

## International

# Zionist parties discuss justice reforms after Netanyahu U-turn

## Biden urges Netanyahu to negotiate in good faith

JERUSALEM: Zionist entity's hard-right government and opposition parties were set for a second day of talks Wednesday on controversial judiciary reforms that sparked a general strike and mass protests in the country's most severe domestic crisis in years.

Scepticism remained high over the negotiations on the judicial overhaul, which would curtail the authority of the Supreme Court and give politicians greater powers over the selection of judges. US President Joe Biden, one of several Zionist entity's allies to have voiced concern, urged Netanyahu to negotiate in good faith and warned against simply ploughing ahead with the reforms.

A first day of talks between the government and the two main centrist opposition parties — Yesh Atid and the National Unity Party — was hosted by President Isaac Herzog Tuesday.

"After about an hour and a half, the meeting, which took place in a positive spirit, came to an end," the president's office said. "Tomorrow, President Isaac Herzog will continue the series of meetings," it added. After three months of tensions that split the nation, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu bowed to pressure in the face of a nationwide walkout Monday.

The strike hit airports, hospitals and more, while tens of thousands of opponents of the reforms rallied outside parliament in Jerusalem. "Out of a will to prevent a rupture among our people, I have decided to pause the second and third readings of the bill" to allow time for dialogue, the prime minister said in a broadcast. The decision to halt the legislative process marked a dramatic U-turn for the premier, who just a day earlier announced he was sacking his defence minister who had called for the very same step.

### 'Ruse or bluff'?

The move was greeted with suspicion in Zionist entity, with the president of the Zionist Democracy

Institute think-tank remarking that it did not amount to a peace deal. "Rather, it's a ceasefire perhaps for regrouping, reorganizing, reorienting and then charging—potentially—charging ahead," Yohanan Plesner told journalists.

Opposition leader Yair Lapid reacted warily, saying on Monday that he wanted to be sure "there is no ruse or bluff". A joint statement Tuesday from Lapid's Yesh Atid and the National Unity Party of Benny Gantz, a former defence minister, said talks would stop immediately "if the law is put on the Knesset's (parliament's) agenda".

The US president warned that Zionist entity "cannot continue down this road" of deepening division. "Hopefully the prime minister will... try to work out some genuine compromise, but that remains to be seen," Biden told reporters during a visit to North Carolina. In a statement, Netanyahu said he appreciated Biden's "longstanding commitment to Zionist entity". But, he added: "Zionist entity is a sovereign country which makes its decisions by the will of its people and not based on pressures from abroad, including from the best of friends." In an earlier statement, Netanyahu had said that the goal of the talks "is to reach an agreement".

Activists, meanwhile, vowed to continue their rallies, which have persisted for weeks, sometimes drawing tens of thousands of protesters.

"We will not stop the protest until the judicial coup is completely stopped," the Umbrella Movement of demonstrators said.

### 'No turning back'

The crisis has revealed deep rifts within Netanyahu's fledgling coalition, an alliance with far-right and ultra-Orthodox parties.

Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, in a tweet Monday, asserted "there will be no turning back" on the judicial overhaul. Fellow far-right cabinet mem-



JERUSALEM: Protesters gather with Zionist national flags during a rally against the Zionist government's judicial reform, outside the presidential residence in Jerusalem. — AFP

ber, National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, had pressed his supporters to rally in favour of the reforms. Ben-Gvir's Jewish Power party revealed on Monday that the decision to delay the legislation involved an agreement to expand the minister's portfolio after he threatened to quit if the overhaul was put on hold. Writing in the left-wing daily Haaretz, political correspondent Yossi Verter said the pause was "a victory for the protesters, but the one who

really bent Netanyahu and trampled on him is Itamar Ben-Gvir". The affair has hit the coalition's standing among the Israeli public, just three months after it took office.

Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party has dipped seven points, according to a poll by Zionist's Channel 12, which predicted the government would lose its majority in the 120-seat parliament if an election were held now. — AFP

## Lisbon Muslim centre stabbing not terror attack

LISBON: Investigators said Wednesday they had uncovered no indication a knife attack that left two women dead at a Lisbon Islamic centre was terror-related. The alleged assailant, identified as an Afghan refugee, may have suffered a mental health crisis before the violence on Tuesday that ended with officers shooting and wounding him, police said.

"There is no indication that this is a terrorist attack" or involved the radicalisation of the suspect, said judicial police chief Luis Neves. "What may be involved here, but only a psychiatric evaluation can determine it, is that it was a mental crisis", Neves said, adding the inquiry was ongoing.

According to witnesses, the suspect was taking a language class at the Ismaili Muslim centre on Tuesday when his behaviour changed suddenly after taking a phone call. A teacher was attacked and then two women who worked at the centre were fatally wounded before the assailant was shot by police. The suspect was in hospital on Wednesday.

Investigators have managed to trace the suspect's route from his home nation to his arrival in Greece, where his wife died in a fire. The alleged perpetrator, a father of three young children, arrived in Portugal in 2021 and planned to travel to Germany in the coming days with them, said Neves. — AFP

## Morocco treads fine line between Zionist entity, Palestinians

RABAT: Morocco is struggling to balance its alliance with Zionist entity with support for the domestically popular Palestinian cause, an increasingly complex challenge with Zionist entity ruled by its most right-wing government ever.

The North African country normalized its ties with Zionist entity in December 2020, part of a series of deals known as the Abraham Accords, backed by the administration of then-US President Donald Trump.

In exchange, Rabat won a key concession from Washington: Recognition of its sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara, where the Polisario movement seeks independence. But the move was at odds with a strongly pro-Palestinian public mood in Morocco.

That square has been harder to circle in recent months as violence has surged in the Zionist-Palestinian conflict, with the army carrying out deadly raids in the occupied West Bank. But Rabat has been quick to defend itself. A case in point is the royal palace's reaction after the opposition Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) "deplored" the Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita for allegedly defending Zionist entity publicly, even as it commits "criminal aggression against our Palestinian brothers".

King Mohammed VI's office hit back, accusing the PJD of voicing "irresponsible excesses and dangerous approximations regarding relations" between Morocco and Zionist entity. "Morocco's position towards the Palestinian question is irreversible," it said, adding that Rabat's foreign relations are the prerogative of the monarch.

### 'Game-changer'

Rabat regularly reiterates its commitment to Palestinian rights, and the king chairs the international Al-Quds committee, which works to preserve the "Arab-Muslim character" of Jerusalem. The Palestinian cause continues to draw immense sympathy from Moroccans, and civil society groups have launched a campaign to push back against normalization. Yet Moroccan journalist and writer Jamal Amiar argues that "having relations with Zionist entity and supporting the Palestinian cause are not mutually exclusive if we defend the two-state solution."

Rabat officially supports the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, with east Jerusalem as its capital. Since the 2020 deal, Morocco's ties with Zionist entity have developed fast, with Rabat buying advanced drones and other military equipment as well as cybersecurity products.

"The Abraham Accords were a game changer, and a lot of things are rapidly changing", Amiar said. Amiar said Rabat's "partnership with Zionist entity is based on common security interests and long-standing relations that have helped build trust".

But some observers have warned of an arms race between Morocco and its regional arch-rival Algeria, which backs both the Palestinians and the Polisario. Algiers cut ties with Morocco months after the Zionist deal citing "hostile acts".

### Normalisation, with conditions

Moroccan-Zionist cooperation is growing in other areas too. Bilateral trade grew by a third in 2022, while some 200,000 Zionists visited Morocco, according to official figures. Some 700,000 Zionists are of Moroccan descent, and many have maintained strong ties. "This human and cultural link reinforces the idea of consolidating the link with the Jewish state, regardless of the political and geopolitical situation," said Zakaria Abouddahab, professor of international relations at Mohammed V University in Rabat.

But the rise of ultra-nationalist Zionist parties, which brought veteran hawk Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu back to power in December, has threatened to undermine deeper ties. Zionist Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich's comment this month that "there are no Palestinians" sparked criticism, including from Zionist's ally Washington. Bourita responded by saying that "Morocco rejects any attitude that could have a negative impact".

Amiar admits that "any prolonged deterioration in relations between Zionists and Palestinians on the ground, in the West Bank or in Gaza, can only negatively impact public opinion on Zionist-Moroccan relations." — AFP



LISBON: People gather in front of the Ismaili Islamic centre in Lisbon, after two people died following a knife attack that wounded several others. — AFP

## Benefits of reconciliation....

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Additionally, more than 1,400 years ago it was revealed to us that we must not hold a grudge towards each other. To be forgiven, one must always

## One of biggest black holes ever...

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close to this black hole, which is roughly two billion light years from Earth. It could even be the biggest black hole ever recorded, but it was difficult to say for sure given the varying techniques and uncertainties involved, he added.

Supermassive black holes sit at the center of galaxies using their vast gravitational pull to gobble up stars like specks of dust, not even allowing light to escape. Previous black holes of this size have been

## Saudi moves in on aviation...

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founded in 1945, receiving its first jet as a gift from US President Franklin Roosevelt. At the time, instead of Riyadh, foreigners were more likely to enter the kingdom via Jeddah on the Red Sea coast, which remains the "Gateway to Makkah", welcoming millions of Muslims performing the hajj and umrah pilgrimages each year. Foreign embassies did not relocate to Riyadh, in central Saudi Arabia, until the 1980s.

These days, however, Riyadh is at the heart of

try to forgive, no matter what. Even if the person wrongs us, we can be the bigger person and reconcile, and that will be better for us. Almighty Allah says what can be translated as: "Be gracious, enjoin what is right, and turn away from those who act ignorantly." (Quran 7:199) When someone harms us and we forgive for the sake of Allah, then Allah (SWT) will reward us infinitely for not being wrathful and egoistic. — TIES Center

observed when their voracious devouring gives off huge amounts of light at the margins — or by measuring the orbit of stars that speed up as they pass by. But these techniques only work for galaxies relatively close to Earth.

Gravitational lensing allows astronomers to "discover black holes in the other 99 percent of galaxies that are currently inaccessible", Nightingale said. There are currently around 500 known gravitational lenses — at least one of which we now know is a supermassive black hole. But "the landscape is about to dramatically change," Nightingale said. The European Space Agency's Euclid mission, planned to launch into space in July, will open a "big data era" for black hole hunters by creating a huge high resolution map of the universe, he said. — AFP

Prince Mohammed's "Vision 2030" reform agenda intended to help transition the world's biggest crude oil exporter away from fossil fuels. Officials talk it up as a rival to Gulf business hub Dubai, predicting that its current population of eight million will balloon to 15-20 million by 2030. Last November, officials announced plans for a new airport in Riyadh that is set to accommodate 120 million travelers per year by 2030, up from roughly 35 million today. The projected growth makes Saudi's current model — in which it effectively has two hubs, Jeddah and Riyadh — untenable, Saudi Finance Minister Mohammed Al-Jadaan told AFP. "Jeddah alone needs one airline to concentrate on it with the hajj and umrah... So you need an airline that is focused on Riyadh," Jadaan said. — AFP

## Big facelift as Bahrain bids to...

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An unexpected boost could come from the announcement of diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which Bahrain accused of stoking unrest during the 2011 protests. "In an optimistic scenario, the Saudi-Iran rapprochement would gather pace and create a more conducive environment for political reconciliation within Bahrain which in turn could derisk the economy," Gulf economist Justin Alexander, director of consultancy group Khalij Economics, told AFP.

Bahrain, a monarchy whose cabinet is appointed by the king, boasts a rich commercial tradition dating back to its days as a flourishing pearling center. Consisting of one large island and about 30 smaller ones, it was a British protectorate until 1971, becoming a financial hub that initially led its neighbors in terms of economic diversification.

Increased regional competition, mainly from Dubai and Doha, but also political instability and economic challenges, especially after global oil prices plunged in 2014, have

all hurt Bahrain. In 2018, wealthier Gulf countries agreed to support Bahrain's economic goals with \$10 billion in loans, giving rise to the current building spree. As well as land reclamations for new housing projects and skyscrapers around Manama, Bahrain is building diving centers including an underwater park. A new \$1 billion passenger terminal at its international airport opened last year, doubling annual capacity to 14 million passengers. Bahrain has also built one of the region's biggest conference centers, aiming to attract international events and visitors.

The country's financial planners aim to balance the national budget by next year, with its Economic Vision 2030 focused on reducing reliance on oil and gas and developing finance, logistics and tourism. Many visitors to Bahrain stream across the 25-km King Fahd Causeway from Saudi Arabia where alcohol is banned, unlike its more laid-back neighbor.

Manama wants tourism to contribute 11.4 percent of GDP by 2026, up from around seven percent currently. Last year, real GDP increased 4.9 percent, the kingdom's highest growth since 2013, the finance ministry said on Monday. "We're confident that we will continue going down that path and achieve the results that we desire," said Humaidan, who spoke as Bahrain hosted its annual Formula One Grand Prix, an event it has held since 2004. — AFP

## KIA sells €1.4bn Mercedes stake...

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stock's closing price Tuesday. The sale will reduce its stake to less than 5 percent.

Mercedes shares dropped 2.4 percent on Wednesday, after having surged about 50 percent from July through the start of March and having more than quadrupled since their March 2020 pandemic low. The KIA had informed the company of its decision and it plans to remain a key shareholder in the automaker, the German company said in a separate statement.

Chief Executive Officer Ola Kallenius has focused the automaker on more profitable segments and pared back its offerings of entry-level models, leading to a 43 percent surge in the average price of a Mercedes since 2019. He also split the luxury-car company from its commercial vehicle operation, spinning off Daimler Truck Holding AG in late 2021.

While the luxury strategy has boosted earnings, signs of strain have emerged, with Mercedes having cut the price of flagship electric models in China, while the European and the US economies are weakening. Kuwait owned 6.84 percent of Mercedes prior to the sale, making it the third-biggest holder, according to data compiled by Bloomberg. The KIA — the world's oldest and one of the largest wealth funds — has been a Mercedes shareholder for almost 50 years. — Agencies