

Saudi Arabia's crown prince hosts Christian evangelical leaders

NBC News, Reuters, Nov. 2, 2018



RIYADH — Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman held a rare meeting with American evangelical Christians on Thursday, as the ultra-conservative Muslim kingdom [seeks to open up more to the world](#) and repair an image of religious intolerance.

The delegation was led by communications strategist Joel Rosenberg and included former U.S. congresswoman [Michele Bachmann](#), according to an emailed statement by the group, as well as heads of American evangelical organizations, some with ties to Israel.

"It was a historic moment for the Saudi Crown Prince to openly welcome Evangelical Christian leaders to the Palace. We were encouraged by the candor of the two-hour conversation with him today," the statement said.

The delegation also met Saudi officials including Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir, Saudi Ambassador to Washington Prince Khalid bin Salman and secretary-general of the Muslim World League Mohammed al-Issa.

A visit by such prominent non-Muslim leaders, who estimate they represent about 60 million people, is a rare act of religious openness for Saudi Arabia, which [hosts the holiest sites in Islam](#) and bans the practice of other religions.

Some of the figures' support for Israel, which the kingdom does not recognize, is also striking.

For instance, Mike Evans, founder of the Jerusalem Prayer Team, describes himself on his website as "a devout American-Christian Zionist leader."

Saudi Arabia has maintained for years that normalizing relations with Israel hinges on its withdrawal from Arab lands captured in the 1967 Middle East war — territory Palestinians seek for a future state.

But increased tension between Tehran and Riyadh has fueled speculation that shared interests [may push Saudi Arabia and Israel to work together](#) against what they regard as a common Iranian threat.

Prince Mohammed, who in recent years has [loosened strict social rules](#) and [arrested Saudi clerics deemed extremists](#), said in April that Israelis are entitled to live peacefully on their own land.

A month earlier, Saudi Arabia opened its air space for the first time to a commercial flight to Israel.

Several members of the delegation, which met with Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed in the United Arab Emirates earlier in the week, have also advised U.S. President Donald Trump on faith issues.

a