



CSSN Issue Paper: **Decades of Systematic Obstructionism: Saudi Arabia's Role in Slowing Progress in UN Climate Negotiations**

Joanna Depledge, Kari De Pryck and J. Timmons Roberts

November 2023



About the authors

Joanna Depledge is a research fellow at the Centre for Environment, Energy and Natural Resource Governance (CEENRG) and the Centre for Science and Policy (CSaP), both at the University of Cambridge (UK). Her previous positions include Editor of the *Climate Policy* journal and Lecturer at the Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS), University of Cambridge. She has published and lectured widely on climate change politics and the UNFCCC negotiation process. Prior to her academic career, Joanna worked for the UN Climate Change Secretariat as a staff member and consultant.

Kari De Pryck is a lecturer (maîtresse assistante) in political science at the Institute for Environmental Sciences (ISE) of the University of Geneva and affiliated to the research hub 'Environmental Governance and Territorial Development' (GEDT). She is also a research associate at the Center Internet et Société (CNRS). She has been researching the IPCC for several years.

J. Timmons Roberts is Ittleson Professor of Environment and Society at Brown University and Executive Director of the Climate Social Science Network. He has attended UN climate negotiations since 2003, focusing on North-South trust and issues of climate finance. Since 2017 he has focused on researching organizations obstructing action on climate change.

Published by the Climate Social Science Network, November 2023

Joanna Depledge, Kari De Pryck and J. Timmons Roberts

<http://www.cssn.org/>

Cite as: Depledge, Joanna, Kari De Pryck, and J. Timmons Roberts. 2023. "Decades of Systematic Obstructionism: Saudi Arabia's Role in Blocking Progress in the UN Climate Negotiations." *Climate Social Science Network Issue Paper* 2023:1.

Photo credit

Shutterstock/[BVFS](#)

Climate Social Science Network

Twitter: @ClimateSSN

More publications and information available at www.cssn.org

CSSN is an international network of scholars headquartered at the Institute at Brown for Environment and Society.

Contents

Introduction **4**

How Saudi Arabia Obstructs **6**

Undermining the Process 7

Undermining the Science 11

What can be done **15**

Conclusion **16**

“What sets Saudi Arabia apart from most other countries is that it sees its national interest as best served by obstructing intergovernmental efforts to tackle climate change”

Introduction

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. This strategy has been termed [Systematic obstructionism](#): “the sustained and aggressive use of obstructionist tactics over time, applied not just on one or two issues but on the general thrust of the negotiation process”.¹

Key findings

- **Since the inception of UN climate talks in the 1990s Saudi Arabia has sought to slow progress**
- **Riyadh’s envoys are among the most active across all tracks of UN climate talks, frequently pushing back on efforts to curb fossil fuels**
- **Promoting carbon capture and removal technology is now a priority for Saudi Arabia: we are likely to see this goal pursued across all talks at COP28**
- **Undermining science is a core strategy employed by Saudi Arabian envoys who contest new climate science at the UNFCCC and IPCC**
- **Despite increased temperatures across Saudi Arabia and falling groundwater supplies Riyadh has shown little sign of shifting strategy**

¹ Depledge, J. (2008). Striving for no: Saudi Arabia in the climate change regime. *Global Environmental Politics*, 8(4), 9-35.

It is not difficult to understand Saudi Arabia’s motivation for seeking to obstruct the UN climate negotiations, including the scientific process under the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). With half its GDP and 70 percent of export income coming from oil and gas, the global decarbonization required to achieve temperature goals clearly represents a serious challenge for Saudi Arabia. What sets Saudi Arabia apart from most other countries, however, is that it sees its national interest as best served by obstructing intergovernmental efforts to tackle climate change, rather than engaging with those efforts. Saudi Arabia has consistently exaggerated the economic costs of mitigation action, while downplaying the impacts of rising temperatures. From Saudi Arabia’s perspective, ambitious global climate action is, therefore, more of a threat than climate change itself. From this perspective, “the more they postpone, the more they earn in every year of unimpeded revenues... Saudi Arabia [thus has] more to gain by staying at the table to influence the process from within, even though their interest contradicts the very purpose of the climate change regime itself”.²

Saudi Arabia delayed joining the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) until the very last moment that would still enable it to participate at the first Conference of the Parties, COP 1, in 1995. Likewise, it ratified the 2015 Paris Agreement only a day before it came into force.

² Flisnes, M.K. (2019). Where You Stand Depends on What You Sell – Saudi Arabia’s Obstructionism in the UNFCCC 2012-2018. Oslo: CICERO Report 2019:11. <https://pub.cicero.oslo.no/cicero-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2611866/Rapport%202019%2011%20-%20web.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

The Saudi delegation has always been dominated by members of its Ministry of Energy, which in turn is closely associated with Saudi Aramco. Its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) under the Paris Agreement is ranked as “critically insufficient,” according to Climate Action Tracker, a group of independent analysts. The country’s net-zero-by-2060 target is so short on detail that Climate Action Tracker is unable to even assess it. The 2023 Production Gap Report³ (p.53) finds that Saudi Arabia has “No government policies or discourses to support a managed wind-down of fossil fuel production” and “no direct policies or discourses regarding a just transition from fossil fuels”.

To be clear, Riyadh does not operate alone. Other countries benefit from hiding behind Saudi Arabia’s obstructive stance. Unlike many Western nations, Saudi Arabia is unconcerned about any damage that may be done to its international reputation by obstructing global climate talks. To the contrary, being assertive and aggressive is part of the DNA of Saudi delegations, it is their ‘signature’ approach. The US and other OPEC and LMDC⁴ members often benefit from what Saudi delegations obtain in negotiations. At moments in the international negotiations when progress is slow anyway, because of struggles between the US and China, for example, then Saudi Arabia tends to stay quiet. And given the decades of unmet promises by developed nations and the mistrust that this has generated in the global South, Riyadh’s attitude is often tolerated by the wider developing country grouping the G77+China.⁵ Saudi intransigence is

seen to serve some developing nations because it deflects pressure for rapid transition off them, putting it back on the developed countries.

In this briefing, to understand the slow progress of the UNFCCC and the IPCC, we review the strategies taken by Saudi Arabia over three decades. We review Saudi’s major demands and its success in achieving them. Building a timeline of obstruction, we document the strategies and tactics utilized again and again by Saudi delegations. Because the future depends on a global solution to the climate crisis, we conclude by outlining some approaches that might be taken to combat this intransigence, and provide further resources for those seeking to understand the issue.

³ SEI, Climate Analytics, E3G, IISD, and UNEP. (2023). The Production Gap: Phasing down or phasing up? Top fossil fuel producers plan even more extraction despite climate promises. Stockholm Environment Institute, Climate Analytics, E3G, International Institute for Sustainable Development and United Nations Environment Programme. <https://doi.org/10.51414/sei2023.050>.

⁴ Like Minded-Group of Developing Countries (LMDC) - a negotiating bloc at the UNFCCC

⁵ Roberts, J. Timmons, and Bradley Parks. (2006). *A climate of injustice: Global inequality, north-south politics, and climate policy*. MIT Press; Ciple, D., Roberts, J.T. and

Khan, M.R., (2015). *Power in a warming world: The new global politics of climate change and the remaking of environmental inequality*. MIT Press.

How Saudi Arabia Obstructs

Saudi delegations to the UN climate talks are highly skilled, well-organized, and have been extremely successful over decades at slowing the efforts of the world community on climate change to a crawl.

Riyadh's strategies and tactics have been fairly consistent over time, but its discourses and focus have shifted as the global climate change debate itself has evolved. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Saudi Arabia focused on calling for compensation for lost oil revenues resulting from decarbonization. Through the mid 2000s, Riyadh shifted to seeking financial assistance for economic diversification. Now, the nation has put Carbon Capture and Storage (CCS), Carbon Dioxide Removal (CDR), hydrogen, and what it terms the 'circular carbon economy' at the forefront of its narrative. These subtly changing discourses are always underpinned by efforts to obstruct and slow the overall pace of progress.

Saudi Arabia's actions should be seen as part of a wider web of obstruction to an effective response to climate change, which includes fossil fuel industry groups and other (predominantly U.S.-based) political lobbyists

and elites, and allied intergovernmental organizations (e.g. OPEC).⁶ It is well documented for the period up to the early 2000s that Saudi Arabia worked closely with industry and political lobbyists to slow progress at the IPCC and the UNFCCC⁷.

Riyadh's obstruction at UN climate talks can be separated into two forms: *procedural* and *substantive*. Given the participation of nearly 200 countries, IPCC and UNFCCC negotiations necessarily rely heavily on formalized procedures. This means that agendas must be agreed in advance, that key countries need to be present during talks, and that discussions must be seen to be fair - meaning all objections are taken seriously. Using these formalised procedures to their advantage, Saudi delegations have successfully *frustrated the political process* and *undermined the way certain issues (e.g. scientific input)* that lie behind the need for action

⁶ See e.g. Brulle, Robert. 2020 "The Structure of Obstruction." CSSN Primer. <https://cssn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/CSSN-Briefing-Obstruction-2.pdf>

⁷ Leggett, Jeremy. 2001. The Carbon War. London: Routledge.

on climate change are framed. We treat each effort in turn.

Undermining the Process

Over decades, Saudi delegations have repeatedly abused procedural rules to throw a spanner into the UNFCCC negotiations. Here are examples.

Ensuring decisions must be taken by

consensus: Riyadh is largely responsible for the absence of any agreed voting rule in the climate change regime.

In the early 1990s, when the decision-making rules were being devised, Saudi Arabia, together with OPEC allies, refused to accept any majority voting rule (e.g. two thirds or three quarters), as would be the norm in UN bodies. Instead, it insisted that all substantive decisions should be taken by consensus. Consensus is itself a fuzzy concept. It is distinct from unanimity but, in practice, means that a small group of countries – perhaps just two or three – can block agreement and prevent a decision from being adopted.

This impasse has never been overcome, with the effect that, in the absence of a voting ruling, almost all substantive decisions must be taken by consensus. This gives outsized influence to laggards and leads to an overall dampening of ambition, which suits Saudi Arabia very well. .

Using procedural objections to slow down

progress: Saudi delegates are well known for being quick to raise procedural objections. These include objecting to meetings running late or being held simultaneously, complaining about the absence of translated versions of documents, insisting that a particular topic is not on the agenda and therefore cannot be discussed, or finding other procedural reasons for stalling the talks. The Saudi delegation is often first to question the status of documents and their permissibility as negotiation texts. This

happens routinely at climate change talks. It uses up considerable time in a negotiation session.

When COVID struck in 2020, Saudi Arabia was at the vanguard of ruling out any virtual negotiations, while in Glasgow at COP 26 in 2021, it tried to claim the Presidency's "cover decision" was not on the agenda and so could not be discussed.

While other countries will also insist that procedures are properly followed, it is clear to longtime observers of the talks that Saudi Arabia raises its objections opportunistically, to try to block progress rather than ensure fairness. Moreover, in raising these procedural concerns, Saudi Arabia seeks to present itself as a champion of developing country concerns, associating itself with small countries who genuinely face difficulties in participating, thus helping to boost its support within the wider G-77.

In his detailed analysis of Saudi positioning, Morten Flisnes observed actions in the key years of negotiating and beginning implementation of the Paris Agreement (2012-2018)⁸. In that time, he observed 45 acts of obstruction by Saudi Arabia, mostly blocking or delaying “progress on items they care less about in order to gain leverage on more important items (“parallel progress”), postponement and delay, blocking on procedure, repetition and propagation.” These were in the open meetings reported on by the highly-respected and neutral reporting service *Earth Negotiations Bulletin (ENB)*. Including closed meetings and actions by coalitions in which the Saudi delegation participated would no doubt make this number far higher.

Table 2: Categorization schema with observations.

Indicators	Bargaining Phase				Implementation Phase			Total
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	
<i>Parallel Progress</i>		2	1	1	2	3	2	11
<i>Repetition and Propagation</i>	1		2		2		3	8
<i>Postponement and Delay</i>	1		1	3	4	1		10
<i>Refusal to Negotiate</i>	1							1
<i>Holding Out</i>			1	1	1		2	5
<i>Procedural Blockage</i>	2			3			3	8
<i>Exploiting Alliances</i>				2				2
Total:	22				23			45

Such a count is valuable in painting a picture of systematic obstruction year after year but, as Flisnes (2019, p.27) points out, the impact of each effort may be widely different. For example, “usage of ‘repetition and propagation’ may slow progress and invoke frustrations, while blocking consensus by ‘refusing to negotiate’ or ‘holding out’ may stop overall progress or initiate deadlocks on certain agenda items.”

⁸ Flisnes, M.K., 2019. Where You Stand Depends on What You Sell–Saudi Arabia’s Obstructionism in the UNFCCC 2012-2018. *CICERO Report*. <https://pub.cicero.oslo.no/cicero-xmloi/handle/11250/2611866>.

Loading the agenda with “Response

Measures”: At virtually every COP there is a negotiating scrap - driven primarily by Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Arab Group - over what are called “Response Measures” in UNFCCC jargon. The term refers to Saudi concern over the possible negative impacts of ambitious climate action on its own economy, such as reduced oil revenues. Saudi Arabia argues that leading fossil fuel producers should get support as they shift away from their main exports - or even that global climate action should be less ambitious to lessen the impact on oil exporters. For example, Saudi Arabia was one of the main holdouts against including the 1.5°C target in the Paris Agreement, because this would imply significantly more ambitious policies than a 2°C ceiling.

Saudi Arabia raises the issue of response measures on every possible occasion, trying to ensure it is discussed under as many agenda items as possible. For Saudi Arabia, this tactic has been hugely successful⁹: according to a recent academic paper on agenda items in the UNFCCC¹⁰, response measures is the fourth most discussed substantive issue at UN climate talks, more so even than technology, adaptation, or science.

Muddying the waters on adaptation: For most nations, climate adaptation means protecting human life, infrastructure and settlements from weather extremes and rising seas. For Saudi Arabia, adaptation means adapting economically to global decarbonisation efforts. When there were debates about guidance for Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement, Saudi Arabia strongly

⁹ Barnett, Jon (2001). The issue of ‘Adverse Effects and the Impacts of Response Measures’ in the UNFCCC. Tyndall Centre Working Paper No. 5 12 July 2001

¹⁰ Allan, J. I. & Bhandary, R. R. (2022) What’s on the agenda? UN climate change negotiation agendas since 1995, *Climate Policy*, DOI: [10.1080/14693062.2022.2120453](https://doi.org/10.1080/14693062.2022.2120453)

supported the notion of a “full scope” NDC. This meant that mitigation, adaptation (as they define it) and means of implementation all had to be included. NDCs could not just be, or even primarily be, about mitigation. This diluted the core requirement of any climate treaty - addressing the excess greenhouse gases being dumped into the atmosphere, and slowed down the acceptance of a key process for the success of Paris--delivering national pledges in an agreed way. By clinging to an outlier definition of adaptation, the Saudi delegation can require consideration of a concept that they have made impossible to agree.

Action to help vulnerable countries adapt to the impacts of climate change - such as weather extremes and rising sea levels - has also been much slower over the decades because of Saudi insistence on linking its own concerns over the economic impact of response measures with those of the vulnerable countries. Donor countries do not want to send funds to Saudi Arabia and other OPEC countries to compensate for lost oil revenue, so vulnerable countries end up losing out. Saudi Arabia has even tried - unsuccessfully to date - to inject response measures into the debate on loss and damage.

Insisting on “parallel progress” and taking items “hostage”:

Saudi Arabia is well-known for its strategy of holding agenda items that it doesn’t like “hostage”, in order to make gains on other issues important to it, notably response measures. As Suraje Dessai explains, “Saudi Arabia constantly uses the argument that we cannot have progress on one issue without having progress on another issue (usually something of interest to this group [OPEC] that is unacceptable to other Parties)”¹¹. Response measures has often been used in this way as a

¹¹ Dessai, S. (2004). An Analysis of the Role of OPEC as a G77 Member at the UNFCCC. *Report for the World Wildlife Fund*.

<https://wwfint.awsassets.panda.org/downloads/opecfullreportpublic.pdf>

bargaining chip to hold up progress on issues of importance to the Global North, or to gain concessions, such as on budget allocation and room in the Global Stocktake.

Blocking debate: Sometimes, Saudi negotiators will simply refuse to engage: they will block an issue and then leave the negotiating room, paralyzing discussions. Observers of UN talks report that Saudi heads of delegation have frequently blocked an entire text, or significant sections, without stating why. The absence of any voting rule gives them much more leeway to do this. Debates on international aviation and shipping (both major oil consumers) have been a key victim of this “just say no” approach, with virtually no progress at all in the climate talks over 30 years. Saudi Arabia has successfully blocked proposals for workshops and technical studies, and even objected to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO) (which have belatedly adopted carbon policies) from speaking at UN climate meetings.

Another way Saudi Arabia slows action is by undermining the ability of climate science to inform public policy.

Undermining the Science

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 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (the IPCC) and the UNFCCC. Saudi Arabia (among others) does not want the IPCC's scientific assessments to be used to call for more stringent climate action.

A key tactic has been to downplay the findings of the IPCC, the global body created by the UN in 1988 to summarize the state of scientific understanding of the issue. The Saudi government delegation has in particular targeted the reports' Summary for Policymakers (SPMs). While non-binding, these documents have a "perceived binding force"¹² in the UNFCCC.

The delegation has regularly tried to weaken wording in IPCC summaries. This includes 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, such as carbon capture and storage (CCS) and carbon dioxide removal (CDR).

At the UNFCCC sessions where IPCC reports are discussed, the Saudi delegation frequently demands to only "note" the IPCC's work, which is not as strong as "welcome" in UNFCCC terminology, and highlights gaps in knowledge to weaken its authority.

In 1995, it is well documented that Saudi Arabia, with the support of US lobbyists, tried to block a sentence in the draft SPM of the IPCC's Second

¹² Riousset, P., Flachsland, C. and Kowarsch, M. (2017). Global environmental assessments: Impact mechanisms. *Environmental Science and Policy*, 77, 260–267.

Assessment Report (AR2), establishing that – despite continuing uncertainties and the evolving state of the science – it was already possible to identify a human imprint on the global climate¹³. Saudi objections played out in a struggle of epic proportions at the IPCC plenary meeting in Madrid in November 1995 Saudi Arabia did not attend some of the key smaller meetings convened to thrash out the issue, in a pattern that has continued over the years). In the end, the strong scientific consensus prevailed, and the assembled IPCC plenary agreed that "the balance of evidence suggests that there is a discernible human influence on global climate". This was a landmark moment, and only took place over Saudi efforts to obstruct.

Efforts to blur this key scientific message continued in the UNFCCC in 1996 which, at the time, was negotiating the Kyoto Protocol, with its emissions targets limited to richer nations. OPEC, led by Saudi Arabia, openly questioned climate science, preventing the adoption of a COP decision stating that the Second Assessment Report of the IPCC (AR2) "should be used as a basis for urgent action". A show of hands called for by the exasperated SBSTA¹⁴ Chair showed that 11 countries – mostly OPEC members – objected to this paragraph, compared with 100+ who supported it. The paragraph was dropped, resulting in a decision remarkable for its blandness.

These attempts to downplay IPCC reports were repeated. In Marrakesh in 2001 (COP 7), UNFCCC delegates were considering the IPCC's Third Assessment Report (AR3). Saudi Arabia and OPEC allies again managed to obstruct the negotiations, resulting in another bland decision that was only passed by removing any reference to "the implications" of the report, and adding

¹³ Oreskes, N. and Conway, E. M. (2010). *Merchants of doubt*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.

¹⁴ Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice (SBSTA) - one of two permanent subsidiary bodies to the UNFCCC

mention of both “scientific uncertainties” and the “effects of response measures”. Something similar happened for the Fourth Assessment Report (AR4), debated in Bali in 2007. After those difficult experiences, less effort was put into even trying to agree on strong endorsements of IPCC reports, resulting in largely anodyne decisions.

Saudi Arabia and the IPCC Special Report on 1.5 Degrees (SR1.5)

SR1.5 was a major special study published in 2018 that was conducted by the IPCC at the request of governments to document the differences in climate impacts if global warming was kept under 1.5°C, or allowed to reach 2°C. Because of a dearth of existing research on the topic, the “SR1.5” process began with widespread doubt, but the report ended up being pivotal in turning global attention to the need to take far more ambitious action. Saudi Arabia [did its best to undermine](#) the process.

Saudi representatives made an effort throughout the process to cast doubt on how much scientists really know about 1.5°C of warming. From the definitive [Earth Negotiations Bulletin](#) summary we learn that Saudi Arabia “called for a general statement in the Summary for Policymakers summarizing the state of knowledge on 1.5°C and highlighting existing knowledge gaps.” The small island state of Saint Lucia, supported by Saint Kitts and Nevis, objected to including such a paragraph, recalling that 6,000 studies had been surveyed for the SR. The Saudis noted other gaps and shortcomings, including deviation from the report’s agreed outline; lack of information on adaptation; lack of information on the costs of achieving 1.5°C global warming; lack of consideration of carbon

removal, energy system transformation; and missing references to means of implementation.

The biggest sticking point for the Saudi government at the SR1.5 negotiations was reference to the Paris Agreement, which it strongly opposed. This was remarkable, considering that the IPCC SR1.5 was requested at COP21 (the Paris negotiations) and represented the first post-Paris output.

In a review of text about the gap between current NDCs and a 1.5°C warming limit, Saudi Arabia, supported by Egypt, opposed the reference to NDCs, arguing that they were outside the mandate and agreed outline for SR1.5. They argued that NDCs were only potential commitments and, in some cases, conditional on support. This paragraph was further discussed exhaustively in a contact group, where Saudi Arabia and Egypt (an Arab Group ally) were the only dissenters, during which the authors proposed alternate text to describe NDCs. This was rejected by the two countries, who noted that the proposed text still referred to “ambitions submitted under the Paris Agreement,” and that this wording made it clear that the subject was NDCs, even without using that term. Many countries argued that the mandate and the underlying science argued for reference to both NDCs and the Paris Agreement. After hours of deadlock, Working Group III (WGIII) Vice-Chair Jim Skea allowed Saudi Arabia and Egypt to record their opposition in the report of IPCC-48. In the SPM, NDCs have been replaced by an ambiguous reference to “nationally stated mitigation ambition”.

UNFCCC deliberations on SR1.5 failed at COP24 in Katowice in 2018, when Riyadh, together with the US (then under Donald Trump), Kuwait and the Russian Federation, [opposed “welcoming” the report](#). Quizzed on his refusal to “welcome” the report, former Saudi chief climate negotiator Ayman Shasly [told Carbon Brief](#): “you would not say things like, you “welcome” it, you’re welcome

to “appreciate” it, because that [means] we are giving legitimacy to some scientific report.”

Obstruction continued in relation to subsequent IPCC reports. In the approval of the Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate (SROCC), Saudi Arabia [blocked](#) any language on 1.5°C and SR1.5 in an attempt to downplay the importance of the report.

Saudi Arabia and IPCC Sixth Assessment Report

The IPCC’s Sixth Assessment Report (AR6), finalized in 2023, is the latest and most comprehensive global effort to collate and synthesize global understanding of how greenhouse gas levels interact with the planet, developing impacts on communities globally and technologies to tackle the climate crisis. Approval of the three Working Group (WG) reports and the Synthesis Report (SYR) were also not exempt from Saudi obstruction.

Extensive interventions: Saudi Arabia intervened extensively during the approval sessions of the WGI (97 times in the ENB reports), WGII (69), WGIII (145) and SYR (79) SPMs. It was among the most vocal delegations (together with India, the United States, and China) during the meetings, repeatedly taking the floor and at times commenting on each sentence and considerably slowing down the path of the deliberations.

Climate denial: Elements of climate denial such as opposing strong language on climate change attribution or highlighting positive impacts of climate change were raised by Saudi envoys but these strategies were largely unsuccessful. Still, in the approval of the WGI SPM, it succeeded in removing all references to fossil fuel emissions. The [Earth Negotiation Bulletin noted](#): “SAUDI

ARABIA objected to the reference to anthropogenic sources of emissions such as fossil fuel emissions, stating that this is beyond the mandate of WG I, which is required to consider emissions only and not sources”.

Challenging the robustness of the findings: On several occasions the Saudi delegation questioned the confidence levels or the sources underpinning certain conclusions; requested quantification (often in cases where the authors could not provide them); requested the addition of qualifiers when discussing conclusions based on models and scenarios (e.g. ‘is projected’ to instead of ‘will’). While these interventions were not always successful, they contributed to slowing down the deliberations.

Overstating the future role of abatement technologies such as CCS and CDR: Saudi government representatives requested (and obtained) the addition of ‘unabated’ or ‘without abatement’ when discussing current and future fossil fuel infrastructure. On numerous occasions, the Saudi delegation opposed requests to highlight the feasibility constraints associated with these technologies, or requested to counterbalance those statements with a more positive framing. To get its way, the delegation often took statements on renewable energy hostage, in a similar tactic to that under the UN climate talks discussed above. As [ENB reported](#), writing about the SYR process, “She said that if barriers to CDR were introduced in this paragraph, her country would require similar balancing language on the feasibility of solar and renewables elsewhere in the report”.

Opposing, or watering down, references to fossil fuel subsidy removal: As the [ENB noted](#) in its report on the WGIII approval process, “SAUDI ARABIA suggested referring only to subsidies leading to wasteful consumption. She also called for deleting references to fossil fuel subsidy removal being projected to reduce emissions by 1-10% by 2030”. While the reference was not

removed, a mention of the "adverse distributional impacts" of subsidy removal was added to balance out the paragraph.

Blocking net zero references and the need for rapid action: Despite Riyadh adopting a 2060 net zero target, the country's teams have opposed mentions of 'net zero', 'strong emission reductions', 'strong, rapid, and sustained reductions of CO2 and non-CO2 emissions' and 'deep reduction' (policy prescriptive terms in their view).

In subsequent talks within the UNFCCC on how to respond to the IPCC AR6, Saudi Arabia (supported by China and India), opposed strong language [endorsing the report](#). It opposed a sentence linking AR6 to the "best available science", contending that AR6 contained too many gaps. It also fought to weaken a sentence acknowledging AR6 as the "most comprehensive and robust" assessment of climate change. The text characterizes AR6 as "more comprehensive and robust than AR5."

What can be done

Accelerating and worsening climate disasters make clear that the world does not have time for the levels of obstructionism and cynical delay displayed by Saudi Arabia's scientific and diplomatic teams in the past 30 years. Riyadh's delegations to the IPCC and UNFCCC are skilled operators, seasoned diplomats who use every minute and rule to their advantage inside global talks. But as the world edges past the 1.5°C warming limit and into fast-worsening impacts, so the world must act.

It is essential that Saudi obstructionism is exposed and called out inside the talks. For too long, diplomatic niceties and fears of offending one of OPEC's great powers have ensured Saudi obstructionism - well-known among climate negotiators - has stayed off the wider international radar.

Yet the obstruction of blocker countries who wish to perpetuate an economic system that is damaging the planet is not inevitable.

- 1. The lack of voting rules and the requirement of "consensus" has been a recipe for paralysis. The UN could and should change procedures to allow voting. A supermajority of 7/8ths of Parties has been suggested in the past. Such a 7/8 supermajority voting rule would capture overwhelming support across the globe, while sidelining a tiny minority of obstructers. Unanimity is not required, nor is it compatible with climate action at the level required.**
- 2. Observers are needed to track obstruction. The UN must fiercely protect observer access to all UNFCCC and IPCC sessions, and only agree to closed meetings where there is a clear need for confidentiality.**
- 3. Negotiations need to progress more rapidly, so repeat procedural blockers at the IPCC and UNFCCC should be called out: just as delay tactics in football can see offenders receive a yellow card, so repeat diplomatic offenders should be sanctioned.**
- 4. Civil society and philanthropic organizations can invest in strategic litigation cases [such as Client Earth's legal complaint against Aramco](#) to raise pressure on Riyadh and other repeat offenders.**
- 5. Evidence of obstructionism should be cited when calculations for climate finance for loss and damage are made: deliberate delay inside the UN climate talks is as bad as continuing to pump emissions into the atmosphere. Doing both - as Saudi Arabia does - is even worse.**

Conclusion

Three decades of evidence makes clear the Saudi Arabian state regards the UN climate talks and IPCC as diplomatic areas where it must slow, obstruct and - if need be - block progress. 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 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. Riyadh has systematically blocked discussion of and formal decisions about energy and fossil fuels at the UN, warning the UNFCCC must not become an energy treaty, and must not single out any one source of GHG emissions.

A cynic might suggest there is a plot to keep the world hooked on oil - indeed that was the headline of a recent [New York Times article](#). Whatever the veracity of that claim, the window for action on climate is closing, and countries cannot continue to allow top fossil fuel producers --chief among them Saudi Arabia--carte blanche with all of our futures. A nation wealthy enough to host a football World Cup is wealthy enough to step up and deliver for the world's climate vulnerable.

Where better for Riyadh's climate team to start that in the United Arab Emirates. A show of Arab unity on climate, and global solidarity on protecting the most vulnerable, is long overdue. It's time to get out of the way.