

## Don't deport the imam (STAR-LEDGER - Aug 18)

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Monday, August 18, 2008

It would be difficult to find an immigrant who has done more for his community and for state and federal authorities than Imam Moham mad Qatanani, the leader of the Islamic Center of Passaic County.

Qatanani has been known for steadfastly preaching tolerance and understanding between all faiths ever since his arrival in 1996. In the dark days after 9/11, Qatanani reached out to members of other faiths and to the FBI and other agencies. His work was vital in helping Muslims, law enforcement and the larger community confront the tensions that surfaced.

Now the federal government wants to deport him. Immigration Judge Alberto Riefkohl should ask why officials are so determined to deport a man whose integrity seems beyond reproach.

It cannot be because of the laughably weak evidence they have introduced in his Newark trial for allegedly failing to disclose a supposed 1993 arrest by Israeli authorities on his green card application years ago.

There is no question the imam was held by the Israelis for three months back then. But the government has utterly failed to show he was "ar rested," as opposed to being detained, like thousands of other Palestinians at the time.

The difference isn't just a semantic quibble, as it would be in the United States. Any resemblance between these detentions and what the average American

might consider an arrest and due process was purely coincidental.

Israeli detainees often weren't told why they were being held, weren't given formal charges and were sometimes convicted without the bother of being present for the proceedings. That is precisely what Qatanani says must have happened with him because he was never told he had been convicted.

This is entirely believable, given that Qatanani's Israeli military court "conviction" papers are so full of discrepancies and holes that Riefkohl refused to admit them into evidence.

The government hasn't even been able to produce a confession that prosecutors claim Qatanani gave -- under head-bagging and other interrogation conditions later outlawed by the Israeli Supreme Court.

Given evidence that is flimsier than what is typically offered in Newark parking court, federal prosecutors have resorted to trying to convict Qatanani on the basis of guilt by association. They claim Qatanani must be a terrorist sympathizer because he has a brother-in-law who is a Hamas military leader.

By this logic, federal prosecutors should have made sure William Bulger spent his years sitting in jail as a mobster rather than rising to become president of the Massachusetts Senate as well as of the University of Massachusetts. After all, Bulger's brother, "Whitey," was a notorious organized crime figure who to this day remains on the FBI's 10 most wanted list.

If Qatanani is a terrorist wolf in cleric's clothing, he must be Rasputin-like in his powers of persuasion. How else to explain that the sheriffs of Bergen and Passaic counties both took the stand as character witnesses for him?

So did a respected assistant U.S. attorney and one of North Jersey's most prominent rabbis. Passaic

Sheriff Jerry Speziale, a man not noted for being warm and fuzzy, told Riefkohl's court that Qatanani "radiates peace."

Riefkohl is expected to rule on Qatanani's case in early September. He should reject the government's charges. The imam should stay in the United States.