

Israeli court system focus of imam's Newark trial (The Star-Ledger)

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by Brian Donohue/The
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The immigration trial of a North Jersey Muslim leader resumed this morning, with testimony about the controversial Israeli military court system the U.S. government says arrested and convicted him in 1993.

Mohammad Qatanani, imam of the Islamic Center of Passaic County in Paterson faces deportation for allegedly failing to disclose on his 1996 green card application that he had been arrested and pleaded guilty to aiding the terrorist group Hamas in an Israeli military court three years earlier.

Tony Kurdzuk/The Star-Ledger Supporters for Mohammad Qatanani, imam of the Islamic Center of Passaic County, huddle under tents as they rally on Broad Street in Newark, NJ across from the Rodino Building against the imam's possible deportation.

His attorneys argue that Qatanani was detained, not arrested, then convicted in absentia and subject to brutal interrogation tactics Israel's top court later outlawed as torture. They are contesting the validity of the Israeli court document the government says records his arrest. Judge Alberto J. Riefkohl has not ruled on whether it will be admitted into evidence.

As the trial entered its third day in Newark immigration court this morning, Qatanani's attorneys called to the stand Lisa Hajjar, a professor at the University of California and an expert on the Israeli military courts.

Hajjar described the court system as one in which "huge numbers" of Palestinians were "swept up" in the Israeli occupied territories during the second intifada uprising in the early 1990's. The court system, which was separate from Israel's criminal courts, were presided over by soldiers who served as both judges and prosecutors.

Hajjar said it would "extremely routine" for someone like Qatanani to be detained for questioning and face harsh interrogation tactics. Still, she said, Qatanani's three-month sentence seemed to be very short for someone convicted of assisting Hamas.

For the third day, several hundred supporters of Qatanani gathered across the street from the Peter Rodino Federal Building, waving American flags and chanting in support of Qatanani, despite the driving rain and high winds.