



## Local family reunited as Giffords helps four get back from Gaza

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A Tucson family is grateful to be back in its adopted country after surviving a civil war and fearing that it would never be able to leave its troubled homeland.

Husain Gharbia and his wife, Fatina, planned to make 2007 the year they returned to the Middle East and introduced their families to their daughters, Ayah, 3, and Tala, 1.

The parents are permanent legal residents, and their daughters are U.S. citizens.

Fatina left with the girls in late January. Husain, a cab driver, joined them three months ago. They were due to return to Tucson via Cairo, Egypt, on June 30.

Little did they know that a civil war would break out on the Gaza Strip, even in his family's neighborhood.

"I was afraid to move around in my living room," Gharbia said Wednesday night, minutes after his flight landed in Tucson. "There was shooting all around."

One bullet whizzed right by Gharbia's head, he said, motioning to describe his narrow escape.

"Even the baby was, 'Stop, please, it's too loud.' "

Complicating matters was the fact that the Islamic militant group Hamas won the battle with rival Fatah in June, and Gaza's borders were shut down. Gharbia feared his family would never be able to leave.

"I knew there was no way" to get out of the country without the proper permits, Gharbia said.

"Over there, everything is paperwork," Gharbia said. "You don't go anywhere if you don't have it. If you have it, no problem."

Here, Gharbia's extended family went to work securing the return trip. More than a decade ago, Husain and Fatina Gharbia immigrated to Tucson because his close cousin, Monir Gharbiah, a computer expert, lives here. The spelling of the family name varies.

Gharbiah's wife, Ginger, set things in motion by calling the local office of U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz.

"Congresswoman Giffords saw this as a humanitarian issue," said her communications director, C.J. Karamargin. "There was a local family with two young children who needed to get out of a virtual war zone."

Two of Giffords' staff members were assigned to work the phones and try to get the Gharbias out of Gaza and into one of the neighboring countries Palestinians routinely travel through.

By coincidence, Giffords was scheduled to travel to Israel with a congressional delegation, Karamargin said. A visit with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert proved to be the key to unlock the borders for the Gharbias, Karamargin said.

The Gharbias were allowed to cross the border into Israel on Tuesday and begin their long journey home.

Wednesday night, the Gharbiah family - Monir, Ginger and their children, Maey, 25, and Hafez, 17 - waited anxiously in the lobby of Tucson International Airport, scanning a monitor showing arriving flights.

"There!" Ginger said, pointing to the screen, thinking her relatives were arriving, only to be disappointed when it was another family.

At last, the weary travelers came into frame, sending the Gharbiahs into cheers and applause. They crowded around the exit, oblivious to the cadre of media around them, eager to welcome their cousins.

Husain Gharbia was the first to land in the lobby, rushing toward Monir. The two men tearfully embraced as their wives and children greeted each other.

"He's much more than a cousin to me," Monir Gharbiah said later. "He couldn't be closer to me than a brother."

Husain Gharbia took a few moments to thank Giffords' representative, district director Ron Barber, before regrouping his family to collect the luggage and make the final journey to their home. Giffords is planning to meet with the families next week.

"I'm going to sleep for two days," Gharbia said, grinning. "And then I'm going back to work."