In the first 2016 edition of A World in Motion, we took a look at some of the ‘forecasts’ for the year ahead – situations to watch considering the trends and events of 2015. The following key issues were covered:

- The growing importance of a new Saudi-led Muslim anti-terror coalition aiming to solve problems of religious extremism without help or interference from the West
- The escalating tensions surrounding China’s occupation of disputed islands in the South China Seas, which could provoke China to confront international powers
- Changes in the geopolitical influence of the United States, as Russia continues to ‘take the lead’ on global matters
- Increased attacks outside the Islamic State’s borders, as the fight against IS gains momentum and IS loses significant amounts of territory

So what has happened in these areas of focus over the past few months?

**Saudi Arabia** has continued to fight a relentless war in Yemen against the Houthi rebels who are aiming to overthrow the Yemeni government. In the past, the US might have ‘lent a hand’ in the armed conflict to the point of deploying troops (due to their close relationship with Saudi Arabia), but this particular conflict in Yemen has been driven by a Saudi-led Muslim coalition without any direct US involvement (though the US still sides with Saudi Arabia). Some are hoping that this is the start of conflict in the Middle East being handled by regional powers only, without the West getting involved.

Tensions in the South China Seas have risen to new heights, with the US Navy committing its Third Fleet of warships to the area as it supports its regional allies defending the right of navigation through the waters (the Third Fleet is responsible for large parts of the Pacific). China, meanwhile, has built an airstrip on an artificially-built island capable of landing military aircraft, as well as placing a missile defence system on the island – this could impact ocean-faring vessels as well as aircraft in the region. Recently, China held military drills around the contested Paracel islands, in direct opposition to a ruling by the Court of Arbitration in The Hague. The Philippines are also challenging China’s claims to the nautical region.

As could be expected during an election year, the ‘geopolitical footprint’ of the US decreased during the first half of 2016. President Barack Obama has long been criticised for failing to bring any significant improvement to the situation in the Middle East, and rather than handing over a ‘nightmare legacy’ to the next president, his administration has focused on supporting local military forces rather than deploying US troops to conflict frontlines. And in the case of Russia’s rising presence in Eastern Europe, Mr Obama has left diplomatic negotiations in the hands of Germany and the EU.

Lastly, the rise of the Islamic State (the self-proclaimed Caliphate set on uniting Islam under one banner and destroying the West) has caused millions to flee their homes in the Middle East, and the ripple effects continue to be felt in Europe and Muslim host nations (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan etc.). While fighting forces from Iraq and Kurdistan (supported by the US-led coalition) as well as from Syria and Iran have made some significant territorial gains and won back key cities that had been under IS control, the battle against one of the most bloodthirsty terror groups in recent history is far from over. IS losses cannot be interpreted as ‘the beginning of the end’, as the group is gaining strength in North Africa (Libya) and continues to inspire attacks in the West (even if it doesn’t organise them directly).
In this special edition, we take a look (in no particular order) at five news events / trends that have had significant impact on the Christian world over the past six months.

1. TERROR ATTACKS AND THE ‘EMPATHY GAP’

Although terror attacks are nothing new, the response of the international community shows an overwhelming ‘bias’. In the first six months of 2016, Islamic extremists attacked an airport and metro station in Belgium, a restaurant in Turkey and a gay nightclub in the US. There were however, many more (from January to June 2016, there were 838 reported terror attacks across the world).

What makes the attacks mentioned above significant is not the fact that they took place in the Western world but that they received so much more coverage and condemnation than the attacks taking place every day around the world in non-Western countries. A suicide bomb claiming the lives of 50 people in Baghdad, Iraq, is viewed as a ‘norm’, as are attacks in Somalia or even Kenya. Only the loss of life in ‘non-violent’ (Western) countries generate mass outpourings of condemnation and support for those impacted by ‘attacks on humanity’. When similar things happen elsewhere, they are mostly overlooked.

Commenting on the way that Facebook offers people the option to overlay their profile pictures with the flag of the country affected by a terror attack, Charlotte Farhan (Managing Director and co-founder of Art Saves Lives International) said the following: “If I did this for only Paris this would be wrong. If I did this for every attack on the world, I would have to change my profile every day several times a day.”

From a Christian perspective
The very different ways in which the world responds to tragedies in different parts of the world reflects an ‘empathy gap’. People tend to respond with empathy and engagement when they see something of themselves in the victims, such as those affected by the attacks in Paris in November 2015. For people who have been to Paris, or who even know someone who has been to Paris, there is a sense of “that could have been me”. For Westerners in general, victims of violence and terror in the Middle East are far less ‘familiar’, and as a result, there is less empathy.

On one hand, this can be seen as a natural state of being, and could be argued as being a means of ‘self-preservation’ so that our emotions are not overwhelmed. But as Christians, we cannot allow ourselves to fall into that same pattern of thinking and response. If we allow God’s love and anguish for the world and all its people – even the perpetrators of the violence themselves – to fill (and even break) our hearts, we will be moved to do something, to contribute to some kind of change, and to seek how to share Jesus with the lost. With a Church engaged and on the move throughout the world (not just in our own neighbourhoods), there can be hope and healing amidst the heartbeat.

2. LONDON ELECTS FIRST MUSLIM MAYOR

Undercover extremist or ‘poster boy’ for moderate Islam? London’s newly-elected mayor, Sadiq Khan, was victorious despite his opponents trying to emphasise his past connections to known extremists, and has become a key new face of the ‘Islam vs. the West’ debate. He has also brought about a major shift in the way Muslim immigrants in Europe may view their future. For many years, the mantra has been that Islam is incompatible with Western values and democracy, but Mr Khan’s rise to power is being lauded as an example of ‘successful’ integration.

Mr Khan’s liberal Islam has a dual effect: radical Muslims are offended by his beliefs and political positions and have made threats against him, while for non-Muslims, Mr Khan may come to represent a new picture of the possibilities of an Islam compatible with Western morality and social standards. Analysts also suggest that Mr Khan may inspire disillusioned Muslim youth to find purpose (and a way to make a difference) in politics and social engagement, rather than in extremism (and joining groups like the Islamic State).

From a Christian perspective
Sadiq Khan’s insistence that mainstream Islam is compatible with Western liberal values should not be taken by Christians as the ‘full truth’. It also needs to be acknowledged that ‘Western liberal values’ are not necessarily Christian values, and that Mr Khan’s Islamic beliefs do not fully reflect the Islam of the Quran. There is a danger for Christians if the image that Mr Khan projects lulls the Church into a sense of complacency and security – this could keep Christians from reaching out to Muslims with the Gospel. Christian and Islamic beliefs continue to clash at their cores, and there is still much work for the Church to do among people of all faith backgrounds.

3. IN CONTEXT MINISTRIES | www.incontextministries.org | P2
StrONGLY CONDEMNING THE ESCALATING VIOLENCE IN AND AROUND THE SOUTH SUDANESE CAPITAL OF JUBA that began on 7 July, the United Nations Security Council joined Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in calling for an end to the fighting, while separately demanding that President Salva Kiir and First Vice-President Riek Machar do their utmost to control their respective forces.

South Sudan’s Ministry of Health issued a statement that 271 lives were lost in the fighting in Juba and the death toll is likely to rise.

At the conclusion of a year-long investigation, the director of the FBI lambasted Hillary Clinton for using a private e-mail server while she was secretary of state, describing it as an “extremely careless” way to handle sensitive, classified information. But in a big relief for the Democratic candidate for president, Mr Comey recommended that no charges be brought.

North Korea said it planned a tough response to what it deemed a “declaration of war” by the United States, after Washington blacklisted the nuclear-armed country’s leader Kim Jong Un for the first time over human rights abuses. Pyongyang described the sanctioning of Kim as a “hideous crime,” according to North Korea’s official KCNA news agency.

3. DEVELOPMENTS IN THE GLOBAL REFUGEE CRISIS

There was widespread panic in 2015 when record numbers of refugees entered Europe. And with the war in Syria and the fight against the Islamic State far from over, the challenge of effectively accommodating refugees is set to continue and to be a concern for years to come.

For most refugees in the UN camps where permanent structures are not allowed, the future looks to involve years of living in tents and makeshift dwellings with almost nothing to call their own. Places like Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey are seen as “waiting areas” as refugees apply to be accepted in Western nations or hope to return to Iraq or Syria, and as Europe starts to limit the number of refugees entering the region and the war continues unresolved at home, a sense of desperation is likely to set in.

Meanwhile, Kenya has threatened to close the Dadaab camp, one of the oldest and largest refugee settlements in the world, which is home to more than 300,000 Somalis. The decision was made after assessments that declared the camp to be a security risk for Kenya – the camp is believed to be a “hive” for extremists from the Somali terrorist group al-Shabaab, from which attacks in Kenya’s borders are planned.

A similar fear relates to the influx of refugees into Europe: how many extremists are using refugee status as a means to gain entry to Western countries? Others, however, are grappling with another question – if camps and borders close, what will happen to the hundreds of thousands for whom turning back and returning home seems like a certain death?

From a Christian perspective

In light of the possible threats that refugees may pose to hosting nations (the threat may be small compared to the number of innocent asylum seekers, but it is still a reality), the Church in these nations needs to decide on its position. Either it pursues caution and supports closed borders and limited contact with refugees, or it actively seeks out opportunities to embrace the stranger, sharing the Gospel with those who may not have encountered Christian love and witness in their home nations.

As stated in an earlier INcontext perspective, there is no other deity that can identify with refugees – not Allah, not Krishna and not Buddha. Only Christ has “refugee status” as part of His story, and there is no doubt that our Saviour’s heart breaks for all those seeking refuge as strangers in foreign countries.

4. IRAN SANCTIONS LIFTED, SAEED ABEDEINIs RELEASED

When a deal to stop the development of Iran’s nuclear programme (in return for the lifting of sanctions) was reached, millions signed a petition campaigning against what they saw as a huge diplomatic mistake. For some years, Iran had been pursuing a nuclear programme in order to strengthen its position against Sunni Arab enemies, and this escalated tensions in the region. So getting Iran (a nation that has openly threatened both Israel and the US) to downgrade its nuclear activities was lauded as a major victory by the West, especially because the deal took years to negotiate (and was seen to be proof that diplomacy can still solve global problems).

Others, however, saw the brokering of the deal – led by the US – as one of the worst foreign policy moves by the Obama administration. Since the nuclear disarmament deal was signed, Iran has made covert arms deals with Russia and India, in clear violation of the agreement with the West.

Meanwhile, while all the attention was on what would happen when sanctions were finally lifted, Saeed Abedini’s release from an Iranian prison happened almost without notice. Abedini, a US citizen imprisoned in Iran for more than three years on charges relating to Christian activities, was returned to the US in a ‘backdoor prisoner swap’ connected to the main disarmament deal. Millions of Christians had campaigned for his release via mass petitions, and the nuclear deal turned out to be the means through which it happened.

From a Christian perspective

It may well be that the 1.1 million signatures on a petition organised by the American Centre for Law and Justice (ACLJ, a legal group representing the Abedini family) played a role in the US government including Abedini’s release as one of the conditions of the deal.

Meanwhile, thousands of Christians are in prisons across the globe, from North Korea to Morocco, on charges relating to their faith. So what happens when a high profile prisoner like Saeed Abedini is released? Are the others then forgotten? A sad reality is that when Christians in the West focus on one prisoner as the ‘poster person’ for all persecuted Christians, many others may fade into obscurity in his or her shadow. And when that ‘poster person’ is released, the needs and sufferings of the others may be forgotten.

It is also important to note that online petitions are often ‘hit and miss’ – some may have an impact, others do not. The most effective advocacy for Christians in prison for their faith happens through enduring prayer, not signing online campaigns. Prayer truly changes situations, and if God can intervene through something like the nuclear deal for Saeed Abedini, He can open the prison doors for others in chains.
5. TURKEY AND THE EU

For a long time, Turkey has stood as a ‘bridge’ between the West and the Islamic world, connecting Europe and Asia. As a result, Turkey has adopted a more modern and secular form of Islam than its Arab and Persian counterparts. There is still, however, a while to go before Turkey meets EU standards that would allow it to be accepted as part of the union (something Turkey has been wanting for a while).

At present, Turkey hosts more refugees from Syria and Iraq than any other country in the world. And in recent months, the Turkish government has ‘used’ the refugee crisis in Europe in order to leverage a deal with Germany with the view of speeding up the EU membership process. According to the deal, Turkey will take back asylum seekers who lack the correct documentation and will host them within Turkish borders.

Concessions made by Germany have opened Chancellor Angela Merkel to further opposition at home – critics are arguing that in her efforts to ease the refugee crisis, she has left the EU vulnerable to ‘blackmail’ by Turkey. Many fear that the EU’s hand may end up being forced, and that Turkey will be allowed to join the EU without amending some of its controversial laws and policies, including those related to human rights.

From a Christian perspective

Even if a deal with Turkey limits the number of refugees entering Europe, Turkey’s possible membership of the EU could see even more Muslims entering the region with legitimate travel papers.

And while many would view Turkey’s joining the EU as something negative and to be feared, there is a positive angle from a Christian and mission perspective. Turkey has long been seen as a ‘gateway’ for Christian missions from the West to the Middle East, and open borders with the EU could allow for the development of new ministries functioning in and out of Turkey.

LOOKING FORWARD: WHAT TO WATCH (AND PRAY FOR)

Based on events and growing trends of the past six months, we now take a look at developing issues and situations to watch in the second half of the year.

1. US ELECTIONS

After a long and often bitter primary race, only two candidates are left: Republican Donald Trump, whose comments and statements feed a narrative that could further fuel radical movements around the world, and Democrat Hillary Clinton, who seems willing to do anything that is politically expedient without considering all the ripple effects.

Whatever the outcome of the election, the impact of the new US president will reach far beyond the nation’s borders and will play a definitive role in the rebalancing of international power, including the response to China’s and Russia’s increasing global roles, therefore the importance of the voting in November cannot be overstated.

From a Christian perspective

The election of the next US president will have a direct impact on Christians in the Muslim world – not just local believers, but also expat workers and missionaries. Whether US military forces are withdrawn from or built up in the Middle East, Christians are likely to suffer as a result of foreign policy decisions. The next US president could change missions and the perception of Western missionaries for years to come, and the global body of Christ has a mandate to pray for the US at this critical time.

2. CONTINUED CONFRONTATION IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEAS

Although the dispute over the South China Seas has been a concern to the US and the rest of Asia for some time, the question for which answers are still being sought is whether China’s aggression is due to the vast material wealth in the area or the maritime region’s strategic positioning for offense and defence. While most of the world’s attention has been focused elsewhere (refugees, Russia, the Middle East), China has been moving forward with their military expansion on islands in the area without much notice or response from the international community thus far.

In recent weeks, however, the US Navy has sent its Third Fleet to the region, and the Philippines have...
3. THE FUTURE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE (IS)

As Iraqi special forces reclaimed the city of Fallujah from the Islamic State (IS) in June, many were increasingly hopeful that the continued loss of IS territory could spell the end of the self-proclaimed ‘caliphate’ that has been terrorising the Middle East and beyond since 2014. With Russian-backed Syrian forces closing in from the west, Kurdish Peshmerga from the north, and US-backed Iraqi forces from the east and the south, IS could (in theory) be defeated before the year’s end. But that is just in Iraq.

As Libya struggles with increasing numbers of IS militants within its borders, and as more of the group’s top leadership relocates to Libya, there are growing fears about whether the extremists are regrouping there for a possible ‘second phase’ of its Caliphate ambitions. There are also more fears for Europe if IS does indeed shift its focus there, because Libya borders the Mediterranean Sea and is being used as the primary crossing route to Europe for many refugees from the Middle East and North Africa (more IS operatives may embed themselves among these refugees).

European powers may therefore start focusing military support on Libya in order to prevent the country falling completely into IS hands. But another foreign intervention in another country could provoke further anger, and further backlashes against Western targets.

4. REPERCUSSIONS OF THE BREXIT VOTE

Britain’s vote to separate from the European Union focused on the desire for its own sovereignty apart from Europe — allowing independent reforms to immigration policies and the rule of law — but it may prove to be the ‘spark’ that leads to the eventual dissolving of the EU. Various right-wing leaders in other EU countries are calling for a similar referendum in their own nations, and while this will not happen overnight, movements calling for independence from the EU are growing in popularity and are making their voices heard.

If other EU countries follow Britain’s lead and the EU starts splitting apart, there will be dramatic consequences for global economies as well as for Europe’s geopolitical influence.

From a Christian perspective

One likely outcome of a possible EU breakup would be a complete closure of borders in some (maybe most) current EU nations, which would almost certainly see the current influx of refugees coming to a standstill. So there is need for the Church to do as much as they can now while borders are still open and opportunities for evangelism abound.

As reported in the previous edition of A World in Motion, a splintered EU is also likely to have less
In the past, the EU has imposed sanctions against Russia due to its human rights abuses, but without external censure from the EU, Russia’s government might shift towards greater authoritarianism. There are already concerns about new Russian laws that could greatly limit the work of the Protestant/evangelical churches there.

5. NATO STANDOFF WITH RUSSIA

The ‘new Cold War’ between Russia and the West began with Russia’s annexing of Crimea in 2014. What started as a rising tide of Russian nationalism in the eastern region of Ukraine swiftly evolved into a civil war, with Moscow playing a key role in the support of the pro-Russian, anti-government rebels (despite its denials of doing so). And while the war continues in Ukraine, other Eastern European nations (formerly part of the Soviet Union) are concerned about their own futures as Russia builds up its military along its borders with the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Because Ukraine is not a member of NATO, it cannot request intervention by the military alliance, but NATO has been building up its defences in the Baltic states, and is set to deploy 4,000 troops to the region.

From a Christian perspective

‘Wargames’ run by the RAND Corporation (a series of hypothetical scenarios that are played out in order to analyse strategic and tactical options) suggest that NATO’s current defence would not hold up against a Russian invasion, and that the Baltic states could fall to Russia in as little as three days if Russia chose to attack.

Just as Ukrainians have been severely impacted by the civil war (thousands have been killed and more than 1.2 million have been displaced), citizens in the Baltic states would be caught in the crossfire if the conflict boiled over into full-out war (especially if the US, as a member of NATO, got involved).

The impact of the war on the Church in Ukraine has been both positive and negative – on one hand, enmity has abounded and accusations of spying have been made against pro-West and pro-Russian believers, while on the other hand, some Orthodox and Evangelical believers have been coming together for the first time in order to assist with the vast humanitarian needs in the country. Meanwhile, some are fearing that if the Baltics do eventually fall to Russia, a ‘new Iron Curtain’ could once again keep the Church in that region under severe restrictions reminiscent of the Soviet era.

RESPONDING WITH HOPE

At present, the world looks like a dark, deeply troubled and suffering place. And that is true. But God is still greater, still good, and still in control, and we know that He is at work around the world even if it is difficult to recognise His plans at times. While it may be tempting sometimes to ‘put heads in the sand’, Christians will be able to respond most effectively from a position of knowledge and understanding of what is happening.

So how do we respond?

- **We pray with a news focus** – this is our primary means of getting involved in what is happening around the world. As you read the information above and in other news reports, pray for the situation: for a resolution to the conflict (know and understand what is happening), for those suffering as a result of what is happening (know who and where they are), for the leaders making critical decisions (know their names), and for the local Church to respond with wisdom and a Kingdom-focus (know about the situation and challenges of local believers).

- **We ask God what He wants us to do on a personal level** – this might be direct involvement (actually going to ‘get our hands dirty’ in the countries in the news), or supporting the local Church and Christian workers through finances. If you would like to personally play a role in the work of the Church around the world, consider getting involved with one (or more) of INcontext’s projects – CLICK HERE for more information about where we are involved, or contact gustav@incontextministries.org

INcontext team members are also available to come teach or to present a seminar at your church or fellowship – if you would like to know more about options, contact eric@incontextministries.org

The INcontext team would like to thank each and every one who has supported our ministry and projects this year so far – we are a faith-based ministry and rely on partnering with people to continue our work and supporting people in the mission field.

Every project is a step of faith. Due to your selfless giving, we are able to continue this work that we are called to. Every donation received is money sown into the Kingdom of God, and we take the responsibility of being stewards of these donations very seriously. We appreciate each and every one of you, and you can know that your contributions are making a difference in the lives of many around the world.