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Revered New Jersey Imam, Facing Deportation, Has Interfaith Support

By TINA KELLEY and ELIZABETH DWOSKIN Published: April 24, 2008

PATERSON, N.J. — For a dozen years, Mohammad Qatanani has supported the members of the Islamic Center of Passaic County by speaking at funerals, hashing out ethical dilemmas and sometimes opening his home to domestic-violence victims at a moment's notice.

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Todd Heisler/The New York Times

Mohammad Qatanani, imam of the Islamic Center of Passaic County, faces possible deportation in a dispute over his application for permanent residency.

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Members of the Islamic Center of Passaic County and leaders of other faiths have rallied around Dr. Qatanani.

But now Dr. Qatanani, 44, the imam of the mosque here, requires the support of the members: he has been barred by federal immigration authorities from renewing his driver's license, and must call on friends to ferry him to hospitals for visits with the sick among his flock. There are fund-raisers for him at the mosque. And after Friday prayers, the hugs the men give him seem to last extra long.

The imam, who is Palestinian, and most of his family face deportation because of his detention in Israel decades ago and questions about whether he lied about it on his application for permanent residency, which he made in 1999 and which was recently denied.

The case has galvanized a diverse group of community figures from a variety of faiths who fear the prospect of losing a leader they see as an example of Muslim moderation. Many of them will gather in West Orange on Thursday for an ecumenical dinner in his honor.

Since Imam Qatanani's arrival at the Islamic Center, which sits on a well-heeled hilltop in this polyglot city, attendance at Friday prayers has doubled to about 900. It is a place still healing, in some ways, from the arrest of its former imam, Mohammed el-Mezain, in a terrorism-financing case against the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development. (Mr. el-Mezain is one of five Holy Land leaders awaiting retrial on charges of

funneling \$12.4 million to Palestinian terrorists. He was acquitted of all but one charge, on which there was a hung jury, last year.)

Now, the mosque displays a banner announcing rallies planned during immigration hearings next month that will determine whether or not Imam Qatanani, his wife, and three of their six children must leave the country. Supporters have collected 15,000 signatures on petitions to be sent to the Department of Homeland Security.

"It absolutely upsets us as a community, and we do feel under siege," said Othman Suqi, 44, who recently drove the imam to a mall to buy a novel for a child's homework assignment. (Imam Qatanani rarely asks for help; last summer, he carried his 16-year-old

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son to a hospital that is a 10-minute walk away after an appendicitis attack.) “This is not about an individual,” Mr. Suqi added. “This is a community leader who builds bridges between us and other communities.”

Such bridges are a hallmark of Imam Qatanani’s years at the mosque, particularly after the Sept. 11 attacks, when federal agents disclosed that three of the 19 hijackers had lived in Paterson.

“After 9/11, when everyone locked themselves in a shell, he stepped out of the boundaries and brought everyone together,” Sinan Aladdin, 23, said as he left the mosque after prayers one recent Friday with a stack of fliers announcing rallies on behalf of Imam Qatanani next month.

The mosque’s members come from just about every country in the Middle East, as well as from Turkey and Pakistan. They wear suits or work boots or long dresses and hijabs to services, and some use headsets that provide the English translations of the imam’s Arabic sermons. The melodic call to prayer is answered, after services, by monotonous music from an ice cream truck drawn to the crowd.

And, lately, “Keep the Imam in America” shirts have been selling swiftly at \$8 each, near cans of olive oil and vats of Middle Eastern spices outside the mosque.

Imam Qatanani’s lawyer, Claudia Slovinsky, said immigration officials are accusing him of lying on his permanent residency application because he said he had never been arrested or convicted of a crime, and made no mention of time he spent in detention in Israel near the end of the first intifada, in 1993, when Palestinians were routinely held by Israelis for questioning.

But Ms. Slovinsky said the imam never received word of any charges or convictions against him during his three months in police custody in Nablus on the West Bank, and thus was not lying on the immigration form.

Ms. Slovinsky said that immigration officials have told her that they have Israeli records showing he was convicted of assisting terrorist organizations for referring Palestinian students arriving in Jordan to join the Muslim Brotherhood, an international Islamitist group, and [Hamas](#). She disputes the authenticity and accuracy of those records. Imam Qatanani was a member of the student chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is a legal organization in Jordan, Ms. Slovinsky said. It is not on the State Department’s list of terrorist organizations. He said that he was never a member of Hamas, which is on the list.

Michael W. Gilhooly, a spokesman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, refused to discuss the case, other than to say that Imam Qatanani is scheduled to appear before an immigration judge next month.

Ms. Slovinsky said that officials also denied Imam Qatanani’s permanent residency application because he has relationships with people including his brother-in-law, Mahmoud Abu Hanoud — a senior Hamas military leader who was killed by the Israelis — and Mr. el-Mezain, the former imam.

If the immigration judge denies the permanent residency application, Imam Qatanani could take his case to the Board of Immigration Appeals, and then, possibly, to the United States Court of Appeals.

“I don’t think I could imagine this mosque without him,” said Khaldoun Abu-Hakmeh, 19, a student who lives in Lyndhurst. “I’d probably go elsewhere.”

Waleed Lashin, 36, a doctor who said he moved to the United States from Egypt after visiting the mosque, said that he feels the influence of Imam Qatanani, who performed his marriage, daily.

“I kiss my wife’s hand every day, because he told me to,” Dr. Lashin said. “It gets a little

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emotional here. I have a successful life, family, children, and any way I look at it, it ends up having to do with something he told me.”

Fuad Issa, 45, an engineer from Highland Park, said Imam Qatanani’s ability to pull people together to learn about other faiths has made the community stronger. “Before he was here, we did not look into the community at large, and it was kind of isolated,” he said.

Yusef Clifton, 46, of Paterson, who works for the AAA, said the case “makes me feel a little embarrassed as an American, that they would target such a man.”

“People say you can get an imam anywhere,” Mr. Clifton added, “but that’s like saying you can get a mom anywhere.”

Immigrant advocate groups said that other imams, in Pittsburgh, Miami, Dallas, Los Angeles and Dearborn, Mich., are also facing possible deportation, which Kareem W. Shora, executive director of the Washington-based American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, called a major concern. “We don’t know if it’s policy-driven or not,” he said. “Is there a pattern? Is it very prevalent? Yes.”

Aref Assaf, president of the American Arab Forum, an advocacy group based in Denville, N.J., said of Imam Qatanani: “If you want to deport him, what sort of person do you want to keep in this country?”

“The years of friendship and openness we’ve had with law enforcement will be reversed,” Dr. Assaf said. Imam Qatanani had invited the [F.B.I.](#) to make a dozen presentations about national security at the mosque. “I don’t think law enforcement officials will be in the position to reach into our community, except as spies, instead of as friends.” The Rev. Phil Latronico, a Roman Catholic priest who is chairman of the North Jersey Christian-Muslim Project, credited Imam Qatanani with increasing discussions among Christians and Muslims tenfold.

Rabbi David Senter of Congregation Beth Shalom in Pompton Lakes called the imam “the most moderate individual you could imagine.” Rabbi Senter, who has publicly praised Imam Qatanani’s work on behalf of interfaith understanding, said he deserves due process. “My fear is, because of Sept. 11 and the wide brush we’ve been willing to paint Muslims with, he will not get that.”

Imam Qatanani said he is relying on his faith. “If you are straight with God, God will take care of you in this life and in the hereafter,” he said in a recent interview. “If you know Allah in the easy time, God will you know you in the difficult time.”

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