

## Cleric claims Israeli torture (HERALD)

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Testifies at deportation hearing

NEWARK -- In his first chance to address the U.S. Immigration Court, Imam Mohammad Qatanani explained Monday how little he knew about the time he spent in an Israeli prison in 1993 or the terms negotiated for his release.

"They did not say charged, did not say guilty plea, did not give any papers," said Qatanani, during the fourth day of testimony in his deportation case at U.S. Immigration Court in Newark.

Immigration authorities are seeking to deport Qatanani because he did not state on his application for U.S. permanent residency that he was arrested by Israeli authorities and charged with assisting Hamas. Qatanani said he only learned about the charges when his family's application for permanent U.S. residency was denied in 2006.

Before testifying about his detention Monday morning, Qatanani asked his children to leave the courtroom. He told the court that Israeli military officials threatened to kill his family and repeatedly tortured him, looking for a confession. Interrogators forced him to squat for hours, drink out of a vessel used for urine and kicked him if he tried to sleep, he said.

"At that time, you feel death is better than life," said Qatanani, who struggled not to cry while talking about the detention. "A human being living in that place has no rights. He has nothing."

During his three months in prison, Qatanani never saw a judge. His lawyer spoke to him for a few minutes through a window but gave no details of the charges. A few days before his release, Qatanani, now 44, signed a document referred to as a "finishing paper" and was told to leave.

On Monday, U.S. Immigration Court Judge Alberto J. Riefkohl, questioned why the spiritual leader of the Islamic Center of Passaic County had not since gotten records or a statement about the terms of his release from his lawyer. Qatanani said he contacted the lawyer through a brother in the Palestinian territories, but they were unsuccessful in getting the 15-year-old documents.

Testimony in the deportation case concluded Monday afternoon, but the judge will not make a decision for several months.

Qatanani moved from the Middle East to Paterson on work visa in 1996 to serve as the imam for the Paterson mosque. He has received national attention for his moderate approach to Islam, work with other faiths and condemnation of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks the day they occurred.

Outside the courthouse, about 200 of Qatanani's supporters rallied across from the Broad Street building. A bluegrass band led by a New Jersey minister played folk songs, and speakers attested to the imam's interfaith work in North Jersey. Fifty of his supporters, and several immigration officials, packed the courtroom for the last day of the testimony.

During the afternoon, the Department of Homeland Security tried to establish that Qatanani was a "well-known voice against the Israeli occupation." Prosecutor Alan Wolf sought to connect Qatanani to his brother-in-law, Mahmoud Abu Hanoud, a former military leader for Hamas in the West Bank who was imprisoned in Israel and later killed. Wolf also referred to Mohammed el-Mezain, Qatanani's predecessor at the Islamic Center of Passaic County. After leaving the mosque in 1999, el-Mezain was charged with raising money for the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development, an organization that federal authorities said funneled money to terrorists in the Palestinian territories.

Qatanani said he did not have good relations with el-Mezain and interviewed for a job at a mosque in Chicago in 1997 because he considered leaving.

At the hearing's conclusion, Riefkohl complimented the lawyers for the prosecution and the defense on their professionalism. The lawyers must submit written summations to the court by July 31. Riefkohl will then hand down his written decision by August or September. Both sides have the right to appeal.

Leaving the courtroom, Qatanani expressed hope that he will win his case and be able to remain in the U.S. as he gathered with his family and supporters.

"We will stand with all of you one day to celebrate this," said Qatanani, an American flag waving in front of him as the crowd cheered in response. "We love you all."

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