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# Homeland Security chief talks building trust with diverse communities in Holocaust Center visit



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The head of the Department of Homeland Security met Friday with a wide range of religious, city and military leaders in metro Detroit, touring the Zekelman Holocaust Center in Farmington Hills and Selfridge Air National Guard Base in Harrison Township and having candid conversations with Arab American advocates in Dearborn about their community being a target of discrimination.

Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas also had lunch at Al-Ameer restaurant with Dearborn Mayor Abdullah Hammoud, who told Mayorkas about concerns that Arab Americans have had with their community being profiled by the department over the past 20 years. Mayorkas then met with about 20 Arab American community leaders and city officials, including Hammoud, at the Dearborn Administrative Center, which contains City Hall offices.

Mayorkas is the latest Homeland Security chief to visit Dearborn and meet with Arab Americans, a tradition that goes back to the post-9/11 era. The last two meetings, in 2016 and 2017, were contentious, but this one was more cordial, according to Arab Americans who attended the meetings.

"The people who attended the event were wounded with difficult experiences from the agencies and their practices, and many blamed the culture," Dr. Yahya Basha of West Bloomfield, who attended the meeting, said afterward.

But during Friday's discussions, there was a "spirit of cooperation and positiveness," said Basha, founder and president of Basha Diagnostics and an advocate for the Arab American community. "I think he's a very positive person."

At the same time, Arab Americans criticized the department and other U.S. government agencies for double standards, such as how Middle Eastern refugees are often blocked from entry while there's now a more welcoming stance for Ukrainian refugees.

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During the meeting, Mayorkas took notes and said he would follow up with some of their concerns. He also spoke about working to gain the trust of diverse communities, acknowledging that some past practices may not have worked, said people who attended the meeting.

Mayorkas, who is Jewish, is the first immigrant and first Latino to lead the department.

Mayorkas was accompanied during his visits by U.S. Sen. Gary Peters, D-Mich., chairman of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. At the Zekelman Holocaust Center, Mayorkas met with 14 faith and community leaders representing metro Detroit Jewish, Chaldean, Muslim, African American and Hindu groups, according to a Peters aide. The meeting also included a member of the Ukrainian American community, Mayorkas said.

The aide did not specify the names of the leaders who were at the meeting at the Holocaust center. A spokesman for the Department of Homeland Security did not respond to requests for comment and details about Mayorkas' visit.

Mayorkas and Peters later visited Selfridge Air National Guard Base in Macomb County, meeting with base leadership and personnel with the Department of Homeland Security, including some with Homeland Security Investigations, Customs and Border Protection and the U.S. Coast Guard, all of which are under the department.

"The senator and I met with a diverse community ... here in this extraordinary Holocaust center," Mayorkas said to reporters during a news conference at the center.

The Holocaust center is "an important message of honor and remembrance to 6 million who lost their lives because of a Holocaust, fueled by an ideology of hate and everything that this country and so much of the world stands against," he said.

"I also think it's noteworthy the diversity of the community with whom we met. We met an individual who represented the Ukrainian American community. ... We in the department are very proud of the swiftness with which we move to grant temporary protected status for you, Ukrainian residents in the United States. We are also proud as a country to come to the

aid of Ukrainians in Ukraine, who have suffered war crimes and other horrors unprovoked by a Russian assault on the sovereignty and freedom of the Ukrainian people."

Mayorkas and Peters spoke about the issue of domestic extremism, saying the department is increasingly focusing on that problem.

Mayorkas also spoke about the issue of building trust and minority communities.

"Trust is not built overnight," he said. "And it is something that we're very, very focused on. ... We have rescinded so many policies in the prior administration, that only exacerbated the level of distrust that that occurred and that proceeded it. We are building bridges between immigrant communities and the Department of Homeland Security. When I first took office, I articulated the position of this department that fundamentally, it is a department of partnerships, that we share an interest in the security, safety and well being of communities of different backgrounds, different ideologies, different faiths, that is who we are as a country."

Peters noted that he helped obtain almost \$250 million in funding for the Nonprofit Security Grant Program, including \$3.5 million for 30 houses of worship and nonprofits in Michigan. Of 30 groups in Michigan that received funding, 15 are in metro Detroit.

An aide to Peters said their office could not share the names of those groups because of security concerns.

At the Dearborn meeting, Arab Americans brought up the issue of being profiled at ports of entry, such as airports and border crossings. The problem is ongoing, said Abed Hammoud, a Dearborn attorney who attended the meeting.

"People spoke also about how ... the government deals with refugees from Syria and Yemen and others and versus how they the Ukrainians were dealt with, like how some things moved so fast" for helping Ukrainians compared with others from Middle Eastern nations, Hammoud said.

Basha noted that thousands of Syrian refugees who were initially admitted into the U.S. were then blocked and still can't gain entry, languishing in other nations such as Jordan.

Bilal Baydoun, a spokesman for Abdullah Hammoud, said the Dearborn mayor spoke to Mayorkas about the concerns he and other Arab Americans have had with racial profiling and being unfairly targeted.

Arab Americans said it was unfair for the department and other federal agencies to label their community as a center of terrorism.

During the meetings with Mayorkas, Hammoud "stressed folks in this community are just as American as anyone else," Baydoun said.

Since FEMA is under the department, flooding issues were also discussed.

Some in the Arab American community had raised concerns that Mayorkas' meeting in Dearborn with Arab Americans was not made public beforehand by his office or by Peters.

Mayorkas said he was glad to meet with the Arab American community.

"I'm incredibly proud to be here and to to meet with the community this afternoon," he said at the Holocaust Center before he visited Dearborn. "And it is an open meeting. And we're ... very much looking forward to hearing from the community, and also speaking of our approach to the community and building trust with our community. ... We built the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships ... in the Department of Homeland Security, to reach out to communities that might not feel that the bridge of distrust has been closed, to prove to them that we are worthy of their trust, that we are here for them, that we are here to serve them, and to make them secure and safe in the practice of their faith and not shrink from their identity. ... That is who we are as the United States."

Others who attended the Dearborn meeting included: Dearborn Police Chief Issa Shahin; Dearborn Fire Chief Joseph Murray; Dearborn Heights Mayor Bill Bazzi; Wayne County Commissioner Sam Baydoun; U.S. Rep. Debbie Dingell, D-Dearborn; State Rep. Abraham Aiyash, D-Hamtramck; Maha Freij, the president & CEO of ACCESS, an Arab-American social services group; business leader Nasser Beydoun, Fay Beydoun, a leader in the Michigan Democratic Party, Osama Siblani, publisher of the Dearborn-based Arab American News, Nada Al-Hanooti, executive director of Michigan chapter of Emgage Action, which advocates for Muslim-Americans in politics; Wally Jadan, the CEO of MEA TV & Radio, a Middle Eastern media outlet in Troy; and Mahmoud Al-Hadidi, a leader with the Michigan Muslim Community Council.

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