



## Middle East and North Africa

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### Eastern Mediterranean

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↓ **Israel-Palestine** West Bank violence killed dozens of Palestinians and seven Israelis as Israeli forces conducted deadliest raid in years, Israeli settlers rampaged town and Palestinians staged attacks.

*Unrest surged and tensions soared in West Bank.* Israeli forces conducted daily raids into northern West Bank and expanded operations into southern West Bank, resulting in near-daily clashes with Palestinians; raids and Israeli settler attacks killed at least 31 Palestinians, while seven Israelis were killed. In deadliest raid since Second Intifada, Israeli forces 23 Feb killed 11 Palestinians and wounded over 100 in Nablus, sparking strikes, protests as well as skirmishes along Gaza-Israel frontier. Following 26 Feb shooting of two Israeli settlers in Hawara town, northern West Bank, Israeli settlers same day rampaged Hawara, burning dozens of homes with residents inside, torching vehicles and shooting dead one Palestinian, while almost 400 were injured that night. In occupied East Jerusalem, Palestinian lone-wolf attacks and Israeli house demolitions continued upward trajectory: Palestinian car ramming 10 Feb killed three Israelis. Spiralling tensions could escalate further around Ramadan and Passover. In attempt to relieve tensions, U.S. 26 Feb gathered Israeli, Palestinian, Jordanian and Egyptian officials in Jordan; after summit, Israel denied announcement it would freeze settlement expansion. Meanwhile, Gaza-based factions 1 and 11 Feb fired rockets into Israel, prompting retaliatory airstrikes 2 and 13 Feb.

*Israel legalised West Bank settlements and advanced controversial judicial reform.* Israeli govt 12 Feb announced legalisation of nine settler outposts in West Bank and building of 10,000 new homes in existing settlements. Knesset 15 Feb passed preliminary reading of bill repealing 2005 Disengagement Law, which evacuated four settler outposts. Knesset 15 Feb passed amendment to Citizenship Law, allowing Palestinians convicted of terrorism to be stripped of Israeli citizenship/residency. Knesset 21 Feb gave preliminary approval to plans enabling govt to appoint judges amid weekly protests attended by tens of thousands in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

*Israel struck normalisation deal with Sudan amid regional tensions.* FM Eli Cohen 2 Feb agreed deal with Sudan aimed at normalising relations. Suspected Iranian drone 10 Feb struck Israeli-owned tanker in Arabian Sea (see Iran). Israel allegedly struck Syria (see Syria).

➔ **Lebanon** Economic crisis deepened as currency reached new record low, sparking protests, while executive vacuums continued without end in sight and Hizbollah issued warnings over U.S. policy.

*Economic strife worsened amid devaluing currency, fomenting public unrest.* Lebanese lira 28 Feb reached new record low value of 85,000 to \$1 at parallel exchange rate; accelerated devaluation from around 40,000 in early Jan may be related to significant decrease in U.S. dollars that Central Bank injects into market at subsidised rate, from around \$40mn daily in Dec to \$10mn in late Feb. Fuel prices continued to rise as other essential imported products grew scarce. Economy and trade ministry 8 and 28 Feb increased prices for Arabic bread. Clashes 10 Feb erupted in both capital Beirut and Tripoli between competing networks of private electricity generators. Widespread protests 16 Feb broke out countrywide against economic conditions and depositors' continued inability to access savings trapped inside illiquid banks, leading to road blocks and arson attack on bank branch in central Beirut.

*Double executive (president and govt) vacuum continued.* Presidential vacuum since 1 Nov continued with little apparent prospect of resolution. Parliament held no electoral sessions during Feb, reflecting prevailing deadlock between various political factions. France, U.S., Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Egypt 6 Feb warned they will reconsider "all ties" with Lebanon if vacuum continues indefinitely. Meanwhile, attempts to form new govt to replace caretaker administration have practically ceased. PM Mikati 6 Feb convened cabinet meeting to authorise spending on health, education and other sectors, which most Free Patriotic Movement-aligned ministers boycotted. Ineffectual executive action could jeopardise orderly succession of key executive positions, such as head of general security who is due to retire early March and Central Bank governor, whose term expires in June; municipal elections in May could also be delayed.

*Hizbollah accused U.S. of destabilising country.* Hizbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah 16 Feb reiterated rhetoric blaming alleged U.S. "siege" for economic misery, warning of grave consequences – including conflict with Israel – if U.S. were to continue deliberate strategy to destabilise country and starve party's base into submission.

➔ **Syria Earthquake killed thousands as regime used international aid to reduce isolation, while crisis reduced both hostilities in north west and Turkish operations in north; Islamic State (ISIS) attack killed scores.**

*President Assad leveraged earthquake aid for soft normalisation.* Earthquake 6 Feb killed over 5,900 people, predominantly in rebel-held north west. Dozens of countries, including every Arab state except Qatar, flew aid into regime-held areas. First UN aid convoy 9 Feb arrived in rebel-held north west. U.S. 9 Feb issued six-month sanctions exemption for aid. In Idlib province, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) refused to cooperate in cross-line aid from regime-controlled areas; govt 13 Feb authorised UN aid via Bab al-Salameh and Ar-rai border crossings from Türkiye. Meanwhile, Tunisian President Saied 9 Feb announced intention to strengthen ties with Syria; Jordanian FM 15 Feb and Egyptian FM 27 Feb visited capital Damascus for first time since 2011; parliamentarians from eight regional countries 26 Feb visited President Assad.

*HTS raids on regime and hostilities between Turkish and Kurdish forces declined.* HTS ceased cross-line attacks on regime positions in Idlib and Latakia following earthquake until 26 Feb, when it raided position in Latakia. Hostilities between

Turkish forces and People's Defence Units (YPG) witnessed slight reduction; nevertheless, YPG rocket attack 7 Feb struck Türkiye's Kilis province, while Turkish drones 12, 16 and 22 Feb struck Kurdish targets in Hasakah and Aleppo provinces.

*ISIS attack killed scores in central Syria.* In largest-scale assault in central Syria since April 2021, suspected ISIS cell 17 Feb killed at least 60 civilians and police escorts near Sukhnah, Homs province. Meanwhile, U.S. forces early Feb killed alleged senior ISIS leader in eastern Deir ez-Zor province. U.S. and Syrian Democratic Forces 10 Feb killed two ISIS leaders, and 16 Feb conducted ISIS arrest raid, which left four U.S. soldiers injured. Coalition forces 18 Feb arrested ISIS member in Hasakah province.

*In other important developments.* Israeli airstrikes 18 Feb struck Damascus, reportedly killing five and injuring 15. U.S. 14 Feb downed Iranian drone in Deir ez-Zor province; suspected Iranian rockets 18 Feb targeted U.S. forces in Green Village base, Deir ez-Zor province.

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## **Gulf and Arabian Peninsula**

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➔ **Iran Coordinated U.S. and European efforts against gov'ts crack-down and military cooperation with Russia continued apace, while nuclear standoff deepened and regional tensions remained elevated.**

*West continued censure amid shrinking appetite for engagement.* U.S. 3 Feb sanctioned eight individuals involved with already-designated drone manufacturer as well as two Iranian navy vessels, 9 Feb targeted Iranian energy exports. New Zealand 15 Feb issued sanctions against eight persons and entities involved in drone production, and widened its travel ban against Iranian officials implicated in human rights abuses. European Union (EU) 20 Feb expanded its human rights designations by targeting additional 34 Iranian persons and entities; UK same day designated eight individuals. Marking 24 Feb anniversary of Ukraine war, UK sanctioned five individuals, U.S. announced export control measures and EU designated seven Iranian entities all related to concerns over drones. Canada 27 Feb sanctioned 12 Iranian individuals over human rights violations.

*Nuclear standoff deepened ahead of nuclear watchdog meeting in March.* International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) 1 Feb expressed concern "that Iran implemented a substantial change in the design information of [Fordow Fuel enrichment plant] in relation to the production of high-enriched uranium without informing the Agency in advance"; Iran's atomic energy chief maintained that there had been an error by IAEA's inspectors. Adding to list of concerns, U.S. media 19 Feb revealed IAEA had detected uranium enriched to 84%; Iran's atomic energy agency denied enriching over 60%. Senior IAEA officials 21 Feb visited Tehran for discussions; lack of progress before 6 March start of IAEA Board of Governors meeting could lead Western govts to introduce another censure resolution. CIA director 26 Feb assessed nuclear program expanding "at a worrisome pace", though no indication of weaponisation.

*Regional tensions remained elevated.* After gov't 1 Feb said early investigations in attack late Jan on Isfahan defence facility pointed to Israeli responsibility, reports 17

Feb emerged of apparent Iranian drone strike against commercial vessel linked to Israeli ownership week earlier; Israeli PM Netanyahu 19 Feb blamed Iran for attack and rocket fire against U.S. forces in north east Syria day earlier (see Syria).

➡ **Iraq Protesters rallied in capital Baghdad, Turkish forces continued striking Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in north as hostilities halted in Türkiye, and security forces targeted Islamic State (ISIS).**

*Protesters rallied against currency devaluation and electoral law.* Iraqi dinar 2 Feb reached new low at 1,750 to \$1 at street exchanges, compared to official rate of 1,460; protesters next day demonstrated devaluation in Baghdad. Central Bank 7 Feb lowered exchange rate to 1,300 to \$1. During visit to U.S., FM Fuad Hussein 10 Feb listed economy and endemic corruption as country's biggest challenges. Protesters 27 Feb rallied in Baghdad against draft electoral law seen as undermining independent candidates. Meanwhile, govt continued regional security dialogue. Saudi FM Prince Faisal bin Farhan 2 Feb visited Baghdad and announced cooperation to reduce regional tensions. Russian FM Sergei Lavrov 5 Feb visited Baghdad and met PM Sudani to discuss bilateral relations, counter-terrorism and Iraq's role in regional mediation. Iranian FM Hossein Amir-Abdollahian 22 Feb visited Baghdad for talks on border security and Iran-Saudi Arabia dialogue.

*Turkish forces continued attacks on PKK in north.* Despite unilateral ceasefire announced by Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) commander in Türkiye following calamitous earthquake on 6 Feb that killed tens of thousands (see Türkiye), Turkish forces continued ground operations and airstrikes in north; notably, Turkish defence ministry 11 Feb announced "neutralising" six PKK members and Turkish strike 27 Feb reportedly killed three militants. Before earthquake, Iran-backed Islamic Resistance Ahrar al-Iraq Brigade claimed eight rockets that 1 Feb targeted Turkish military base in Ninewa governorate; Turkish forces and PKK members 2 Feb reportedly clashed in Metin mountains; Ankara 4 Feb announced "neutralising" three PKK members.

*Security forces conducted anti-Islamic State operations.* Army 12 Feb announced killing seven suspected ISIS members in airstrikes in Hamrin mountains in Diyala governorate. Iraqi forces 14 Feb killed three ISIS militants in Wadi Shay, Kirkuk governorate; same day killed three in Kubeisa town, Anbar governorate. Iraqi airstrikes 15 Feb reportedly killed at least 12 suspected ISIS members around capital Baghdad. Security forces 16 Feb clashed with suspected ISIS cell in Tarmiya district, Salah al-Din governorate, killing three militants and four soldiers.

➡ **Saudi Arabia Riyadh hosted meeting between U.S. and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), while media spat pointed to tensions with Egypt.**

*U.S. and GCC held meeting on counter-terrorism and security cooperation.* U.S.-GCC working group 13-16 Feb held meeting in capital Riyadh that had been postponed in Oct 2022 following U.S.-Saudi tensions over oil production. Joint statement following meeting focused on threats of Islamic State (ISIS), Iran and Iran-aligned groups, while reaffirming "that diplomacy remains the preferred way to address Iran's destabilizing policies." Earlier, FM Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud 2 Feb visited Iraq and discussed Gulf-Iraq electricity connectivity, oil policy and re-

gional security dialogue (see Iraq). FM Al-Saud 18 Feb reaffirmed need for new approach to Syria and dialogue with Syrian President Assad for humanitarian reasons, following deadly earthquake (see Syria).

*Saudi-Egyptian media spat broke out.* Saudi and Egyptian media pundits engaged in tit-for-tat verbal criticisms over deterioration of Egypt's economy and Saudi Arabia's decision to apply stricter conditions on lending money (see Egypt); Egyptian President al-Sisi 9 Feb denied conflict with Saudi Arabia. Spats surfaced after Saudi Arabia's finance minister in Jan described kingdom's new approach to providing aid to allies, moving from "direct grants and deposits without strings attached" to "working with multilateral institutions to actually say we need to see reforms"; another source of tension relates to delayed transfer of Sanafir and Tiran islands in Red Sea from Egyptian to Saudi control per 2016 deal.

➔ **Yemen Saudi-Huthi backchannel talks displayed signs of progress, Huthis criticised UN's role in Hodeida and Riyadh announced large deposit in Aden-based Central Bank as govt faced economic troubles.**

*Tentative signs of breakthrough in Huthi-Saudi negotiations emerged.* Contours of deal reportedly became clear as Huthis claimed that Saudi Arabia agreed to their preconditions, including easing movement restrictions around Sanaa airport and Hodeida port and paying state employees' salaries in Huthi-controlled areas. In positive signals, Riyadh permitted increased movement in Huthi-controlled Hodeida port and both sides toned down negative media rhetoric. Meanwhile, concurrent high-level diplomacy continued. In hope of resurrecting truce ahead of Muslim holy month of Ramadan beginning late March, UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg's military adviser early Feb met govt military commanders, tribal and civil society leaders to discuss possible ceasefire mechanisms. Grundberg 7 Feb met Presidential Leadership Council members al-Alimi and Abu Zara'a al-Muharrami in Aden to discuss inclusive political process; next day met Southern Transitional Council (STC)-aligned Aden governor. Grundberg and Iranian foreign ministry special adviser 9 Feb travelled separately to Oman for talks with Omani officials and Huthi chief negotiator.

*Huthis grew critical of UN's role in Hodeida.* Huthis 6 Feb accused UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism for Yemen (UNVIM) of intentionally blocking cargo ships from entering Hodeida port, which UNVIM denied, and called for abolition of mechanism; criticism may reflect Huthis' desire to diminish UN role ahead of possible lifting of Saudi Arabia's restrictions on port. Huthis 5 Feb accused UN of delaying mission to salvage rusting oil tanker *FSO Safer*.

*Economic outlook remained bleak, govt forces manoeuvred along front lines.* Riyal in govt areas hovered around lowest rate since start of truce, while govt's oil production remained at near-halt amid Huthi threats; Huthis sought to channel import commodities solely through Huthi-controlled Hodeida rather than govt-controlled Aden. Saudi Arabia 21 Feb announced \$1bn deposit intended for Central Bank of Aden. Meanwhile, Nation Shield Forces – commanded by PLC head al-Alimi – deployed across key fault lines in Lahij, Shebwa, al-Dhale and Hadramawt governorates, which have seen friction between STC and Islah forces; move could be aimed at forestalling STC takeover in Hadramawt.

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## North Africa

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### ➔ **Algeria** Amid rifts within army and security apparatus regarding rapprochement with West, Algerian-French relations suffered setback.

*Tensions flared again between Algeria and France.* Algerian-French rights activist Amira Bouraoui early Feb left Algeria for Tunisia while under house arrest and 6 Feb found refuge in France. Algiers 8 Feb accused French diplomats and other personnel of participating in Bouraoui's "illegal and secret evacuation" from Algerian territory, denouncing "violation of national sovereignty", and same day recalled Algerian ambassador to Paris for consultations. Authorities 14 Feb arrested nine people suspected of involvement in case including Algerian-Canadian senior analyst for NGO Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, Raouf Farrah, who was later charged with "spreading classified information and documents" and "receiving foreign funding".

*Authorities discussed military and economic cooperation with U.S., Russia.* U.S. Africa Command commander, Gen. Michael Langley, 8 Feb met with President Tebboune and army chief of staff, Gen. Saïd Chengriha, during two-day visit to Algeria to discuss opportunities for U.S.-Algerian military partnership. U.S. newspaper *The Wall Street Journal* 6 Feb revealed U.S. oil company Chevron in talks with Algiers about shale gas exploration in Algeria. Tebboune and Chengriha 27 Feb met with Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev in capital Algiers to discuss strengthening military cooperation.

*Tensions with Morocco remained high over Western Sahara.* During African Union (AU) summit held 18-19 Feb in Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa, divisions between Morocco, on one hand, and Algeria and self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, on the other, blocked appointment of North African country representative as VP of AU bureau.

### ➔ **Egypt** Economic situation remained fragile, security continued to improve in Sinai Peninsula, and tensions emerged between Cairo and Riyadh.

*Economy stabilised temporarily, but vulnerabilities persisted.* After exchange rate devaluation last month, overall economic situation in Feb stabilised with foreign investors resuming purchase of govt treasury bills, and exchange rate remaining steady at around 30 Egyptian pounds to \$1. Country remained vulnerable to shocks, however. Central Bank 2 Feb kept interest rate unchanged at 16.75%, surprising most economists and drawing criticism from foreign investors. Ratings agency Moody's 7 Feb downgraded Egypt's credit score from B2 to B3, pushing bonds further into junk status, expressed concern about social and political impact of adjustment.

*Jihadist activity reached new low in Sinai Peninsula.* Tribal sources in Sinai 9 Feb reportedly informed military that locals have noticed movements of Islamic State (ISIS)-affiliated Sinai Province operatives in mountainous areas of central Sinai Peninsula. Army in following days began searching for ISIS elements. Improvised explosive device around 14 Feb wounded 12-year-old girl on outskirts of Sheikh Zuweid town in North Sinai.

*Relations with Saudi Arabia deteriorated, top diplomat travelled to Türkiye.* Amid tensions over delayed handover of Egypt's Red Sea islands of Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi Arabia, several Saudi Arabian commentators and journalists late Jan-early Feb criticised Egypt's profligate fiscal practices and inefficient economy marked by army interference with business. Comments came after Saudi Finance Minister Mohamed al-Jadaan in Jan announced Riyadh would change financial aid policy and require reforms in exchange for money, in likely reference to Egypt. In response, Egyptian journalist Abdel Razek Tawfiq 1 Feb lashed out at Riyadh's perceived arrogance on Cairo24 and *al-Gomhuria* websites. President Sisi 9 Feb however attempted to mend ties with Riyadh, calling on Egyptians to remember support received from their "brothers". In following days, Cairo24 and *al-Gomhuria* websites removed Tawfiq's article. In first visits by top Egyptian diplomat in a decade, FM Sameh Shoukry 27 Feb travelled to Türkiye and Syria to show solidarity after devastating earthquake.

➡ **Libya Political deadlock persisted one year after Libya split into two rival govts.**

*East-based parliament continued to chart unilateral path out of political crisis.* Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) 7 Feb approved constitutional amendment that could be used as basis for elections. Amendment calls for simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections to take place within 240 days of adoption of election laws by joint committee of HoR and Tripoli-based advisory High State Council (HSC) members. Tripoli-based critics of HoR, including some HSC members, accused body of seeking to buy time, notably opposing open timeline for drafting election laws and obligation to have presidential election. In another unilateral move, HoR President Aghela Saleh 16 Feb proposed formation of 45-member committee – including HoR, HSC and independent members – to decide on new executive to replace two govts now in place.

*UN Libya envoy proposed new initiative to break stalemate.* In briefing to UN Security Council, Special Representative for Libya Abdoulaye Bathily 27 Feb criticised HoR's constitutional amendment as "controversial", underscoring that it does not stipulate clear roadmap, including timeline, for holding elections in 2023. Instead, Bathily proposed formation of high-level steering committee composed of representatives of political and security institutions, and other political, tribal and civil society leaders to facilitate adoption of legal framework and time-bound roadmap to enable elections in 2023.

*UN welcomed coordination mechanism for withdrawal of foreign fighters.* UN Support Mission to Libya 8 Feb said officials from Libya's 5+5 Joint Military Commission – which brings together representatives of armed forces from eastern and western Libya – as well as liaison committees from Sudan and Niger, approved "coordination mechanism" for "withdrawal of mercenaries and foreign fighters from Libya" during two-day meeting in Egypt. Mechanism unlikely to affect presence of Turkish forces alongside Tripoli govt or Russian Wagner contractors alongside eastern forces.

*Energy deal with Italian company ENI sparked controversy.* Opponents of Tripoli-based PM Abdelhamid Dabaiba, including his own oil minister and HoR members, early Feb criticised as "illegal" \$8bn agreement struck late Jan between National Oil

Corporation and Italian state-owned oil company ENI, arguing it required HoR buy-in; investment plan notably outlines steps to increase Libya's oil and gas export capacity.

↓ **Tunisia** **President Saïed's comments unleashed wave of violence against sub-Saharan Africans, and authorities carried out spectacular arrest campaign targeting critics and opposition figures.**

*Unprecedented violence targeted sub-Saharan Africans.* Police mid-Feb arrested sub-Saharan African migrants across country, reportedly detaining around 300 people. President Saïed 21 Feb said influx of irregular sub-Saharan migrants aimed at changing country's demographic make-up and must be stopped, linking migrants to violence and criminality. African Union 24 Feb expressed "deep shock and concern at the form and substance of the statement". Incidents of mob violence against Black people in following days reportedly left dozens injured across country.

*Authorities went on arrest spree of political and media figures.* Security forces 11-13 Feb arrested influential businessman and former confidant of ousted President Ben Ali, Kamel Eltaïef; senior leaders of Islamist-inspired An-Nahda party, Abdelhamid Jlassi and Nouredine Bhiri; fierce opponent of Saïed, Khayam Turki; former Judges Taïeb Rached and Béchir Akremi; and general director of private radio station Mosaique FM, Nouredine Boutar. Leaders of opposition coalition National Salvation Front, Issam Chebbi, Jahwar Ben M'Barek and Chaima Issa, also detained 22-23 Feb. Saïed 14 Feb accused those recently detained of conspiring against state security, saying "traitors who seek to fuel the social crisis" are responsible for rising prices of food commodities. Civil society and foreign partners condemned crackdown. Thousands 18 Feb joined main workers' union UGTT for protests in eight cities across country, accusing Saïed of stifling basic freedoms including union rights. UN human rights office 14 Feb urged Tunis to "release immediately all those arbitrarily detained" including "in relation to the exercise of their rights to freedom of opinion or expression".

*International Monetary Fund (IMF) rescue program still under discussion.* As unspecified G7 countries pledged to prevent Tunisian default, IMF continued to insist on steps needed to approach IMF's Board for approval of four-year, \$1.9bn loan program.

➡ **Western Sahara** **President Ghali reshuffled govt, while tensions remained high between Morocco and Algeria over status of disputed territory.**

*Cabinet reshuffle removed political heavyweights.* President of self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), Brahim Ghali, 14 Feb reshuffled cabinet, notably replacing long-time FM Mohamed Ould Salek with Mohamed Sidati, former Polisario Front independence movement representative in Paris; Ghali also appointed Sahrawi-Algerian citizen Meriem Salek Hamada as new interior minister. Bechir Mustapha Sayed, who in Jan ran against Ghali to become Polisario Front secretary general, removed from his position as presidential adviser.

*Algeria and Morocco remained at loggerheads over Western Sahara's status.* Responding to written questions from MEPs, European Union (EU) Foreign Policy



Chief Josep Borrell 17 Feb said EU “does not have information on potential collaboration between Polisario Front and terrorist groups” in Sahel region and “has not detected any evidence” of diversion of humanitarian aid provided to Sahrawi refugees. Algerian and pro-Polisario media outlets immediately welcomed statement as evidence that Morocco’s longstanding allegations are baseless. During African Union (AU) summit held 18-19 Feb in Ethiopia’s capital Addis Ababa, divisions between Morocco, on one hand, and Algeria and SADR, on the other, blocked appointment of North African country representative as VP of AU bureau.