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Saudi energy-industrial leadership rhetoric: A critical discourse analysis of metaphor, agency, and legitimacy in Aramco's 2024 sustainability reports

Khalid Abdullah Alotaibi[1]*, Safaa Sayed Mahmoud[2], Rami A. Sa'di[3] & Neelofar Hussain Wani[4]

[1]Department of Psychology, College of Education, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

[2]Department of Business Administration, College of Business, University of Bisha & Department of Educational Technology, Specific Education, Ain Shams University, Egypt

[3]Department of English, College of Humanities and Sciences, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia

[4]Department of English, College of Languages and Translation, King Khalid University Abha, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

*Correspondence: ka.alotaibi@psau.edu.sa

ABSTRACT

Saudi Aramco's Arabic sustainability communication occupies a difficult rhetorical position. It must present continued hydrocarbon production as economically and socially necessary while also presenting the company as a credible participant in a lower-emissions future. This article examines how that position is made persuasive in the company's official Arabic Sustainability Report 2024 and selected leadership, strategy, and governance sections of its Arabic Annual Report 2024. The study combines critical metaphor analysis with transitivity, social-actor analysis, and van Leeuwen's account of legitimation. The page-bounded corpus contains 20,185 raw tokens and 18,262 cleaned tokens distributed across 187 layout-defined prose blocks and 687 clause units. Lexical scans guided, but did not replace, close reading. The analysis finds that leadership is constructed through an interlocking repertoire of journey, growth, architecture, vision, and rank metaphors. Aramco repeatedly appears as the named agent of investment, development, reduction, and protection, whereas energy demand, technological change, and the transition itself often appear as autonomous pressures. Legitimation consequently works on two levels: authorization aligns corporate conduct with national and international frameworks, while rationalization links hydrocarbon continuity to reliability, affordability, and orderly change. Moral evaluation adds the vocabulary of responsibility, citizenship, safety, and care. The result is not a simple denial of environmental strain. It is a calibrated leadership narrative in which accountability for operational improvement is accepted, but the pace and boundaries of structural change are discursively redistributed across markets, technologies, governments, and global demand.

KEYWORDS: Arabic corporate discourse, Saudi Aramco, critical discourse analysis, metaphor, transitivity, social actors, legitimation, sustainability reporting

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1. Introduction

Corporate sustainability reports are peculiar public documents. They resemble records, yet they also make a case. Figures, targets, photographs, executive messages, risk statements, and carefully chosen verbs are brought into a single account of what the company is, what it has done, and why its future course deserves confidence. That persuasive burden becomes especially visible in the reporting of a national oil company. The text must acknowledge environmental limits without allowing those limits to dissolve the economic, institutional, and political legitimacy of the organization whose core business remains tied to hydrocarbons.

Saudi Aramco's 2024 Arabic reporting offers a particularly revealing instance of this problem. The company speaks at once as a large industrial producer, a steward of nationally important resources, an employer, a technological investor, and a participant in global climate governance. Those identities are not merely listed. They are connected through language that gives some actors initiative, casts other forces as constraints, and turns disputed policy choices into apparently reasonable courses of action. The familiar vocabulary of "transition," "growth," "leadership," and "value" therefore deserves attention not as decoration but as part of the institutional work performed by the report.

Research on sustainability reporting has long shown that disclosure can make organizations appear coherent in circumstances marked by contradiction. Reports may expand what can be publicly scrutinized, but they may also stabilize an identity by selecting which harms are named, which achievements are foregrounded, and which futures are treated as feasible (Boiral, 2013; Cho et al., 2015; Milne et al., 2009). This tension is particularly acute when a company claims environmental leadership while planning for continuing demand for its principal products. Treating such a claim as either transparent fact or cynical "green" language is too blunt. The more useful question is how the claim is composed: what conceptual pictures organize it, who is represented as acting, and what reasons make the preferred course appear legitimate.

That question belongs to a critical tradition concerned with the relation between discourse, institutions, and power (van Dijk, 1993), including environmental-policy work that treats discourse as constitutive rather than merely descriptive (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005). Studies of corporate climate response further show that organizational positions are built through selective accounts of responsibility, capability, and practical constraint (Ihlen, 2009).

The Arabic text matters in its own right. It addresses domestic and regional readers through linguistic choices that cannot be assumed to reproduce the rhetorical effects of an English edition. Arabic permits flexible word order, frequent nominalization, implicit subjects, and dense patterns of coordination. In institutional prose, these resources can magnify agency in one clause and background it in the next. Leadership statements also draw on evaluative words whose force depends on their immediate collocations: responsibility may be attached to safety, citizenship, reliability, national development, or emissions reduction. A language-specific reading is therefore necessary even when the report belongs to a global reporting genre.

This article asks three related questions. First, which metaphor families organize Aramco's representation of sustainable industrial leadership? Second, how do transitivity and social-actor choices allocate agency among the company, technology, markets, governments, energy users, and environmental pressures? Third, how do authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and future-oriented claims legitimate the resulting allocation of responsibility? The questions are pursued through a page-bounded corpus drawn from two official Arabic documents, with every quoted passage supplied in Romanized Arabic and English translation. No Arabic script appears in the analysis.

The argument is that Aramco's leadership rhetoric depends on a consequential division of labor. The company is highly agentive when the clause concerns investment, technical development, safety, efficiency, or measured reductions. By contrast, increasing energy demand and the difficulty of transition tend to arrive as circumstances that the company must manage. Metaphors connect these grammatical patterns. A journey can have several speeds; an architecture can be built through "pillars"; a landscape can be surveyed through scenarios; growth can be cultivated without requiring a break in institutional identity. These images make continuity and adaptation compatible. Legitimation then supplies the reasons: affordable energy is socially necessary, national development authorizes investment, technical realism counsels gradual change, and responsible citizenship moralizes the company's role.

The contribution is threefold. Empirically, the article provides a documented analysis of Arabic corporate sustainability discourse from a major energy producer. Analytically, it shows why metaphor, agency, and legitimation should be read together rather than as separate stylistic phenomena. Methodologically, it demonstrates a reproducible way to work with Romanized Arabic evidence while retaining page-level traceability to the source. The point is not to decide whether every corporate commitment will be fulfilled. It is to explain how a particular distribution of action, obligation, and uncertainty is made sensible to readers.

2. Sustainability Reporting as Leadership Discourse

2.1 Reports, legitimacy, and organizational identity

Legitimacy is not a permanent asset stored inside an organization. It is a relation between conduct and socially available judgments about what is proper, useful, or necessary (Suchman, 1995). Public reporting contributes to that relation because it supplies categories through which conduct is evaluated. "Efficiency," "reliability," "net-zero ambition," and "societal value" do not simply label pre-existing objects. They place actions inside recognizable moral and practical orders.

Organizations also defend contested change through recognizable rhetorical strategies and contrasts between established and emerging institutional logics (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). In restructuring discourse, those strategies may transform painful or disputed choices into necessities of markets, competitiveness, or collective survival (Vaara et al., 2006). Green narratives are credible, Preuss and Dawson (2009) argue, only when their quality and legitimacy can be evaluated rather than assumed from moral vocabulary alone.

Sustainability reports are especially active in this respect. They gather potentially conflicting performances into a unified organizational voice. Livesey and Kearins (2002) showed how corporate reports can construct identities of transparency and care, while Livesey's (2001) analysis of Shell demonstrated that environmental identity emerges through discursive struggle rather than unilateral corporate definition. Later work has examined the gap between expansive sustainability narratives and the organizational practices those narratives purport to describe. Milne et al. (2009) argued that corporate representations of sustainable development can preserve a business-centered version of the concept. Boiral (2013) described highly rated reports as simulacra when their polished form obscures organizational disorder. Cho et al. (2015), in turn, located disclosure within organized hypocrisy and façade-building: incompatible demands may be handled by separating talk, decisions, and action. Genre comparison adds another layer. Annual and sustainability reports can present different ideological versions of the same organization (Mäkelä & Laine, 2011), while calibrated stance helps construct a trustworthy corporate identity (Fuoli, 2018). These observations support reading the two Aramco reports together without assuming that one is communicative surface and the other an unmediated record.

These critiques do not make the language of reports analytically trivial. On the contrary, if organizations face incompatible expectations, discourse becomes one of the places where the incompatibility is ordered. Tregidga et al. (2014) show how the "sustainable organization" is repeatedly represented and reconstituted rather than finally achieved. Hahn and Lülfs (2014) further demonstrate that adverse aspects are managed through recognizable legitimation strategies, including marginalization, abstraction, and indications of corrective action. Such findings invite attention to the small choices through which a company appears simultaneously candid, capable, and directionally sound.

Leadership rhetoric intensifies this identity work. A leader claims more than compliance. Leadership implies foresight, competence, movement, and a relation to followers or peers. It is therefore comparative even when no competitor is named. Expressions such as "preferred supplier," "among the lowest," or "world-leading" position the company within an industrial field. Meanwhile, the report's national setting enlarges the claim: corporate capacity can be narrated as part of energy security, economic development, localization, or a national vision. The organization becomes legitimate not only because it manages its own impacts but because its continuity is tied to valued collective projects.

2.2 Metaphor as an institutional resource

Metaphor allows an unfamiliar or contested domain to be understood through a more familiar one. Critical metaphor analysis adds a question often neglected in descriptive accounts: whose understanding becomes easier, and what political consequences follow from that ease? Charteris-Black (2004) treats metaphor as a resource joining semantic, pragmatic, and ideological work. Steen et al. (2010) offer a disciplined procedure for identifying metaphor-related words by comparing contextual and more basic meanings. In public institutional discourse, the method helps distinguish a live conceptual mapping from a word that has become routine, while still recognizing that routine metaphors can carry durable assumptions.

Five metaphor families are central to the present corpus. In **transition as journey**, change has routes, stages, speeds, directions, and obstacles. The journey frame accommodates progress while leaving the duration negotiable. In **strategy as architecture**, policies become pillars, frameworks, foundations, or enabling structures; coordination looks designed and stable. In **enterprise as organism or cultivated growth**, development is naturalized through growth, expansion, maturity, and flourishing. In **foresight as vision**, the future becomes a landscape to be viewed, scanned, or anticipated. Finally, in **leadership as rank or position**, the company occupies the front, preserves its place, or advances relative to peers.

None of these families is inherently deceptive. A journey metaphor can clarify sequential change, and an architectural metaphor can make governance intelligible. Their critical significance emerges from combination and omission. A journey emphasizes direction but may obscure who selected the destination. Growth suggests vitality but can detach expansion from material throughput. A framework suggests order but can conceal conflict among the actors placed inside it. Vision privileges the observer's vantage point. Rank turns environmental performance into competition, often narrowing ecological questions to comparable indicators. The analysis therefore considers metaphor alongside grammar and legitimation, where its institutional effects become clearer.

2.3 Agency, transitivity, and social actors

Transitivity concerns how clauses construe experience: who acts, what kind of process occurs, who or what is affected, and under which circumstances. Halliday and Matthiessen's functional account distinguishes material processes of doing, mental processes of sensing, relational processes of being, verbal processes of saying, and other process types. Critical discourse analysis uses these distinctions to examine how grammar distributes responsibility. An active material clause with a named corporate actor—"the company launched"—does different political work from a passive construction—"a program was launched"—or an intransitive event—"demand increased."

Social-actor analysis extends the question beyond grammatical subjecthood. Actors can be named or classified, individualized or aggregated, activated or passivated, personalized or represented through institutions (van Leeuwen, 2007). In a corporate report, "Aramco," "the company," "our people," "communities," "the Kingdom," and "the world" have distinct scales and moral resonances. Technology can also be personified as an actor that "enables," "supports," or "drives." Such activation is consequential when responsibility moves away from decision-makers and toward apparently autonomous technical systems.

The present analysis pays particular attention to asymmetry. When outcomes are favorable, does the company occupy the agent position? When risks or harms are reported, do clauses retain a responsible actor, substitute a process noun, or invoke an external condition? The point is not that every passive construction conceals blame. Arabic institutional prose uses passive and nominal forms for many ordinary reasons. A critical interpretation is warranted only when a recurrent grammatical pattern aligns with a recurrent distribution of praise, duty, or constraint.

2.4 Legitimation: why this course is reasonable

Van Leeuwen (2007) identifies several broad modes through which discourse answers the question, "Why should this be done?" **Authorization** appeals to persons, institutions, laws, customs, or recognized standards. **Moral evaluation** invokes values. **Rationalization** grounds action in utility, purpose, function, or apparently natural order. **Mythopoesis** uses narratives in which legitimate conduct is rewarded and deviation carries costs. Corporate reports frequently combine these modes. Alignment with a national development program authorizes strategy; a target supplies calculable purpose; reliable and affordable supply rationalizes continued production; responsibility and citizenship moralize the enterprise. The combination matters because each mode repairs a weakness in the others. Technical rationality can appear cold, but moral evaluation gives it a civic purpose. Moral aspiration can appear vague, but targets and standards give it administrative form. National authorization can appear particularistic, but references to global frameworks broaden the audience. The resulting legitimacy is layered rather than singular.

Future orientation is also part of legitimation. An ambition can invite support without carrying the same accountability as a completed action. Christensen et al. (2013) call attention to "aspirational talk," which may be dismissed as inconsistency but can also create expectations that press organizations toward change. Critical analysis should keep both possibilities open. It should neither treat every promise as action nor assume that promises have no institutional effects. In Aramco's reporting, the relevant question is how aspiration is grammatically distinguished from commitment, and how both are placed beside accounts of past performance.

3. Saudi Aramco's 2024 Reporting Context

The two documents examined here were published by Saudi Arabian Oil Company and obtained from the company's official reporting archive. The Arabic Sustainability Report 2024 presents the company's fourth sustainability report and organizes its account around climate change and energy transition, safe operations and people development, minimizing environmental impact, growing societal value, governance, and data. The Arabic Annual Report 2024 places sustainability within a wider account of corporate strategy, operational performance, risk, governance, and finance.

The pairing is useful because the reports do not address identical rhetorical situations. The sustainability report gives environmental and social themes more space, more case studies, and more performance indicators. The annual report places those themes beside production capacity, market conditions, profitability, risk, and shareholder value. Leadership claims that look self-contained in one document can therefore be read against the priorities articulated in the other. This is not a comparison between "public relations" and an unmediated financial truth; both are institutional genres. It is a comparison between two differently weighted accounts issued by the same organization for overlapping audiences.

The analysis remains focused on discourse. It does not audit emissions data, evaluate engineering feasibility, or infer the intentions of individual executives. Nor does it treat Saudi policy as a background that automatically explains every phrase. Instead, national development and energy-security references are examined when the reports themselves mobilize them. This restraint is important: a critical reading is strongest when it shows what the text does, not when it assigns motives that the evidence cannot bear.

4. Corpus and Method

4.1 Corpus boundaries and preparation

The master source set comprised the official Arabic Sustainability Report 2024 and Arabic Annual Report 2024 (Aramco, 2025a, 2025b). For this article, the sustainability subcorpus included printed pages 2–19 and 112–119: the chair's and chief executive's messages, the 2024 overview, the account of oil and gas in future demand, preparation for the future, the sustainability approach, stakeholder engagement, and governance. The annual-report subcorpus included printed pages 6–9, 20–27, 60–61, and 109–111: leadership messages, corporate strategy, sustainability approach and governance, and the relevant board-committee material. These boundaries were fixed before lexical counting.

Text was extracted from the archived PDFs on 15 August 2026. The sustainability PDF stored paired printed pages on most PDF pages, so printed page boundaries were mapped to physical pages before extraction. The annual report used one printed page per PDF page after its front matter. Raw extraction produced 11,830 tokens from the sustainability selections and 8,355 from the annual-report selections, for a combined 20,185 tokens. Cleaning removed repeating navigation lines, report-title footers, isolated page numbers, typographic controls, web-only strings, leader lines, and rows dominated by numerals or punctuation. It retained substantive headings, bullets, and prose. The cleaned corpus contained 10,805 sustainability-report tokens and 7,457 annual-report tokens, totaling 18,262.

For descriptive segmentation, a paragraph block was any layout-separated block containing at least four lexical tokens after cleaning. A clause unit was a span of at least three tokens delimited by sentence-final punctuation or by a comma followed by a common Arabic coordinator or subordinator. These rules yielded 187 blocks and 687 clause units. The units were aids to retrieval, not claims about a fully parsed Arabic syntax, and borderline cases were interpreted in their page context.

Tables were handled conservatively. Numerical rows were excluded from the cleaned counts because PDF extraction often scrambled column order. Prose embedded in charts or diagrams was retained only when its wording formed a complete, interpretable statement. Duplicate running headers were removed; repeated substantive claims appearing in different report sections were retained because recurrence itself may be rhetorically meaningful. No official web release was needed to fill a gap, and no translated English report text was substituted for the Arabic corpus.

4.2 Transliteration and presentation of evidence

Examples were first located in Arabic, checked against the relevant PDF page, then Romanized using a consistent IJMES-style scheme. Long vowels are marked with macrons; emphatic consonants and pharyngeals are distinguished; the definite article is written as *al-* without phonetic assimilation. Case endings absent from the source are not reconstructed. Because the source is largely unvocalized, the Romanization records a defensible reading rather than claiming to recover every inflection intended by the publisher. Proper names follow familiar English forms when they occur in discussion, but quoted evidence follows the same transliteration rules as the rest of the examples.

Each example is followed by an idiomatic English translation and a locator containing the document abbreviation and printed page. "SR" denotes the Sustainability Report 2024; "AR" denotes the Annual Report 2024. Short excerpts are used so that the grammar under discussion remains visible. The appendix consolidates the representative examples and adds a clause-level analytical note.

4.3 Analytical procedure

Analysis proceeded in four passes. The first pass identified metaphor-related lexical items by comparing their contextual meaning with a more concrete or embodied sense, following the logic of MIPVU while adapting it to the Arabic material (Steen et al., 2010). Candidate expressions were grouped inductively, then consolidated into the five recurrent families described above. Borderline cases such as "growth" were retained only when the surrounding clause mapped biological development onto organizations, markets, capabilities, or demand.

The second pass examined process type and participant roles in clauses surrounding those metaphors. Material processes were coded for an explicit actor, an affected participant where present, and relevant circumstances. Relational and mental clauses were noted when they assigned qualities, possession, belief, or foresight to the company. Passive voice, impersonal constructions, and nominalizations were recorded when they changed the visibility of agency. The aim was not an exhaustive grammatical annotation of all 687 units; it was a complete review of the retrieved metaphor and legitimation passages in their local context, followed by close analysis of representative clauses.

The third pass classified the social actors and legitimation modes attached to those passages. Corporate reference forms were distinguished from national, governmental, global, technological, industrial, employee, and community actors. Legitimation was coded as authorization, moral evaluation, rationalization, or narrative consequence. A clause could receive more than one label. For example, a reference to supporting national ambitions through reliable energy could combine authorization, instrumental rationalization, and moral evaluation.

The fourth pass returned to the whole cleaned subcorpus through declared lexical scans. These scans were deliberately modest: they counted stems or exact phrases and served as checks on interpretive salience. The journey-motion list returned 48 matches; leadership and rank, 35; growth and development, 164; architecture, 63; and vision or outlook, 24. Corporate naming forms returned 472 matches, while the moral-evaluation list returned 138 and the instrumental-rationalization list 35. Because stems overlap and context can alter meaning, these figures are not presented as semantic frequencies. They show where close reading was concentrated and permit the retrieval step to be reproduced.

No intercoder-reliability statistic is reported. Coding was conducted as a reflexive, theory-guided close reading rather than as independent categorical annotation by multiple coders. To make that choice auditable, the corpus boundaries, cleaning rules, lexical lists, page locators, and representative examples are disclosed. Claims in the findings are restricted to patterns demonstrable in those materials.

5. Findings

5.1 A journey whose pace belongs to "reality"

The journey family gives the transition direction without imposing a single timetable. The report speaks of routes, stages, speed, momentum, and movement. In the chief executive's account, the preferred approach is not a linear substitution of one energy system for another but a path differentiated by national conditions. One clause describes the transition through a striking accumulation:

> *Nuʾminu bi-anna al-taḥawwul al-ʿālamī fī majāl al-ṭāqa yakmunu fī ittibāʿ nahj mutaʿaddid al-maṣādir wa-al-suruʿāt wa-al-abʿād.*
>
> "We believe that the global energy transition lies in following a multi-source, multi-speed, and multidimensional approach." (SR, p. 3)

The grammatical subject of *nuʾminu* ("we believe") makes executive judgment visible, but the content of the belief distributes variation outward. Countries have different priorities; transition has different speeds. This is more than a cautious observation. It provides a vocabulary in which delay can be understood as legitimate differentiation rather than failure. The journey still advances, yet no single actor possesses the clock.

Elsewhere, "pathways" and "scenarios" offer a view of a future energy "landscape." The company becomes the observer and evaluator of possible routes. Foresight is thereby joined to leadership: the leader does not merely move first but surveys uncertainty and chooses responsibly. The report's use of scenario language is technically appropriate to corporate planning, but its rhetorical effect is to render the future plural. A mandated destination gives way to several possible configurations, each requiring assessment of affordability, security, sustainability, policy, and technology.

Journey language also absorbs difficulty. A hard road implies courage and perseverance, while a multi-stage process makes abrupt change appear unrealistic. Such descriptions legitimate managerial patience without explicitly rejecting decarbonization. They also reduce the visibility of contest over pace. Communities, regulators, competitors, and climate-vulnerable populations do not negotiate the itinerary in these clauses. The "world," "transition," and "demand" form the environment through which the company travels.

The metaphor is therefore double-edged. It commits the company to movement and makes stasis hard to claim. At the same time, it gives continuity a progressive appearance. Existing oil and gas operations can remain within the journey if they are described as becoming more efficient, less emissions-intensive, or supportive of new energy. Change occurs by addition, optimization, and staged diversification rather than by a clearly narrated exit from the current portfolio.

5.2 Building continuity: pillars, frameworks, and foundations

Architectural language gives the strategy solidity. The reports repeatedly describe "frameworks," "pillars," "enablers," and "foundations." These expressions turn a heterogeneous set of investments, technologies, targets, and committees into an engineered whole. A framework has edges and internal relations; a pillar supports something larger; an enabler supplies the missing condition for action. The vocabulary is organizationally useful, yet it also gives contested priorities the appearance of structural necessity.

The annual report's sustainability approach is especially revealing. Sustainability is presented not as an external demand but as part of the company's internal grammar:

> *Tuʿaddu al-istidāma juzʾan lā yatajazzaʾ min istrātījiyyat Arāmku al-Suʿūdiyya, fa-hiya tushakkilu abjadiyyāt taʿāmul Arāmku al-Suʿūdiyya maʿ muwaẓẓafīhā wa-shurakāʾihā wa-muwarridīhā wa-al-mujtamaʿāt allatī tuzāwilu fīhā aʿmālahā wa-al-kawkab bi-asrihi.*
>
> "Sustainability is an integral part of Saudi Aramco's strategy; it forms the very alphabet of how Saudi Aramco deals with its employees, partners, suppliers, the communities where it operates, and the planet as a whole." (AR, p. 60)

The "alphabet" metaphor is more intimate than the usual framework. An alphabet precedes particular statements and makes them possible. Sustainability is thus represented as generative code rather than an added program.

The long list of affected groups, ending with "the planet as a whole," expands the moral scope of the corporate actor. Yet this breadth also compresses different relationships into a single grammatical object of corporate "dealing": employees, suppliers, communities, and planet occupy parallel positions even though they cannot participate in the same way.

Architectural terms also stabilize the relationship between hydrocarbon leadership and lower-emissions initiatives. The reports can place emissions-intensity leadership, gas expansion, carbon capture, renewables, hydrogen, materials, and research under one strategy. Once represented as mutually supporting pillars, possible tensions among them recede. The building metaphor asks whether each element strengthens the structure, not whether the structure's overall material scale is compatible with ecological limits.

Governance descriptions reinforce this effect. Boards, committees, executive bodies, steering groups, and corporate functions are arranged as a vertical architecture of oversight. Named institutional actors "oversee," "align," "review," and "support." The grammar displays organizational capacity: sustainability has a place, responsible bodies, and a route upward to the board. However, the visibility of internal supervision is not matched by equal visibility for external contestation. Stakeholders are engaged, but the governing architecture remains corporate.

5.3 Growth made compatible with environmental leadership

Growth and development are the most frequent metaphor family in the retrieval scan, with 164 stem matches. Their prevalence is unsurprising in annual reporting, but the collocations matter. Growth is attached to the company, gas capacity, markets, technology, local content, renewables, social value, and future-ready capabilities. Because "development" can name both economic expansion and improvement in sustainability performance, the family joins goals that might otherwise require trade-offs.

The reports do not ordinarily present growth as an environmental problem. Growth is an outcome to be enabled, directed, or made more sustainable. Environmental action modifies the manner of expansion: lower emissions intensity, greater efficiency, reduced flaring, circularity, and new energy investment. This construction resembles what Milne et al. (2009) identify as the corporate domestication of sustainable development. The ecological question becomes how growth is managed rather than whether some forms of material expansion should be constrained.

Leadership as rank reinforces this settlement. The company is described as seeking to preserve its position as the world's largest crude-oil producer by volume while remaining among the lowest-cost and lower-emissions-intensity producers in its peer group. The comparison moves the evaluative baseline from absolute fossil-carbon dependence to relative operating performance. A leader can then be the producer that emits less per unit than competitors, even if aggregate production remains large.

This is a powerful form of legitimation because it is not wholly symbolic. Cost, reliability, and upstream emissions intensity are measurable characteristics. The discursive move lies in selecting them as the dimensions on which leadership should be judged. Absolute lifecycle emissions, consumption enabled by production, and alternative pathways receive less agency in the leadership claim. Rank narrows the moral field to a contest the company can plausibly lead.

The cultivation metaphor also humanizes the corporation. Skills are developed, people are the source of future capability, communities grow, and innovation is nurtured. Such language counters the image of a remote extractive apparatus. It locates leadership in workers, knowledge, and long-term relationships. Yet the same warmth is unevenly distributed. Nature rarely "grows" for itself in these leadership sections; growth is overwhelmingly organizational, economic, or technological. The asymmetry anticipates the agency pattern examined next.

5.4 The company acts; demand and transition happen

Corporate naming is unusually dense in the selected pages. The exact name "Saudi Aramco" and the classification "the company" together account for 472 lexical matches. Repetition produces more than cohesion. It keeps the organization available as an actor across sections that might otherwise fragment into technical projects, committee descriptions, and social programs. Material clauses regularly place that actor before verbs of investment, development, implementation, reduction, support, protection, and expansion.

The pattern is strongest around favorable, bounded action. The company signs agreements, establishes departments, develops technologies, conducts assessments, protects people, and invests in infrastructure. Such clauses possess three features conducive to accountability: a named agent, a concrete process, and an object whose change can be imagined. Even when a future project remains conditional, corporate competence is staged through the ability to plan and coordinate.

One leadership passage makes the shift from aspiration to action explicit:

> *Wa-istikmālan li-hādhā al-ṭumūḥ, waḍaʿat al-sharika hadafan marḥaliyyan jadīdan li-ʿām 2030 li-al-taqlīl min kathāfat al-inbiʿāthāt al-karbūniyya li-aʿmāl al-tanqīb wa-al-intāj bihā.*
>
> "To complement this ambition, the company set a new interim target for 2030 to reduce the carbon intensity of its upstream operations." (SR, p. 3)

The company is the actor of *waḍaʿat* ("set"), while the target becomes a managed object. The clause is accountable in the limited but important sense that it names who set what and by when. Its scope is also explicit: carbon intensity in upstream operations. The wording does not claim an absolute company-wide emissions reduction. Critical reading here requires precision. The relevant observation is not that the clause hides its metric, but that leadership is constituted through a scoped metric that can coexist with production growth.

Agency is configured differently when the reports discuss global energy need. Demand "continues," populations "grow," living standards "improve," and difficult-to-abate sectors "depend" on hydrocarbons. These processes are often intransitive or relational. No actor chooses demand in the same way the company chooses an investment. The world becomes a beneficiary requiring reliable supply, while the causal chain producing that requirement remains diffuse.

This contrast is visible in a statement from the sustainability report's account of future demand:

> *Wa-maʿ istimrār numuww al-ṭalab al-ʿālamī ʿalā al-ṭāqa munkhafiḍat al-inbiʿāthāt, yaḥtafiẓ qiṭāʿ al-nafṭ wa-al-ghāz bi-ahammiyyatihi fī daʿm mubādarāt al-istidāma.*
>
> "As global demand for lower-emissions energy continues to grow, the oil and gas sector retains its importance in supporting sustainability initiatives." (SR, p. 9)

The circumstantial opening establishes a world in which demand grows independently. The oil and gas sector is then the carrier of continuing "importance," not the agent of an optional strategy. Support for sustainability appears as a function of that importance. The clause thereby changes the burden of argument: rather than asking why hydrocarbons continue, it asks how they can assist a transition whose demand conditions already require them.

Technology occupies an intermediate position. It is sometimes an object developed by the company and sometimes an activated force that "enables," "supports," "improves," or "reduces." This alternation is productive. When Aramco develops a technology, leadership belongs to the company; when technology delivers efficiency, causality can be attributed to innovation itself. The reports thus create a partnership between organizational agency and technical agency. Political choices about scale, investment sequencing, and acceptable residual emissions are partially recast as engineering problems.

Negative outcomes produce a more varied grammar. The leadership message's report of eight workplace deaths is unusually direct: the people died following incidents while working for the company, the company investigated, and lessons were applied. The acknowledgment avoids an unqualified success narrative. Yet the harmful event remains grammatically separated from an individual or organizational actor who caused it. This separation may reflect legal caution and incomplete causal knowledge, but it also shows the limits of corporate activation. The company is strongly active in response—investigating, learning, preventing—while causation is lodged in "incidents."

The pattern should not be reduced to a simple active-positive/passive-negative formula. The reports do name environmental risks and operational shortcomings, and passive grammar occurs in neutral descriptions. The broader finding is relational: agency becomes sharpest where managerial intervention is plausible and reputationally valuable, while systemic causes appear through abstractions such as demand, transition, risk, and technological progress. This distribution permits the company to accept responsibility for improvement without accepting sole responsibility for the industrial system being improved.

5.5 Authorization across national and global scales

Authorization appears sparingly in raw lexical terms but strategically in argument. The reports align their focus areas with Saudi Vision 2030, national energy and localization priorities, international reporting frameworks, and recognized assurance standards. These authorities do different work. National references embed the company in a collective development project; standards offer procedural legitimacy; international sustainability goals broaden the moral horizon.

The national scale is especially important because it joins corporate investment to public value. Reliable energy, employment, local procurement, research capacity, and economic diversification are represented as contributions to the Kingdom's future. The company does not have to legitimate each project from first principles when it can be narrated as supporting an authorized national trajectory. This is not merely an appeal to hierarchy. It also invites identification: corporate continuity is connected to shared prosperity, competence, and security.

Global authorization is more cautious. The reports refer to the aims and vocabulary of climate action but retain their own account of feasible pace. International standards are strongest where measurement and assurance are concerned. They authorize the procedure of reporting—what is counted, how boundaries are defined, what receives limited assurance—without necessarily resolving the substantive dispute over production. Procedural authority and strategic autonomy therefore coexist.

Governance descriptions add internal authorization. The board and its sustainability, risk, health, safety, and environment committee oversee policies and practices; executive committees distribute responsibility; dedicated functions coordinate action. Institutional titles matter rhetorically because they make sustainability a governed object. The company's commitments do not appear as the preference of a communications unit but as matters placed within formal authority.

This vertical arrangement has limits. Communities, employees, suppliers, and partners are recognized as stakeholders, yet the text generally places them outside the chain that authorizes strategy. They are consulted, supported, protected, or engaged. The board authorizes; management executes; stakeholders receive or contribute. Leadership is therefore participatory at the level of engagement but corporate at the level of decision.

5.6 Rationalization and the ethics of "realism"

Instrumental rationalization answers criticism with purpose. The selected corpus repeatedly uses constructions equivalent to "to achieve," "with the aim of," "supports," and "helps." The lexical scan returned 35 such markers, but the reasoning extends beyond those phrases. Continued hydrocarbon production is linked to reliable and affordable supply, economic growth, materials for renewable systems, and the needs of sectors for which substitutes remain limited. Emissions reduction is linked to efficiency, competitiveness, and operational excellence. Investments become legitimate because they serve multiple ends.

The annual report condenses this argument in its call for a "robust and realistic" energy-transition plan:

> *Wa-dhālikafīẓilliḥtiyājal-ʿālamilākhuṭṭaqawiyyawa-wāqiʿiyyali-taḥqīqal-taḥawwulfīmajālal-ṭāqa,khuṭṭa turakkizuʿalāahammiyyatistighlālal-ṭāqātal-jadīdamaʿal-iqrārbi-istimrāral-ḥājali-al-ṭāqaal-taqlīdiyya.*
>
> "This comes as the world needs a robust and realistic plan for achieving the energy transition: a plan that emphasizes the use of new energies while acknowledging the continuing need for conventional energy." (AR, p. 60)

"Realistic" is evaluative, but it presents itself as descriptive. A realistic plan recognizes need; an unrealistic one presumably ignores it. The adjective therefore closes some argumentative space before evidence is debated. The parallel between new and conventional energy looks balanced, yet the second term is protected by the noun "need." Continued conventional supply becomes prudence rather than preference.

Affordability and reliability intensify the claim. These values are difficult to oppose, especially when presented as requirements of communities rather than advantages for producers. Their moral force can nonetheless narrow the range of alternatives under consideration. The reports seldom dwell on who defines affordability, how costs are distributed over time, or how environmental damages enter price. "Reliability" likewise describes a system property while carrying an implicit warning against rapid change.

Scenario discourse offers a sophisticated rationalization rather than a simple appeal to inevitability. Multiple pathways are compared against an energy trilemma of cost, security, and sustainability. The company becomes reasonable because it tests futures rather than declaring one. Yet the evaluative criteria are already institutionalized within an energy-supply frame. Ecological sufficiency, demand reduction, or distributive claims from vulnerable groups are less prominent. Rationality is broad but not neutral.

5.7 Responsibility, care, and the moral company

Moral evaluation supplies the warmth that technical realism lacks. The selected moral lexicon—responsibility, commitment, values, duty, citizenship, and reliability—returned 138 matches. "Value" itself is semantically flexible: it refers to moral principles, shareholder return, local economic contribution, and benefits for communities. This polysemy lets the report move smoothly between ethical and economic registers.
The chair's message widens sustainability beyond emissions:

> *Wa-yattasiʿ mafhūm al-istidāma li-yashmala al-taḥallī bi-mabādiʾ al-muwāṭana al-ṣāliḥa, wa-al-tarkīz ʿalā salāmat muwaẓẓafīnā wa-taṭawwuruhum ʿalā al-madā al-baʿīd, wa-iḍāfat al-qīma ilā al-mujtamaʿ ʿalā niṭāq awsaʿ.*
>
> "The meaning of sustainability also extends to good citizenship, attention to our employees' safety and long-term development, and adding value to society more broadly." (SR, p. 2)

The inclusive definition is ethically attractive. It resists reducing sustainability to carbon alone and acknowledges work, community, and long-term human development. At the same time, the expansion makes the concept easier to satisfy through a portfolio of benefits. Weak performance in one domain can be accompanied by strong performance in another without the text explicitly proposing a trade-off. "Sustainability" becomes an umbrella under which several kinds of merit accumulate.

Possessive forms such as "our employees" and "our values" personalize the institution. The corporate "we" can believe, feel sorrow, take pride, and trust in people. These mental and affective processes make leadership answerable in a human voice. They also concentrate the right to narrate. Workers and communities rarely speak in direct quotation in the selected leadership pages; their interests are voiced by the organization that claims to serve them.

The company's self-presentation is thus neither purely technocratic nor purely moral. Care validates competence, while competence makes care credible. Safety investigations, environmental targets, local development, and reliable supply become parts of one responsible identity. The identity is persuasive precisely because it includes painful acknowledgment as well as achievement. Its limitation lies not in the absence of responsibility language but in the scale at which responsibility is accepted: chiefly operational, managerial, and improvement-oriented.

6. Discussion

The combined analysis shows how metaphor, agency, and legitimation form a single rhetorical system. Journey metaphors pluralize pace; architecture integrates potentially conflicting initiatives; growth normalizes expansion; vision privileges managerial foresight; rank converts environmental leadership into comparison. These conceptual frames are sustained by grammar. The company acts upon projects and performance, technology enables solutions, and systemic demand unfolds as circumstance. Legitimation then explains why this distribution is right: it aligns with national direction, follows recognized procedures, serves reliability and affordability, and embodies responsibility.

This configuration can be described as **bounded accountability**. Aramco accepts a visible obligation to reduce operational impacts, set targets, govern sustainability, investigate failures, and invest in lower-emissions options. The boundaries of that accountability are equally visible. The company does not take discursive ownership of global demand, the pace of substitution, or the political economy of consumption. Those matters are distributed among the world, markets, governments, customers, and technical possibility.

Bounded accountability is more durable than denial because it accommodates evidence of environmental pressure. It can report emissions, spills, risks, and deaths without surrendering the leadership identity, provided the organization is represented as measuring, learning, and improving. Hahn and Lülfs's (2014) legitimation strategies help explain this resilience: negative aspects become evidence of corrective capacity when accompanied by response. Cho et al.'s (2015) account of façades also remains pertinent, but the Arabic material suggests that coherence is created not only by selective disclosure. It is created by assigning different kinds of causality to different actors.

The findings also qualify the idea of aspirational talk. Targets and ambitions are not interchangeable with completed reductions, yet they do institutional work. A dated target creates an object that future reports can revisit. The report's careful scoping may limit the promise, but it also makes the promise more accountable than an unspecific pledge. The critical task is therefore to read scope, metric, baseline, and agency together rather than counting future verbs as evidence of either leadership or evasion.

For Arabic discourse studies, the article shows the value of analyzing the original edition. Recurrent corporate subjects, possessive forms, nominalized processes, and moral-evaluative collocations produce effects that disappear in summary translation. Romanization allows those effects to be discussed for an international readership, but it does not erase the need for language competence or page-level checking.

7. Implications

For analysts and reviewers, three practical implications follow. First, leadership claims should be tested against their grammatical scope. A company may be highly agentive while acting on a narrowly specified indicator. Second, metaphor inventories are most informative when connected to participant roles. Finding "journey" words is less revealing than asking who travels, who chooses the route, and who controls the clock. Third, credibility assessment should distinguish procedural authorization from substantive justification. External assurance can strengthen confidence in selected metrics without settling the wider argument about corporate strategy.

For reporting practice, greater clarity would come from placing absolute and intensity measures beside one another, distinguishing investments approved from projects merely contemplated, and identifying the actors whose decisions are required for each target. Stakeholder engagement would be more substantively visible if reports included bounded disagreement rather than only consolidated corporate paraphrase. These changes would not remove the tensions of transition, but they would make the allocation of responsibility easier to examine.

8. Limitations and Future Research

The corpus is deliberately narrow: two documents, one reporting year, and selected leadership, strategy, and governance pages. It supports close claims about this rhetorical formation, not general claims about Saudi public discourse or the petroleum industry as a whole. PDF extraction also creates imperfections, especially in paired pages and tables; the study therefore excludes scrambled numerical rows and checks every quotation against the page image.

The study does not compare the Arabic and English editions. Such a comparison could reveal how agency, politeness, modality, and national reference shift across audiences, but it would require an aligned bilingual design. Future work could also trace targets longitudinally, compare Aramco with other national and investor-owned energy companies, or examine how external audiences accept, resist, or reinterpret the leadership narrative. Reception evidence would be especially valuable because textual legitimation does not guarantee social legitimacy.

9. Conclusion

Aramco's 2024 Arabic sustainability rhetoric does not resolve the conflict between hydrocarbon continuity and environmental transition. It organizes that conflict. The organization is portrayed as moving through a demanding landscape, building a stable strategy, cultivating capabilities, and leading peers on selected dimensions. Named corporate agency is strongest around investment, innovation, governance, care, and operational improvement.

The wider forces that sustain hydrocarbons—demand, affordability, industrial dependence, technological readiness, and the pace of transition—are represented as conditions to be navigated.

Legitimacy follows from this allocation. National development and recognized standards authorize the course; reliability and realism rationalize it; responsibility and citizenship moralize it. The narrative is persuasive because it combines measurable commitments with a broader claim to prudence. Its critical vulnerability is equally clear: relative efficiency and bounded targets can support leadership without answering the question of absolute ecological scale. Reading metaphor, agency, and legitimation together makes that boundary visible. It also replaces a generic accusation of "green" rhetoric with a more exact account of how industrial continuity is made compatible with the language of transition.

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Declarations

Data availability: The article analyses public institutional webpages. The source register and representative Romanized excerpts are included. A reusable corpus should be archived only after checking institutional copyright, webpage changes, and journal data-sharing requirements.

Ethics: The corpus contains no private or personal data. Institutional texts are quoted briefly for scholarly analysis.

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