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belief blog

## Imams brief congressman on trip to concentration camps to battle anti-Semitism

(Washington, DC) Minnesota Congressman Keith Ellison held a public briefing on Capitol Hill to hear from a group of American imams on their recent trip to former Nazi concentration camps to help combat anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial.

The group visited Dachau and Auschwitz camps in Germany.

"I had gone to Auschwitz as a college exchange student and it had a transformative effect on me," Ellison said after the briefing Wednesday. The Democrat said that was one of the main reasons he got involved with the group.

The weeklong trip in August was the brainchild of Rabbi Jack Bemporad, the director of the Center for Interreligious Understanding.

"It occurred to me that the important thing was for them to go there and simply say, 'this is what the truth is,'" he said at the briefing. "Not a political statement, not a propaganda statement, not even necessarily a religious statement. It had to be a statement in a sense that bore witness to what was the truth."

Imam Muhamad Maged was part of the trip. The iman is from the All Dulles Area Muslim Society in Virginia and vice president of the Islamic Society of North America.

"You see the ashes of people. You see the pictures. You walk the trail, you see the gas chambers, it is beyond imagination that somebody would do something like that," he said.

Maged spoke about the importance of speaking the truth in Islam.

"One of the most dangerous things in Islam is to have a false testimony and when someone denies the Holocaust, they bear false testimony," he said.

"There is no way you can deny evidence of history when you have seen the actual hair, the shoes," he said referring to exhibits at Auschwitz that display hills of hair and shoes from the tens of thousands of Jews gassed by the Nazis during World War II.

Hannah Rosenthal, the U.S. State Department special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism, weighed in on her trip.

"Holocaust denial doesn't just feed anti-Semitism, it is anti-Semitism and it is growing," she said at the briefing.

She said the anti-Semitism and Holocaust denials she monitors from some Muslims clerics in the Middle East are prompted by ignorance and hatred.

This trip was important to help combat those issues and raise awareness in the U.S. Muslim community, she said.

"Sometimes, the message is the most important thing. And sometimes it's the messenger," she said. "So having Muslim leaders condemn anti-Semitism is far more powerful than someone named Hannah Rosenthal condemn anti-Semitism."

As the imams, the rabbi and Rosenthal were in Europe, a Florida pastor threatened to burn the Quran and protesters took to the streets in Manhattan to rally against the building of an Islamic center so close to ground zero.

For Bemporad, the rhetoric around the two events and subsequent debates were eerily familiar.

"The same patterns that I studied teaching Jewish history, with respect to anti-Semitism, are now occurring with respect to anti-Muslim," Bemporad said. "It's the same propaganda, it's the same character assassinations, it's the same dehumanization, it's the

same de-contextualization. We [Jews] have to be the ones, because of our history have to stand up against what's happening to the Muslim community."

Ellison said the administration's response to the Quran burning threat was the right one. "What they did was help maintain America's level of liberty and freedom where nobody has to fear who they are based on whether they have a kufi on or hijab on or a yarmulke, " Ellison said. "Whether you're a Mormon or a Hindu, you can still worship as you please. It's your business and you don't have to fear."