

A WORLD IN MOTION



P1 | US-SAUDI ARABIA

Donald Trump's maiden international visit, to Saudi Arabia, has prompted many questions due to its significance and controversy.

P2 | EUROPEAN UNION

EU leaders, including those who are newly-elected, have expressed their commitment to keeping the bloc unified.

P3 | IRAN

Hassan Rouhani, viewed as a 'reformist', has been re-elected for a second term, and 'reformists' won major gains in local council elections as well.

P4 | PROJECTS

Project DOTA supports discipleship training for pastors in three countries in Asia.



THE NUMBERS:

US-SAUDI RELATIONS



1931

The year in which the US recognised the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia



10.02 million

The number of barrels of oil produced per day by Saudi Arabia (Jan. 2017) - top producer, followed by Russia and the US



\$350 million

The estimated value of the recently secured arms deal (over 10 years)



57%

The percent of Americans in 2013 who viewed Saudi Arabia unfavourably (compared to 27% favourable views)

TRUMP'S HISTORIC VISIT TO SAUDI ARABIA



By *Cherolyn Amery*

Donald Trump received a glittering welcome in Saudi Arabia on the first day of his first international tour, as the two countries agreed on a series of military deals worth nearly \$110bn (£85bn). The US president's decision to make the Saudi capital his first foreign call was seized on by senior Saudi officials as a symbol that Washington aimed to be once again a bedrock for the kingdom and its allies. A White House official said Trump and Rex Tillerson, the secretary of state, would attend the signing of a memorandum of intent on a package of defence equipment and services to bolster the security of the kingdom and the Gulf region in the face of Iranian threats. "This package demonstrates, in the clearest terms possible, the United States' commitment to our partnership with Saudi Arabia and our Gulf partners, while also expanding opportunities for American companies in the region, and supporting tens of thousands of new jobs in the US defence industrial base," a statement said. (*The Guardian*)

Significance and contradictions

President Trump's first international tour includes multiple stops. After Saudi Arabia, Mr Trump travelled to Israel where he met with both the president and the prime minister, as well as the Palestinian leader. Then it was on to Rome for a meeting with Pope Francis, to Brussels for talks with EU and NATO leaders, and finally to a G7 summit in Sicily. All of these meetings are significant in their own right, but the fact that Saudi Arabia – the 'heart' of the Islamic world – was first on the agenda caused much speculation.

Before becoming president, Mr Trump was openly antagonistic about Islam and Saudi Arabia, and there were many who were expecting his speech to

Muslim regional leaders to be divisive and somewhat offensive. The tone, however, was opposite to that of Mr Trump's campaign days – he described the Saudis as "great people", spoke of a "spirit of cooperation and trust" and "deliver[ed] a message of friendship and hope and love".

Ishaan Tharoor, of the Washington Post, described the speech as "a sop [something of no value, given as a concession], soaked in platitudes, to the Saudi agenda in the Middle East". Sahar Aziz, writing for CNN, says that Mr Trump has "no qualms about contradicting himself to get what he wants" – he can call for peace and prosperity while at the same time selling weapons. Aziz also believes that "while citizens in the Middle East and America may find his contradictions repugnant, his audience in Saudi Arabia will not... Middle East authoritarians see Mr Trump as a fellow demagogue who will do whatever it takes to get what he wants."

During his visit, Mr Trump also attended the opening of a new Saudi-run centre for "combatting extremist ideology", along with the Saudi king and the Egyptian president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

Overview of the US-Saudi relationship

How is it that two such diverse countries – an ultraconservative Islamic absolute monarchy and a secular ('Christian') democratic republic – came to form a long-term alliance?

Diplomatic relations between the two nations began in 1931, when the US officially recognised Saudi Arabia as a state and the US was given permission to explore for oil in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. During WWII, the relationship gained momentum, as the US saw Saudi oil as being strategically important – in 1943, US president Franklin D. Roosevelt stated that "the defence of Saudi Arabia is vital to the defence of the United States". Permission was given to the US to fly over Saudi airspace and to construct airfields (which advanced their position in the region), and US forces guarded oil installations that had been targeted by Axis powers.

In 1951, the two countries entered into a mutual defence agreement, which became the basis of a longstanding security relationship (Saudi Arabia is

NEWS HEADLINES



On 22 May, a suicide bombing was carried out at Manchester Arena in Manchester, **England**, after a concert by American singer Ariana Grande. The attacker was identified by police as Salman Ramadan Abedi, a 22-year-old British-born citizen of Libyan descent who detonated an improvised explosive device as concertgoers were leaving the arena, killing 22 people, and injuring around 120 others.



Germany's decision to grant asylum to Turks accused of participating in last year's failed coup has further heightened tension between the two NATO allies, Turkey's prime minister said. German officials said that 414 Turkish citizens with diplomatic passports and other government work permits had requested asylum in Germany since the attempted putsch.



Hundreds of thousands of **Venezuelans** took to the streets on 21 May to mark 50 days of protests against the unpopular government of President Nicolas Maduro, with unrest gaining momentum despite a rising death toll and chaotic scenes of night-time looting. At least 46 people have been killed in the worst turmoil faced by Maduro since he won the presidency in 2013.

the US' largest foreign customer of military sales). Over the years, they were allied in their opposition of Communism and in the quest for stable oil prices, and for stability in the economies of Western nations in which Saudis had invested. They fought together against Soviet forces in Afghanistan and against Iraq in Kuwait in 1991, and both are invested in limiting Iran's reach in the region.

The relationship between the two nations, however, has not always been smooth. When the US supported Israel against Arab states in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Saudi Arabia initiated an oil embargo against the US, which created an American energy crisis. The 9/11 attacks also caused much tension – 15 of the 19 hijackers came from Saudi Arabia (as did Osama bin Laden), and one of the given reasons for the attack was the presence of US troops in Saudi Arabia (most of these withdrew in 2003). Under the Obama administration, the relationship went through another season of 'souring' – the former US president suggested that Saudi Arabia may be an 'unreliable ally' in the fight against extremism, and expressed concerns about the civilian toll of Saudi's war in Yemen.

In March this year, Deputy Crown Prince and Minister of Defence Mohammed bin Salman visited Mr Trump in Washington, and the meeting was described as "extremely cordial". Key topics discussed included expanded economic cooperation, an "agreement that Mr Trump's travel ban was justified and was not a 'Muslim ban'", and the "gravity" of Iran's "expansionist moves in the region" (*Aljazeera*).

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Mr Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia has prompted many questions. What message did it send that the leader of the biggest 'Christian' nation in the world, where all freedoms are championed, made his first visit to a country where not a single church is allowed and where freedoms are severely repressed? Does an economically beneficial relationship outweigh issues of values and convictions? How did Mr Trump's visit open doors for future positive discussions and better relations between the West and the Muslim world?

Ryan Mauro, a security analyst writing for Clarion Project, suggests that there were subtleties to Mr Trump's speech that point to a stronger approach to the Muslim world than that of his predecessors, and that between the niceties and platitudes, he challenged his audience (particularly in terms of targeting extremism).

Whatever developments Mr Trump's historic visit have set in motion, God will use them to build His Kingdom and to create new ways for the Gospel to reach those whose 'captivity' goes beyond earthly oppression. Few people saw China, once completely closed to the West, opening up the way it did (beginning with the 2008 Beijing Olympics), so little by little, economic relationships may one day result in the same for Saudi Arabia.

PRAY > For the relations between the US and Saudi Arabia to serve Kingdom purposes > For Christians working in Saudi Arabia to have opportunities to witness > For Saudi leaders to come to know Christ in miraculous ways

KEY EU MEMBERS REITERATE COMMITMENT



By Andrew Richards

France's new President Emmanuel Macron secured backing from key ally Chancellor Angela Merkel for his bid to shake up Europe, despite scepticism in Berlin over his proposed reforms. Macron said in a joint press conference he will be an "open, direct and constructive partner" of Germany and also called for more "pragmatism" in bilateral relations. Merkel also underlined the need for closer cooperation in order to push new EU initiatives forward, and promised to be a "trusting, friendly and close" partner of France. (*Al Jazeera*)

Unfulfilled populist predictions

2017 – the year of the far-right, the end of Muslim migrants to Europe and, most importantly, the fall of the European Union – or so the populist movements across Europe had hoped. Albeit the fact that Brexit is a reality, with the EU set to lose a major economic partner, electoral defeat in the Netherlands and France is a timely reminder that

even popular revolutions have a sell-by-date. When Britain voted in favour of leaving the EU, Brexit became the first casualty the media prematurely referred to as the fall of the EU.

Geert Wilders of the Netherlands and Marine Le Pen of France both rode a popular wave birthed by Brexit. The opposition leaders made leaving the EU a cornerstone of their respective election campaigns, with opposition groups in Germany hoping for the same, if only they could unseat Chancellor Merkel. The EU, however, lived another day, with Wilders losing to Mark Rutte and Le Pen to Emmanuel Macron. Angela Merkel's CDU party is predicted to win in the upcoming September elections.

Russian threat and EU's precarious future

Some analysts suggest that even with anti-EU voices hushed for now, cracks have already formed and divisions will come later that will leave the economic bloc weaker and more vulnerable to Russian influence. A weaker EU would most certainly strengthen Russia, as the Kremlin provides most of Eastern Europe with their gas requirements. If the EU broke up, European countries would be at Russia's mercy: lacking a united front, European nations would be more easily bullied into abandoning their sanctions against Russia.

Some say that Russia is already bullying the EU, and proof thereof is Ukraine. However, Ukraine is not a member of either the EU or NATO, which is partly why Russia invaded Ukraine. Tim Marshall (journalist,

NEWS HEADLINES



Jakarta's Christian governor has been sentenced to two years in jail for blasphemy, a harsher-than-expected ruling critics fear will embolden hard-line Islamist forces to challenge secularism in **Indonesia**, the world's largest Muslim-majority nation.



Turkey warned the United States that a decision to arm Kurdish forces fighting the Islamic State in Syria could end up hurting Washington, and accused its NATO ally of siding with terrorists. Turkey views the YPG as the Syrian extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has fought an insurgency in southeast Turkey since 1984 and is considered a terrorist group by the United States, Turkey and Europe.



Some eight months after the UN Security Council authorised the deployment of an extra 4,000 peacekeepers to war-torn **South Sudan**, the first of those troops have just trickled in amid bureaucratic hurdles by the country's reluctant government. "Meanwhile the situation in the country has deteriorated at a rapid pace," UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a monthly report.

author and broadcaster), in his book "Prisoners of Geography", explains why Russia is willing to confront its Western neighbours (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia), even at the risk of retaliation: "Rule A, lesson one in Diplomacy for Beginners: when faced with what is considered an existential threat, a great power will use force. In terms of Crimea (Ukraine), Russia saw it as an existential matter. Russia could not cope with losing Crimea, the West could." An existential threat is a threat to a people's existence or survival, and for Russia, the invasion of Crimea was necessary to save the Russian-speaking people of Crimea from being assimilated into greater Europe.

Apart from the Baltic States, NATO will most likely never give membership to Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia because they all host large numbers of the Russian diaspora, who could be encouraged by Russia to turn against their European neighbours (as was the case in East Ukraine). Even now, NATO would never give membership to Ukraine because Ukraine is already involved in military conflict with Russia. If Ukraine becomes a NATO member, then the whole NATO alliance, including the US, would be 'at war' with Russia. This would destabilise the region further and surely impact the Church, both negatively and positively. The good news is that Mr Macron's meeting with Ms Merkel is seen to not only strengthen the EU but to re-build it from within. But even then, Russia patiently waits for its chance.

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

One of the reasons for Brexit was an attempt to stop the flow of Muslim refugees to the UK as part of a quota system implemented by the EU. By late 2015, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands were inundated with countless refugees from Syria and Iraq, and it was decided that EU member states had to share the responsibility. This, in part, was the same reason both Wilders and Le Pen encouraged

voters to stand against the establishment: to protect their countries from further terrorist attacks and the possible 'Islamisation' thereof.

The EU exists for the free movement of products and people between the 28 member states, and is today (as a whole) the largest economy in the world. When considering the Church in the EU and its contribution to missions, it's crucial to understand that European churches were largely responsible for the Christianisation of large parts of Africa and the former Soviet Bloc. Ukrainian missionaries who, according to the local Church, are (largely) responsible for new churches planted in Russia, say that a stronger EU would mean a stronger Church. Even though Ukraine is not a member, Christians there recognise the value of a political system that inadvertently creates opportunities for the Church to grow.

A strong economy could strengthen the Church and its mission endeavours, but at the same time, history has shown that it can also negatively impact the Church, with Christians finding security in finances rather than depending on God (which is evidenced by thousands of churches across Europe seeing only a handful of believers attend Sunday services). That, however, has been changing – thanks to more than a million refugees entering Europe. The EU's strong economy allowed it to take care of the refugees and has opened doors for once-stagnant churches to again fill their pews with new converts. If the EU were to dissolve, these 'open doors' could close and a season of harvest among the Muslims of the Middle East could be missed.

PRAY > For political developments in Europe to benefit the European Church > For the European Church to make the most of every opportunity to connect with Muslim refugees > For wisdom for EU leaders as they seek the way forward

'REFORMISTS' WIN BIG IN IRANIAN ELECTIONS



By *Donnelly McClelland*

Iran's re-elected moderate President Hassan Rouhani received a further boost after reformists won key council elections in the capital, Tehran. The pro-Rouhani reformist group Omid (Hope) ousted their conservative rivals who had been in power for 14 years. Mr Rouhani won [19 May's] presidential election in the first round. He promised voters a moderate and outward-looking Iran and criticised the conservative-dominated judiciary. President Rouhani, 68, said his resounding victory showed that voters rejected extremism and wanted more links with the outside world. Analysts say he is in a strong position to seek reforms and to revive Iran's ailing economy. After his re-election there were celebrations in the capital, Tehran, with crowds of

young people singing and dancing in the central Vali Asr Square. (*BBC News*)

Voting for the 'least-worst' option

Iran's complex power-sharing government, created in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, has at its heart an unelected Supreme Leader, who is also the country's commander-in-chief over the military and the powerful paramilitary Revolutionary Guard. The real power, therefore, lies in the hands of the Supreme Leader, a position currently held by Sayyid Ali Hosseini Khamenei, and the security services that control many industries and businesses.

An Iranian president serves a four-year term and is subordinate to the Supreme Leader, but retains a measure of power – this was seen when Mr Rouhani secured the 2015 nuclear deal, despite Ayatollah Khamenei's scepticism.

Running alongside the incumbent Mr Rouhani in these elections was a 56-year-old hard-line cleric, Ebrahim Raisi, considered to be a close ally and protégé of the Supreme Leader. Some analysts view him as a potential future successor to the ailing Ayatollah, who turns 78 this year. Mr Raisi tried to pick up working-class votes by promising more financial support, and

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emphasising his status as a 'seyed', a direct descendant of Prophet Mohammed.

Mr Rouhani, meanwhile, framed his re-election bid as a choice between greater civil liberties and 'extremism'.

From some 56 million eligible voters, more than 70 percent voted. More than 23 million votes went to Mr Rouhani, and 15 million plus to Mr Raisi.

Back in 2009, Iranians attempted to speak up for their future through the 'Green Movement' that campaigned on expanding rights for the people and ending confrontation with the West. But their resistance was crushed and the state arrested thousands. Many of their leaders remain under house arrest, despite President Rouhani's promise in his 2013 campaign to free them.

'Snail-pace' reform from the ground up

In the local council elections, a coalition of reformists and moderates swept to power in major cities across the nation. In the capital, they took all 21 seats for the first time since municipal council voting began in 1999. Iranian media reported similar gains in other major cities.

Almost all major cities were previously in the hands of conservatives, but this latest vote showed that new tactics by reformists were helping them beat the system's restrictions. In the past, the intelligence services and conservative-dominated judiciary vetoed candidates and blocked hundreds of reformists, leaving many voters unsure of who to back. So the reformist leadership started providing lists of their preferred candidates, sharing them via social media. This proved highly effective.

While municipal councils' powers are limited to local affairs, they represent a more direct control of governance by the people. Council members serve four-year terms and choose mayors, decide on budgets and development projects, and oversee local cultural and religious activities.

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Christian charity Middle East Concern (MEC) said the following: "Despite Mr Rouhani's promises to improve human rights in Iran, during his presidency

the treatment of Christians, especially converts [from Islam], has not improved. The number of Christians who were arrested and detained increased, as did the amounts required for release on bail. Mr Rouhani's Charter on Citizens' Rights, which was published in December 2016, falls short of internationally recognised standards of Freedom of Religion and Belief. It is unlikely that Christians, or religious minorities in general, will see a change in Iran's legal system and practice opposing freedom of religion while the Supreme Leader remains in power." But some well-informed observers of Iranian politics point out that this year more Christian candidates were running than in previous local elections.

The 1979 Revolution established a hard-line Islamic regime, and the years that followed saw Christians facing increased opposition and persecution: missionaries were expelled from the country, evangelism became illegal, Bibles in Persian were banned, and several pastors were killed. The small Iranian Church came under tremendous pressure and many feared it would wither away and die. But, according to Mark Howard of Elam Ministries, the exact opposite happened. "Despite continued hostility from the late 1970s until now, Iranians have become the Muslim people most open to the Gospel in the Middle East. Two factors have contributed to this openness. First, violence in the name of Islam has caused widespread disillusionment with the regime and led many Iranians to question their beliefs. Second, many Iranian Christians have continued to boldly and faithfully tell others about Christ, in the face of persecution."

Some observers may consider the re-election of Mr Rouhani as a bleak prospect, but Christianity is reportedly the fastest-growing religion in Iran (an average annual rate of 5.2%), and it remains the largest non-Muslim minority religion in the country. There are those who believe that Christians will constitute 10% of the population by 2020, resulting in a 'paradigm shift' in the country and the surrounding region.

PRAY > For God to direct the leadership of Iran, even if they don't recognise Him as sovereign > For the underground Church in Iran to grow in strength, number, influence and witness

KNOWLEDGE TO ACTION

PROJECT DOTA

Supporting Discipleship Training in South Asia

The Church in South Asia is growing at a phenomenal rate, but as the Church is growing, the need for adequate training is becoming greater.

There are opportunities to provide this vital training in three countries in this impoverished region. This project aims to cover participant costs for pastors attending DOTA* training sessions (including travel, food and accommodation, and study materials).

* "DOTA" refers to "Discipleship On The Air" training, developed for rural pastors and leaders



To support this project, please make use of the INcontext bank details and use DOTA together with your email address (as much as possible of it) as reference.

If you have any questions about this project, please contact our project department (gustav@incontextministries.org) or [CLICK HERE](#) to visit the website.