



REVIEW ARTICLE

Section: Literature, Linguistics & Criticism

From hydrocarbon continuity to low-carbon promise: Temporality, modality, and transition narratives in Aramco's 2024 Arabic sustainability discourseKhalid Abdullah Alotaibi^{1*}, Mahmoud Ali Kanakri², Rami A. Sa'di³ & Mohammad Osman Abdul Wahab⁴¹Department of Psychology, College of Education, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia²Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Ajloun National University, Jordan³Department of English, College of Humanities and Sciences, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia⁴Department of English, Faculty of Languages and Translation, King Khalid University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*Correspondence: ka.alotaibi@psau.edu.sa**ABSTRACT**

Energy-transition discourse is built as much from time as from technology. Dates, aspect, modal verbs, targets, scenarios, and disclaimers determine whether a corporate statement describes accomplished change, ongoing work, intended investment, conditional possibility, or distant ambition. This article examines those distinctions in Saudi Aramco's official Arabic Sustainability Report 2024 and selected market, strategy, sustainability, and forward-looking sections of its Arabic Annual Report 2024. The page-bounded corpus comprises 31,457 raw tokens and 28,446 cleaned tokens across 268 layout-defined prose blocks and 1,114 clause units. A discourse-pragmatic analysis distinguishes completed action, continuing process, dated commitment, volitional intention, predictive possibility, and cautionary qualification. It then traces how these temporal forms are assembled into narratives of continuity and transition. The findings show a dual chronology. Hydrocarbon demand and supply are represented through durable, near-continuous time: they "continue," "remain," and are expected to retain importance. Lower-carbon initiatives are organized through milestones, project schedules, and ambitions extending to 2030, 2035, and 2050. The contrast does not make the latter empty, since several promises have explicit metrics, scopes, and interim dates. Yet grammatical commitment varies considerably. Completed operational reductions sit beside intentions to expand hydrocarbon-linked businesses, while technological benefits are often conditional on successful testing, market formation, and policy support. Aramco's transition narrative therefore operates through temporal layering: present continuity underwrites future experimentation, and future promise legitimates present continuity. The article proposes a six-part commitment test for distinguishing accountable corporate pledges from aspirational direction without treating either as self-evidently credible or insincere.

KEYWORDS: energy transition, temporality, modality; Arabic discourse, Saudi Aramco, corporate futures, commitment, sustainability reporting.

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1. Introduction

The future is one of the principal materials from which sustainability reports are made. Companies announce targets, imagine demand, forecast technology, set interim milestones, and describe projects that may not yet have passed a final investment decision. Past achievements appear beside present programs and distant ambitions. A reader who treats all these statements as equivalent will miss the report's most important distinctions. "Reduced," "is reducing," "aims to reduce," "may reduce," and "will reduce by 2035" do not carry the same evidential or institutional burden.

This problem is pronounced in energy-transition reporting. A large oil and gas producer must narrate two temporalities at once. The first is continuity: societies currently rely on energy systems, infrastructure, industrial materials, and fuels that cannot be replaced instantly. The second is transformation: emissions must fall, new systems must be built, and long-lived capital must be redirected. Corporate discourse can connect these temporalities in several ways. Continuity may fund transition, bridge toward it, slow it, or define its practical limits. Future promise may discipline present action, but it may also postpone harder choices.

Saudi Aramco's 2024 Arabic sustainability discourse makes this temporal problem unusually visible. The official reports place short-term operational results beside ambitions for 2030, 2035, and 2050; they discuss scenarios for oil and gas demand, investments in renewables and carbon management, and plans to expand gas and liquids-to-chemicals capacity. The resulting narrative is not adequately described as either a defense of hydrocarbons or a promise of low-carbon change. It is an account of how the two are sequenced, synchronized, and made mutually supportive.

The analysis begins from the proposition that tense and modality are forms of public accountability. A past-tense material process normally presents an event as accomplished. A progressive or continuative construction presents duration. A future date narrows the horizon of assessment, but only if the actor, metric, baseline, and scope are clear. Volitional verbs such as "aim," "seek," and "intend" express corporate orientation without guaranteeing an outcome. Predictive expressions such as "is expected to" distribute commitment between the speaker and an external forecast. Conditional clauses make dependency explicit. Disclaimers can then withdraw or qualify the apparent certainty of the document's forward-looking statements.

This article asks four questions. How are hydrocarbon continuity and lower-carbon change located in time? Which modal resources distinguish commitment, intention, prediction, and possibility? How do reports move between completed performance and future ambition? Finally, which linguistic features make a future claim more or less accountable? The questions are addressed through a page-bounded Arabic corpus and close analysis of Romanized examples. The analytical focus is discourse-pragmatic: it considers what a statement commits its institutional author to in context, rather than assigning truth values to forecasts that cannot yet be tested.

The central finding is a dual chronology. Hydrocarbon continuity occupies grammatical forms of endurance and necessity: oil and gas "continue," demand "grows," conventional energy "remains," and dependable supply "will be indispensable." Lower-carbon change is more often calendrical and projective. It appears through dated ambitions, intended capacity, expected commissioning, research aims, and conditional technical benefits. The two chronologies reinforce one another. Current production provides the resources and claimed reliability from which future investment proceeds; future investment, in turn, makes current production narratable as part of transition rather than its opposite.

This interpretation avoids two shortcuts. The first is to count every future expression as a firm promise. The second is to treat every aspiration as meaningless because it is not yet an outcome. Aspirational talk can create expectations and internal obligations (Christensen et al., 2013; Haack et al., 2012). Yet its force depends on wording and institutional design. A dated intensity target with a baseline and defined asset boundary differs from an undated intention to support innovation. The article develops a commitment test that preserves those distinctions.

The contribution extends research on the temporal dynamics of energy transitions into Arabic corporate discourse. Transition scholarship has shown that energy systems change across uneven timescales and that accelerated decarbonization requires alignment across technology, policy, infrastructure, behavior, and finance (Bridge et al., 2013; Geels et al., 2017; Sovacool, 2016). Discourse scholarship, meanwhile, has examined climate narratives, imaginaries, and corporate aspiration. Bringing these literatures together reveals how corporate

grammar converts temporal complexity into an argument about reasonable action.

2. Time, Modality, and Corporate Transition

2.1 Transitions do not share one clock

Energy transitions unfold through infrastructures with different lifetimes, institutions with different decision cycles, and communities with different exposures to cost and risk. The phrase “the transition” can therefore mislead if it suggests a single process moving everywhere at the same rate. Bridge et al. (2013) emphasize the geographical constitution of low-carbon change, while Sovacool (2016) shows that transitions can be both historically extended and surprisingly rapid depending on what is measured. Geels et al. (2017) argue that deep decarbonization requires accelerated sociotechnical change rather than isolated innovation. Delina and Sovacool (2018) add that plurality and temporal justice matter: speed is not only a technical variable but a question of whose needs and losses shape the schedule.

Corporate reports translate this complexity into organizational time. Annual reporting imposes a yearly rhythm, capital projects create milestone time, and targets create deadline time. Scenarios add branching futures. A company may also work with a legal time shaped by permits and standards, a market time shaped by prices and demand, and an ecological time shaped by cumulative emissions. These timescales need not align. One rhetorical function of the report is to make them appear governable from a single strategic center.

Temporal alignment is also a justice question. The political economy of a “just transition” concerns who bears near-term costs and who gains from long-term restructuring (Newell & Mulvaney, 2013). Three decades of mitigation history show that accumulating promises have not yet bent the global emissions curve at the required scale (Stoddard et al., 2021). Corporate timing must therefore be read against both infrastructural difficulty and the consequences of postponement.

Temporality is consequently more than a list of dates. It includes aspect: whether a process is completed, ongoing, habitual, repeated, or incipient. It includes sequence: whether lower-carbon activity precedes, accompanies, or follows expansion. It includes duration: whether conventional energy is described as a short bridge or a continuing component. It includes urgency and patience, each of which can be morally loaded. The claim that change cannot occur “overnight,” for example, may be empirically sensible and rhetorically strategic at the same time.

2.2 Modal commitment and evidential distance

Modality concerns degrees and kinds of commitment between a proposition and its speaker. Palmer (2001) distinguishes forms related to knowledge and inference from those related to obligation, permission, and volition. In functional grammar, modality occupies the space between an unqualified positive and negative proposition, while modulation concerns inclination and obligation (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Corporate discourse frequently exploits that middle space. “May,” “could,” “is expected to,” “aims to,” and “plans to” all orient readers toward a future without asserting that the future will occur.

The Arabic material draws on lexical and grammatical resources rather than a one-to-one equivalent of English modal auxiliaries. Possibility can be expressed through *qad*, *yumkinu*, and constructions equivalent to “it is possible.” Prediction appears in *min al-mutawaqqa'* (“it is expected”) and verbs of expectation. Volition appears in verbs meaning “aim,” “seek,” “intend,” and “plan.” Necessity is expressed through words for need, indispensability, and obligation. Future reference may be marked by *sa-* or by a present form interpreted prospectively through a date.

These forms position the institutional author at different distances from the claim. A categorical future can expose the company to later comparison. An expectation attributes the proposition to a forecast and leaves room for revision. An aim displays direction but not outcome. A possibility foregrounds technical potential. A conditional makes the proposition dependent on an event outside the assertion. None of these forms is inherently weak. A research project should be described conditionally if its result is uncertain. The critical issue is whether readers can see the dependency and whether the report distinguishes possibility from deployment.

Work on hedging shows why apparently small qualifications are central to the social organization of knowledge claims (Hyland, 1998). Appraisal theory further distinguishes the grading of certainty from the evaluation of actors and outcomes (Martin & White, 2005). In annual reporting, stance choices help a company

appear confident without claiming knowledge it does not possess (Fuoli, 2018).

Stance research shows that corporate credibility is built through a combination of assertion and restraint rather than maximal certainty (Fuoli, 2018). A trustworthy voice may acknowledge limits, specify evidence, and avoid claiming what has not occurred. The forward-looking disclaimer in an annual report formalizes this restraint, though it also protects the issuer. Modality is thus both epistemic discipline and risk management.

2.3 Narratives, imaginaries, and future-making

Temporal statements become more consequential when arranged as narratives. A narrative does not require a literary plot. It connects an initial condition, agents, obstacles, actions, and anticipated outcomes. Climate discourse often relies on such structures because distant and complex change must be made imaginable (Fløttum & Gjerstad, 2017; Nerlich et al., 2010). Sociotechnical imaginaries likewise join visions of social order to science and technology, giving collective futures institutional form (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015).

Corporate transition narratives commonly assign the present a transitional function. Today's assets provide cash, energy security, engineering competence, or materials for tomorrow's systems. The firm becomes a bridge between eras. This structure can motivate investment, but it can also reproduce what Lamb et al. (2020) call discourses of climate delay when action is displaced by claims that conditions are not yet ready, responsibility lies elsewhere, or disruptive change would threaten vulnerable users.

The content of an imaginable future is also culturally and institutionally contested. Levy and Spicer (2013) show that climate imaginaries carry rival political economies, while Kuchler and Bridge's (2018) study of coal demonstrates how national sociotechnical imaginaries can sustain an incumbent resource. Climate-communication research likewise shows that narrative, framing, and certainty allocate collective responsibility (Nerlich et al., 2010; Olausson, 2009). Hajer and Versteeg (2005) therefore treat environmental discourse as constitutive of policy possibilities, not as a secondary description of them.

Delay is not proven by future grammar alone. A dated target can accelerate action; a scenario can reveal risk; a conditional can honestly register technical uncertainty. Analysis must therefore ask how future claims relate to present commitments. Does the report identify an actor, allocate capital, name a baseline, define scope, and provide an interim checkpoint? Does it report prior performance on the same measure? Does the language allow the proposition to be falsified or revised transparently? These questions guide the analysis below.

2.4 Aspirational talk and the possibility of self-binding

Christensen et al. (2013) argue that aspirational corporate talk should not be dismissed merely because it exceeds current practice. Public aspiration can establish ideals against which an organization is later judged. Haack et al. (2012) similarly show how "talking the talk" may produce moral entrapment and creeping commitment: once a standard is publicly embraced, stakeholders and organizational members can press for conformity. Strategic silence offers the inverse strategy, withholding a claim to avoid accusations of hypocrisy (Carlos & Lewis, 2018). These insights complicate the reading of Aramco's ambitions. A 2050 statement may be distant, but public repetition creates an institutional reference point. An interim 2030 or 2035 target may further bind the organization by shortening the review cycle. At the same time, the force of the promise depends on its boundary. An ambition covering Scope 1 and Scope 2 emissions from wholly owned and operated assets does not extend automatically to all subsidiaries, Scope 3 emissions, or the combustion of sold products. Linguistic accountability is therefore a matter of both temporal specificity and semantic scope.

The distinction also matters across reporting genres. Mäkelä and Laine (2011) show that different corporate reports can present different ideological emphases under the voice of one chief executive. Historical studies of fossil-fuel communication demonstrate why exact wording, audience, and document type must be preserved when assessing climate claims (Supran & Oreskes, 2017, 2021).

3. Corpus and Research Design

3.1 Documents and subcorpus boundaries

The source set consists of Saudi Arabian Oil Company's official Arabic Sustainability Report 2024 and Arabic Annual Report 2024 (Aramco, 2025a, 2025b). Both were downloaded from the company's reporting archive. The sustainability subcorpus comprises printed pages 8–17 and 20–55. These pages cover the role of oil and gas

in future demand, preparation for the future, sustainability strategy, the climate-change and energy-transition section, its targets and roadmap, emissions-management initiatives, product and portfolio development, and selected technology and investment cases.

The annual-report subcorpus comprises printed pages 18–27, 59–63, and 145–146. It includes market outlook, corporate strategy, the opening sustainability pages and climate focus, and the forward-looking-statements notice. The notice is analytically necessary because it defines the legal and evidential status of projections elsewhere in the document. The boundaries deliberately exclude the leadership pages analyzed in the companion study of metaphor and legitimation.

The selected sustainability pages yielded 23,016 raw tokens and 21,041 cleaned tokens. The annual-report pages yielded 8,441 raw and 7,405 cleaned tokens. The combined corpus contains 31,457 raw tokens and 28,446 cleaned tokens. After layout-based segmentation, it comprises 268 prose blocks and 1,114 clause units. Extraction took place on 15 August 2026.

Cleaning removed repeated navigation bars, report-title footers, isolated pagination, bidirectional control characters, URLs, leader lines, and rows dominated by numbers or punctuation. Narrative text and complete statements embedded in diagrams were retained. Numerical tables were consulted visually when needed to understand a neighboring claim but were not treated as orderly prose because extraction disrupted their columns. Substantive repetitions were retained, since the reappearance of a target across sections can strengthen its institutional salience.

3.2 Temporal and modal categories

Each relevant clause was read in its page context and assigned to one or more of six pragmatic categories:

1. **Completed action:** a bounded event presented as achieved, launched, signed, reduced, or completed.
2. **Ongoing process:** activity presented as continuing, under way, or currently developing.
3. **Dated commitment:** a target or intended state tied to a stated year and a specified measure or deliverable.
4. **Volitional intention:** an aim, ambition, plan, or undertaking whose outcome remains open.
5. **Predictive possibility:** an expectation, estimate, capacity, or possible benefit grounded in forecasting or technical potential.
6. **Cautionary qualification:** a condition, scope restriction, approval dependency, market contingency, or formal disclaimer that limits a future claim.

The categories describe the force of the wording, not the sincerity of its author. A clause could be both a dated commitment and a volitional intention. A project could be ongoing while its benefit remained predictive. Completed action was coded only when the text represented an event as already accomplished; a completed feasibility study did not convert the proposed facility into a completed facility.

3.3 Narrative analysis

After clause-level classification, passages were grouped by narrative function. The **continuity narrative** concerns enduring demand, reliability, affordability, conventional energy, gas expansion, and hydrocarbon-derived materials. The **transition narrative** concerns emissions reduction, renewables, hydrogen, carbon capture, efficiency, electrification, offsets, and lower-carbon products. A third, **integration narrative**, presents current hydrocarbon capabilities as enabling transition through finance, materials, infrastructure, or technical expertise. The analysis traced how clauses move among these functions. Particular attention was paid to temporal handoffs: a completed action followed by a future target; a present need followed by a long-term ambition; an intention followed by a condition; or a forecast followed by a strategic response. These transitions reveal the report's plot more clearly than isolated modal counts.

Declared lexical scans supported retrieval. Dated-future expressions returned 75 matches; prospective modality, 119; volitional commitment, 112; ongoing process, 41; and a deliberately narrow completed-action list, 15. The continuity list returned 113 matches and the transition list 87. These are reproducible string and stem matches, not categorical totals. The counts overlap, and individual tokens can serve different pragmatic functions. They were used to locate dense passages for close reading, not to substitute frequency for interpretation.

3.4 Romanization, translation, and audit trail

Quoted Arabic appears only in Romanization. An IJMES-style scheme marks long vowels, emphatic consonants, hamza, and ‘ayn; the definite article remains *al-* rather than assimilating to a following solar consonant. Because the source is unvocalized, the Romanization presents a consistent contextual reading. Each excerpt was checked against the official PDF page and translated idiomatically. “SR” refers to the Sustainability Report; “AR” refers to the Annual Report.

No reliability coefficient is claimed. The study uses reflexive discourse analysis with a disclosed category scheme and examples rather than independent coding by several raters. Its reproducibility lies in the fixed page ranges, cleaning rules, category definitions, lexical lists, and clause locators. The approach is designed to keep interpretive claims close to evidence while acknowledging that pragmatic force is not reducible to an automated label.

4. Findings

4.1 The durable present of oil and gas

The continuity narrative begins in the present tense but reaches forward. Oil and gas “retain” importance, conventional sources “remain” necessary, and the world “continues” to require reliable and affordable energy. These forms make continuity look less like a new corporate choice than an enduring condition. The future marker often intensifies the point:

Baynamā yas‘ā al-‘ālam li-talbiyat iḥtiyājātihi min al-ṭāqa bi-ṭarīqa akthar istidāma, sa-yastamir al-naft wa-al-ghāz fī la‘b dawr jawharī fī talbiyat al-ṭalab.

“While the world seeks to meet its energy needs more sustainably, oil and gas will continue to play a fundamental role in meeting demand.” (SR, pp. 8–9, future-demand overview)

The concessive opening admits the sustainability objective, but the main clause gives hydrocarbons a categorical future. “Will continue” combines prediction with duration. The actor is the coordinated sector, while “demand” is an object already waiting to be met. The sentence does not specify a terminal date, so continuity remains open-ended even though the surrounding page projects to 2050.

The continuity narrative also relies on habitual time. Aviation, shipping, construction, food production, data infrastructure, and petrochemical materials are described as sectors whose requirements persist. The reports present renewable systems as dependent on hydrocarbon-derived components and mining. Such claims integrate current products into the material preconditions of a lower-emissions future. They do not merely say that oil and gas survive during transition; they say that some functions of transition depend on them.

This integration is rhetorically efficient because it displaces the image of two competing eras. Hydrocarbons and lower-carbon systems coexist within one supply narrative. The relevant choice becomes how to produce current energy and materials with lower operational emissions, not whether continuity itself requires a publicly stated endpoint.

The annual report uses a stronger necessity construction in its climate position:

Nu’minu bi-anna imdādāt al-ṭāqa al-mawthūqa wa-al-maysūrat al-taklīfa, allatī tashmalu al-naft wa-al-ghāz, sa-takūnu ḍarūra lā ghinā ‘anhā li-talbiyat al-ṭalab al-‘ālamī al-mutazāyid ‘alā al-ṭāqa.

“We believe that reliable and affordable energy supplies, including oil and gas, will be indispensable for meeting growing global energy demand.” (SR, p. 24, position on climate change)

The speaker marks the proposition as belief, but “will be indispensable” is categorical. Reliability and affordability make the future claim morally charged. If supply is indispensable, continued production becomes service. This is a stronger commitment than an expectation, even though it concerns market need rather than a corporate target.

4.2 Milestone time and the architecture of promise

Lower-carbon action is organized through dates. The report's principal horizons—2030, 2035, and 2050—perform different functions. The 2050 horizon carries the net-zero ambition for Scope 1 and Scope 2 emissions from wholly owned and operated assets. The 2030 and 2035 horizons convert parts of that ambition into interim measures, including upstream carbon-intensity and avoided-emissions goals. Dated milestones create a sequence in which the distant future is approached through shorter reporting cycles.

A representative passage layers these commitments:

Waḍaʿat al-sharika hadafan marḥaliyyan jadīdan yatamaththalu fī khafḍ kathāfat al-inbiʿāthāt al-karbūniyya al-nātiḡa ʿan aʿmāl qitāʿ al-tanqīb wa-al-intāj ilā 8.6 kilūghrām ... aw aqall min dhālika fī ʿām 2030, wa-taḥqīq khafḍ bi-nisbat 15% bi-ḥulūl ʿām 2035 muqāranatan bi-mustawayāt ʿām 2018.

“The company set a new interim target to reduce upstream carbon intensity to 8.6 kilograms ... or less in 2030, and to achieve a 15% reduction by 2035 compared with 2018 levels.” (SR, pp. 22–23, climate targets)

This is among the report's more accountable future statements. It names the actor, metric, threshold, dates, baseline, and operational scope. The past-tense *waḍaʿat* (“set”) describes a completed act of target-setting, while the infinitival reductions remain future outcomes. The distinction prevents a common slippage: setting a target is an achievement, but it is not the same achievement as meeting the target.

The target is also intensity-based and asset-bounded. Those features do not invalidate it; they specify what it can demonstrate. If production changes, carbon intensity and absolute emissions may move differently. If an asset lies outside the stated ownership and operational boundary, its emissions may not be covered. Temporal accountability therefore depends on semantic boundaries as much as dates.

Roadmap graphics strengthen milestone time by arranging measures along a visual trajectory. Efficiency, methane, flaring, renewables, carbon capture, natural climate solutions, and offsets appear as contributions to the ambition. The narrative effect is cumulative: no single measure carries the whole transition, but each fills a place between present operations and 2050. This can make the ambition administratively credible. It can also obscure potential dependence on measures whose scale, permanence, or commercial readiness differs substantially.

4.3 Aspectual braiding: achieved, continuing, and intended

The reports frequently braid three aspects within one paragraph. A past achievement establishes competence, a continuative verb shows momentum, and an intention projects the next stage. Consider the description of liquids-to-chemicals expansion:

Taʿtazimu al-sharika muwāṣalat tanmiyyat aʿmālīhā fī majāl taḥwīl al-sawāʾil ilā kīmīyāʾiyyāt ... wa-bi-nihāyat ʿām 2024 ḥaqqaqat Arāmku al-Suʿūdīyya mā yuqāribu 45% min hadafihā, fimā yajri al-ʿamal ʿalā ziyādat al-tāqa al-intājiyya.

“The company intends to continue growing its liquids-to-chemicals business ... By the end of 2024, Saudi Aramco had achieved about 45% of its target, while work is under way to increase capacity.” (SR, pp. 24–25, transition framework)

The temporal sequence is clear: intention, quantified progress, ongoing work. Yet the object is expansion of a hydrocarbon-derived product chain. It sits inside the transition framework because the report associates advanced materials and chemical conversion with products that may have lower-emissions applications or longer life cycles. Transition time here does not replace continuity; it accelerates a different use of the hydrocarbon resource.

This aspectual braid is a recurring credibility device. Completed actions lend evidential weight to future plans. Signing an agreement is placed beside the expected operation of a facility; testing a prototype precedes a statement about possible deployment; establishing an investment fund precedes descriptions of future

technologies. The reader moves from what has happened to what may happen without a sharp rhetorical break. The report generally provides verbs that allow a careful reader to preserve the distinction. Problems arise only when summaries collapse those verbs into a single category of “action.” A signed memorandum is an action, but not a commissioned asset. A pilot can demonstrate a process, but not commercial scale. A fund allocation can enable investment, but not guarantee emissions reduction. The Arabic wording often keeps these levels visible; evaluators should do the same.

4.4 Prediction and the distancing work of expectation

The prospective-modality scan returned 119 matches, with forms equivalent to “may,” “can,” and “is expected to” especially prominent. Expectations often introduce forecasts of demand or project schedules. The impersonal construction *min al-mutawaqqaʿ an* (“it is expected that”) creates evidential distance. The company reports a projection without presenting itself as the sole guarantor.

In project descriptions, this distance is appropriate because commissioning depends on construction, partners, approvals, and market conditions. For example:

Wa-min al-mutawaqqaʿ an yabdaʿ hādhā al-mashrūʿ aʿmālahu bi-kāmil ṭāqatihi bi-ḥulūl nihāyat ʿām 2030.

“The project is expected to begin operating at full capacity by the end of 2030.” (SR, pp. 50–51, petrochemicals project)

The project, rather than the company, is the grammatical subject of future operation. The passive evidential phrase lowers authorial commitment. A deadline remains, but responsibility for meeting it is dispersed across the project assemblage. This is not evasive by definition. It is a precise sign that the statement is a forecast rather than a promise.

Technical benefit is still more conditional. Carbon capture, novel materials, mobile-source capture, direct air capture, and hydrogen research are described through capacity and potential. One case states:

Idhā athbatat hādhihi al-taqniyya najāḥahā, fa-innahā sa-tuʿaddī ilā taqlīl al-taklifa al-ijmāliyya li-anḣimat istikhlāṣ al-karbūn bi-mā qad yaṣilu ilā 50%.

“If this technology proves successful, it will reduce the total cost of carbon-capture systems by as much as 50%.” (SR, pp. 54–55, venture technology profile)

The claim contains three layers of qualification: an explicit success condition, a future result, and the scalar hedge “by as much as.” Such wording should not be cited as an achieved cost reduction. At the same time, its conditionality is a sign of responsible technical discourse. The critical question is how prominently that condition survives when the project is summarized elsewhere.

Forecasts of global demand often carry less visible conditionality than experimental technology. They are presented through charts and scenarios, but the surrounding prose can move from “is expected” to “will continue.” The asymmetry matters. Technological transition is contingent; hydrocarbon need approaches certainty. This distribution supports the dual chronology at the center of the report.

4.5 Volition: aim, ambition, plan, and intention

The volitional list returned 112 matches. Its verbs should not be treated as synonyms. “Ambition” marks a desired end state; “aim” gives an actor a direction; “intend” indicates a present commitment to pursue an action; “plan” suggests a more organized sequence, though it may still depend on approval; “seek” often presents continuing effort without specifying the result.

The net-zero statement is explicitly an ambition. The noun appears consistently enough to prevent an attentive reader from mistaking it for a guarantee:

Yatamaththalu ṭumūḥ Arāmkū al-Suʿūdiyya fī taḥqīq al-ḥiyād al-ṣifri li-inbiʿāthāt al-ghāzāt al-

“Saudi Aramco’s ambition is to achieve net-zero greenhouse-gas emissions for Scopes 1 and 2 across the assets it wholly owns and operates by 2050.” (AR, p. 59, net-zero ambition)

The statement has a date and boundary, but the head noun remains “ambition.” Its accountability is therefore intermediate: more specific than a general aspiration, less committal than an unconditional undertaking. The interim targets examined above partly strengthen it by providing nearer checkpoints.

The verb “intend” appears in expansion plans as well as emissions initiatives. This parallel is analytically important. The company does not reserve strong volition for low-carbon activity. It intends to develop gas, chemicals, materials, research, and lower-emissions solutions. The transition narrative is portfolio-wide, and the grammar reveals that expansion and emissions management are simultaneous corporate projects.

“Seek” is more open-ended. The company seeks to reduce operational greenhouse-gas emissions and invest in solutions supporting global transition. The formulation presents sustained orientation, but it does not identify the point at which seeking becomes success. Reports can improve its accountability by connecting the verb to a measure, budget, milestone, or decision status.

4.6 The disclaimer as a second temporal voice

The annual report’s forward-looking-statements notice introduces a markedly different voice. Where strategy sections animate the future, the notice inventories reasons it may not arrive. Plans, intentions, expectations, assumptions, and objectives are grouped as forward-looking matters subject to risks and uncertainties. The notice states:

Wa-ḥi ḍaw’ hādhihi al-makhṭir wa-ḥālāt al-ghumūd wa-al-iftirādāt, qad lā tataḥaqqaq al-umūr al-istishrāfiyya ‘alā al-naḥw al-wārid fī hādihā al-taqrīr aw qad lā tataḥaqqaq abadan.

“In light of these risks, uncertainties, and assumptions, forward-looking matters may not materialize as described in this report, or may never materialize.” (AR, pp. 145–146, forward-looking-statements notice)

The legal notice does not cancel every future claim. It reclassifies them. A target can guide management while remaining exposed to uncertainty; a forecast can be reasonable without becoming a warranty. The notice is therefore part of the report’s temporal pragmatics, not an external footnote.

Its placement at the end creates two institutional voices. The strategic voice speaks in milestones, confidence, and opportunity. The legal voice restores contingency and limits reliance. Readers encounter the first voice throughout the report and the second in a concentrated notice. This asymmetry of distribution is significant: qualification is formally comprehensive but rhetorically less salient than the repeated future narrative.

The notice also reveals why commitment analysis cannot rest on grammatical form alone. Even a categorical “will” may fall within a defined class of statements subject to risks. Conversely, a target may be backed by governance and capital allocation despite cautious legal wording. The analyst must consider the entire commitment package.

4.7 Near horizons, remote horizons, and uneven reviewability

Dates do not all create the same degree of reviewability. A 2030 project date lies within a period in which permitting, construction, procurement, and commissioning decisions should leave documentary traces. A 2035 emissions target crosses more reporting cycles but remains close enough for an interim trend to be visible. The 2050 horizon is different. It exceeds ordinary executive tenures and many asset-planning cycles, so its credibility depends heavily on nearer decisions.

The report partly addresses this problem by nesting 2030 and 2035 measures inside the 2050 ambition. This temporal nesting is stronger than a solitary long-range pledge. It allows readers to ask whether the upstream-intensity trajectory, methane performance, renewable capacity, and carbon-management projects are

moving in the stated direction. Yet not every component of the roadmap has an equally explicit checkpoint. Some initiatives are represented through capacity goals, others through investment commitments, and others through research portfolios. They cannot be added as if they shared one unit of achievement.

Near-term results also complicate a simple progress narrative. The report records reductions in selected indicators while reporting an increase in upstream carbon intensity associated with greater gas production and processing, as well as a higher flaring-intensity rate relative to 2023. This juxtaposition is temporally important. The document does not depict every annual movement as progress toward the long-term ambition. Instead, it explains adverse year-on-year movement through operational causes and places it inside a longer reduction pathway.

Such candor can strengthen credibility, but explanation must not become temporal insulation. If an adverse result is always treated as a short-term fluctuation while favorable results are evidence of the long-term trajectory, the horizon becomes asymmetrical: success counts immediately and failure is deferred. An accountable transition narrative should therefore state what variance would trigger corrective action, target revision, or a change in capital allocation. The 2024 texts describe causes and initiatives, but they do not consistently specify such decision thresholds.

The difference between calendar language and event language is also instructive. “By 2030” creates a fixed endpoint. “Upon completion,” “after successful testing,” and “subject to demand” create movable endpoints whose date depends on another event. Event time may be unavoidable for research and joint ventures, but it is less readily audited. A report can improve reviewability by pairing the event condition with a date for the next decision, not merely the hoped-for operational result.

Finally, annual reporting creates an implicit promise of return. Even when a project is distant, its status can be updated each year. This repeated encounter turns corporate time into a sequence of accountable speech acts. A claim that quietly disappears differs from one explicitly postponed, revised, or cancelled. Future research and reporting practice should therefore treat omission as a temporal event worthy of explanation.

5. The Transition Plot: Continuity Funds Promise, Promise Validates Continuity

The report’s temporal elements form a coherent plot. The initial condition is rising and differentiated global demand. The principal actor possesses scale, low-cost production, technical expertise, infrastructure, and investment capacity. The obstacles are cumulative emissions, uncertain policy, hard-to-abate sectors, technological maturity, and affordability. The action consists of operational reduction, portfolio development, research, partnerships, and phased investment. The anticipated outcome is reliable energy with progressively lower emissions and a more diversified product and energy portfolio.

Within this plot, current hydrocarbons have a transitional function. They supply energy, materials, cash flow, and engineering capability. Lower-carbon projects are not narrated as external replacements imposed on the firm; they grow from corporate strengths. This is an integration narrative rather than a substitution narrative.

Integration has genuine strategic advantages. It recognizes infrastructural interdependence and avoids pretending that complex systems change through declaration. Yet it also makes the duration of continuity difficult to contest. Because present assets are assigned the task of enabling future change, arguments for limiting those assets can be represented as threats to the transition’s material foundation.

Future promise returns the favor. The 2030, 2035, and 2050 horizons give present production a direction. Hydrocarbon continuity is not portrayed as repetition but as a period of improvement and preparation. This is why the narrative cannot be evaluated through target counts alone. Its central effect lies in temporal reciprocity: continuity makes promise feasible, and promise makes continuity legitimate.

The discourse of climate delay provides a useful but demanding comparison. Lamb et al. (2020) identify strategies that redirect responsibility, emphasize the costs of action, surrender to change as impossible, or advocate inadequate measures. Aramco’s reports do not simply reject action. They claim active reduction, provide selected metrics, and disclose uncertainty. The more precise concern is whether “realism,” differentiated pace, and technological dependency perpetually defer structural questions. Longitudinal evidence is required. If interim targets are met, scopes expand, and conditional projects move into deployment, aspiration may become self-binding. If horizons repeatedly recede while continuity remains categorical, the narrative would look more like delay.

6. A Six-Part Test of Future Commitment

The analysis suggests a practical test for corporate transition claims. It is not a scoring system and should not be converted into a single index. Its purpose is to keep six questions visible:

1. **Actor:** Who is responsible for the action or outcome? A named company or governing body carries more direct accountability than an impersonal expectation.
2. **Action status:** Is the statement about completion, ongoing work, intention, forecast, technical capacity, or ambition? These categories should not be collapsed.
3. **Object and metric:** What exactly changes—absolute emissions, intensity, installed capacity, investment, or a research result?
4. **Scope and baseline:** Which assets, emissions scopes, subsidiaries, products, and comparison year are covered?
5. **Time and checkpoint:** Is there a date, and are interim milestones close enough to be assessed through ordinary reporting cycles?
6. **Dependencies and recourse:** Which approvals, market conditions, partners, technologies, or policies could alter the outcome, and will later reports explain variance?

Applied to the upstream-intensity target, the test finds a named actor, a defined metric, a 2018 baseline, 2030 and 2035 checkpoints, and an operational boundary. Applied to the venture technology that “may” reduce capture costs, it finds a transparent success condition but no corporate deployment commitment. Applied to the claim that oil and gas “will continue” to play a fundamental role, it finds high predictive force but diffuse responsibility and no endpoint. The test does not declare one statement good and another bad; it identifies what kind of claim each one is.

7. Discussion and Implications

The Arabic reports make temporal complexity governable through a disciplined repertoire. Continuatives naturalize hydrocarbon duration; dates organize lower-carbon ambition; aspectual braiding transfers credibility from completed actions to future projects; expectation creates evidential distance; volitional verbs express direction; and the legal notice restores uncertainty. Together, these resources construct a company that is both anchored and moving.

The findings extend work on corporate aspiration by showing that self-binding is scalar. A public ambition becomes more constraining when it is decomposed into interim metrics and repeated across reporting genres. It becomes less constraining when its scope is narrow, dependencies are vague, or the main verb expresses possibility. This scalar approach avoids the moral binary in which a company either “walks the talk” or does not. Organizations may bind themselves on one operational measure while leaving a portfolio-level issue open. The analysis also adds a discourse dimension to transition temporality. Scholarship often compares the speed of historical energy shifts, but corporate texts decide which processes are allowed to have speed. In Aramco’s narrative, transition can accelerate through technology and investment while conventional supply continues. The apparent paradox is managed by assigning different objects to change: emissions intensity and product mix can move quickly even when the institution’s hydrocarbon role endures.

For report users, the practical implication is to preserve verbs. A table that lists “targets and actions” can inadvertently equate achievement, construction, agreement, plan, and ambition. Reviewers should quote the governing verb, record the boundary, and revisit prior-year statements. Reports could assist by using explicit status labels—operational, under construction, approved, proposed, pilot, research, or aspirational—and by providing a reconciliation of forecasts that changed.

For corporate authors, caution need not weaken credibility. Clear conditionality is preferable to inflated certainty. What matters is whether the condition is visible where the benefit is claimed. A project profile that says “if successful” should not become an unqualified reduction in an executive summary. Likewise, a 2050 ambition becomes more credible when nearer milestones and capital decisions are reported with the same prominence.

8. Limitations and Future Research

This article analyzes one reporting year and does not determine whether future statements were later fulfilled.

Its corpus is larger than a handful of examples but remains selective, focusing on sections where transition time is most concentrated. The legal force of the annual-report disclaimer is not assessed; it is examined only as discourse.

The study also avoids inferring the source of forecasts when the report does not clearly attribute them. Future research could compare forecasts with their cited models, track each commitment over successive reports, align Arabic and English editions, or examine investor, employee, and civil-society interpretations. A longitudinal commitment ledger would be especially useful: it could show when an ambition became a project, when a project became operational, and when a target changed scope.

9. Conclusion

Aramco's 2024 Arabic transition discourse is organized by two clocks. Oil and gas occupy the durable present, extended through verbs of continuity, necessity, and expected demand. Lower-carbon change occupies milestone time, structured through targets, project schedules, research horizons, and ambitions. The two clocks are synchronized through a narrative in which present hydrocarbons enable future investment and future investment recasts present hydrocarbons as transitional.

This temporal layering is neither proof of delivery nor proof of evasion. Its accountability varies statement by statement. Some targets identify actor, metric, baseline, scope, and date. Other claims remain intentions, expectations, or conditional technical possibilities. The forward-looking notice makes this uncertainty explicit, though far less prominently than the strategic narrative.

A careful reading therefore begins with grammatical modesty: preserve the verb, preserve the date, preserve the condition, and preserve the boundary. Doing so reveals where the company binds itself and where it retains room to maneuver. It also makes the central political question harder to hide: not whether transition takes time, but who is entitled to define its pace, its milestones, and the activities that may continue while the future is being built.

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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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