



Does US Overstate Importance of Middle East?

By Scott Stearns
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Secretary of State John Kerry says the United States must remain “deeply engaged” in the Middle East because it has a direct impact on the U.S. economy and national security. But is the Obama administration overstating those threats?

In the six months since the collapse of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, there has been an upsurge of violence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and 50 days of fighting in Gaza.

Yet Kerry continues to meet separately with Palestinian and Israeli leaders, looking for an opening to restart talks on a two-state solution while keeping up momentum at home, where he says Americans cannot wall themselves off from the Middle East.

“We have to be deeply engaged - deeply engaged - in this region because it is directly in the interest of our national security and our economy,” he said.

But in an essay for the magazine *Politico*, Cato Institute analyst Justin Logan says Washington overstates the region’s importance.

“American attention to the Middle East is disproportionate compared to the Middle East’s strategic impact,” he said.

On security, Kerry says no ocean can shield Americans from danger.

“And that is a primary reason why the Middle East matters. But it also matters because our friends are so important to us. We are proudly and unapologetically connected to Israel and many Arab states with whom we have worked closely for decades,” he said.

Those decades of military support should have changed the U.S. view of risks facing Israel, Logan says.

“It has a qualitative military edge over all of its conceivable rivals in the Middle East. It has terrorism problems. It has a very nasty dispute with the Palestinians. But none of these endanger Israel’s survival as a Jewish state in that part of the world. So we tend to overstate that consideration,” he said.

On economic risks, Logan says the Middle East accounts for just six percent of global Gross Domestic Product, including oil exports, with no one power positioned to monopolize supply.

“Iran isn’t going to conquer Saudi Arabia, vice versa, etc. So the energy security problems, which are under-defined, actually aren’t that great for us. They could be. But there’s no prospective danger in the near term,” he said.

Kerry says the United States cannot walk away from the Middle East even as it approaches its own energy independence.

“Any serious disruption to the Gulf oil supplies can have major consequences for our own well-being, as well as the global economy to which we are all attached today,” he said.

Kerry says the United States is also linked to the Middle East by “rich spiritual and ethical traditions” that have helped shape Americans’ belief in the importance of every human being - a conviction that he says is now “under vicious assault.”

“Sure, we could turn away, pretend that we don’t see or hear what is happening. But America would not be America if we turned our back on that suffering. It is not who we are, it is not in our DNA, and it is not in our interest,” he said.

Kerry says nowhere are the “building blocks of international security” at graver risk today than in the Middle East, where in Egypt, for example, he says violence threatens to drag the entire region into “total turmoil.”