

## US imam's deportation hearing focuses on disputed arrest (Associated Press)

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NEWARK, New Jersey: An immigration hearing for a popular Muslim leader resumed Monday with both sides focusing on a disputed arrest at the heart of his deportation case.

Mohammad Qatanani, 44, is being denied U.S. residency based on allegations that he failed to disclose a 1993 arrest and conviction in Israel on his green card application.

Qatanani, a Palestinian with Jordanian citizenship, has been the imam of the Islamic Center of Passaic County in Paterson, New Jersey, since 1996, the year he came to the United States on a work visa. He applied for permanent residency in 1999.

The U.S. government is now seeking to deport him, arguing that he did not list a prior arrest in Israel on his application &mdash; a disclosure that could disqualify him from getting a green card.

Israeli military authorities say Qatanani admitted to being a member of Hamas during interrogation in 1993 in Israel. Both the United States and Israel consider Hamas to be a terror group.

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An Israeli army statement says an Israeli military court sentenced Qatanani to three months in prison and a 12-month suspended sentence, and also fined him.

During the third day of testimony Monday, defense witnesses and lawyers for Qatanani continued to dispute he was ever arrested and countered claims he was associated with Hamas.

They said Qatanani, a Palestinian with Jordanian citizenship, had been detained &mdash; not arrested &mdash; while traveling to his native West Bank in 1993. They said he was unaware of any conviction.

They continued to challenge the authenticity of documents that immigration authorities say came from Israel.

Witnesses for Qatanani also testified Monday that detention of Palestinians traveling through Israel in the early 1990s was routine.

On Monday, Jonathan Kuttab, a Jerusalem-based lawyer, and Lisa Hajjar, a professor at the University of California, were called by the defense as expert witnesses on Israeli military courts. Another expert witness discussed interrogation techniques commonly used in Israel at the time.

Kuttab and Hajjar separately described Israeli military courts in the early 1990s as backlogged with thousands of Palestinian defendants during the height of the Intifada in Israel.

Kuttab said court proceedings were routinely conducted in Hebrew and

defendants only had access to lawyers post-interrogation. The majority of cases were resolved with plea bargains that often followed confessions obtained with techniques later classified as torture, according to Hajjar.

Kuttab questioned why the documents in Qatanani's case did not contain a confession &mdash; a document he said was nearly always central to Israeli cases. He expressed surprise at the light sentence Qatanani was allegedly given for being a suspected Hamas member.

"They say he got only three months (detention) for membership in Hamas? And a few weeks after his release he was issued a permit and allowed to travel to Jordan?" Kuttab asked.

Immigration lawyers for the U.S. government questioned each witness' expertise and established that none of them had direct knowledge of Qatanani's case.

Although the details of the Israeli incident are disputed, both sides have testified that U.S. immigration officials were unaware of them until Qatanani brought them to their attention in 2005. That's the year he asked for a special meeting with immigration to find out why there was a six-year delay in his green card application.

When the judge called for a lunch break, Qatanani &mdash; surrounded by at least 40 supporters &mdash; led daily prayers in the middle of the courthouse cafeteria.

Despite high winds and rain, Qatanani supporters outside the courthouse waved American flags at passers-by and shouted through megaphones that Qatanani is a man of peace.

The hearing will resume June 2, when Qatanani is scheduled to testify.

