

## Editorials

# Security vs. Liberty

Seven years ago, on Sept. 11, 2001, everything changed. Since then, our government has been engaged in a profound struggle to find the right balance between two essential and sometimes competing interests — the interest in ensuring our national security and the interest in protecting the individual liberties and civil rights that define our democracy. The Department of Homeland Security's efforts to deport Mohammad Mahdi Ahmad Quatanani, the imam, or spiritual leader, of the Islamic Center of Passaic County (ICPC), a mosque located in Paterson, is a disappointing example of the government getting it wrong.

Mr. Quatanani was born in the West Bank in 1962. He moved to Jordan in 1982, where he received bachelor's and master's degrees, and subsequently a Ph.D. He remained in Jordan after completing his studies and in 1989 he became an imam. In 1996, he left Jordan with his wife and children to accept an offer to become the imam of the ICPC.

Mr. Quatanani originally came to the United States on a temporary religious worker visa, which was set to expire in April 1999. On that visa's expiration date, Mr. Quatanani filed an application for a permanent residence visa. Due to processing delays on the government's part, that application languished for years — Mr. Quatanani was not even interviewed for seven years — until May 2006. In July 2006, after Mr. Quatanani retained counsel to press for resolution, the Department of Homeland Security denied the application and instituted a deportation action, alleging, among other things, that Mr. Quatanani had engaged in terrorist activities.

The matter was tried in May, and on Sept. 4, U.S. Immigration Judge Alberto Riefkohl granted Mr. Quatanani's application for permanent residence and issued an opinion that amounted to a complete repudiation of the government's allegations. In short, Judge Riefkohl determined that the documents relied on by the

government were totally unreliable and that its main witness was not credible.

By all accounts, during his 12 years in the U.S., Mr. Quatanani has been an extraordinarily positive force in his community and a productive and active member of our society. He has worked tirelessly to promote inter-faith dialogue and build bridges between and among Jews, Christians and Muslims. Through his efforts, the ICPC has become an inviting sanctuary for a wide variety of ethnic groups, hosting numerous events that bring rabbis, ministers and priests into the mosque.

He also has provided consistent and valuable assistance to local and federal law enforcement officials. Under his leadership, the ICPC was among the first Mosques to issue a statement after 9/11, condemning the attacks within hours. He has been vocal in his opposition to terrorism and has helped to open lines of communication between law enforcement officials and his community.

In addition, he has encouraged members of his community to become active participants in civic and public life. At a time when many Muslims in America report feeling oppressed and isolated, he has dedicated himself to fighting the insular tendencies of his community and helping his congregants assimilate into a broader American culture.

As described by Judge Riefkohl, the evidence of Mr. Quatanani's alleged terrorist activities or associations was embarrassingly flimsy. In light of that, and mindful of Mr. Quatanani's many community-building and outreach efforts, we question the government's decision to prosecute. It was an unwise exercise of discretion and it reflects poorly on our government and our country. In the spirit of bridge-building and in the interest of rebuilding trust in the Muslim community, we would urge the government to accept Judge Riefkohl's decision and not pursue an appeal.