News



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A delegation of conservative evangelical Christian leaders from the United States met Nov. 1 with Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, who is under fire after the death of a journalist in his country's consulate in Istanbul.

The delegation met with the embattled leader at the royal palace in Riyadh to hear his vision for the kingdom and the region — a first for a group of U.S. evangelicals, according to a press release about the meeting from A. Larry Ross Communications.

The meeting comes one month after the death of Washington Post contributing columnist Jamal Khashoggi, for which Saudi Arabia has acknowledged responsibility

after first denying knowledge of the journalist’s disappearance, then deflecting blame onto rogue intelligence agents.

Khashoggi disappeared Oct. 2 after visiting the consulate in Istanbul to get documents he needed to marry his Turkish fiancée. The Saudi government publicly has called his death a “terrible tragedy.”

But questions remain, and most recently the Washington Post reported that Salman claimed in a phone call with U.S. officials that Khashoggi was dangerous and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, which Khashoggi's family denies.

The crown prince also reportedly urged President Donald Trump's advisers Jared Kushner and John Bolton in the call to preserve the alliance between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia.

"There’s a lot of people who would say this is the wrong time to go to Saudi Arabia and meet with the leadership there. I understand that criticism, but I disagree," author Joel Rosenberg told CBN (Christian Broadcasting Network) News.

Rosenberg, who wrote an opinion piece praising Salman as a reformer in late August for Fox News, led the delegation, which included Christian media leaders and several of Trump's unofficial evangelical advisers.

The group decided to meet with Salman despite the controversy surrounding him because, according to the statement, "The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is among the wealthiest, most powerful, and most important nations in the Middle East, in all of history." It also is "the beating heart of the Arab and Islamic world," influencing Muslim theology around the world, it said.

"While the Kingdom is restrictive and controversial in various and serious respects, it has under the Crown Prince begun to undergo reform and professed the desire to change in profound ways," the statement said.

The invitation had been extended to the U.S. evangelical group more than two months ago, according to the joint statement from the delegation.

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The delegation included Michael Little, former head of CBN; the current and former presidents of National Religious Broadcasters, Jerry Johnson and Wayne Pederson; and Larry Ross, founder of A. Larry Ross Communications.

It also included former U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann and Johnnie Moore, president of the Congress of Christian Leaders and a commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Both were members of the Trump campaign's evangelical advisory board, which no longer exists in an official capacity.

Also on the trip were Mike Evans, founder of the Jerusalem Prayer Team, and Pastor Skip Heitzig of Calvary Albuquerque in New Mexico, who has attended several White House events for evangelicals.

Johnson told CBN News the delegation was there not as representatives of the United States but as "ambassadors for Christ."

And a joint statement from the delegation Thursday said, "As Evangelicals, it is our desire to lift up the name of Jesus whenever we are asked and wherever we go."

Earlier in the week, the Americans attended a meeting with Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, as well as Christian and Muslim leaders in the United Arab Emirates. The delegation to the United Arab Emirates also included Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council and a USCIRF commissioner, and Kay Arthur, founder of Precepts Ministries International.