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Egypt, Syria are falling apart – an Israeli nightmare unfolds

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Iron Dome anti-missile stationed in Haifa

Israeli Air Force Commander Maj. Gen. Amir Eshel warned Tuesday, Jan. 29, that Syria is falling apart and no one knows what the next day may bring: “War may not break out tomorrow,” he said, “but we stand ready for any eventuality.”

If war is not expected tomorrow, why have Israel’s armed forces, including the air force, been on their highest level of preparedness since Friday, Jan. 25? The Syrian crisis may not technically fit the description of a state of war. However, the violent turbulence in that country may at any time spill over the border into hostilities in some shape or form.

The “no comment” stance on the Syrian civil war, long held by Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ehud Barak is untenable and pointless, especially after the latter cut short an overseas family trip to be flown home in a hurry Saturday.

No one believes the official explanation that the three Iron Dome anti-missile batteries stationed over the weekend in northern Israel - in the sight of many thousands of local dwellers - are there for a preplanned routine test - least of all after a senior Israeli officer told AFP that large Hizballah forces are parked at Bashar Assad’s chemical weapons stores poised ready to seize them.

If this happens, said the officer, “A decision to attack Syria or Lebanon will need to be implemented immediately.”

This is beginning to sound as though the politicians and the generals are not on speaking terms.

Gen. Eshel’s comment came hard upon the grave warning issued earlier Tuesday by Egypt’s army chief Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, who is also the defense minister. “The political strife is pushing the state to the brink of collapse,” he said on the sixth day of turbulent protests across the country at the cost of more than 60 lives.

Gen. El-Sissi reacted to the chaos and lawlessness engulfing Egypt. The government headed by President Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood is no longer a functioning administration. They have been reduced to the single task of fighting to hang onto power.

None of the forces of law and order - the army, internal security, police - are willing to clash head-on with the opposition protesters rampaging on the streets of the main cities including Cairo. Some towns have descended into chaos and some outlying areas in this country of 90 million are no longer receiving regular food and water supplies.

The Egyptian defense minister’s warning may be taken two ways:

1. As a last warning to the Muslim Brotherhood and the opposition on the streets that this is the eleventh hour and if they don’t step back from their confrontation, the military will be forced to seize power to save the country.
2. Alternatively, that the army will not interfere and will stand aside for now, while warning that a civil war in Egypt would be more extensive and calamitous than the vicious conflict bringing Syria to ruin in the last two years.

As the two countries teeter on the brink of catastrophe, Gen. Eshel's dry forecast of doom correctly noted that no one knows what tomorrow will bring.

However, Israel is coming face to face with its worst fear: being hemmed in by a blazing ring of hopeless conflicts just across its borders: Syria and Lebanon in the north; Egypt in the west and south; and Jordan under threat.

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