

Pascrell affirms he backs imam (THE RECORD)

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SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

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Rep. Bill Pascrell Jr. of Paterson reiterated his support for Imam Mohammad Qatanani on Wednesday, saying he agreed to testify in the popular cleric's behalf in January.

Qatanani, the spiritual leader of the Islamic Center of Passaic County in Paterson since 1996, faces deportation for not disclosing a conviction in an Israeli court on his application for permanent U.S. residency.

Last month the imam's defense lawyer opted not to have Pascrell testify because she had to limit the roster of witnesses and believed his letter of support could stand on its own.

Pascrell wrote one of the 200 affidavits submitted to the court in behalf of the imam.

In the letter sent to the immigration court judge, Pascrell called the imam "magnanimous" and "peace-loving."

"As a religious leader, Imam Qatanani has had an enormously positive impact in my district," the letter stated. "Our community would suffer a serious loss should he be required to leave."

In a statement issued last month, Israeli police said the Palestinian man

confessed to assisting Hamas and was sentenced by a court to a three-month imprisonment.

Qatanani said he never confessed to assisting Hamas, which the State Department considers a terrorist group. The 44-year-old cleric said he was detained while crossing the border between Jordan and the West Bank.

Twelve people will be testifying in the imam's behalf, including Passaic County Sheriff Jerry Speziale and Charles B. McKenna, assistant U.S. attorney in Newark.

McKenna met the imam after Sept. 11, when Qatanani offered translation services and other support to law enforcement.

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Source: <http://www.northjersey.com/news/immigration/18755704.html>