

## N.J. Muslim Leader Quizzed On Terror Ties (WNBC)

N.J. Muslim Leader Quizzed On Terror Ties

POSTED: 8:57 am EDT June 2, 2008

UPDATED: 5:36 pm EDT June 2, 2008

NEWARK, N.J. -- U.S.

immigration lawyers sought to tie the influential leader of a New Jersey mosque to terrorist-affiliated groups and individuals as part of their argument Monday that he should be deported.

Mohammad Qatanani, a Palestinian who has been the spiritual leader at the Islamic Center of Passaic County in New Jersey since 1996, is facing deportation on charges that he lied on his 1999 application for a green card.

U.S. officials, in rejecting his bid for permanent residency, said Qatanani failed to disclose a 1993 arrest and conviction in Israel for being a member of the militant group Hamas.

Qatanani said he has never been a Hamas member and was detained, not arrested, in Israel, arguing that such detentions were routine at the time.

Qatanani began his testimony Monday -- after asking his children to leave the courtroom -- by graphically describing the torture he claims he was subjected to in Israeli custody.

Under cross-examination, lawyers for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security -- which oversees immigration proceedings -- asked Qatanani about his relationships with several individuals connected to terrorist groups.

Alan Wolf, a lawyer for DHS, questioned Qatanani about his brother-in-law, Mahmoud Abu Hanoud, who was a senior Hamas military leader killed by the Israelis.

Qatanani said he knew Hanoud because he was his wife's brother, but that Hanoud had been in prison for much of their association.

Wolf also pressed Qatanani about his ties with the former imam of the Paterson mosque, Mohammed el-Mezain, who was later arrested and is currently facing retrial on charges of funneling money to Palestinian terrorist groups.

Qatanani testified that he was never aware of el-Mezain's activities, did not share his vision for the mosque and had so many disagreements with him that Qatanani tried to resign his position after six months.

Wolf also cited excerpts of sermons Qatanani had given calling Israelis "transgressors," and questioned whether Qatanani or the mosque had donated money to various Islamic organizations.

Qatanani's lawyer, Claudia Slovinsky, objected several times to the line of questioning, at one point yelling out, "Your honor, this is slanderous. It is guilt by association."

Monday was the fourth and probably final day of the trial, according to Immigration Judge Alberto J. Riefkohl, who is overseeing the case in Newark federal court.

The judge set a July 31 deadline for final written summations in the case, and said he would render a decision by mid-September as to whether Qatanani, his wife, and three of the couple's six children who are foreign-born can remain in the United States.

Prior days of testimony featured witnesses from rabbis to FBI agents, who testified that Qatanani was a moderate Muslim leader dedicated to interfaith cooperation and community outreach.

On the stand Monday morning, Qatanani recounted for the court his time in

Israeli detention -- describing being tied to a small chair with his hands bound, kept in a freezing cell, deprived of food and water, and subjected to violence and threats. Several of his supporters in the packed courtroom quietly wept.

"Judge, you cannot imagine," Qatanani said, his voice breaking. "They say, 'We will kill your family.' They say, 'You know what your family is doing now? We will go to them, we will burn them.'"

Qatanani paused to compose himself before telling the judge, "At that time, you feel that death is better than life."

Qatanani testified that his six children were raised here and that he felt connected to New Jersey after 13 years working in the state.

When asked by his lawyer why he was trying to stay in America, Qatanani said he loved the people.

<http://www.wnbc.com/investigations/16456429/detail.html>