

Feds try to connect imam to terrorists (Record)

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[View PHOTO GALLERY](#) from Newark.

Mohammed Qatanani, continuing victim of Israeli persecution? Or Mohammed Qatanani, sinister figure always on the edge of involvement with terrorists?

The sharply differing portrayals flashed constantly Monday as U.S. immigration lawyers grilled the prominent North Jersey Muslim cleric they seek to deport.

The lawyers especially focused on whether Qatanani, imam of the Islamic Center of Passaic County, had been aware of terrorist ties of some members of groups he belonged to, as well as relatives of his wife.

It was the fourth, and likely the last, day of a U.S. Immigration Court trial in Newark which Qatanani is making a new attempt to obtain permanent U.S. residency. Immigration authorities rejected Qatanani's first residency application, filed in 1999, based on their assertion that he failed to disclose a 1993 arrest and conviction in Israel for being a member of Hamas — a militant group that the United States lists as terrorist.

The trial has been closely watched by political and religious leaders. Qatanani has won a reputation as a leading Muslim voice in New Jersey of

moderation and tolerance.

Qatanani has said that he was detained by Israeli authorities for three months, but that at no time did anyone tell him he had been arrested, charged or convicted. He said he did not mention the incident because Palestinian males routinely were detained by Israelis.

Alan Wolf, a government lawyer, repeatedly raised the high rank that Qatanani's brother-in-law, Mahmoud Abu Hanoud, had in Hamas. But Qatanani's lawyer argued that her client should not be held accountable for the activities of relatives.

Wolf also tried to establish a link between Qatanani and the former ICPC imam, Mohammed el-Mezain, who was charged with raising money for the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development, which authorities said funneled money to Palestinian terrorists.

But Qatanani said that from the time he arrived in 1996 on a religious visa, he realized that he and el-Mezain had very different "visions" for the mosque. He said he favored reaching out to other faiths and encouraging the congregation to be active in the larger non-Muslim community, while el-Mezain preferred a more insular approach.

He said that the differences between them had become such an issue that he had even attempted to resign, but he eventually got the support of the mosque to pursue his ideas for interfaith outreach.

Qatanani's lawyer, Claudia Slovinsky, bitterly objected to the questions.

"This is slanderous, pulling out names and trying by guilt of association, calling him a terrorist," Slovinsky said to Immigration Court Judge Alberto Riefkohl. "I go to a lot of conferences where people speak and I don't know who they are."

Earlier in the day, Qatanani at times choked up while describing the torture Israelis subjected him to while they detained him for three months.

The imam, 44, testified that Israeli officials kept a foul-smelling hood over

his head for long periods, forced him to sit in an unstable child's chair for hours, and played loud music and yelled at him when he tried to sleep.

After assuring that his children — who have attended the hearings along with his wife — were not in the courtroom, Qatanani recounted that Israelis made threatening comments about his parents and children.

“They want to break you,” Qatanani said, his voice often breaking as he spoke. “It is a kind of death, judge. You feel death is better than life. A human being in that place has no rights, he has nothing.”

His lawyer has questioned the existence of a confession the Israelis say Qatanani signed, and says the U.S. government, which has mentioned it in court, has failed to produce it.

The imam says he signed papers in Hebrew under duress while detained by the Israelis, but he had no idea what the papers said.

“The system there is very different than the system in this country,” he said. “The system there is military. Soldiers are around you, everyone is watching you, even the lawyer is afraid.”

Riefkohl said he will likely render a decision on the case by mid-September.

Some dozen U.S. officials sat in the back of the courtroom, listening to the testimony and occasionally shooting one another glances. It was a far larger presence than the two or three who have sat in the back of the courtroom thus far during the hearings.

At those hearings, people testifying on behalf of the imam depicted him as a peaceful man who condemns violence and never would be associated with a group such as Hamas. Experts on the Israeli court system described it as unfair, arbitrary and one that often engaged in the torture of Palestinians under its custody.

Government witnesses included officials with the FBI and Immigration and Customs Enforcement who said that in a meeting with Qatanani — which the imam

requested to inquire about the delay in his green card application – the Muslim cleric volunteered that he had been arrested by the Israelis and that he admitted to having been a member of Hamas.

But on Monday, under questioning from Slovinsky, Qatanani categorically denied that he had said those things to the U.S. officials at that meeting. He testified that he had specifically said he had been detained, a routine experience for Palestinians at the time, and that he had never said that he was arrested or convicted.

The semantical difference is important in this case, because the government is attempting to argue that Qatanani suppressed what he knew was a significant experience — an arrest and conviction — while Qatanani is saying that detention is not viewed as significant, but routine for many Palestinian males.

The decision before Riefkohl is whether to approve Qatanani's new application for U.S. residency for himself and, by extension, his wife and three of his children. Three other children were born in the United States.

The imam, who has Jordanian citizenship, said he would find it difficult to adjust to life if he had to return to the Middle East.

He said his children “don't know Palestine, they can't visit Palestine, they became part of this community.”

“My mentality became connected in the [U.S.] environment in which I've worked,” he said. “I believe anybody who lives in this country will love it, this is a country of democracy.”

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KEVIN R. WEXLER/ SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

Imam Mohammad Qatanani raises his hands after leaving federal court in Newark on the final day of his trial.

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