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CIA goes hiring in heart of Arab America

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11/27/2009

DEARBORN, Michigan (Reuters) - At Tuhama's Lebanese deli in Dearborn, and at bakeries and barbershops throughout town, it's no secret the CIA is looking for a few good spies.

"There is a lot of talk, and nobody likes it," said Hamze Chehade, a 48-year-old Lebanese-American, taking a bite of his chicken shawarma.

In dire need of agents fluent in Arabic, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency has made an unusual public show of its recruiting effort in Dearborn -- a city of 100,000 with the densest Arab population in the United States.

The agency has bought full-page ads in Arabic-language newspapers and it is rolling out TV ads aimed at luring Arab-Americans and Iranian-Americans to spycraft.

But despite a weak economy and high unemployment, the CIA will find it hard to hire here, residents say. Many see U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East as misguided and anger over the perceived mistreatment of Arab-Americans runs deep.

It won't be easy to win hearts and minds here, they say.

"If anyone goes, they would be just going for the money, not following the heart," said Chehade, a cabinet-maker who immigrated from Lebanon 21 years ago.

CIA recruiters said the agency sorely needs speakers of Arabic and other languages due to the intensifying insurgency in Afghanistan and the continuing U.S. occupation of Iraq.

"Obviously, with the wars going on in the Middle East, that's really on America's radar," said Henry Medina, who is in charge of CIA recruiting in the Midwest.

"We're going to recruit that knowledge, that language, the linguistics, the cultural nuances that are critical to fully understand the foes and enemies," said Medina during a briefing for reporters who were shown the agency's new ads.

One TV spot showed a dinner party at an Arab-American home, with a narrator intoning, "Your nation, your world. They're worth protecting. Careers in the CIA." The camera zooms out to show the party taking place in a modern high-rise building, then a view of the United States from outer space.

A second spot introduces five Arab-American professionals in turn -- an engineer, a scientist, an economist, a lawyer, and an academic -- then shows them together announcing, "We work for the CIA."

"We're trying to de-mystify the agency. We don't want people to only see us as being something like what you see in the movies or spy novels," said CIA recruiter Zahra Roberts.

"DOES AMERICA LOVE US?"

The CIA declined to disclose the cost of the ad campaign or detail the number of Arab-American recruits it wants to hire.

Leaders in Dearborn's Arab community said they welcomed efforts to make U.S. intelligence agencies more inclusive.

But they said people have grown wary of the government's use of wiretaps and informants in the Arab-American community.

Strict enforcement of immigration laws and delays at airports and border crossings for Arab-Americans have also created a backlash, they said.

"People have been told, 'Your name is Mohammed; your name is Ahmed; you must be a terrorist,'" said Osama Siblani, Lebanese-born publisher of the Dearborn-based Arab American News. "How do you bring people into the government when they have been subjected to a great deal of discrimination?"

He added: "You have to believe that what you are doing is the right thing, otherwise you are just a gun for hire."

Siblani, whose newspaper runs CIA recruiting ads, met CIA Director Leon Panetta during a September visit to Dearborn. "I said, treat us like Americans," he said. "We love America but does America love us?"

Dawud Walid, head of the Michigan branch of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, agreed that many Arab-Americans were torn between feelings of patriotism and resentment of U.S. government policy at home and abroad.

"I think transparency will do a lot more than airing TV commercials. There's a large amount of fear and mistrust with the government," Walid said.

People of Middle Eastern origin make up more than one-third of Dearborn's 100,000 residents, an influx that began a hundred years ago when Henry Ford hired Lebanese immigrants to work in the nearby River Rouge plant. More recently, many Iraqi refugees have also settled in Dearborn.

On Warren Avenue, where signs in Arabic outnumber those in English, other residents said they doubted the CIA would find many willing recruits in Dearborn.

"It's not lack of patriotism. It's questioning of wrong policy," said Mohammed, a 24-year-old graduate student of Libyan descent who asked not to use his last name.

Inside Tuhama's, Chehade said he would warn his adult sons to consider the consequences of signing on with the CIA.

"People are going to hate you," he said.