

Rabbi, priests, sheriffs support Passaic imam in court (The Star-Ledger)

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by Brian Donohue/The Star-Ledger

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Mitsu Yasukawa/The Star-Ledger
Imam
Mohammad Qatanani greets supporters who hold a rally across the street from
Peter W. Rodino Jr. Federal Building in Newark today.

Mitsu Yasukawa/The Star-Ledger
Supporters
of Paterson Imam Mohammad Qatanani rally in Newark today.

A Jewish rabbi, Roman Catholic and Episcopalian priests, a federal prosecutor
and two sherriffs took the witness stand today to heap praise upon a popular
Muslim cleric as his attorneys began presenting their case for why he should not
be deported.

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.

His attorneys argue that Qatanani was detained administratively, convicted in
absentia and subject to interrogation tactics Israel's top court later outlawed
as torture.

Among the witnesses subpeonad by Qatatani's lawyers was Assistant United
States Attorney Charles McKenna, who described numerous trips to the Paterson
mosque as part of an effort to create better understanding between law
enforcement and the Muslim community.

As an example, he said investigators often interpreted the tendency of Muslim
women to not look them in the eye as a sign of deceit. Through the dialogue at
the mosque, they realized it is routine in Arab culture for women not to look
men outside their family in the eye.

"It's important for us to have leaders in the Islamic community who will be
accepting of us and give us inroads in the community," he said.

The sheriffs of two north Jersey counties echoed McKenna's statements that the mosque's open door policies had helped investigators become more familiar with cultural aspects of the Muslim community.

But they also described a more personal connection they had made through their cooperation with Qatanani.

"When I'm in his presence, and he does have a presence, this small, unassuming person, he doesn't say "boo" but he gives me a better feeling of peace," said Bergen County Sheriff Leo McGuire. "I feel better as a person to be with him."

Jerry Speziale, the sheriff of Passaic County echoed McGuire's testimony saying Qatanani "radiates peace."

Christopher Brundage, one of two Department of Homeland Security attorneys serving as prosecutors in the case, pressed Speziale and McGuire, asking if they would have different opinions if they had known about Qatanani's alleged ties to Hamas.

Speziale said he would need to see proof of the conviction himself. McGuire said, "It would surprise me," but added, "it cannot change my mind about what I have observed."