

A WORLD IN MOTION

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Nadiya Savchenko, the Ukrainian pilot recently released from Russian prison, could prove to be a political game changer in the divided country.

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REWOLUSIE VAN DIE HART is an Afrikaans novel about the Persecuted Church, set in Egypt.



THE NUMBERS: UKRAINE CONFLICT



26 months

The length of time the conflict in Ukraine has lasted (from April 2014 till now)



9160

The number of casualties, of which 2568 were civilians (dated to February 2016)



600

The estimated number of foreign fighters (from Germany, Serbia, Hungary, Belarus, Georgia, Croatia and the US) involved with both the separatists and the national army



2

The number of Russians 'traded' in Savchenko's release deal

NADIYA SAVCHENKO: UKRAINE'S 'JOAN OF ARC'



Just two days after being released from a Russian prison, pilot Nadiya Savchenko is capitalising on her symbolic importance to Ukrainians, saying on Friday that she would run for president "if Ukrainians want me to". Savchenko, Ukraine's first female pilot, was elected to the country's parliament and appointed to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe during her nearly two years in captivity, fuelling speculation that she might have political ambitions. (*Voice of America*)

A celebrated release

The release of Nadiya Savchenko – dubbed "Ukraine's Joan of Arc" – came two years after she was found guilty by a reportedly biased Russia court, on charges connected with the deaths of two Russian journalists during a Ukraine military operation against Russian-backed separatists in Lugansk in 2014. According to *Reuters*, "Savchenko's bold defiance at Russian authority during her two-year captivity restored Ukraine's national pride bruised by the conflict with Russia." She was released to cheering crowds, on the second anniversary of Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko's rise to power, and while the negotiations that led to her release might seem like the 'crowning achievement' of Mr Poroshenko's presidency to date, *Reuters* suggests that Savchenko's return might prove to be a deadly 'thorn in the side' for the president as he clings to power amidst rising criticism regarding his governance.

In April this year, while imprisoned in Russia, Savchenko began a hunger strike that quickly

caught the attention of both Russian and Ukrainian governments, as well as reaching as far afield as the US. It was speculated that if Savchenko died in prison, Ukrainian nationalism could rise to new and dangerous levels that would have had a direct (negative) impact on the ongoing civil war. And if she had died, Mr Poroshenko would have faced severe criticism for his poor ability to handle high-profile and sensitive situations.

Political game changer?

While still in prison, Savchenko was made a lawmaker in what is now the main opposition party, in a season of growing disillusionment with the slow pace of reforms and attempts to tackle corruption. *Newsweek* believes that she could prove to be a "political game changer" and has the potential to become "the most consequential lawmaker in Ukraine's history". On Tuesday 31 May, she attended her first session of parliament where she received a standing ovation, and after the meeting, she described the current lawmakers as "lazy schoolchildren".

Previously, she also condemned a key part of Mr Poroshenko's ceasefire deal with pro-Russian separatists, which granted them autonomy in eastern Ukraine. And Savchenko's return, together with her rising popularity among ordinary citizens as well as opposition leaders, is set to prove to be a real challenge for Mr Poroshenko's governance. Controversy continues to surround the president, especially after he was named in the Panama Papers, and despite a formal denial, Ukrainians have started to realise that despite the Maiden revolution attempt to oust corrupt oligarchs (leaders who were in power to benefit themselves), the leaders who replaced them may be equally corrupt. Additionally, Savchenko sees Mr Poroshenko's dealings with Russia as 'traitorous', and her position as the 'poster girl' for Ukrainian nationalism and Russian opposition will likely spread this opinion far afield in the country.

NEWS HEADLINES



Russian President Vladimir Putin warned **Romania** and **Poland** they could find themselves in the sights of Russian rockets because they are hosting elements of a US missile shield that Moscow considers a threat to its security. Putin issued his starkest warning yet over the missile shield, saying that Moscow had stated repeatedly that it would have to take retaliatory steps but that Washington and its allies had ignored the warnings.



Reports say at least 130 **Iraqi** soldiers have been killed in a series of attacks by the Islamic State near the city of Fallujah in the Anbar province. After more than a week of operations aimed at retaking Fallujah, which lies just 50km west of Baghdad, the Iraqi army – made up of the military, police and Shia units, and backed by air power from a US-led coalition – has been unable to reach the city centre.



A **British** exit from the EU would be a serious risk to global economic growth, G7 leaders said in a summit declaration, as Prime Minister David Cameron urged voters to "listen to our friends" on the impact of Brexit. Brexit was listed alongside geopolitical conflicts, terrorism and refugee flows as a potential shock of a "non-economic origin".

Meanwhile, Mr Poroshenko has already started to play the "Savchenko-card" in a bid to secure his presidency, saying that he would get back Crimea and Eastern Ukraine "just like we brought back Nadiya".

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

If Savchenko continues to build on her rebellious popularity, there is more than an extended war or presidential challenges at stake: dissatisfaction with the government may boil all the way over into another revolution. And as Ukraine continues to fight a bitter war in the east, essentially against Russia, another revolution could prove disastrous for the country, as well as for the US (and other Western powers) who might be forced to intervene.

PRAY > For Nadiya Savchenko to use her influence for the good of the Ukrainian people > For an end to the Ukraine-Russian conflict > For the Ukrainian Church to learn deeper unity and to reach out even more at this time

ISRAEL'S CONTROVERSIAL NEW DEFENCE MINISTER



After weeks of political manoeuvring, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appointed Avigdor Lieberman to be his defence minister. A long-time political hard-liner who has filled various cabinet positions for more than a decade, Lieberman made his career with coarse talk: Israel, he said, should "cut off the head" of a disloyal Arab citizen, or take "a lesson from Putin" on how to deal with terror. His appointment served as a climax to parallel dramas: a public dispute between Netanyahu's most conservative ministers and the Israel Defence Forces, which Lieberman's appointment will inflame, and a secret peace initiative prompted by Tony Blair, involving players from the opposition leader, Isaac Herzog, to Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, which the appointment effectively scuttles. (*The New Yorker*)

Who is Lieberman and why does Netanyahu need him?

Lieberman, a secular nationalist, grew up in Moldova (part of the former Soviet Union) and immigrated to Israel when he was 20. He became involved in politics early on, joining the right-leaning Likud party before forming his own party, Yisrael Beyteynu (meaning "Israel is our home"), in 1999. Earlier, in 1996, he had made a name for himself by playing a leading role in Mr Netanyahu's successful campaign for prime minister, and he was appointed as Mr Netanyahu's chief of staff. Much of his support

During the conflict over the past few years, the Ukrainian Church has been through much – either directly affected by the war, or by accusations of spying (Orthodox believers being associated with Russia, and protestant believers with the West). Yet there have also been instances of the Church coming together in remarkable ways, with those living in relative freedom reaching out across denominations to those caught in the war zone. *Incontext's* representative in Ukraine said the following: "It is good to be patriotic, even as a Christian, but Christians need to understand the bigger picture of how the Bible instructs us to live our lives as peacemakers. The Ukrainian Church needs to be (and be seen to be) peacemakers."

comes from the approximately 1 million Israelis who immigrated from the former Soviet Union, and he is viewed by supporters as a politician who says what others think but are unwilling to voice.

The coalition government that Mr Netanyahu established after Israel's March 2015 election (in which Lieberman chose not to participate) had given the prime minister the narrowest of majorities (61 to 59) in Israel's 120-seat parliament, the Knesset. Lieberman's party increased this majority to 65 Knesset votes, giving Mr Netanyahu more room with which to manoeuvre.

Local and international reaction

The Guardian reported as follows: "This move by Mr Netanyahu has surprised many political commentators, both because the prime minister would be bringing into his cabinet a fierce political rival who split with him after the 2014 Gaza war – when Lieberman was foreign minister – and because it would break with the longstanding tradition of having a former senior military figure in the role."

Moshe Ya'alon, the outgoing defence minister who has clashed in recent days with Mr Netanyahu over the role of the military in public discourse, expressed his opinion about Lieberman's appointment: "To my great sorrow, extremist and dangerous elements have taken over Israel and the Likud Party." This belief was reinforced by former Prime Minister Ehud Barak who had also served as defence minister, saying that Israel "has been infected by the seeds of fascism" and that the government "needs to be brought down before it brings all of us down".

Meanwhile, there are reports that Egyptian leaders view the appointment of Lieberman as an act of 'betrayal' that could have some serious repercussions on Egyptian-Israeli relations. And in the US, Mark Toner of the State Department said that the appointment raises questions about the

NEWS HEADLINES



The selection of a hard-line cleric as the new Taliban chief all but dashes US President Barack Obama's hopes for opening peace talks before he leaves office, one of his top foreign policy goals. The Taliban leadership tapped Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, a conservative Islamic scholar from the group's stronghold in southern **Afghanistan**, to succeed Mullah Akhtar Mansour who was killed in a US drone strike.



In **Turkey** Binali Yildirim was sworn in as prime minister following the ouster of his predecessor, Ahmet Davutoglu. Mr Yildirim is a loyal supporter of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the president, and vowed to continue with an overhaul of the constitution which is handing more powers to the presidency.



A court in **India** has found 24 people guilty of involvement in one of the most notorious massacres during the 2002 anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat. More than 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, died after a train fire killed 60 Hindu pilgrims. Muslims were blamed for the train fire, and Hindu mobs eager for revenge rampaged through Muslim neighbourhoods across Gujarat during three days of violence.

"direction" the Israeli government may be taking, but their commitment to Israel was still intact: "We're going to work with this government as we have with every Israeli government that preceded it, with the goal of strengthening our cooperation, and we remain steadfast in our commitment to the security of Israel, and in our commitment to working towards a two-state solution."

One of the key concerns surrounding Lieberman's controversial appointment is the possible impact on the stalled peace talks with Palestine. Many believe that Lieberman's ultranationalist stance – and the fact that he is a 'settler' in the West Bank himself – does not bode well for future negotiations. However, in response to criticism of Lieberman's appointment, Mr Netanyahu's office made the following statement: "Hard-line politicians have gotten further with Palestinians because Israelis feel confident that security concerns will be front and centre of any negotiations."

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

The dramatic and far-reaching reactions over the appointment of Lieberman to the position of Defence Minister is evidence of the important and critical role which Israel continues to play in the

tense Middle East. After Lieberman was elected Finance Minister in 2009, Robert Fisk of *The Independent* wrote the following: "The Iraqis produced the hateful Saddam, the Iraqis created the crackpot Ahmadinejad, and now the Israelis have exalted a man, Avigdor Lieberman, who out-Sharons even Ariel Sharon." Fisk added that "Lieberman speaks like a Russian nationalist rather than the secular Israeli he claims to be".

As the new Defence Minister, Lieberman is positioned to make critical decisions about Palestine, Hamas and Hezbollah. While the current global spotlight focuses on what is happening with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, tensions continue to bubble in the Israel-Palestine issue, and war between the two is never really far away, so many around the world will be watching Lieberman's moves closely in the weeks and months to come.

PRAY > For Israel's leaders, that they govern with wisdom and integrity > For Israel to be a blessing to its citizens and neighbours > For a breakthrough in Israeli-Palestine relations

US SUPPORT FOR CHRISTIAN MILITIAS IN IRAQ?



Christian anti-Islamic State forces in Iraq are set to benefit from a defence spending bill headed for authorisation by the US Congress and Senate, justifying this action as part of the fight against the self-proclaimed jihadist "Islamic State" and as a concrete result of the statement with which the same US Congress has described the violence suffered by Christians on behalf of IS militants as "genocide". [The bill] aims to include, in the US defence budget, the financing and distribution of weapons to self-styled "Christian militias" in the anti-jihadist fight. A parliamentary measure had previously allocated funds for local security forces in the Nineveh Plain. The new bill makes specific reference to "Christian militias" as privileged recipients of the US logistical and military support. (*Agenzia Fides*)

The rise of Iraqi militias

In April this year, Owen Bennett-Jones (*BBC News*) published his report about a Christian militia in Baghdad – the Babylon Brigade. Approximately 30 militias (civilian military forces supplementary to the regular army) – of some 100,000 volunteers – have been established in recent years, with a track record of standing firm when the Iraqi army

collapsed or retreated in the wake of the IS onslaught. According to Bennett-Jones, militias have been appealing to the Iraqi government for funding, and an approximate annual amount of \$1.4bn has been allocated to their collective efforts. As a result, militia leaders receive more than \$600 a month, which, in Iraq, is a good salary. This financial reward appears to be a strong motivator: "There are stories about people renting a house in Baghdad, gathering a few people together, announcing they had formed a militia and going to the government to apply for the funds."

Most of these militias are Shia Muslim, a few are Sunni Muslim, and ever fewer are Christian. The Babylon Brigade, which prefers to be called a "popular mobilisation unit", says they had no choice but to take up arms in order to defend themselves and others. "I know the Bible says that if you get hit on one cheek you should offer the other. But we have really good defence forces now. No-one is going to do anything bad to the Christians. Some Christians had their homes taken over. I have personally been to these houses to tell the new people living there to get out. Christian suffering is over."

Foreign involvement

Another Iraqi Christian militia – profiled this April by Samuel Smith in the *Christian Post* – is the Nineveh Plains Protection Unit (NPU). In addition to their attempts to defend some of the remaining Christian villages in the Nineveh Plains region, they also hope to reclaim Mosul and Qaraqosh (Iraq's "two capitals of Christianity") from IS forces.

FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

INcontext Website:

www.incontextministries.org

Please visit our website for up-to-date information on events around the world.

If you have any questions or comments relating to the articles in this publication or on the website, please feel free to contact us at any time.



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Matthew VanDyke, an American combat expert who heads up an organisation called *Sons of Liberty International* (SOLI) and who was once a prisoner of war, is playing a leading role in this group's training. To date, he has trained more than 330 NPU recruits in a three-week basic training course, and his next goal is to do advanced platoon combat training in order to equip fighters with the skills necessary to launch an offensive. SOLI also offers the NPU "frontline consulting" and advice on media relations and supplies, and helps to facilitate a relationship between the Christian militia and the US State Department.

VanDyke says that the NPU plans to "demonstrate to their people that they will be safe and that they can stay in the country and Christianity can survive in Iraq". In his opinion, the Iraqi army is ineffective because the soldiers are only in it for the salary, while the Kurdish Peshmerga (Kurdistan's fighting force) might be willing to protect minorities within Kurdish borders but are not prepared to risk their lives for an Arab or Arab territory (i.e. the Nineveh Plains). According to VanDyke, SOLI's efforts rely on public donations: "We have decided to crowdfund the war against IS. We give people around the world an opportunity to have a tangible impact on fighting IS, rather than just retweeting something or clicking 'like' on Facebook. They can make a donation to the fight and have their dollars actually contribute to bringing about an end to IS."

Dwekh Nasha (meaning "one who sacrifices" in Syriac) is another small Christian militia that has attracted foreign fighters. Florian Neuhof of *International Business Times* reported a common factor among them: a desire to "do something" with their lives. Other motivations for joining the group include the inability to adjust to civilian life after military service, and the desire to 'fight Islam' without social reprimand. According to an

American, joining Christian militias like Dwekh is the easiest way for foreigners to get close to the action, as the Peshmerga are far more wary of outsiders.

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Chaldean Patriarch Louis Raphael I Sako, after the news surfaced that the US may be funding and arming Iraqi Christian militias, said that the move was a bad idea. He believes that groups that style themselves as Christian militias are 'politicized' simple people desperately in need of a salary, and that encouraging them would bring further conflict and division to the region. "Everyone wants to exploit Christians of Nineveh Plain for their ambitions and political interests. It is an area with different ethnic groups and religious communities, it is the dividing area between the region dominated by the Kurds and the region dominated by Sunni Arabs... if the US really wants to defeat IS, they have to support the regular armies that are part of the central government and the autonomous Kurdistan government, instead of creating sectarian militias".

Meanwhile, the Babylon Brigades quote Luke 22:36 as a motivation for their fighting: "[Jesus] said to them, 'But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one.'" This is one of the most debated verses in the Bible: was Jesus meaning an actual sword or a metaphorical one? Most commentators argue for the latter, but the debate about this verse reflects the wider debate of Christian armed self-defence. There are no easy answers, but join us in praying for the remaining Christians in Iraq, that they would seek the will of God before their own ideas and plans.

PRAY > For extreme wisdom for US decision makers > For Iraqi Christians to prioritise peacemaking over conflict > For foreign fighters seeking purpose to find it in Jesus

BOOKS AVAILABLE



REWOLUSIE VAN DIE HART

A Christian Afrikaans novel about the Persecuted Church

"Rewolusie van die Hart" ("Revolution of the Heart") is an Afrikaans novel written by South African author Adriana Faling. It tells the story of two women whose lives become intertwined - an Egyptian Christian who converted from Islam and is trying to escape her family while holding fast to her new-found faith, and a South African women trying to come to terms with her husband's calling to serve the Persecuted Church in the Middle East. The novel takes place against the background of the true events of the 2011 Egyptian revolution.

The cost of the book is R160 per copy, and proceeds from the sale go towards the work on INcontext Ministries.

If you would like to order a copy of this book, please contact Donnelly: donnely@incontextministries.org