

04 JAN, 2026

Plainly bureaucratic

Sunday Star, Malaysia



By MAX BEARAK

AROUND lunchtime on the day we met, Fatih Birol, a soft-spoken Turkish energy economist, retreated to his hotel room to scarf down two hard-boiled eggs and a banana in front of his computer.

Birol was, in his typically humble way, preparing for a meeting with potentially far-reaching consequences. The organisation that he has led out of obscurity over the past decade, the International Energy Agency (IEA), had just come under withering attack by the Trump administration.

He was about to sit down with the US energy secretary, Chris Wright, who had just publicly blasted the IEA as “nonsensical” for predicting that fossil-fuel demand would soon begin to shrink globally. Republicans were threatening to cut the US government’s substantial funding to the agency if it didn’t change its tune.

The fact that the meeting was held at all shows just how much influence the IEA has gained under Birol’s tenure. A decade ago, he told me, he probably would have met Wright’s assistant’s assistant. Now, he was playing a verbal game of tug-of-war with the US government.

Birol likes to joke that he is “the world’s most boring man.” He certainly exudes a kind of bureaucratic plainness. But he has also deftly led the IEA through a decade during which energy has reemerged as a geopolitical weapon. The debate over how to address climate change is upending economic and diplomatic relations around the world – right as the Trump administration works to reverse a global push for a transition to renewable energy by producing, consuming and exporting as much fossil fuel as it can.

Birol, for his part, has repeatedly offered the fossil fuel industry a kind of “adapt or fail” warning, particularly as solar power grows at a pace that even the IEA underestimated.

Whether one agrees with the IEA or not, its relentless spigot of data-driven reports routinely roils markets, influences billions of dollars of investment and evokes admiration and scorn from politicians, energy executives and climate activists who hang on Birol’s every word.

More than a dozen countries have bestowed Birol with state honours. He holds the Japanese First Class Order of the Rising Sun, the highest state honour given to laypeople, as well as the First Class Order of Zayed II, given by the United Arab Emirates in honour of its founder.

Birol now regularly appears in the photos alongside the world’s most powerful leaders at their ritzy, high-stakes summits.

“The more important we become, the more people would like us to sing their song,” Birol said of the attention he gets from people across the political and economic spectrum. “But our song is data. The data always wins.”

And yet, compiling raw data from its dozens of member states is only part of what the IEA does. Under Birol’s watch, the IEA has become an organisation that sketches out differ-

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Still, everyone wanted to meet the ‘World’s most boring man’ in 2025, and US president Donald Trump wanted to ‘fire’ him. Will the International Energy Agency chief Fatih Birol be on Trump’s hit list in 2026?



Birol says people only pay attention when there is a catastrophe, but we need a plan for climate change. Here, commuters make their way along a street engulfed in dense smog in Lahore, Pakistan. — AFP

ent paths that the world could take on energy use, and it offers road maps for how to get there.

The organisation’s members, mostly Western countries, have increasingly turned to it for guidance, even if the IEA has occasionally been wrong on some of the biggest questions, like how fast solar power would grow or how quickly coal would decline. Perhaps the biggest question of all – whether or not the world is nearing peak demand for fossil fuels – is one that the IEA has revised its response to numerous times.

That the IEA makes such a prediction at all has created friction between the agency and the Trump administration, which has dismantled nearly all US climate policy. The United States provides around 14% of the IEA’s budget. Republicans have accused the agency of publishing “politicised information to support climate policy advocacy.”

A dim view of the IEA is shared by many in the fossil fuel industry. The head of OPEC, the oil-producing bloc, said this year that the IEA had an “anti-oil narrative” and that its road maps were “unrealistic.”

But Birol says he is not telling anyone what to do, just what is most likely to happen. And for now, he has persuaded Washington to withhold punishment. Meanwhile, the organisation has welcomed

two new members who are major energy players: India and Brazil.

On hot-button issues

The International Energy Agency was created by Henry Kissinger, then US secretary of state, in the 1970s at a time

when climate change was not part of the political lexicon. The agency’s original mandate was to monitor global oil supplies and help countries coordinate to prevent energy-price shocks. In 1973, a group of Arab oil producers had blocked exports of oil to the US and others to protest their support for Israel. That sent prices soaring and led to fuel shortages and a period of economic malaise that came to be known as “stagflation.”

Birol was a young film student in Vienna when the IEA was in its infancy. He had a penchant for surrealism. Only one cinematic work of his remains, he said. It was shot on 8mm film, is 18 minutes long and was titled *A Lyrical Love Murder*. The film features no dialogue, its soundtrack being Tchaikovsky’s lugubrious Symphony No 6 in B minor. “Not a happy story,” Birol said.

But he had married at 18 and had a child at 19 and film wasn’t paying the bills. He switched to energy economics and got a side job at a

produce market. After graduating, he became a number cruncher at OPEC.

He shifted to the IEA and had worked his way up for two decades by the time he was elected executive director in 2015.

Alternative energy sources like solar, wind and fracked natural gas were on the cusp of significant growth. The agency expanded its focus from oil to include analysis on how they might power vehicles, data centres and heavy industry. Climate change began to emerge as a hot-button political issue as the science linking its causes to greenhouse gas emissions became clearer.

Soon after he took charge, Birol engineered a major change in how the organisation would predict the future. Previously, the agency had predicted only what would happen to global fossil fuel demand if countries simply stayed their current course. Those reports generally implied long-term growth in fossil fuels.

But in 2020, the agency replaced that scenario with one that took into account policies that countries were most likely to enact, based largely on their promises to cut emissions as part of global climate negotiations. At the time, Birol said it offered a more realistic picture of the world’s energy future. But it also signified the beginning of a rift between the IEA and many fossil fuel proponents.

The IEA also issued a so-called net zero scenario, which, rather than simply projecting the future, laid out 400 milestones the world could hit on its way to fully stop adding greenhouse gases to the atmosphere by 2050.

One milestone was the elimination of all investments in new coal, oil and gas fields. That became a mantra for climate activists, though Birol later clarified that the IEA was not prescribing a course of action but merely saying that it would eventually happen as the world worked toward net zero emissions of greenhouse gases.

Even as the IEA’s work has attracted more attention and criticism, Birol has remained popular. He was unanimously elected by the organisation’s member states to a third four-year term that will end in 2027. And the agency itself has doubled in size under his leadership. Birol beamed recalling how more than 1,000 people had recently applied for an entry-level position similar to the one he had in the 1990s.

In 2025, amid pressure from Washington, the IEA brought back its original “current policies scenario” to accompany the others.

That annual report, the World Energy Outlook, was published last November. But as is often the case when trying to make everyone happy, some ended up upset instead.

“I am here to make people think about the future – like, really, really imagine it, which is very difficult,” he said.

“Climate change is a good example of that. People only pay attention when there is a catastrophe. But we need a plan for it.” — ©2026 The New York Times Company

Birol: The IEA’s song is data. And the data always wins. — Caroline Gutman/The New York Times