

Israel's Home Front chief's dose of reality flusters defense establishment

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Gen. Eyal Eisenberg's wake-up call

After just a month on the job as Home Front Commander, Maj. Gen. Eyal Eisenberg warned Monday, Sept. 5 of the increasingly peril of a total Middle East war in the wake of the Arab revolts and Israel's rift with Turkey.

Stressing the long term, Eisenberg warned that the Arab Spring would likely evolve into "a radical Islamic winter" raising the potential for "total war in the Middle East" and the possible use of weapons of mass destruction.

His comments shocked Israel's policy-makers and defense establishment out of their placidity into issuing a vehement denial of his predictions.

Eisenberg also revealed that Palestinian terrorists in the Gaza Strip had recently acquired a new weapon. The million Israelis battered by 150 missiles in recent weeks had accordingly been advised to take shelter under two roofs – not just one.

debkafile's military sources recall that before Gen. Eisenberg made his dire prediction, chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz recently lectured to the IDF's General Command on the danger of the Arab Spring fast degenerating into "an Arab autumn or winter."

"There is no need to sow panic," said the defense minister's political adviser Amos Gilead in an early morning interview Tuesday, Sept. 6 in which he sharply contradicted the Home Front commander point by point with "the real facts."

"Israel's security situation has never been better," said Gilead. "We have deterrence in the north and the south, the Arab regimes around us are stable" and "all we need do is take care that current situations don't develop into threats." Israel has broad leeway for action, he insisted, and plenty of time to prepare for the unexpected. "It is therefore not correct to say that we face total war."

Asked about the potential use of unconventional weapons in war against Israel, the defense minister's adviser was a lot less certain. While anxious to refute the Home Front Commander, the defense minister's adviser still took care to hedge his bets.

"We must behave as though it is a weather forecast," said Gilead. "We know weather forecasters can't always be accurate and we are often surprised by unexpected rain and stormy weather. The same applies to national security forecasts."

debkafile's military analysts point out that while Gen. Eisenberg's outlook is substantially credible for the long term, the events rushing forward in Libya, Syria and Egypt and the uncertainty in Jordan are rapidly shrinking the foreseeable time scale to weeks and making his words a wakeup call, whereas Gilead's words aim at obfuscating six pertinent facts:

1. The "stable regimes" he referred to are a myth: In Egypt the military rulers are not in control. The latest US intelligence assessments, as the defense ministry's adviser is no doubt aware, register dismay over the discovery that the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi extremist groups are assured of a two-thirds majority in elections for the presidency and parliament, for which the movement for toppling Hosni Mubarak fought so hard. The military rulers' only hope of staying in power is to stage a second Egyptian revolution to suppress the drive for democracy. For now, they are playing ball with the Islamic extremists, a fact which Mr. Gilead has not revealed.

2. This pattern applies equally to Israel's security backyard in Sinai, where debkafle's intelligence and counter-terror sources report that the military rulers in Cairo have abandoned any attempt to root out terrorists despite their increasing use of this territory as a jumping-off base.

Not a single smuggling tunnel carrying arms to Hamas in the Gaza Strip has been destroyed, contrary to reports appearing in the Israeli media.

For three weeks, Israel has maintained troops on high alert on its southern border with Egyptian Sinai and kept main highways closed to civilian traffic, since being forewarned of a large Palestinian Jihad Islami terrorist team from the Gaza Strip lying in wait to strike southern Israel from the Egyptian border. Egyptian security forces have not lifted a finger to interfere with their movements.

The supply of arms to the Gaza Strip has since the Egyptian revolution swelled to an unprecedented volume. It is bringing to Hamas and other terrorist groups quantities of surface missiles of greater range and power even than the Grads, which last month hit targets at a distance of 30 kilometers, such as Beersheba; F-7 anti-air and anti-tank missiles.

Nonetheless, Gilead referred to Israel's situation as "never better" and lauded its deterrent capacity in the south.

3. He was just as smug about Israeli deterrence in "the north," including the Lebanese border facing Hizballah.

4. In Syria, circumstances are so volatile that a war situation could ignite in hours.

5. In Jordan, the political and security ground under the throne is far from stable and while domestic unrest has scarcely broken surface, it could erupt at any time.

6. While Libya was never part of the Arab front line against Israel, its relevance to Israeli security is growing. Since NATO launched its operation to unseat Muammar Qaddafi in March, gunrunning from Libya is rife, channeling large quantities of Libyan arms by smuggling routes into the Gaza Strip and Sinai.

7. Iran is fast nearing nuclear weapon capability and missiles capable of delivering nuclear warheads.

One of the greatest threats comes from the new regime the US, Britain, France and NATO are preparing to anoint in Tripoli. Since Qaddafi's departure, the Libyan capital has fallen under the control of pro-Al Qaeda rebel elements and extremist Salafis. Their Western sponsors have put their trust in these extremists changing their spots and embracing moderation and democracy. This illusion they are liable to replicate in Cairo and Damascus. Israel would then be beset at all hands by avowedly hostile Islamist regimes whose ideology obliges them to wage jihad against the Jewish state.

Eisenberg tried to open Israeli eyes to the real perils around the corner, while Gilead made haste to close them.