

A Royal Pickle: Jordanian Evangelicals and American 'Help'

The pastor of the Amman International Church in Jordan had a problem.

Suspected intelligence agents were coming to church, asking questions and attending Bible studies. His youth pastor was detained at the Israeli-Jordan border and denied reentry. Members of his church, some who had lived for years in Jordan, were suddenly denied visas.

"Politically speaking, we were the best protected church—half of our congregation were military or foreign service," Greg Griesemer, pastor since 2012, said.

"But after testing the waters with us, the government went more aggressively against the Jordanian evangelical churches."

Griesemer eventually had to leave the country also, informed that the government had an alleged file accusing him of proselytizing Muslims. But he believed the government was checking to see if anyone would stand up for evangelicals in general, as the Vatican would do for Catholics. Unlike the historic churches of Jordan, evangelicals are not represented in the official national council of churches.

Despite a congregation filled with American citizens, appeals to the U.S. Embassy went nowhere, he said. And then quite unexpectedly, in came the cavalry.

Completely unrelated to local developments in Jordan, popular Christian author Joel Rosenberg had been developing a warm relationship with Jordan's King Abdullah. An evangelical of Jewish background, Rosenberg writes political thrillers about

the end times, weaving current events into a biblical narrative of apocalyptic prophecy.

In one bestseller, the king and the Hashemite Kingdom were targets of a series of ISIS terrorist attacks. After reading the novel, Abdullah invited Rosenberg and his wife to Jordan for a five-day visit, and a friendship emerged. Later and at the king's invitation, in November 2017, Rosenberg led a delegation of American evangelical leaders to see Jordan firsthand.

But not just any leaders. They included several who were politically connected, including close advisers to President Donald Trump. The group featured Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council; Jim Garlow, former senior pastor of Skyline Church in San Diego, who moved to Washington to minister to politicians; and Michele Bachmann, a former congresswoman from Minnesota, in addition to others.

Jordan was not their only priority. In the past 18 months, Rosenberg also led the group to visit Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Coming again with official invitations, he wanted to forge better ties between evangelical Christians and Middle East governments and people. A key priority has been to support Christian minorities, who often feel under pressure in society, if not persecuted by Muslims of extremist ideologies.

Also invited to participate was Mike Evans, leader of the Jerusalem Prayer Team and founder of the Friends of Zion Heritage Center in Israel. A self-proclaimed Christian Zionist, he and several members of the delegation were well-known for their strong support of Israel.

Their reputation preceded them in Jordan, and some local evangelical leaders turned down invitations to meet. Though Jordan maintains a peace treaty with Israel, popular sentiment is strongly in favor of the Palestinians. They did not want to

be associated with an ideology that would strain relations not only with Muslims, but also traditional Christian church leaders.

But Rosenberg's delegation did come at the invitation of King Abdullah, and they had already met with several senior government officials, including the foreign minister and the chairman of Jordan's joint chiefs of staff. Nearly 40 evangelical leaders and pastors agreed to sit down, representing many of the major denominations and ministries in Jordan. They included Emad Maayah, president of the Jordan Evangelical Council, and Imad Shehadeh, president of the Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary, and they shared their perspectives and prayer requests in an off-the-record dialogue.

The pastors conveyed a deep sense of respect toward the king and appreciation for the freedom Jordan gives them and all Christians in the country. Some spoke reluctantly of issues they were facing, and Griesemer was also present to share his story. Notes were taken, discussed and agreed to be shared tactfully with King Abdullah.

Mike Evans, a journalist by profession, took particular interest. During the delegation's working lunch at the palace with the king later that day to conclude their visit, he spoke up first to relay the issues discussed. Others followed.

Photos were agreed upon, and a simple press release was issued by both the palace and delegation.

In later discussions with the palace, Evans mentioned a Jordanian pastor who was having his ministries shut down by the government, and how evangelical churches were losing the ability to offer volunteer visas to foreign staff.

Abdullah expressed surprise, that he had never heard of these troubles, and in front of the group assigned one of his closest advisers to look into it.

“Everyone was very encouraged,” Evans said. “I went back to the Jordanian believers, and told them I have good news.”

Such a response was fitting with the reputation of the king. Last year in November he was awarded the prestigious \$1.4 million Templeton Prize, celebrating exceptional contributions to “affirming life’s spiritual dimension.” First given to Mother Teresa, previous winners range from Billy Graham to the Dalai Lama. Abdullah was cited for his efforts to foster better inter-Islamic unity in rejection of terrorism, as well as leadership in fostering Muslim-Christian dialogue and peace.

Six weeks later came the salvo.

“For King Abdullah to receive the Templeton Prize for religious tolerance in view of this situation in Jordan is an absolute travesty,” wrote Evans in the Jerusalem Post. “It is the Templeton Prize for bigotry.”

What changed? Evans wrote that he worked with the king’s adviser for over a year, but things only got worse. The Jordanian pastor’s ministry was dismantled. Churches were being asked to submit membership lists to the government. It seemed fitting with a media campaign launched against evangelicals, as interpreted by some. A year earlier, the Jordan Times published an article in which an Arab Christian leader called them “outlaws,” using an Arabic word frequently describing ISIS.

Frustrated, Evans went public, and Griesemer was pleased. He had pushed Evans to engage the press earlier.

“I value trying to work quietly through individuals and groups, but with the issue of Christian persecution, the Jordanian government doesn’t care enough to deal with it until there is public pressure,” Griesemer said.

“It is clear the government was committed to its hypocrisy of

waving the flag of religious freedom, but in the background persecute Christians.”

He cited a similar situation a decade earlier. Christian expats were being expelled from Jordan, some under accusations of proselytizing. In many cases, no reason was given, though the government stated they were violating the terms of their residency visas. But once the press got involved, Griesemer said, international attention caused Jordan to backtrack and the wave of expulsions ceased, with some reversed.

Evans hopes a media strategy will be successful again, describing his obligation as the one who addressed these issues with King Abdullah, personally.

“I believe it can help the situation, because nothing else has,” he said. “I will speak up for them, no matter the cost.”

But who will pay it?

Imad Shehadeh, the seminary president, had to answer nonstop phone calls and messages about his role in the article. Evans did not check with us, he told them, and circulated published quotes in which he praised the king for winning the Templeton Prize.

“We are praying for protection and no further escalation,” Shehadeh said.

Evans believed he was doing Jordanian evangelicals a favor. In his article, the only cases attached to names were ones where he had specific personal permission. But for everyone else, he anticipated their reaction.

“I don’t think they’ll be happy, and they are the ones who live there,” he said. “But they can always say, ‘We didn’t talk to him.’”

But Evans’ article also caught other members of the delegation by surprise. Joel Rosenberg said all conversations with the

Jordanian Christians and palace were explicitly off the record. (Evans disputed this.)

"I was disappointed to see a friend of mine break our ground rules of confidentiality with both His Majesty and our Jordanian Christian brothers and sisters, and then publicly accuse King Abdullah of being a bigot," Rosenberg said. "Nothing could be further from the truth, and it does not reflect the reality."

After reading Evans' article against the king, Rosenberg immediately reached out to the Royal Court as well as to Jordanian evangelical leaders in an effort to limit the damage, even sending a personal note of apology to the king for the unfair attack by one of his delegation members.

In an interview with *Religion Unplugged*, Rosenberg praised Abdullah as "far and away the leader of the pack" among other Middle East leaders working to protect Christians, allowing churches to operate openly, and promoting peaceful relations between Muslims and Christians.

"There is no question Jordanian Christians, like all Middle Eastern Christians, have challenges and problems, that is the reality of the region," he said. "But my direct understanding from evangelical leaders throughout the Hashemite Kingdom is how much they appreciate the king and the freedom they have."

"Any argument by a few frustrated individuals has to be seen in the context of the respect Jordanian society has for Christians," he said.

Shehadeh spoke similarly, defending King Abdullah.

"Jordan is not a perfect country. No country is," he said, describing Abdullah's past interventions to solve Christian issues.

"But the king is in a very difficult position trying to work

with people of opposing positions and has consistently done a remarkable job to bring sides together. Political leaders in other countries can learn a lot from him.”

The furor has now died down, Shehadeh described, thanks to Rosenberg’s response.

Award-winning journalist Daoud Kuttab, a committed Christian who lives in Jordan, also downplayed the long-term implications. Evans published in an Israeli newspaper, in English, so most of society was likely ignorant. But he published a response in the Jerusalem Post nonetheless, and called out Evans for shoddy journalism.

“It was a hit job,” he said. “Evans used partial information from renegade and non-mainstream people, without talking to all sides.”

Kuttab quoted the president of the Jordan Baptist Convention stating that only one evangelical church was closed down, but due to the attitude of the pastor Evans cited. (The pastor disputed this.)

“Sure there are problems,” Kuttab said, “but for Evans to call the king a bigot? He made evangelicals look like the reason.”

Evans, however, warned about becoming blind to the abuses of power, just to retain access. Why are Muslim leaders reaching out to them to begin with? Because of their connections to Trump.

“They want things from America, but I don’t think this can be one-sided,” he said. “We’re not official, and we don’t speak for the president.

“But we have influence, and we have to live with our own consciences. It is a matter of integrity and the word of God.”

Perhaps. But it is his call to make? Griesemer, the international church pastor, believes it is worth it, and that

he himself paid a high price in having to leave his job, home, and community.

“Either be moderately persecuted in the dark, or speak out and maybe it gets better—or worse. Let God work out the details,” he said.

“I lived there for a decade. I had similar risks, though not the same.” {eo}

This article originally appeared on Religion Unplugged. Reprinted with permission.