

## International

# Echoing Zionists, US hints at force if Iran diplomacy fails

## US Secretary of State voices growing frustration

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden's administration hinted Wednesday it could resort to force if diplomacy fails on Iran's nuclear program, rallying more closely than ever behind warnings by Zionists. Amid a standstill in negotiations with Iran, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken voiced growing frustration as he held three-way talks with the top diplomats of Zionist entity and the United Arab Emirates, US allies that established relations last year amid shared alarm about Tehran.

Blinken renewed Biden's offer to re-enter a 2015 nuclear agreement, trashed by former president Donald Trump, in which Iran drastically scaled back nuclear activity in return for unfulfilled promises of sanctions relief. "We continue to believe that diplomacy is the most effective way," Blinken told a joint news conference. "But it takes two to engage in diplomacy and we have not seen from Iran a willingness to do that at this point," he said.

"We are prepared to turn to other options if Iran doesn't change course," he warned. He did not elaborate, but Zionist Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, without being contradicted, said of Blinken's comments: "I think everybody understands - here in Zionist entity and in the Emirates and in Tehran - what it is that we mean."

Lapid was more explicit, saying that both he and Blinken, as sons of Holocaust survivors, "know there are moments when nations must use force to protect the world from evil." "If a

terror regime is going to acquire a nuclear weapon, we must act. We must make clear the civilized world won't allow it," Lapid said. "Zionist entity reserves the right to act at any given moment in any way. That is not only our right; it is also our responsibility."

### Plan B?

Enrique Mora, the EU envoy in charge of re-visiting the troubled deal, plans to visit Tehran on Thursday. He tweeted that he will "raise the urgency" of resuming talks. The Biden administration held six rounds of indirect negotiations with Iran, with Mora shuttling between the two sides in Vienna hotels, but talks broke off in June as ultraconservative Ebrahim Raisi took over as Iran's president. "We feel like coming back would still be the best outcome, but we're realistic," the US negotiator on Iran, Rob Malley, said at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "We know that there's at least a good possibility that Iran is going to choose a different path, and we need to coordinate with Zionists and with our other partners in the region," he said.

After taking part in the talks with Zionists and the UAE, Malley said he would head in the coming days to the UAE, as well as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. France, one of three Western powers that remain in the nuclear accord, on Wednesday joined the growing criticism of Iran. "Through its statements and actions, the new



WASHINGTON: Secretary of State Antony Blinken (left) and United Arab Emirates Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan (right) participate in a bilateral meeting at the State Department in Washington. — AFP

administration of President Raisi is sowing doubts on its intention to return" to the deal, a French foreign ministry spokesperson said.

Iran has said repeatedly that it is ready to resume talks "soon," but no date has been announced. Iran denies it is seeking a nuclear

weapon, which the clerical state argues is religiously forbidden. But Tehran believes it needs to defend itself in a hostile neighborhood, with memories still vivid of the brutal 1980-88 war launched by Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein with backing from the West. — AFP

## Tarek Bitar, Lebanon's judge with a grudge

BEIRUT: Tarek Bitar, the young and discreet judge investigating last year's devastating Beirut port explosion, is arguably the most exposed man in the country.

By daring to take on some of Lebanon's untouchable political barons, he has landed himself at the centre of a battle of wills that is bringing the country to the brink once again. To some of those seeking truth and justice after the deadly port blast, the 47-year-old is a white knight fighting a desperate and lonely battle against a corrupt and criminal elite.

For part of the establishment and its supporters, Bitar is politically biased and the biggest threat to the status quo since a wave of protests against the ruling class in 2019. For the relatives of the 215 people who were killed when a huge consignment of haphazardly stored fertilizer exploded on August 4 last year, Bitar is the only hope. "He is conscientious and bold at the same time. These are essential qualities for a judge," says Yousef Lahoud, one of the lawyers representing the victims' families.

His determination will be tested more than ever after a demonstration for his removal by supporters of the Shiite Muslim Amal and Hezbollah movements degenerated into deadly violence and scenes reminiscent of the 1975-1990 civil war. The man handling the biggest case since former prime minister Rafik Hariri's 2005 assassination is a little known figure who never talks to the press or even appears in public. The virulent hate campaign launched against him in recent days only has a couple of pictures of him

available for social media trolls to share on social media or party muscle to torch in street protests.

### 'Incorruptible'

Bitar has rocked the boat by summoning top politicians from a range of political parties for questioning, and even going as far as issuing an arrest warrant when one failed to show up. Former finance minister and senior lawmaker from the Shiite Amal party, Ali Hassan Khalil, lashed out after the arrest warrant against him, threatening a "political escalation" if the course of the investigation "was not rectified".

The group's ally, powerful Shiite movement Hezbollah, is also a prominent critic calling for his dismissal. The movement, blacklisted by the United States but present in Lebanese parliament, has accused Bitar of political bias and Washington of "interference" in the investigation.

The Shiite duo's supporters, at an anti-Bitar protest that escalated into deadly clashes yesterday, burnt images of US ambassador Dorothy Shea, alongside Bitar's. But the judge's supporters say he is independent and has managed to position himself outside a political system of patronage under which parties bank on sectarian allegiance to get their way. "He has no known political affiliation," said a person close to him who agreed to speak on the condition of anonymity.

"That's why politicians have a problem with Bitar—they have no means to pressure him." The politicians he is pursuing accuse him of being outspoken about the fact that the time has come to change the political class. Throughout his career, the Catholic judge from the north of Lebanon has managed to forge himself a reputation as an "upright and incorruptible" member of the judiciary, even to his detractors. — AFP

## Iran warns Zionists against 'military adventures'

TEHRAN: Iran warned Zionists in a letter to the UN Security Council chief yesterday against any attack on its nuclear facilities after its arch-foe declared its right to use force. "We warn the Zionist regime against any miscalculation or military adventure targeting Iran and its nuclear program," Iran's ambassador to the UN Majid Takht Ravanchi wrote in the letter published by the Tasnim news agency. He accused Zionists of taking its "provocative and adventurous threats... to alarming levels" and said that the "systematic and explicit threats by the Zionist regime... prove that it is responsible for terrorist attacks against [Iran's] peaceful nuclear program in the past".

Speaking alongside US Secretary of State Antony Blinken Wednesday, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said that Zionist entity "reserves the right" to use force to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. He added that, as sons of Holocaust survivors, both he and Blinken "know there are moments when nations must use force to protect the world from evil". Blinken said: "We continue to believe that diplomacy is the most effective way," but added: "We are prepared to turn to other options if Iran doesn't change course." — AFP