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Muslims See Imam's Case as an Omen;
'High level of fear' reported as Islamic agencies field dozens of calls after religious figure agrees to leave the United States.

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BODY:

One day after a well-known Muslim cleric gave up his immigration fight and agreed to leave the country in order to win release from detention, many Muslims in Southern California reacted with concern, saying the case has renewed fears that government efforts to fight terrorism will limit their civil rights.

Some said Wednesday they worry that if Wagdy Mohamed Ghoneim, an imam at the Islamic Institute of Orange County, could be targeted by the Department of Homeland Security, they, too, might be forced out of the country.

"There's a high level of fear," said Hussam Ayloush, executive director of the Anaheim-based Southern California chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

"Most of the calls I've been getting have been asking, 'Shall we start packing up? Are we next?' "

Ghoneim was arrested Nov. 4 at his Anaheim home for overstaying his visa.

He has remained in custody at the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention facility in San Pedro.

A hearing to determine whether he should be granted bond was held Tuesday. But before the judge issued her written ruling, Ghoneim decided to leave, citing poor health.

Government officials said they believe Ghoneim, who came from Egypt in 2001, may have been giving speeches and helping raise funds for groups with terrorist ties. His attorney denied the allegation, saying there was no evidence to support their claim.

News that Ghoneim agreed to leave the country provoked dozens of calls Wednesday to local Arab American organizations. Mosques in Claremont and Anaheim called the Council on American-Islamic Relations to schedule workshops aimed at calming the community.

Ayloush said many in the Muslim community feel deeply ambivalent about Ghoneim's decision to give up the fight.

"The last thing the community wants to see is for him to have a heart attack and lose his life [in custody]," he said.

"On the other hand, his packing up and leaving is unfortunately a dent in our civil rights struggle."

Abdul Rashid, the public relations chairman at Ghoneim's mosque, agreed that it was a wise choice for the imam.

But, he said, "For the community, no. This sends a message in respect to the community that we couldn't win.

"Because he is Muslim, it's a different outcome."