



Meanwhile, Back in Teheran

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The war against Hizbullah has pushed the latest developments in the Western effort to halt Iran's nuclear weapons program from the headlines.

The two issues are clearly linked - Hizbullah is armed by and functions as Iran's vanguard force - even if the evidence does not support the theory that Iran actually planned the July 12 attack on Israel to divert international pressure. (The strike was part of a series of such attempts by Hizbullah, which has its own motivations and calculations, in addition to the Iranian links.) For the leaders in Teheran, the Hizbullah war has not been much of a diversion - on the contrary, awareness of the dangers posed by the radical Iranian regime seeking to "wipe Israel off the map" has increased.

After dithering over dead-end negotiations the "international community", meaning Europe - the Americans understood the stakes years ago - is getting more serious. Going beyond the stage of offering bribes, the major powers are now threatening to take action to force a halt in uranium enrichment.

In the final declaration of the G-8 summit in St. Petersburg on July 16, the leaders of the major powers, including Russia, demanded the "suspension of all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities, as required by the IAEA and supported in the United Nations Security Council Presidential Statement."

A July 31 Security Council resolution (well into the Hizbullah war) explicitly threatened sanctions for the first time, and set a deadline of August 31.

Iran's leaders, who played the diplomatic game successfully for 20 years in acquiring the technology for building nuclear weapons, are not going to back down unless the risks become unbearable.

Indeed, Iran has threatened to escalate. Ali Larijani, Iran's main negotiator, declared: "We will expand nuclear technology at whatever stage it may be necessary, and all of Iran's nuclear technology, including the centrifuge cascades, will be expanded."

IF SANCTIONS are imposed, Iran is threatening to counter by withholding oil from the market, and as the second-largest oil exporter in OPEC, this could send prices skyrocketing. While US and even a few European officials have stated that halting Iran's nuclear ambitions is "more important than preventing high crude oil prices," it is hard to imagine politicians sticking to this position.

At the same time, for leaders of the G-8 the specter of turmoil and expanding warfare on the Arab-Israel front is more frightening than a limited Iranian oil embargo. The realization that attacks against Israel, led by Iran's fanatical ideological and religious partners armed with thousands of Iranian missiles, could touch off a full-scale war have begun to register in Brussels, Paris and even Moscow.

A radical regime in Iran armed with nuclear weapons, and with no knowledge of Israeli red lines, would not promote stability - and that is to understate the concerns.

Similarly, in Iran, the Israeli response to Hizbullah's salami tactics (cutting off one slice at a time, and never knowing when the red line is reached) may also have a major impact on perceptions.

Until now, there has been no cost to be paid (other than some minor scolding and ridicule) for President Ahmadinejad's genocidal rhetoric. In contrast to such declarations and some premature boasts about advanced



weapons capabilities, Iranian leaders have been careful to avoid direct military confrontations.

After the Iraqi invasion and subsequent war, which devastated Iran and almost led to its defeat, the leaders in Teheran have acted cautiously, preferring to use proxies to fight their battles.

However, scenarios in which Hizbullah drags Iran into a full-scale nuclear confrontation with Israel, just as terror groups aligned with Pakistan came close to triggering a nuclear war with India, should make everyone more sober. Perhaps the images of Beirut and the rest of Lebanon have caused some of the bombastic orators to imagine Teheran under attack following a similar "miscalculation."

FOR POLITICIANS and diplomats in democratic societies the status quo, regardless of the dangers, is usually easier to accept than risking political or military conflict, and the costs that would be entailed. This is certainly the case in Europe, where many journalists and political officials have created a religion based on avoidance of difficult decisions regarding security and terrorism. But, as the results of the intense efforts to ignore Hizbullah's clearly visible preparations for war have tragically demonstrated, such short-term risk-avoidance leads to catastrophic war in the longer term.

The Hizbullah war has been a belated wake-up call for the international community, and a reminder that further delay in moving to stop the Iranian nuclear project will lead to disaster. With the torrent of missiles and destruction in Lebanon and in Israel reverberating around the world, such a policy shift may finally have begun.

And in Teheran, if anyone has now realized that a civil dialogue with Israel is necessary to avoid catastrophe, they know where to find us.

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