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Focus

SEEKING SUPPORT,
KHARTOUM MOVES
CLOSER TO RIYADH

By Tom Little

Long one of Iran's few Sunni Arab partners, Sudan has cut ties with Tehran in the latest step in its move towards Saudi Arabia as Khartoum seeks to end its isolation and right its economy. The impoverished east African state followed Riyadh in severing relations with Iran, saying it was responding to attacks on Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran after the execution of a Saudi Shiite cleric. But with Khartoum hungry for Saudi investment to boost its battered economy, the move was made for "pragmatic reasons", said Al-Tayeb Zein al-Abidine, political science professor at Khartoum University.

It follows Sudan's surprise decision in March to send troops to join the Saudi-led coalition against Yemen's Shiite Houthi rebels. "The government realized it was very isolated, even within the Arab world, and decided to change sides," Abidine said. President Omar Al-Bashir's 26-year rule has seen Sudan slapped with sanctions over rights abuses and its support for Islamic extremists, including Osama bin Laden. Bashir himself is wanted on war crimes charges related to the insurgency in the western region of Darfur.

Ties with the Gulf disintegrated over Khartoum's support of the 1991 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, leaving Sudan to turn to Iran, also isolated and hit by sanctions. Reports said Tehran supplied Sudan with ammunition and small arms, helping to develop its arms industry. Iranian warships used to stop over in Port Sudan across the Red Sea from Saudi Arabia.

'Relationship of Convenience'

But it was a "relationship of convenience", said Magdi El Gizouli, an independent analyst. "I don't think there's a strong ideological commitment," he said. The partnership soured in Sept 2014, when Sudanese officials ordered the closure of an Iranian cultural centre in Khartoum, accusing its employees of preaching Shiite Islam in majority Sunni Sudan. Observers saw underlying motives. "They closed the centres to give a positive signal to Saudi Arabia," a diplomatic source in Khartoum told AFP.

The closure came with the economy faltering after nearly 20 years of sanctions. When South Sudan became independent in 2011, it took with it three quarters of the country's oil reserves. And Sudan's lifting of fuel subsidies triggered street protests in Sept 2013, in one of the most serious challenges to Bashir's rule since he seized power. "The main driver of foreign relations is the situation of the 'bank of Sudan'," said Gizouli, referring to the overall state of the country's economy. Sudan made a firmer commitment to Riyadh and its Gulf allies in March when it joined the coalition, despite fighting insurgencies in the western Darfur region and South Kordofan and Blue Nile states. Its troops have reportedly been active in combat roles in Yemen and Sudanese troops have been filmed driving in convoy through the southern port of Aden. In August, Sudan said it had received a \$1 billion deposit in its central bank, with media reports at the time saying it was aimed at shoring up Sudan's foreign reserves. Foreign ministry spokesman Ali Al-Sadiq denied Sudan's "very good relations" with Riyadh were driven by financial and economic motives. "The flow of investments has (been) coming all the time," he said.

More Investment

But since Sudan's rapprochement with Riyadh and its Gulf allies, officials have been promising there will be more Saudi investment in the country. The investment minister told parliament last week that Saudi investments in Sudan were worth \$11 billion. And after Sudan cut ties with Iran, the deputy head of its mission in Riyadh met the head of the Saudi chamber of commerce to discuss more financial and economic projects. The diplomatic change of course is also likely to prove popular with the families of the hundreds of thousands of Sudanese workers living in the Gulf. "They give support to many families in Sudan, so mending relations with the Gulf was a very popular step," Abidine said.

In March 2014, Saudi banks stopped dealing with Sudan, hitting the workers sending remittances back badly. Following Sudan's decision to join the war in Yemen, officials said the measures could be eased. There has been little improvement in Sudan's economy since its attempted rapprochement, and Riyadh is also facing uncertainties due to the slump in oil prices. But Sudan is still banking on its backing. Khartoum may also hope Riyadh will lobby Washington over its sanctions regime, the removal of which would also lift the economy. "All countries lead a foreign policy in line with their interests," the diplomatic source in Khartoum said. "Sudan's interest now is economic." — AFP

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DAVID BOWIE: CHAMELEON OF ROCK

By Naomi O'Leary

From Ziggy Stardust to the Thin White Duke and Aladdin Sane, David Bowie was rock's ultimate chameleon. A master of reinvention whose career spanned two generations, he dazzled millions with his taste for experiment, taking on everything from glam rock and soul to electronica and jazz. Bowie's sexuality was an experiment too - he played with gender on stage and remained ambiguous on the issue off stage. He marked his 69th birthday on Friday by releasing his 25th studio album "Blackstar", hailed by many as one of his most innovative yet.

Delighted critics heralded a new musical era for the star. But just two days later, Bowie's family made the shock announcement of his death Sunday via social media, revealing that the star had endured a secret 18-month battle with cancer. Starting with "Space Oddity" in 1969, Bowie scored hit after hit over more than four decades, ranging from "The Jean Genie" and "Heroes" in the 1970s to "Let's Dance" and "Modern Love" in the 1980s to more recent hits like 2013's wistful "Where Are We Now?"

Many of these became era-defining hits around the world while successively defining what it meant to be a music legend. Bowie was "an innovator who proved time and again that the only way to make music a vital part of our culture is to continue to break the rules," said Bowie's long-term producer Tony Visconti.

From South London to Superstardom

Bowie sold an estimated 140 million records worldwide but the scale of his influence goes far beyond sales, with musicians from Lady Gaga to Blur citing the importance of his work for theirs. Born David Robert Jones in Brixton, south London on January 8, 1947, his family moved out to the leafy suburb of Bromley when he was six. He changed his name to avoid being confused with The Monkees singer Davy Jones. Bowie's eponymous first album was released in 1967 but it was "Space Oddity" that first caught people's attention.

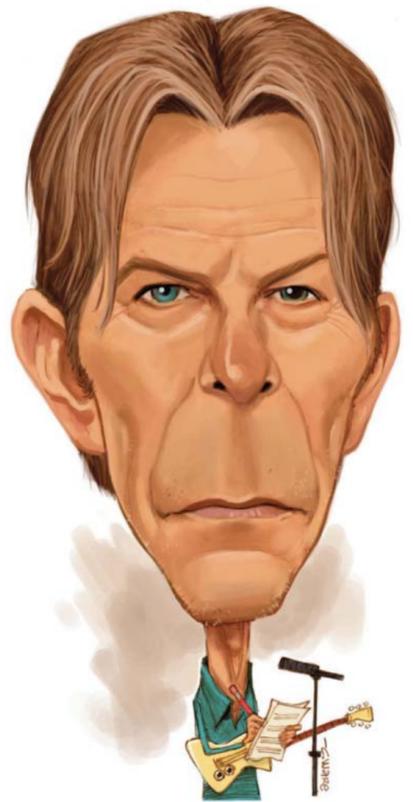
Then in 1972 with his first re-invention as the androgynous Ziggy Stardust, he hit the big time. He brought his

love of mime, fashion and theatre to his music - enabling him to challenge traditional views on style, gender and sexuality. In 1973 he moved on to create the Aladdin Sane persona and two years after that made his breakthrough in the US with "Fame", co-written with John Lennon and Carlos Alomar. The singer was living in the US with his wife Angie, but in 1976 he moved to West Berlin with his son Zowie, in a bid to escape a hedonistic life of drugs, drink and orgies. The marriage ended in divorce in 1980.

From 1976 to 1979, during his Berlin period, he produced a trilogy of albums with Brian Eno ("Low", "Heroes" and "Lodger"). His album "Let's Dance" in 1983, which yielded hits like "China Girl", conquered a younger audience on the dance floor and was his biggest-selling album to date. His late-1980s hard-rock period with the band Tin Machine, received mixed reviews. He married Somali supermodel Iman in 1992, with whom he had a daughter, Alexandria, and after a period living in Switzerland the family decided to split their time between London and New York.

Web Trailblazer

True to form, he was an online musical pioneer, releasing his 1999 album "Hours" on the Internet and sharing his news and passions on a website. Alongside his music career, Bowie took on regular film roles, from "The Man Who Fell to Earth" in 1976 to starring alongside Michael Caine and Scarlett Johansson in the period film "The Prestige", months before his 60th birthday. British media reports suggested he had declined a knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II in 2003. He did not confirm this but reportedly said of such honours: "I seriously don't know what it's for." Bowie suffered a minor heart attack in 2004 which cut short his "A Reality Tour" concert schedule, after which he kept a relatively low public profile. But to an ecstatic reception from fans, he released "The Next Day", his first album of new material for ten years, in 2013. That became his first UK number one for 20 years and his highest entry on the US billboard charts, at number two. "Blackstar", released on Friday, had also drawn critical acclaim, with many fans hoping it would lead to more new work in the coming years. — AFP



BRITISH EMPLOYERS KEEP TIGHT GRIP ON PAY

By William Schomberg

Britain's economy is heading into its seventh year of growth after the financial crisis but for many employers such as Mike Naylor, who runs a small metal-casting firm, business is too uncertain to raise staff pay by much this year. With the Bank of England holding off on raising record-low interest rates until it sees stronger pay growth, Naylor said he would probably only be able to offer an increase that is less generous than last year's. "If the confidence isn't there, it's very difficult to say we will give you 2 percent or 3 percent this year," he said.

Business has slowed recently at Naylor's firm, Durham Foundry, in line with much of British manufacturing, and he worries about the coming year. "I can't see what 2016 is going to do for us," Naylor said, adding he wished he could do more for the 15-strong team at Durham Foundry, which is based in the northern English city of Sheffield - a centre for metal-working since the 14th century.

BoE Governor Mark Carney has sounded equally wary and few economists expect the central bank to move closer to a rate rise this week when it holds its first policy meeting of 2016. After suggesting the BoE might increase rates on a couple of occasions in the past two years, only to be knocked off course by plunging inflation, Carney and his fellow policymakers are looking at pay, among other factors, to help them decide when to move on borrowing costs.

But rather than speeding up as the

BoE has predicted, earnings growth has slowed down, even as unemployment has fallen back to its levels before the financial crisis. Inflation has been stuck around zero, easing the strain of low pay growth for households, but looks set to start edging up soon. Trade union officials say stronger wage growth is needed urgently to make up for several years of below-inflation rises. "It will take until 2018 for average earnings just to get back to the real value they held in 2008 - 10 years of pay going backwards," Trades Union Congress chief Frances O'Grady said.

The breakdown in the usual economic relationship between employment, wages and inflation has stumped the BoE as well as other central banks witnessing a similar phenomenon. Carney said in November he would look for annual earnings growth of more than 3 percent, compared with a little more than 2 percent now, to help him feel that Britain was finally ready for a rate rise. Since then, oil prices have tumbled again and a new slump in China's stock markets has revived concern about the growth outlook there, prompting finance minister George Osborne to say the British economy faced a "dangerous cocktail" of threats.

Trying to Read the Economy

On top of the risks from abroad, investors have also become nervous about a planned referendum on whether Britain should remain in the European Union. Markets are now betting on no increase in BoE rates until 2017, which would be eight years after they were cut

to 0.5 percent.

Jenny Holloway, who runs a not-for-profit clothes factory employing 85 people in London, shares the wariness of many employers. She held off on pay rises for her staff in January, when their wages usually go up. The firm, Fashion Enter, is facing demands for ever cheaper clothing from high-street stores who themselves are resorting to almost permanent discounts to win over careful shoppers. Around a third of her lowest-paid staff will benefit from a 7.5 percent rise from Britain's new minimum wage starting in April. But the outlook for the rest of her team is unclear. "At the moment I am just waiting. It's not very fair to staff, but I have got to read the economy," Holloway said.

Things are brighter in some pockets of the labor market. Firms desperate for skilled workers in areas such as cyber-crime prevention and digital marketing are offering double-digit pay increases to poach staff, according to Benjamin Frost, a consultant with Hay Group, a human resources firm. Long-standing shortages of engineers and other science-based professionals have pushed up their pay. Wages for construction workers are also rising more quickly as building picks up.

The new minimum wage will directly boost the earnings of Britain's nearly 2 million lowest-paid workers in April. About the same number who earn a bit more are likely to get a rise too, albeit a much smaller one, as its effects ripple up the pay scale, according to the Resolution Foundation, a think tank.

But the impact for Britain's 31 million workers as a whole is likely to be small.

The Bank of England expects the new minimum wage to add just 0.1 percentage points a year to earnings growth in the next few years. At the same time, the BoE's forecast that wages would be rising by 3.75 percent a year by the end of 2016 looks too optimistic to many experts. This prediction, made in November, already depends a lot on an improvement in stubbornly weak productivity growth.

BoE officials accept unemployment might fall further without pushing up wages. Deputy Governor Minouche Shafiq, whose views are close to Carney's, has said she expects wages to resume their recovery soon but acknowledged this could take longer. Carney is likely to want to give a new message on the BoE's outlook, as his previous guidance that a decision on rates would become clearer around the turn of the year has timed out. Pay growth may be part of that.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, a trade group for human resources firms, expects pay rises to remain stuck around 2 percent this year. Unlike in previous economic recoveries, British employers can hire workers from across 27 other EU countries, easing the pressure usually felt when skilled workers become hard to find locally, the CIPD's chief economist Mark Beatson said. Tougher welfare rules that have pushed more Britons into work and a steady rise in the number of people delaying retirement have also kept the heat off wages. "I think it's old-fashioned to think that we hit skill shortages and then prices start going up," Beatson said. — Reuters