

Prominent Paterson imam testifies in deportation trial (The-Star-Ledger)

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by Amy Ellis Nutt

Monday June 02, 2008, 7:17 PM

Imam Mohammed Qatanani, one of New Jersey's most prominent Muslims, told a government attorney this afternoon that he never knew why the Israeli military detained him in 1993, a critical point in his deportation trial in Newark.

The Immigration and Customs Enforcement asserts Qatanani, now imam of the Islamic Center of Passaic County, was convicted by an Israeli military court of assisting the terrorist group Hamas, and that Qatanani was not truthful about it when he applied for permanent U.S. residence in 1999.

During cross-examination, Qatanani said the Israelis never told him he did anything illegal. He denied he was ever a member of Hamas, and that he ever made a confession to that effect to the Israelis.

"Did you and your lawyer discuss the legal basis for you being held?" asked prosecutor Alan Wolf.

"No," answered the imam.

"You never talked to him about the legal basis for your detention?"

"Mr. Wolf, when you are in that place, you have just a few seconds to talk," Qatanani said. "Soldiers are all around you. My lawyer said 'I hope you go home in several days.'"

"Did you agree to anything on your release," asked Wolf, referring to a possible confession.

"I agree to nothing," said Qatanani.

Wolf frequently asked Qatanani about his relationships with the former imam of the Islamic Center, Mohammad el-Mezain, who is awaiting retrial in a terrorism-related case, as well as one of his brothers-in-law, a military leader for Hamas in the West Bank.

When Wolf then asked Qatanani about whether he remembered meeting an alleged Hamas sympathizer at a conference where the cleric gave a talk, Qatanani's lawyer Claudia Slovinsky objected, raising her voice for the first and only time of the day.

"This is slanderous. This is without foundation. This is guilt by association," she said. "I go to a lot of conferences and I don't know all the people who are there and what they do."

The fourth and final day of the deportation trial brought emotional testimony from the man the government is seeking to send back to the Middle East. In the morning session, Qatanani recounted what he said was 30 days of verbal and physical torture by

Israeli interrogaters in 1993 when he was detained on a trip from Jordan back to Palestine to visit relatives.

"I have been here 13 years," Qatanani said, in response to his own lawyer's questions. "This country became my country. It became my family ... It is a country of freedom, of democracy. We have now a journey to continue. This country has a very beautiful society."