

Son of Hamas Founder Granted Asylum in U.S.

The son of a Hamas founder who converted to Christianity and spied for Israel can stay in the U.S. pending fingerprinting and a routine background check, a U.S. immigration judge said Wednesday.

Mosab Hassan Yousef, 32, had been denied political asylum in February 2009 because the Department of Homeland Security said he posed a terrorist threat. Yousef, who came to the U.S. in 2007, has said he feared assassination if he returned to the Middle East because he spied for Israel and abandoned Islam. Yousef told reporters he was surprised by the outcome of the deportation hearing held in San Diego this morning. It lasted less than 20 minutes because Homeland Security dropped its opposition to his asylum request without explanation.

Those close to the case speculate that support from members of Congress, former CIA director James Woolsey and Yousef's Israeli intelligence handler, Gonen ben Itzhak played a part in the decision.

Itzhak traveled from Israel to testify on Yousef's behalf, though no witnesses ultimately were called. "Basically, I wanted to say that Mosab was not a terrorist," Itzhak said, according to *Fox News*. "He was not affiliated with Hamas. He's a great guy, and he should get asylum."

Yousef is the oldest son of respected imam Sheikh Hassan Yousef, a founder of the Palestinian terror organization Hamas who is serving a six-year sentence in an Israeli prison. The younger Yousef has been disowned by his father; he became a Christian in 2005 and later spied for Israel's intelligence agency, Shin Bet. He recounts his experience in a memoir, *Son of Hamas*, that released in March.

In a blog posting last month, Yousef admitted that he posed as a terrorist and carried a gun while spying for Shin Bet at meetings with Palestinian leaders.

“Yes, while working for Israeli intelligence, I posed as a terrorist,” Yousef wrote. “Yes, I carried a gun. Yes, I was in terrorist meetings with Yasser Arafat, my father and other Hamas leaders. It was part of my job. And I passed on to the Shin Bet all the information I gathered during those meetings and saved the lives of many people—including many Americans.”

In the blog, Yousef also criticized Homeland Security’s handling of his case, saying the department was looking for terrorists in the wrong places. “If Homeland Security cannot tell the difference between a terrorist and a man who spent his life fighting terrorism, how can they protect their own people?” he asked.

During a conference call today, Yousef said he hoped the government would learn from his experience. In order to fight the relatively new threat of individual terrorists, Yousef said Homeland Security and other intelligence agencies must better understand the religion, culture and motive of those individuals.

“In my case, unfortunately, [there was a] lack of knowledge, lack of experience, lack of distinguishing between who’s terrorist and who’s not terrorist,” he said. “I’m not criticizing; that wasn’t my goal. I wanted, and I still want, American public and Homeland Security, FBI, to consider more. This is not just a small threat, it’s a huge threat, and in order to fight it we need to take different measures.”

Yousef, who lives in San Diego, said he hopes to become a U.S. citizen and pursue a master’s degree in history and geography. He said he will keep fighting the ideology behind terrorists “because I know how they think.”

This year he will celebrate the Fourth of July without the

threat of deportation, but he said he has long been an American.

“I think I became American when I start to fight for liberty and freedom,” he said. “At that moment I served the common ground that gathers every free man and woman in this country. I celebrated always the Fourth of July. I think independence is a great thing, but what I think is greater is the liberty that is in the heart of every individual of this country. I think this is a great country, a great nation, and I will be proud to be called American.”

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