientific councils have identified the banning of advertising and sponsorship by the fossil fuel industry as an essential policy measure. The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP, 2020) cites advertising regulation as a mechanism for lifestyle change. EU-funded research project CAPABLE reflects that by banning advertising and sponsorships at an early stage of policy sequencing strategy, governments can contribute to “reshaping the public information environment” and “help build public acceptance for policies with greater economic or behavioural impact”.¹³⁷ At the local level, cities and towns are, as noted, equally waking up to the threats posed by fossil fuel advertising and sponsorship, with more than 50 places across Europe having already implemented bans focused on products and services from the fossil fuel industry, as well as from the aviation and automobile industries.¹³⁸

These initiatives make valuable contributions to reducing the visibility of fossil fuels and in demonstrating public and political support for action on fossil fuel advertising. Yet, they also have inherent limitations: some measures are not legally binding and most are confined to small geographic areas. To augment their reach and effectiveness, national or transnational regulatory intervention will be required, and with regard to the latter, the European Union is well placed to act.

5.1. The Case for EU Intervention

There is no shortage of efforts – in sport and society more broadly – trying to combat climate change and restrict fossil fuel advertising more specifically. One important source of action comes from the world of sport itself. Various stakeholders have worked toward improving the carbon footprint of the sector and its alignment with environmental objectives.¹³⁹ Against this backdrop, some might argue that the sport ecosystem can solve this problem on its own – that is, to make serious and effective improvements with a view to climate change, including a commitment to not lend fossil fuel companies

137 “[Fossil fuel advertising bans are broadly supported across Europe](#)”, Capable, (21 March 2025).

138 Martin Iginii, “[Amsterdam, Florence become latest cities to ban fossil fuel ads](#)”, [Earth.org](#), (5 February 2026).

139 Famous examples include Forest Green Rovers in England and FC St. Pauli in Germany. See also Jennifer Amann and Mark Doidge, “[‘I Hadn’t Realised That Change Is Not a Difficult Thing’: Mobilising Football Fans on Climate Change](#)”, [Sociology](#), (6 December 2023).

a platform for brand cultivation. However, the FIFA–Saudi Aramco deal is a forceful reminder that money often trumps values in football, a result of the governance problems described above. The problems at FIFA exist in many other sports governing bodies.

Regulatory intervention is needed, and the myriad of measures taken by municipalities and local governments provide evidence for the increasing willingness for such intervention. International fora like the IPCC and UN COP process could, in theory, provide the necessary frameworks for fossil fuel regulation in sport and beyond. In practice, however, their effectiveness has been limited. This has, partly, to do with the fact that reaching international agreement is difficult, and is shaping up to be even more difficult in the foreseeable future because of rising geopolitical tensions. Partly, it is also due to the weak enforcement structures in international law. There are only limited tools for policing violations of international obligations, making compliance by national governments often patchy and unpredictable. At the present juncture of history, where the rules-based international order is being dismantled before our eyes, relying on its tools is a particularly shaky strategy.

EU action offers a more promising path. Comprising 27 Member States, the EU is the best integrated regional organisation in the world. It has well-established mechanisms for policy making and robust enforcement mechanisms, which ensure that national authorities and private individuals comply with its rules at levels comparable to ordinary states. While its territorial scope, too, is limited, this is compensated by the size of the EU's internal market, the largest trading block globally with around 450 million citizens. Its dimensions mean that even for companies or actors located outside of Union's borders, for example in the USA, China or Saudi Arabia, it will often make sense to comply with European rules to ensure that their products or services can be marketed on the old continent, a dynamic that has been dubbed the "Brussels Effect".¹⁴⁰ The resulting economic strength also renders the EU less prone to pressure from powerful sports governing bodies like FIFA.¹⁴¹

A further advantage is that the EU has built a strong reputation for being an effective environmental regulator. Ever since the 1970s, it has adopted numerous laws and decisions promoting environmental protection.¹⁴² The European Green

140 Anu Bradford, *The Brussels Effect: How the European Union Rules the World* (Oxford University Press 2020).

141 Henk Erik Meier and Borja García, "[Protecting Private Transnational Authority Against Public Intervention: FIFA's Power Over National Governments](#)"; *Public Administration*, (17 December 2015).

142 Suzanne Kingston, Veerle Heyvaert and Aleksandra Čavoški, *European Environmental Law* (Cambridge University Press 2017).

Deal is the latest major project in this context, which commits the Union to reach net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Sport is another field on which the EU has left a significant regulatory mark.¹⁴³ Through court rulings and policy measures, it has reshaped various aspects of how governing bodies, leagues and clubs operate. Consequently, the intersection of environmental and sporting concerns that defines the issue of fossil fuel advertising in sport – as well as the underpinning questions of economic regulation, another key area of EU activity¹⁴⁴ – make the Union a particularly well-suited institution to respond.

To facilitate regulatory cohesion and durability, EU action should ideally take the form of legislation.¹⁴⁵ Three options are available: enacting a Fossil Fuel Advertising Directive, adopting a European Sports Act and amending or re-interpreting the Audiovisual Media Services Directive.

5.2 Option 1: A Fossil Fuel Advertising Directive

The first option is a bespoke fossil fuel advertising and sponsoring ban, which could be modelled on existing legislation such as the Tobacco Advertising Directive.¹⁴⁶ The Directive was adopted in 2003 with the intention of limiting the visibility of tobacco products in the media, as part of the EU's broader and continuous efforts to reduce smoking.¹⁴⁷ It prohibits advertising in the press and other printed publications, with the exception of magazines directed at professionals working in the tobacco trade.¹⁴⁸ The same prohibition, without

143 Arnout Geeraert, "The EU in International Sports Governance", (Springer 2016), and Richard Parrish, "Sports Law and Policy in the European Union", (Manchester University Press 2003).

144 Jacques Pelkmans, "Why the Single Market Remains the EU's Core Business" (2016) 30 *West European Politics* 1095.

145 Litigation is another potential strategy which is increasingly used in the climate context, but it comes with limitations. Judicial proceedings are ad hoc, can only ever tackle one regulatory issue at a time and are time-consuming and resource-heavy. Moreover, a court ruling will rarely, if ever, demand a specific policy solution, such as restrictions on fossil fuel advertising – it will, instead, typically take the form of a tort claim (e.g. forcing polluters to pay for the damage caused) or positive obligations (e.g. obliging a country to do more against climate change). The recent EU Greenwashing Directive prevents companies from making misleading environmental statements, but it cannot be employed to limit fossil fuel advertising or sponsoring.

146 Directive 2003/33/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 May 2003 on the approximation of the laws, regulations and administrative provisions of the Member States relating to the advertising and sponsorship of tobacco products [2003] OJ L 152/16.

147 See also Directive 2014/40/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 3 April 2014 on the approximation of the laws, regulations and administrative provisions of the Member States concerning the manufacture, presentation and sale of tobacco and related products [2014] OJ L 127/1; Council Directive 2011/64/EU of 21 June 2011 on the structure and rates of excise duty applied to manufactured tobacco [2011] OJ L 176/24.

148 Art. 3 Tobacco Advertising Directive.

qualifications, applies to radio advertising. In addition, radio programmes must not be sponsored by “undertakings whose principal activity is the manufacture or sale of tobacco products”.¹⁴⁹ Finally, sponsorship of events or activities “involving or taking place in several Member States or otherwise having cross-border effects” is also banned; tobacco products cannot be freely distributed as part of these events either.¹⁵⁰

The measure could serve as a blueprint for regulatory intervention into fossil fuels. A new Fossil Fuel Advertising Directive could, just like the 2003 Directive, restrict advertising of fossil fuel products in the press. It could ban radio advertising and sponsoring by companies active in the sector. More importantly perhaps, it could prevent the sponsoring of events with a cross-border dimension. Virtually all major football and sport events would, thus, become fossil fuel free, given that they tend to involve teams, locations and commercial partners from (or affecting) multiple EU Member States. This includes the UEFA Champions League, the European Championship and FIFA World Cup, to name but a few high-profile examples.

Although several key dimensions of commercial activity would be covered in this way, one gap would remain: television broadcasting or, more broadly, audiovisual media services, a category that extends to streaming platforms which are rapidly gaining in relevance in the sports sector. These formats are not caught by the Tobacco Advertising Directive as they are governed by a different legislative instrument, the Audiovisual Media Services Directive.¹⁵¹ To guarantee the effectiveness of the regulatory project, their inclusion should be considered. Two solutions are thinkable. First, the scope of the Fossil Fuel Advertising Directive could be broadened to audiovisual media services and impose corresponding requirements against advertising and sponsoring on them. Alternatively, the Audiovisual Media Services Directive could be amended to contain provisions on fossil fuel products and companies; more on that below.

Given the combination of different regulatory considerations at play, different legal bases can, in principle, be considered. Much would depend on the Directive’s precise framing. One strong candidate is Article 114 TFEU, the EU’s main competence for regulating the internal market, which was also used for the Tobacco Advertising Directive. Careful drafting would be advised, particularly as the Court of Justice struck down elements of an earlier version

149 Art. 4(2) Tobacco Advertising Directive.

150 Art. 5(1) and (2) Tobacco Advertising Directive.

151 Directive 2010/13/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 March 2010 on the coordination of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the provision of audiovisual media services (Audiovisual Media Services Directive) [2010] OJ L 95/1.

of the legislation for overstepping the Union's constitutional mandate.¹⁵² (The validity of the present version has been confirmed later.¹⁵³) Its case law articulates boundaries for resorting to Article 114 TFEU, yet these boundaries are generously drawn. A mere finding of disparities between national laws is not sufficient to activate the provision; these disparities must obstruct free movement and have a direct effect on the functioning of the internal market.¹⁵⁴ Future obstacles suffice in so far as they are likely. All of this is a given when it comes to fossil fuel advertising in football: not only have divergences started to show across Europe, they impede the cross-border provision of a variety of services connected to advertising, the commercialisation of sporting events and, yes, potentially even the marketing of fossil fuel products.

The fact that environmental protection, a non-economic objective, would be a decisive motivation for the Directive would not stand in the way of relying on Article 114 TFEU. In fact, Article 114(3) TFEU explicitly asks the Commission to aim for a high level of environmental protection in its regulatory proposals, while Article 11 TFEU contains a horizontal duty to integrate environmental concerns into all EU policies. What is important, however, is that legislation genuinely seeks to improve the functioning of the internal market. A simple free-standing ban of a product or service is unlikely to do that. It would, however, pass constitutional muster if forming part of an attempt to regulate a broader market in which these products or services are embedded – the idea being that cross-border trade is facilitated by prohibiting some, yet allowing other, economic activities.¹⁵⁵ This is why the recent EU Greenwashing Directive, which is framed as a measure that advances both consumer and environmental protection, was based on the internal market competence.¹⁵⁶ It prohibits making misleading, but allows accurate environmental claims, thus increasing market reliability. The same rationale could be applied to the Fossil Fuel Advertising Directive: although prohibiting one type of advertising and sponsoring, it ultimately seeks to regulate the broader market for advertising services, thus facilitating the commercialising of sporting events across Europe through a uniform set of rules.

152 Case C-376/98 *Germany v European Parliament and Council (Tobacco Advertising I)* ECLI:EU:C:2000:544.

153 Case C-380/03 *Germany v European Parliament and Council (Tobacco Advertising II)* ECLI:EU:C:2006:772.

154 Case C-491/01 *British American Tobacco* ECLI:EU:C:2002:741; Case C-58/08 *Vodafone* ECLI:EU:C:2010:321; Case C-547/14 *Philipp Morris* ECLI:EU:C:2016:325.

155 Stephen Weatherill, 'The function and limits of legislative harmonization in making the internal market' in Robert Schütze and Takis Tridimas (eds.), *Oxford Principles of European Union Law: The Internal Market* (Oxford University Press 2026).

156 Directive (EU) 2024/825 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 February 2024 amending Directives 2005/29/EC and 2011/83/EU as regards empowering consumers for the green transition through better protection against unfair practices and through better information [2024] OJ L 2024/825.

Were the Fossil Fuel Advertising Directive to be given a primarily environmental focus, Article 192 TFEU could serve as an alternative legal basis. It allows the EU, among others, to adopt measures that contribute to preserving, protecting and improving the quality of the environment and prudent and rational utilisation of natural resources. A fossil fuel advertising ban would fall squarely into those categories. It could be enacted, just like measures based on Article 114 TFEU, in accordance with the ordinary legislative procedure. The derogation enshrined in Article 192(3) TFEU, which requires unanimity in the Council for measures significantly affecting a Member State's choice between different energy sources and the general structure of its energy supply, would not apply, given that restrictions on advertising and sponsoring do not have an effect on a country's energy infrastructure.

5.3 Option 2: A European Sports Act

A second option would be to adopt sport-specific legislation with provisions on fossil fuel advertising and sponsoring. The EU has, as explained earlier, been an active sports regulator. Its imprint on the field is, first and foremost, the result of the case law of the Court of Justice, which has ruled that sporting activities may fall into the scope of European law, in particular the rules on free movement and competition. This has sparked significant litigation activity in the sector over the past five decades. In addition, EU institutions have adopted a variety of policy measures addressing different aspects of sport. The 2007 White Paper on Sport of the European Commission and 2021 Council resolution on the key features of a European Sport Model are milestones in this respect.

While there is, thus, a substantial EU sports *acquis* already, voices have been growing that more should – and can – be done, including from within the football industry.¹⁵⁷ Exner, Weatherill and Zgliniski have published an academic proposal for a European Sports Act.¹⁵⁸ This would be an EU regulation that lays down binding minimum standards for sports governing bodies and competition organisers, to be enforced by a dedicated EU Sports Agency and national counterparts. The original proposal contains requirements on good governance, social responsibility, sporting competitions and athlete rights. As part of these, sports organisations would, among others, have to hold regular elections for board positions at least every four years, ensure that their decision-making

157 “[European Professional Football Forum Highlights the Urgent Need for Reforms](#)”, Union of European Clubs, (15 October 2024). “[Joint Statement: European Leagues and FIFPRO Europe](#)”, European Leagues and FIFPro Europe, (11 April 2025).

158 Jan Exner, Stephen Weatherill and Jan Zgliniski, “[The European Sports Act: a proposal to improve sports governance through EU legislation](#)”, LSE Law, Society and Economy Working Papers No 10/2025, (October 2025).

bodies are balanced in terms of gender, publish annual reports and financial statements, as well as provide adequate healthcare for athletes. There is, further, a duty for sports organisations to conduct risk-based human rights and environmental due diligence in line with the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive.¹⁵⁹

This or similar proposals could be complemented with special provisions on fossil fuel advertising and sponsoring. The wording could be drawn from the aforementioned Fossil Fuel Advertising Directive. The substantive scope would be narrower than that of the other two options – only sport would be covered. But that would allow for a more tailored approach. In addition to prohibiting advertising at and sponsoring of sporting events, requirements relating to the particular characteristics of sport could be adopted, for instance restrictions on fossil fuel partnerships with clubs or the displaying of respective imagery on football jerseys.

The EU has an explicit sports competence since the Treaty of Lisbon: Article 165 TFEU. But the norm establishes supplementary powers only; it cannot be used to adopt harmonising measures that would establish legally binding standards.¹⁶⁰ Against this backdrop, the appropriate legal basis for a European Sports Act would be Article 114 TFEU. Much of what has been said above applies here as well. The legislation in general, and the provisions on fossil fuel advertising in specific, would need to be shown to contribute to the functioning of the internal market – which they do. Sport has become a significant economic activity, contributing to over 2 percent of the EU's GDP and 3 percent of its employment.¹⁶¹ Growing regulatory divergences, due to private and public regulation, create obstacles to free movement and affect competition. All of which justifies EU intervention.¹⁶²

It would also chime well with recent EU policy efforts toward greening sport. The 2022 Cooperation Arrangement between the European Commission and UEFA emphasised that both sides were convinced that football could “play a role in promoting awareness and behaviour change towards EU sustainability goals” and that they intended to “use football’s global reach to raise awareness of the

159 Directive (EU) 2024/1760 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 on corporate sustainability due diligence [2024] OJ L 2024/1760.

160 See also Case C-333/21 *European Superleague Company* EU:C:2023:1011, para 67.

161 “[Study on the Economic Impact of Sport Through Sport Satellite Accounts](#)”, European Commission, (April 2018).

162 The recent resolution of the European Parliament recognises that Article 114 TFEU can be a basis for regulating sport, see European Parliament, Resolution of 7 October 2025 on the role of EU policies in shaping the European Sport Model (2025/2035(INI)).

climate emergency ... and inspiring people to take action to save the planet”¹⁶³ A “playbook” with practical recommendations on how sport can contribute to the European Green Deal was published in 2023, following the work of an expert group on the topic.¹⁶⁴ Finally, the Commission released the SHARE 2.0 Green Sport Manifesto in December 2025, which outlines five commitments to which sports organisations can (voluntarily) sign up to demonstrate their commitment to sustainability. Having legally binding rules on fossil fuel advertising in sport would complement these initiatives in a productive way.

5.4 Option 3: The Audiovisual Media Services Directive

A third option would lie in interpreting the current environmental norms in the Audiovisual Media Services (AVMS) Directive more expansively or amending its text.¹⁶⁵ The Directive, which has its roots in the Television Without Frontiers Directive, establishes a regulatory framework for television broadcasters and on-demand providers in the EU. It sets out minimum standards for various aspects of media services, ranging from retransmission duties, to advertising restrictions, to viewer protections. The legislation is best-known in the football world for allowing countries to designate certain events, such as the Euro or World Cup finals, as being of “major importance for society” to ensure that the general public can view them freely.¹⁶⁶ It has undergone a legislative update in 2018.¹⁶⁷ A further revision has been announced by the European Commission for this year.¹⁶⁸ It is meant to respond to the challenges posed by the evolving media landscape, which is defined by the growing importance of digital tech,

163 Commission Decision of 9 June 2022 on the adoption of the Arrangement for Cooperation between the European Commission and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA)–er, C(2022) 3721.

164 “[Sport’s contribution to the European Green Deal: A sport sector playbook](#),” European Commission Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, (2023).

165 Directive 2010/13/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 March 2010 on the coordination of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the provision of audiovisual media services (Audiovisual Media Services Directive) [2010] OJ L 95/1.

166 Case C-201/11 P *UEFA v European Commission* ECLI:EU:C:2013:519; Case C-204/11 P *FIFA v European Commission*; Case C-205/11 P *FIFA v European Commission* ECLI:EU:C:2013:478 (all concerning the corresponding provisions in the predecessor Directive 89/552/EEC).

167 Directive (EU) 2018/1808 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 November 2018 amending Directive 2010/13/EU on the coordination of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the provision of audiovisual media services (Audiovisual Media Services Directive) in view of changing market realities [2018] OJ L 303/69.

168 “[Press Release: Commission seeks views and information for the evaluation of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive](#),” European Commission, (24 November 2025).

the rise of new actors in the sector and the need for adequate safeguards against harmful content. The process could be helpfully used to incorporate concerns surrounding fossil fuels and climate change.

The AVMS Directive in its present form already contains some provisions as regards environmental protection, which have been part of the Directive and its precursor since it was first adopted in 1989.¹⁶⁹ They are aimed at “audiovisual commercial communications”, a broad category that extends to TV advertising, sponsorship, teleshopping and product placement. The protections, however, are unclear. They task Member States with ensuring that “behaviour grossly prejudicial to the protection of the environment” is not encouraged.¹⁷⁰ There is an argument to be made that fossil fuel advertising falls into this category, as it is, indeed, grossly prejudicial to the environment for the reasons explained. That position, however, is not explicitly articulated in the legislation, making it difficult to counteract climate change in a predictable and practicable way.

The rules regarding tobacco are stronger and could, once again, serve as an inspiration. As to commercial communications, for instance, the Directive categorically prohibits “all forms of audiovisual commercial communications for cigarettes and other tobacco products, as well as for electronic cigarettes and refill containers”.¹⁷¹ Undertakings whose “principal activity is the manufacture or sale of cigarettes and other tobacco products, as well as electronic cigarettes and refill containers” are banned from sponsoring media services or programmes.¹⁷² Finally, the Directive rules out any “product placement of cigarettes and other tobacco products, as well as electronic cigarettes and refill containers” in audiovisual programmes; the same goes for “product placement from undertakings whose principal activity is the manufacture or sale of those products”.¹⁷³

A similar set of requirements could be adopted for fossil fuel products and companies. A new Article 9(6) could, for example, state that:

“all forms of audiovisual commercial communications for fossil fuel products and services shall be prohibited.”

169 Council Directive 89/552/EEC of 3 October 1989 on the coordination of certain provisions laid down by Law, Regulation or Administrative Action in Member States concerning the pursuit of television broadcasting activities: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:31989L0552>.

170 Article 9(1)(c)(iv) AVMS Directive.

171 Art. 9(1) AVMS Directive. The provision is also cross-referenced in the section concerning video-sharing platform services.

172 Art. 10(2) AVMS Directive.

173 Art. 11(4)(a) AVMS Directive.

A new Article 10(5) could require that:

“Audiovisual media services or programmes shall not be sponsored by undertakings whose principal activity is the extraction of fossil fuels or manufacture or sale of fossil fuel products or services.”

And a new Article 11(4)(c) could establish that:

“In any event programmes shall not contain product placement of [...] fossil fuel products and services, or product placement from undertakings whose principal activity is the extraction of fossil fuels or manufacture or sale of fossil fuel products.”

This would ensure that all major dimensions of audiovisual media – programming, advertising, sponsoring and product placement – as well as, in some respects, social media would become free of fossil fuels, thus significantly reducing their visibility. A targeted, yet powerful signal.

The greatest advantage of this solution is its simplicity: existing rules in an existing directive would merely have to be copied and transposed to another sector. Only a minor legislative amendment would be needed, leaving intact the structure of the established rules. Articles 53(1) and 62 TFEU could, as for the current AVMS Directive, remain the legal basis. The Court of Justice’s case law in this area gives no reason to doubt the validity of the present or future shape of the legislation in the way proposed here.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ See case law *supra*, as well as Case C-283/11 *Sky Österreich* ECLI:EU:C:2013:28 and Case C-555/19 *Fussl Modestraße Mayr* ECLI:EU:C:2021:89.

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