

US Muslim leader fighting deportation talks of torture in Israeli detention (Associated Press)

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NEWARK, New Jersey: A popular Muslim leader facing deportation asked that his children be removed from the courtroom Monday before he broke into tears while describing graphic torture he said he was subjected to in Israeli detention.

The issue of torture is at the heart of the deportation proceedings against Mohammad Qatanani, a Palestinian who has been the mosque leader of the Islamic Center of Passaic County in Paterson since 1996. It is one of the largest mosques in the northeastern state.

The United States government has rejected his bid for permanent U.S.

residency, saying Qatanani failed to disclose a 1993 arrest and conviction in Israel for being a member of Hamas on his green card application.

Qatanani denies the charges, saying he was detained, not arrested, by the Israelis along with many Palestinians at the time.

As he recounted his time in Israeli detention — describing being tied to a small chair with his hands bound, kept in a freezing cell, and subjected to violence and threats — several of his supporters in the packed courtroom began quietly weeping.

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"Judge, you can not 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 Immigration Judge Alberto J. Riefkohl, "At that time, you feel that death is better than life."

Earlier in the day, Qatanani described growing up poor in a Palestinian refugee camp. He said that since age 6, he has wanted to be a mosque leader — following in the footsteps of his father.

Qatanani's lawyers spent part of the morning trying to distance him from his controversial predecessor at the mosque, Mohammed el-Mezain, who was arrested and is facing re-trial on charges of funneling money to Palestinian terrorist groups.

Qatanani testified that he didn't get along with el-Mezain and never shared his vision. On the stand, Qatanani pointed to his commitment to interfaith dialogue, cooperation with law enforcement, and the integration of Muslims into mainstream American society.

Riefkohl, who is hearing the case in Newark federal court, said Monday would probably be the last day of the trial.

The judge said it could take him a month or more to decide whether Qatanani, his wife, and three of the couple's six children who are foreign-born can remain in the United States.