



Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) women fighters run with children in the town of Tabqa, after SDF captured it from Islamic State militants this week, Syria. Picture taken on Friday

# US-S Arabia nears \$100b arms deal

REUTERS, Washington

The United States is close to completing a series of arms deals for Saudi Arabia totaling more than \$100 billion, a senior White House official said on Friday, a week ahead of President Donald Trump's planned visit to Riyadh.

The official, who spoke to Reuters on condition of anonymity, said the arms package could end up surpassing more than \$300 billion over a decade to help Saudi Arabia boost its defensive capabilities while still maintaining US ally Israel's qualitative military edge over its neighbors.

"We are in the final stages of a series of deals," the official said. The package is being developed to coincide with Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia. Trump leaves for the kingdom on May 19, the first stop on his maiden international trip.

Reuters reported last week that Washington was pushing through contracts for tens of billions of dollars in arms sales to Saudi Arabia, some new, others already in the pipeline, ahead of Trump's visit.

The United States has been the main supplier for most Saudi military needs, from F-15 fighter jets to command and control systems worth tens of billions of dollars in recent years. Trump has vowed to stimulate the US economy by boosting manufacturing jobs.

The package includes American arms and maintenance, ships, air missile defense and maritime security, the official said.

While in Riyadh, the official said Trump would attend three major events: A series of meeting with Saudi officials, a separate session with leaders of the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council and a lunch with Arab and Muslim leaders, 56 of whom have been invited, to discuss combating extremism and cracking down on illicit financing.

Trump will discuss how to counter the threat from Islamic State militants, the war in Yemen and threats of ballistic missiles and maritime shipping in the Red Sea, the official said.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Scottish man finds Viking treasure trove

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A metal detectorist has learned he has hit a £2m jackpot after uncovering Britain's biggest ever Viking treasure.

Derek McLennan unearthed the 10th-century collection of rare Viking artefacts in a field in Dumfries and Galloway in Scotland's south-west in 2014.

The haul of about 100 items included silver bracelets and brooches, a gold ring, an enamelled Christian cross and a bird-shaped gold pin.

The bulk of it is silver jewellery, but it also contains textiles and a range of



precious metal and jewelled items described as "outstanding and exceptional" by experts, including a rare gold ingot, beads, crystals and a decorated silver-gilt cup thought to be of Byzantine origin.

McLennan passed on the treasure to the Queen's and Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer (QLTR), which rules on found goods and property without an owner.

David Harvie, from QLTR, described the hoard as of "outstanding international significance" and "one of the most important finds ever discovered in Scotland".

QLTR ruled the collection should be handed over to Scotland's National Museum for display, provided it can pay McLennan £1.98m to acquire the treasure.

## Trump sees 'fast' decision over new FBI director

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump yesterday said he would act quickly to appoint a new FBI director following his controversial dismissal earlier this week of James Comey -- a move that was still reverberating around Washington.

Trump's administration -- embroiled in a deepening crisis over the sacking and its shifting explanation of events -- will interview the first four candidates for the post on Saturday, US media reported.

"We can make a fast decision," Trump told reporters aboard Air Force One before flying to southern Virginia, where he is set to deliver a commencement address at Liberty University, an evangelical Christian school.

The White House has provided no set timeline for the process of replacing Comey.

Asked if the decision or an announcement could take place before he leaves for



Saudi Arabia on Friday, Trump said: "Even that is possible."

He described the candidates being considered for the post as "outstanding people," "very well-known," and of the "highest level."

On Saturday, Attorney General Jeff Sessions and his deputy Rod Rosenstein will interview acting FBI director Andrew McCabe, Texas Senator John Cornyn, former federal prosecutor Michael Garcia and former assistant attorney general Alice Fisher, The New York Times reported, citing a source familiar with the meetings.

They are among a dozen candidates being considered for the job.

The choice of a new FBI director seen as independent from the White House will be closely scrutinized as Trump faces an avalanche of criticism for firing Comey, the man in charge of a criminal probe into his campaign's possible ties to Russia.

## GLOBAL RANSOMWARE CYBERATTACKS

### Researcher finds 'kill switch'

AFP, Hong Kong

@MalwareTechBlog said.

A cybersecurity researcher appears to have discovered a "kill switch" that can prevent the spread of the WannaCry ransomware -- for now -- that has caused the cyberattacks wreaking havoc globally, they told AFP Saturday.

The researcher, tweeting as @MalwareTechBlog, said the discovery was accidental, but that registering a domain name used by the malware stops it from spreading.

"Essentially they relied on a domain not being registered and by registering it, we stopped their malware spreading," @MalwareTechBlog told AFP in a private message on Twitter.

The researcher warned however that people "need to update their systems ASAP" to avoid attack.

"The crisis isn't over, they can always change the code and try again,"

Friday's wave of cyberattacks, which affected more than 100 countries, apparently exploited a flaw exposed in documents leaked from the US National Security Agency.

The attacks used a technique known as ransomware that locks users' files unless they pay the attackers a designated sum in the virtual currency Bitcoin.

Affected by the onslaught were computer networks at hospitals in Britain, Russia's interior ministry, the Spanish telecom giant Telefonica and the US delivery firm FedEx and many other organisations.

"I will confess that I was unaware registering the domain would stop the malware until after I registered it, so initially it was accidental," @MalwareTechBlog tweeted.

Unfortunately however, computers already affected will not be helped by the solution.



## ROW OVER SOUTH CHINA SEA

### Manila-Beijing talks next week

AFP, Manila

The Philippines and China will open bilateral talks on their dispute over the South China Sea next week, Manila's ambassador to Beijing said yesterday.

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has sought to deepen relations with China despite its extensive island-building in disputed parts of the South China Sea, in the hopes of securing billions of dollars' worth of investments from Beijing.

"We will inaugurate the bilateral consultative mechanism on issues of particular concern to each side. This is where the sensitive issues will be discussed," Ambassador Jose "Chito" Santa Romana said in Beijing in comments aired by ABS-CBN television.

Santa Romana made the comments ahead of Duterte's arrival in Beijing to attend the One Belt, One Road summit on Sunday and Monday -- a pet project of Chinese President Xi Jinping.

"The first session will be next week but this will be a session that will continue on a twice-yearly basis, a chance to exchange views on the South China Sea issue," he said.

China claims nearly all of the strategically vital waterway, despite partial counter-claims from several regional states including the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Taiwan and Vietnam.



The leader of Britain's opposition Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, laughs at a campaign event on the promenade in Lowestoft, Britain, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## SYRIA WAR

### Army seizes airbase from IS: sources

AFP, Beirut

Syria's army captured an airbase in eastern Aleppo from the Islamic State group yesterday, after more than two months of fierce clashes, a military source and monitor said.

The Jarrah airbase had been under IS control since January 2014, when the jihadists seized it from rebels who had captured it a year earlier.

"Regime forces took control of the Jarrah military airport after heavy fighting, said Rami Abdel Rahman, director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor.

"The majority of the jihadists have withdrawn, and regime forces are carrying out clearing operations in the airport and engaged in limited clashes with remaining IS elements," he added.

Syria's army launched an offensive against IS in eastern Aleppo province in mid-January, backed by ally Russia.

So far it has taken control of more than 170 villages and towns in the area, according to the Britain-based monitor.

A military source, speaking on condition of anonymity, also confirmed the capture of the military base.

"The Syrian army has completed its capture of Jarrah airport and a number of the surrounding villages," he told AFP.

"It will continue its advances into the areas held by the terrorist organisation and... expand the areas it controls in eastern Aleppo province," he added.

The next key target for government forces in the area will likely be the town of Maskana, on the edge of Lake Assad.

## Pope makes child shepherds saints

AFP, Fatima

Two young shepherds who had visions of the Virgin Mary 100 years ago in Fatima, a Portuguese site now a global draw for pilgrims, were yesterday declared saints by Pope Francis.

Catholic faithful from all over the world cheered, filling a giant, 400,000-capacity, esplanade that faces the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Fatima, some of them crying -- with many more watching the canonisation from adjacent streets on giant screens.

"We declare the blissful Francisco Marto and Jacinta Marto saints," the Argentine pontiff said in front of the white basilica where the siblings are buried, two giant portraits of the little shepherds hanging in the background.

"We register them on the list of saints, declaring that they must be venerated as such by the Church."

The canonisation took place on the 100th anniversary of the day when Jacinta, then aged seven, her brother Francisco, nine, and their cousin Lucia, 10, first reportedly saw the Virgin Mary on



the spot where the sanctuary was built.

She is said to have appeared six times between May and October 1917 to the three impoverished, barely-literate shepherds, and apparently shared three prophecies with the trio at a period marked by the ravages of

World War I. These reportedly included a warning of a second conflict.

Francisco died in 1919 and his sister Jacinta the following year in the Spanish Influenza epidemic that swept through Europe at the end of the war. Their cousin Lucia lived on until 2005, becoming a nun and meeting several popes including the late John Paul II.

They were canonised yesterday after the Church officially attributed two miracles to the pair -- a necessary step to become a saint.

Wheelchair-bound Maria Emilia Santos said she regained the ability to walk on February 20, 1989, the anniversary of Jacinta's death, after praying to her.

And the parents of a Brazilian boy say he healed at lightning speed after falling more than six metres from a window in 2013, after they prayed to the late Jacinta and Francisco for help.

"The doctors, including non-believers, weren't able to explain this recovery," his father Joao Batista told reporters in Fatima on Thursday.

## First Farc rebels complete disarmament

AFP, Bogota

A group of Colombian FARC rebels on Friday became the first to formally complete a disarmament process under a peace accord designed to end a half-century-old conflict, United Nations monitors said.

"A first group of 12 members of the Farc received today from the UN mission a certificate of completion of individual disarmament, which allows them to formally begin their reintegration into civilian life," the UN said in a statement.

The Farc is disarming under UN supervision as part of last year's accord, which the government says will effectively end a 53-year civil conflict.

## Trump to back Palestinian 'self-determination': aide

REUTERS, Washington

President Donald Trump will express support for Palestinian "self-determination" during a Middle East trip this month, a senior aide said on Friday, suggesting Trump is open to a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict despite not having publicly embraced the idea so far.

The comment by U.S. national security adviser HR McMaster came just nine days after a White House visit by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in which Trump vowed to seek a historic peace deal but stopped short of explicitly committing to the eventual goal of Palestinian statehood, a longtime bedrock of US policy.

Previewing Trump's first foreign trip, McMaster also said he would use a visit to Saudi Arabia, his first stop, to encourage Arab and Muslim partners to take "bold new steps" to confront those from Iran, Islamic State, al-Qaeda and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government "who perpetuate chaos and violence."

Trump's travels, which begin late next week and will also include stops in Israel and Rome, are intended to "broadcast a message of unity" by visiting holy sites of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, McMaster told reporters.

Trump's meetings with Israeli and Palestinian leaders, currently due to be held separately, will be closely watched for whether he begins to articulate a cohesive strategy to revive long-stalled negotiations. Most experts are skeptical of Trump's chances of brokering a peace accord that eluded his predecessors.

Trump sparked international criticism in February when, during a news conference with Netanyahu, he appeared to back away from a longstanding US commitment to Palestinian statehood, saying he would leave it up to the parties to decide.

An independent state is not only the aspiration of the vast majority of Palestinians but has been the objective of successive U.S. administrations and the international community.