

Field Report from Detroit, Michigan

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.

When it came time to celebrate on February 11th, about a hundred Egyptians crammed into a pizza parlor that sits in a little strip mall north of Detroit.

Amir Massoud says that after he opened his place about a year and a half ago, word trickled out among local Egyptians that one of their own had a pizzeria. When news of the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak came, the locals came out to celebrate.

Massoud and his fellow Egyptians listened to the same music their friends and family were hearing in Tahrir Square, and they celebrated the revolution they've been waiting for their entire lives.

Soon, Egyptians like Ola Elsaid will watch as Egypt holds its first democratic elections in its history. Elsaid hopes leaders in the US are paying attention.

"What we'd like to see is for America to look at Egypt and the Egyptian people as the bright young people we are, and what we can bring to America and the region."

Elsaid doesn't place a lot of hope in American politicians. She says whatever goodwill the Obama administration built up through its support for the Arab Spring uprisings will be demolished if it fails to support statehood for Palestine.

"The entire region is looking at the injustice happening in Palestine. So Egyptians are looking at America being unjust, so is Tunis, so is Libya, so is Syria. It's going to be a region-wide decision that America is not our ally anymore, and that will be very hard to fix."

Elsaid sees little to convince her that the politicians seeking the White House in 2012 are all that concerned about supporting the people fighting repressive governments in the Arab World. She expects foreign policy will take a back seat to domestic issues as the election season wears on.

Rami Jandali, a native of Syria, is an independent voter, and hasn't decided who to support in the 2012 presidential election. But, he says, the remarks of at least one candidate suggest a view wildly at odds with his take on the opportunities the Arab Spring presents for the US.

"Hearing this kind of rhetoric really troubles me, because there is a tremendous opportunity for the United States giving its influence and power to try to nudge this movement in the right direction so it favors our interests down the road."

Jandali argues that the US cannot ignore the changes happening in the Middle East and North Africa. He says it's no less significant than the fall of the Ottoman Empire, or the Berlin Wall.

"We really are seeing the whole political map being redrawn, and a transformation of the whole political structure of this region, a region that's really of vital interest to our national interest and national security."

Asad Tarsin is a Libyan-American. He says if you want to know whether extremism is likely to fill the vacuum left by Gadhafi, just look at how things are unfolding.

"The proof is in the pudding. You don't have people—now that Libya is free and there's freedom of speech—burning US flags or saying, 'Down with America!' or 'Down with the West!' or even at Israel for that matter."

Still, Tarsin says the Palestine question has many people in the region convinced that American politicians—including Obama—will only disappoint them.

"It's indicative of where things are going overall, and who President Obama is in the greater spectrum of political candidates. I think there's a sense of 'Well, if he stood against the Palestinians, then it's hopeless to expect any real help from America.'"

—Reported by Sarah Hulett for America Abroad.

A Continuation of our Roundtable Discussion...

Guests include: **Carroll Doherty**, Associate Director at the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press; **Susan Glasser**, Editor in Chief of *Foreign Policy Magazine*; **Jennifer Rubin**, columnist and blogger for *The Washington Post*.

Ray Suarez (RS): This is such an American story. People coming here from various places in the world and having one foot and part of their heads back in their home country and still being immersed in the day-to-day struggle to get over in the United States. Carroll Doherty, I know Pew has done polling among Muslim Americans. How are they looking at domestic politics?

Carroll Doherty: Well it's very interesting. In terms of the first question on the Arab Spring, support—but not overwhelming support—and some measure of caution about what these changes might mean for the governments and countries over there. On domestic issues, Muslim Americans are classic liberals in some ways, but somewhat conservative on social issues like gay marriage and homosexuality. So it's a mixed bag and most overwhelmingly support Obama and most affiliate with the Democratic Party.

RS: Susan, has decades of relatively high levels of immigration—we're back to the highest level of foreign-born Americans that we been in ninety to a hundred years—changed the way parties have to think about foreign policy? Are their domestic constituencies for decisions about the rest of the world that press on congressman, senators and so on?

Susan Glasser (SG): No question. I think the difference is that those tend to be much more focused, even niche issues. A candidate, like we're seeing in the Republican primary right now, doesn't want to talk in the broad sense about foreign policy because broadly speaking, Americans just aren't ranking it high on their list of priorities this year. That being said, there are certain crucial constituencies more narrowcast within the party that you need to talk to; whether it is Arab Americans in Michigan, for example, they are a major force in Michigan politics. They could be crucial in a primary election campaign for the Democratic Party for example. Or whether it's the question of Israel among the Christian evangelical vote.

RS: Jennifer, we saw the Republican candidates struggling at the beginning to criticize the president over the Libya policy. "We were in too much. We were in not enough. It wasn't going to work." It's been interesting to watch but it's also got an audience among these people that we heard from from Michigan.

Jennifer Rubin: The administration has not come up with a coherent policy vis-à-vis that region. Its foreign policy with regard to the Palestinian and Israeli conflict is arguably the biggest failure since the founding of the state of Israel. He's managed to annoy both the Palestinians, who are now personally out to embarrass him by taking their unilateral declaration to the Security Council and the Israelis are very upset with him. So, I think it's hard for voters to be proud or to be supportive of a policy that they frankly don't understand, and you have to sympathize with voters because it hasn't been all that clear. So it's very logical, at least from my perspective, that you will have people complaining that on one hand he has been too supportive of Israel. And on the other hand, people complain he's been too supportive of the Palestinians because he has not created—forget about an Obama doctrine—a coherent foreign policy that has been successful that's been able to project American influence.

RS: Susan Glasser, Jennifer Rubin highlights some of the difficulty here. At 30,000 feet if you ask voters if they support freedom or democracy in North Africa and the Middle East, everybody's pro-freedom as a general proposition, and pro-democracy if they are sitting in Michigan or Illinois or on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn. But if you are in power, from any party, it starts to get a lot tougher to do, doesn't it?

SG: I think that's a very important observation. What you're suggesting, and clearly we've seen it playing out in the course of the Arab Spring, is that Americans have a very idealistic view not only of themselves but also of our role in the world—that it should be in some broad sense to advance freedom and democracy. We like to see ourselves on the side of the good guys; we like to see ourselves supporting students pouring into the streets to peacefully demand their rights in Egypt, for example. That being said, this sort of idealistic impulse in American foreign policy pretty quickly collides with a much more realist approach, especially in the Middle East. If anything, the Middle East has been this tectonic plate where our idealism has clashed most dramatically in recent years with our hardheaded realism. We supported in the region many unsavory dictators, and continue to do so by the way. Even in this season of Arab renewal, we were quick to abandon Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, for example, but look at our very contradictory approach in Bahrain where the US has a very important naval presence and right next door

is Saudi Arabia. Both states do not allow even basic freedoms to many of the people who live there. So, we already have a very contradictory approach when it comes to this. I think for most Americans, they do not have a clear sense perhaps of what the alternatives always are. But it does come at a time when we feel economic pressures at home and where the expansive view of the American role in the world—the very muscular interpretation of internationalism taken by George W. Bush and his administration—has really tainted, I think, in American political discourse, the question of what our role in the world should be. 'This is democracy' and nation-building have been discredited by what we've done in Iraq and Afghanistan in many ways. This has been a disappointing era for those starry eyed idealists about America promoting democracy.