

Witness says imam.. (The Star-Ledger)

Witness says imam admitted belonging to Hamas
by Brian Donohue/The
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Mitsu Yasukawa / The Star Ledger Zeinab
Gaver of Little Falls and other supporters of the Imam hold a rally across the
street from Peter W. Rodino Jr. Federal Building in Newark today.

More
photos from the rally.

The immigration trial of a revered Muslim leader began today with the lead
government witness testifying the cleric pleaded guilty in an Israeli military
court to being a member of the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas from 1989 to
1991.

Mohammad Qatanani, imam of the Islamic Center of Passaic County in Paterson,
faces charges that he failed to disclose his 1993 conviction by Israeli
authorities when he applied for permanent U.S. residency three years later.

If the charges are proven, Qatanani, his wife and the three of his six
children - who were not born in the United States - could be deported.

Testimony later in the day revealed that it was Qatanani who told federal
agents about his arrest in Israel, when he contacted the FBI in 2005 seeking
help with his stalled green card application.

Testifying this morning for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Amos
Guiora, professor at the University of Utah School of Law and a former judge and
prosecutor in the Israeli occupied territories, read from court records showing
Qatanani confessed before a judge in 1993 to charges of membership in Hamas and
providing services to Hamas.

Qatanani has denied any ties to Hamas. He said he was detained, but unaware
of any formal charges or conviction on his record.

Mitsu Yasukawa/The Star-Ledger Supporters and followers of the Imam offer daily noon prayer across the street from Peter W. Rodino Jr. Federal Building in Newark where Imam is on trial.

Under cross examination, Qatanani's attorney, Claudia Slovinsky honed in on discrepancies in the paperwork - including the lack of any specific mention in the court records that Qatanani was actually present at his conviction.

She also attacked the credibility of the Israeli military court system itself, reading from reports from Human Rights Watch and other groups that found the Israeli military had routinely used tactics like sleep deprivation, hooding and exposure to cold temperatures on detainees during that time period.

Mitsu Yasukawa/The Star-Ledger During a lunch break, Mohammad Qatanani, center, surrounded by family waves to supporters as they rally across the street from the federal courthouse in Newark.

Conviction rates for Palestinians detained in the West Bank and Gaza during that time period ranged from 90 to 95 percent, with nearly all of the cases ending with guilty pleas, Slovinsky said. Harsh questioning tactics used by the military were banned by the Israeli Supreme Court in 1999 which declared them torture.

Subject to such conditions, Guiora conceded a detainee like Qatanani "no doubt will tell an interrogator what he thinks he wants to hear."

Later today, FBI Agent Angel Alicea said he met with Qatanani in February 2005, after mosque officials called the FBI trying to find out why his green card application was stalled. At that time, Alicea said, Qatanani told him he had been arrested after crossing from Jordan to the West Bank in 1993.

As the trial began, hundreds of Qatanani's supporters gathered across the street from the Peter Rodino Federal Building, where the trial is taking place before Judge Albeto J. Riefkohl. When the trial broke for lunch Qatanani came out and greeted the crowd, blowing kisses.

After testimony ended for the day, Qatanani said: "I believe justice will prevail."

