

Aaron: Imam cleared in court of public opinion (Record)

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By LAWRENCE AARON

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THE EVIDENCE is mounting against the well-respected local Muslim leader threatened with deportation. But his attorney is returning strong counterarguments.

It may take an immigration hearing judge weeks to determine whether Imam Mohammad Qatanani was a supporter of Hamas and deliberately hid it from immigration authorities when he applied for permanent residency.

The government's case against him is reinforced by signed documents obtained from the Israeli courts, which show him admitting to membership in Hamas. Meanwhile, Qatanani's attorney, Claudia Slovinsky, is poking holes in those court documents and attacking the government's credibility.

The loud but peaceful rally taking place on his behalf outside the federal building in Newark is a major departure for the local Muslim community, which seldom engages in street demonstrations.

They've kept a low profile in the midst of post-Sept. 11 tensions, while building a good relationship with their neighbors.

Ultimately, what Qatanani has going for him is a record of good works, community service and recognition of his willingness to cooperate with the FBI, local law enforcement and religious leaders outside his Islamic circle.

He's gotten unequivocal support from some local leaders, who recognize Qatanani as a liaison between the Muslims and many other segments of North Jersey's religious and political community. Christian clerics also joined Muslim religious leaders in support of the imam. That can only reinforce his image as a conciliator.

Accused of aiding Hamas

The imam of the Islamic Center of Passaic County in Paterson is trying to get permanent residency. Immigration officials say he failed to disclose that he'd been arrested, convicted and detained in the West Bank by Israeli authorities who accused him of aiding Hamas, viewed by Israel and the United States as a terrorist organization. He says that he was tortured and signed documents that weren't true and that there was never a trial or conviction.

Also in his favor is that he was released after 90 days. Had he been a serious threat to security, he'd still be in an Israeli prison today.

Qatanani's strength is in his people, certainly. Muslim supporters in the hundreds have demonstrated in Newark, where his hearing is taking place.

The religious leader is respected and loved in many corners of the Muslim community. A testament to his strong backing are Friday services generally attended by Muslims from many different cultures.

Additional endorsements from outside of the Muslim community will go a long way toward convincing the judge that Qatanani's failure to indicate he'd been held in an Israeli jail might have been an innocent omission from his 1999 application for residency.

Ultimately, the fate of Qatanani, his wife and six children may hinge on the fact that questions about his incarceration in Israel only surfaced in 2005 after he initiated a discussion with an FBI acquaintance. He hoped to find out what was holding up his green card.

It was only then that U.S. government officials said that reports from Israel suggested that he had not been entirely truthful on his 1999 written application.

Qatanani has an impressive array of witnesses on his side. Bergen County Sheriff Leo McGuire, Passaic County Sheriff Jerry Speziale and Assistant U.S. Attorney Charles McKenna were among character witnesses who agreed to testify on his behalf.

Wrong side of argument?

Backing Qatanani could be risky for local high-profile supporters, who would not be inclined to put their necks on the block unless they really believed in the imam's innocence. In the post-Sept. 11 world, none of them would want to be trapped on the wrong side of the terrorist argument.

Qatanani's extensive support from non-Muslims indicates a level of détente between Muslim and non-Muslim groups.

North Jersey has come a long way in accommodating unfamiliar Islamic culture. Thanks partly to the moderating influence of Qatanani, there's been little local tension or evidence of the level of Islamic extremism seen elsewhere in the world.

Lawrence Aaron is a Record columnist. Contact him at aaron@northjersey.com. Send comments about this column to letterstotheeditor@northjersey.com.