

A WORLD IN MOTION

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In this special edition

LOOKING BACK AT 5 KEY EVENTS OVER THE PAST YEAR

&

LOOKING FORWARD AT 5 DEVELOPING STORIES TO WATCH (AND PRAY FOR)



2016—LOOKING BACK AT FIVE KEY EVENTS

THE NUMBERS: THE WORLD IN 2016



7.4 BILLION

The approximate world population in 2016



35

The number of general / presidential elections in 2016



14,864

The reported number of fatalities in terror attacks in 2016 to date



43

The number of armed conflicts (national and regional) with more than 100 deaths in 2016



For a few days in early November, the world seemed to stand still. The US presidential election was something of a 'global story', with the world watching to see what would happen in the world's leading superpower. Never had the American people been so visibly divided, and so loathe to vote for either of the two candidates (Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump), seen to be the 'two worst choices in recent history'.

Now, with Donald Trump as President-elect and with the Republicans holding a majority influence in both the House and the Senate, people are gearing up for changes during the coming 'era of Trump'. French president François Holland has said that the world is likely to be "a little more crazy", but before looking forward to an uncertain 2017, we will take a look back at some of the headlines of 2016 and how they shaped the world.

As we do this, it is important to seek continual reminders that God is in control. While much of the news may seem negative and depressing, it becomes necessary to 'speak life' and to be a different voice in a world that is desperate for hope. And there were some positive breakthroughs in 2016: while Nigeria's Boko Haram extremists continued their rampage through the north-east of the country (killing many, including Christians), a group of the kidnapped Chibok girls were released from captivity; while Islamic State fighters tragically used human shields in their quest to hold on to territory in Iraq, the Christian towns of Qaraqosh and Bartella were liberated and

displaced Christians were able to start their return; while some European countries were building walls to stop the flow of refugees from the Middle East, the Church in Germany is taking every opportunity to share the Gospel with refugees who have lost all hope (leading to hundreds of former Muslims embracing Christianity).

Looking for evidence of God at work, rather than getting caught up in sensationalist negativity, is a deliberate choice. Failing to do so will result in increased apathy, which will limit our outlook and effectivity in the Kingdom of God.

With this in mind, here are INcontext's five leading stories from 2016 (aside from the US elections).

BREXIT

Brexit – Britain's vote to exit the European Union (EU) – was one of the biggest upsets in modern European history, dealing a heavy blow to the future of a united EU. Some suggest that one of the major contributing factors to the majority 'leave' vote was the immigration crisis, which has seen more than a million refugees from the Middle East flee to Europe. Other key issues were economics and sovereignty.

With a likely outcome of Brexit being similar referendums elsewhere, it could mean the complete closure of the EU to incoming refugees from the Middle East. Even if Germany chooses to keep its borders open to refugees, closed borders in surrounding nations would make it almost impossible to get to Germany. Therefore, the 'open door' for sharing the Gospel with Muslim arrivals from the Middle East may close in the near future.

A divided European Union will also have less influence against Russia, especially in terms of defending NATO allies against increased Russian expansion or aggression and monitoring human rights violations within Russia.

NEWS HEADLINES



The number of people killed or injured by landmines across the **world** reached a 10-year high last year, driven by a spike in improvised devices planted by militant groups like the Islamic State, researchers said. More than three quarters of victims were civilians, 38 percent of them children.



Extending US sanctions on **Iran** for 10 years would breach the Iranian nuclear agreement, Iran Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei said, warning that Tehran would retaliate if the sanctions are approved. The US House of Representatives re-authorised last week the Iran Sanctions Act, or ISA, for 10 years. The law was first adopted in 1996 to punish investments in Iran's energy industry and deter Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons. The House bill must still be passed by the Senate and signed by President Barack Obama to become law.



Cuba's most prominent dissident group called off its weekly protest march for the first time in 13 years following the death of its nemesis Fidel Castro, the revolutionary leader whose passing has cast a pall over the island. Castro, an icon of the Cold War who built a communist state on the doorstep of the United States and defied half a century of US efforts to topple him, died at the age of 90.



FAILED COUP IN TURKEY

On 15 July, a splinter group within the Turkish military made a bold attempt to overthrow the government of President Erdogan. 290 people were killed in the coup attempt, which was crushed within 24 hours. Self-exiled Islamic cleric Fethullah Gülen (currently living in the US) was blamed by Mr Erdogan for masterminding the coup attempt, but US authorities refused to extradite him without concrete evidence of his involvement. This caused a severe strain in Turkish-US relations (the US considers Turkey a key ally in the region).

In the wake of the failed coup, Mr Erdogan began purging anyone with ties to Gülen. As a result, thousands of military, judicial, educational and

ICC WITHDRAWALS

2016 saw the International Criminal Court (ICC) receive a heavy blow, as South Africa, Burundi and Russia withdrew their membership. Furthermore, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines called the court a "useless" tribunal, and threatened that his country would be the next to leave. African nations are blaming the ICC for focusing its convictions on Africa alone, which has triggered a shift in international cooperation between the West and Africa/Asia. In essence, the recent withdrawals from the ICC puts a spotlight on the division between 'developed' First World countries and those from the 'developing' Third World, which causes a significant geopolitical shift in world affairs. Russia's withdrawal can be seen as a timely manoeuvre, aligning with Africa and Asia in a time that has become known as the 'global East-West Cold War'.

As the ICC loses members, its legitimacy comes into question and opens a discussion about the value of other world bodies (like the United Nations). Just as Brexit had a lot to do with a desire for British independence and sovereignty, departures from the ICC point to a growing trend of countries becoming more inward-focused and less globally-minded in terms of geopolitics.



public service personnel were removed from their posts. Analysts suggested that this purging was an attempt by Mr Erdogan to consolidate all executive powers and to increase his influence in the country as well as the region.

A month after the coup attempt, Russian president Vladimir Putin travelled to Turkey to mend diplomatic ties between the two nations, which had severed in November 2015 after Turkey shot down a Russian military jet in Syria. Russia's move towards Turkey was seen to be an attempt by Moscow to draw Turkey away from Europe and the West, and there is some concern that Russia could convince Turkey to 'switch sides' in the Syrian war (currently Turkey is part of the US-led coalition seeking to remove the Assad regime).

If Turkey gains more influence in Syria, Mr Erdogan will have more 'bargaining power' in talks about Turkey's accession to the EU. Turkey is accommodating vast numbers of refugees at present, and in order to gain Turkey's co-operation with restricting the flow of refugees to Europe, the EU has been open to speeding up the membership process. However, the situation is very volatile, and this makes Turkey a critical role player in the EU-Middle East region.

SADIQ KHAN ELECTED LONDON MAYOR

When Sadiq Khan was elected the first Muslim mayor of London in May this year, he became the 'new face of liberal Islam'. Part of his campaign was focused on integration, and pointed to a peaceful co-existence of Islam and Christianity in multicultural London. While some analysts suggest that Mr Khan's election (and moderate, not-so-Islamic lifestyle) could prompt terror attacks in the capital, others believe that his election could have positive repercussions in the war on radical Islam.

As more than 850 people with links to Britain have joined the Islamic State (IS), and as half of them have returned to Britain, there are justified fears about terrorism within British borders. Approximately 10 terror attacks have been foiled by security personnel over the past two years. In this context, Mr Khan may prove to be something of a 'gamechanger' – for disillusioned Muslim youth seeking a future that counts for something, Mr Khan may stand as an example that Muslims from a poor, immigrant background are able to achieve significance in the secular, Western world.

From a Christian perspective, believers need to be aware that the Islam Mr Khan represents (one that is compatible with Western morality and values) is not the Islam of the Quran, and that there is still as great a need as ever to reach out with the Gospel to Muslims. Islam with a 'nice face' is still a religion that denies Jesus as Saviour, and the Church cannot afford to fall into the belief that integration and mutual tolerance is the ultimate goal.

INCREASED PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS

2016 saw a sharp increase in the persecution of Christians, in various nations. China continued its

NEWS HEADLINES



An **Egyptian** bill regulating NGO's is so restrictive it effectively bans human rights work and makes it harder for charities to operate, activists and development workers say. The bill, passed by parliament but subject to a final vote, restricts NGO activity to developmental and social work introducing jail terms of up to five years for non-compliance. Egyptian rights activists say they face the worst crackdown in their history under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who they accuse of erasing freedoms won in a 2011 uprising that ended Hosni Mubarak's 30-year rule.



Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan threatened to unleash a new wave of migrants on Europe after lawmakers there voted for a temporary halt to Turkey's EU membership negotiations, but behind the fighting talk, neither side wants a collapse in ties.



A suicide truck bomb killed about 100 people, most of them Iranian Shi'ite pilgrims, in the city of **Iraq** city of Hilla (100 km south of Baghdad). The Islamic State, which considers all Shi'ites to be apostates, claimed responsibility for the attack. In recent months, the IS has intensified attacks in areas out of its control in efforts to weaken the offensive launched on October 17 to retake Mosul, the last major Iraqi city under Islamic State control.

crackdown on unregistered house churches, and Russia passed a new law restricting religious freedom (drafted in reaction to the October 2015 bombing of a Russian aeroplane over the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, which killed 24 people). Human rights activists, however, say that the downed aircraft is just a pretext, and there was also an intention to clamp down on basic freedoms. Because of Russia's Orthodox majority, most evangelical/protestant churches are viewed with suspicion and are seen to be pro-West, and the law is being used to accuse the evangelical Church of undermining Russian internal security.

Pakistani minority Christians also experienced one of the worst terror attacks against them, when the Taliban targeted a group of Christians on Easter Sunday, killing 69. Asia Bibi (the Pakistani woman facing the death penalty for charges of blasphemy) is still in prison, while others in the country are targeted with unsubstantiated blasphemy charges that generate increased hatred for the local communities of believers.

Persecution against Christians also increased in Iraq, Nigeria, Somalia and North Korea, and this is set to continue in 2017 as the fight against the Islamic State and the war in Syria continues, and as China and Russia show no signs of slowing down their attacks on religious freedoms.

In 2016, however, there was also some good news. After more than three years in prison in Iran (on charges relating to house church

activity), both Saeed Abedini and Behnam Irani were released. The Church in Iran is also seeing the largest increase of Muslim-background believers of any Muslim country in the world. Another reason for celebration was the liberation of Qaraqosh and Bartella, two Christian towns in Iraq that were captured by the Islamic State in 2014. Christian refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) have started returning to the homes that they had fled, hoping to restore the Christian communities that date back to the first century AD.



PRAY > That God would guide the Turkish leadership, especially in discussions with the EU and Russia, that they make wise decisions for their nation and region > That international bodies like the ICC would seek justice in a balanced and unbiased manner > That believers in the UK would lead the way in being ambassadors of reconciliation > For Christians around the world who are facing persecution – that they would be strengthened to maintain their witness

LOOKING FORWARD—WHAT TO WATCH (AND PRAY FOR)



CONTINUED RUSSIAN AGGRESSION

Many political analysts believe that the current tension and standoff between the West (Europe and the US) and Russia constitutes a 'Cold War', but there is little agreement about whether this is ever likely to develop into a full-blown military conflict. The fact that both NATO and Russia have been amassing troops on borders could indicate a possible confrontation, but it is unlikely that Russia (spending billions on the separatist fight in Eastern Ukraine as well as on its efforts to prop up the Syrian regime) will open a new 'front'.

While the attention of the world has been focused more on the war in Syria and the rise of the Islamic State, Russia has been encouraging

the swelling of Russian nationalism in Eastern Ukraine, which keeps the separatist war in Donbas active and unresolved. In 2017, it is expected that the global focus will be on US President-elect Donald Trump's early days of policy implementation and leadership rather than on Donbas, and with Mr Trump's apparent approval of Russia (and the pressure he faces to focus on eliminating the Islamic State), it is quite possible that Russia may seize the opportunity to annex more territory where separatists are agitating (though probably not territory where NATO forces are stationed).

Although Ukraine is not a member of NATO, NATO would be obligated to defend Eastern Europe against Russian aggression and attempts of annexation. However, if Mr Trump follows through on his promise to re-evaluate the role of the US in NATO and decides to withdraw, the lack of advanced US military support would greatly undermine the threat that NATO poses to Russia.

Beyond Eastern Europe, Russia is also playing a critical role in Syria – since 2015, the Russian military intervention on behalf of Bashar al-Assad's embattled regime has proved to be a gamechanger. Russia is also allied with Iran, the Shia Muslim

NEWS HEADLINES



Moscow protested Ukraine's plans to carry out missile tests near Crimea, which **Russia** annexed in 2014 following the toppling of a pro-Russian Ukrainian president, raising the temperature in the dispute between the two countries. Russian aviation agency Rosaviatsia said it had received a notification from Ukraine on missile tests in "Russia's sovereign air space" on December 1 and 2 in the region of Simferopol in Crimea.



More Rohingya Muslims from **Myanmar** poured into neighbouring Bangladesh, with some feared to have drowned after a boat sank during a bid to flee violence that has killed at least 86 people and displaced 30,000. The violence is the most serious since hundreds were killed in communal clashes in 2012, and poses the biggest test yet for the eight-month-old administration of Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. Many people in Buddhist-majority Myanmar regard the country's 1.1 million Rohingya as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.



On 18 November **Vietnam's** 14th National Assembly passed the nation's first ever Law on Belief and Religion, amid concerns that multiple drafts of the Bill did not conform to international standards on freedom of religion or belief.

powerhouse in the region, which complicates matters for the US and its Middle East allies and gives Russia significant influence.

CALIPHATE ON THE MOVE

With the Islamic State (IS) losing more territory every day, there seems to be two possible outcomes of their likely 'defeat'. One possibility is IS shifting its focus from the Middle East and 'relocating' to North Africa where it has been building up a strong base of support (in Libya, Nigeria and even Somalia). If this happens, the people of North Africa could face similar carnage to that inflicted on the Iraqi and Syrian people. A second possibility is increased attacks against Western targets, especially US citizens and possibly the nation of America.

Boko Haram, the IS-affiliated Islamic terror group in Nigeria, has announced that "we remain steadfast in our faith and we will not stop... to us, the war has just begun". The Afghani Taliban has voiced similar threats.

The question for 2017 is whether the US will once again deploy military troops to the Middle East (and possible to North Africa) in its effort to eliminate the global terror threat of the Islamic State. Much depends on Mr Trump's plans, of which he has revealed very little.

THE ISLAMIC DIVIDE

2016 was an active year for many of the radical Islamist groups, including the Islamic State, the Taliban (Afghanistan and Pakistan), Boko



REFUGEES

At the end of 2015, the total number of displaced people throughout the world stood at 65 million, with 21 million having been forcefully displaced by war. The war in Syria alone was responsible for the displacement of more than 12 million people, and with no real end in sight, these numbers are likely to increase through 2017, as conflicts continue in multiple regions around the world.

According to the UNHCR's projected resettlement forecast for 2017, an additional 1,190 000 people are going to be in need of resettlement in the year to come, and the EU is expecting to absorb another three million refugees by the end of 2017.

This will continue to impact the rapidly shifting politics and upcoming elections in Europe as anti-immigrant groups protest open borders and push for a leadership change.

Haram (Nigeria) and al-Shabaab (Somalia). Some were striving for a global caliphate, while others like the Afghani Taliban were fighting for regional sovereignty.



Whatever their reason for waging violent jihad, their actions continue to expose the religious divide within Islam. More Muslims are killed by Islamic terrorist groups than Christians, which continues to cause many Muslims to question their faith and how it can claim to be a 'religion of peace'. And while many are being drawn to Christianity, many are also embracing atheism in response to their disillusion with religion as a whole – Saudi Arabia, one of the 'heartlands' of Islam, is seeing the biggest growth of atheism in the region.

2017 seems set to be another year of widespread violence in the name of Islam. For the Church, the urgent question is not whether Christians will be targeted, but what the response of the Church is going to be towards the millions of Muslims who are having to wrestle with their faith.

THE 'ERA OF TRUMP'

While the November US presidential elections officially ushered in the 'era of Trump', the two-year campaign period in the run-up to the elections has exposed a United States deeply divided in new ways. For the world's most powerful nation, there is so much hanging in the balance as everyone waits to see how Mr Trump's uncharted policies will be implemented after he takes office on 20 January 2017.

Will Mr Trump, who criticised the Iranian nuclear deal as the "worst deal ever made", pursue a more hardline approach to Iran? Will China feel an economic impact if Mr Trump focuses on keeping American jobs in America in order to "make America great again", and will he challenge China's aggression in the South China Seas? How will he approach relations with Britain in the light of Brexit, and what is the future of EU-American trade relations?

For many, the primary question is how Mr Trump will follow through with his promises to defeat terror. During his campaign, he criticised the Obama administration for withdrawing troops from Afghanistan and Iraq and blamed President Obama for the rise of the Islamic State and the war in the Middle East. Mr Trump's calls for another global War on Terror closely resembled those of former president George W. Bush, and while Mr Trump focused primarily on the Islamic State, he

FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

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also made mention of plans to defeat Boko Haram and al-Shabaab, and to ultimately 'destroy the ideology of extremist Islam' (which, during eight years of Democratic leadership in the US, seems to have grown).

Not everyone is dismayed by Mr Trump's election. Benjamin Netanyahu, prime minister of Israel, called Mr Trump "a true friend", and will be hoping that Mr Trump will prioritise Israel's interests in any attempts to broker a peace plan.

2017 FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

For the Church in 2017, much of its effectiveness will be determined by how Christians choose to see the news reported by the secular media. The millions of refugees can be viewed as an 'Islamic threat' (which would prompt fear, suspicion and closed hearts) or as a mission opportunity (prompting active engagement and reaching out). The vast majority of refugees have fled in hope of a better future, and who better to restore hope than the Church? If the Church chooses to view refugees with animosity instead of seeking to share the hope of Christ with them, the greatest opportunity that the Church has in this lifetime will be missed.

At this point in time, it is very difficult to gauge what the world will look like in 2017 – much depends on how the new president of the US understands and responds to global challenges. If Mr Trump scales back on his campaign promises, very little might change. If he does, however, follow through with his controversial claims and commitments, there could be massive changes with global repercussions. A focus on "making America great again" could create a much more inward-looking focus, which could result in a declining US presence where currently they are involved, but this agenda is at odds with Mr Trump's promise to destroy the Islamic State.

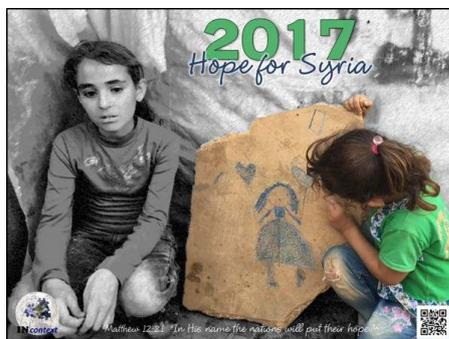
Mr Trump's election is also good news for Turkey's President Erdogan, who openly criticised the Obama administration of undermining regional security by opposing Syria's President Assad (and by arming Kurdish rebels). Mr Trump sees Turkey as a strong ally, and could reverse previous foreign policies that have limited Turkey's influence in the region (Mr Erdogan may even be hoping that Mr Trump could agree to extradite Gülen, the supposed mastermind of the failed coup earlier in the year).

A world less influenced by the US would likely see Russia and China taking a lead in global geopolitics. Both nations have a history of severe Christian persecution, and this could have ripple effects on the Church in the wider Eastern Europe and Asia.

Europe, too, appears to be poised on a knife-edge between increased nationalism (and right-wing anti-immigration sentiment) and a desire to maintain its policies of multiculturalism and openness. In the midst of this, the European Church faces the challenge of resisting social pressures and new 'norms' and seeking to maintain a Biblical vision and mandate (as many of the churches in Germany are already doing).

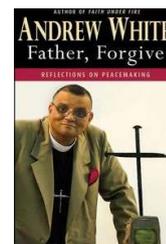
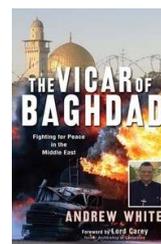
PRAY > For Muslims who are disillusioned with their faith to encounter the truth of the Saviour, Jesus Christ > For Europe as they face critical elections in the coming year, and for the Church to respond to opportunities while the borders remain open > For Russia and China's leadership to encounter God in transforming ways > For the US as Mr Trump gets ready to assume the presidency, and for Christians in the leadership team around him to offer Godly wisdom

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