

Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

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**AFTER THE 31 AUGUST DEADLINE:
THE FADING INTERNATIONAL RESOLVE TO CONFRONT IRAN**

Emily B. Landau
Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies

On August 31, Iran clarified that it had no intention of suspending uranium enrichment activities as demanded by UN Security Council Resolution 1696. Nevertheless, the expiration of this deadline has not opened the door to immediate discussions on sanctions. In fact, any resolve the international community once had to force Iran either to acquiesce or be exposed as a defiant nuclear proliferator is quickly dissolving, and only the US is now pressing for sanctions. European leaders, who earlier this year were widely reported to be firm in their determination not to allow Iran to defy the international community, have responded to Iran's most recent act of defiance by opting for more negotiations. All this suggests that European firmness was more apparent than real and that while the appearance could be preserved so long as the issue of sanctions was merely hypothetical, it dissolved as soon as the prospect became more real, and Europeans, like Russians and Chinese, had to calculate the impact of sanctions on their own economic interests.

This is not the first time that the international

community has attempted and failed to force Iran to make a choice. On every previous occasion, important states have failed to follow through on an ultimatum to which they were party and rationalized their failure with a variety of explanations: a lack of conclusive evidence of Iran's military nuclear plans; insufficiently attractive incentives offered to Iran; a lack of real American commitment to provide security assurances to Iran; and fears that too much pressure on Iran will cause it to react forcefully, leading to instability and escalation. These explanations avoid confronting the basic reality, which is that for three years the international community has been unable to stop Iran and that each missed opportunity to do so further emboldens Iran. At the root of this problem is Iran's unwavering determination, on the one hand, and differing interests and levels of commitment on the part of those confronting Iran, on the other. In this structural reality, Iran enjoys an innate advantage that it has been playing to maximum effect.

The recent war in Lebanon highlighted the

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dangerous implications of Iran's hegemonic ambitions and underscored the central role that proxies play in that regard. Consequently, the war should logically have led to an invigorated determination to confront Iran directly. Instead, the same familiar explanations are again being conjured up to account for the fact that many major international actors, including European governments, are shying away from any sort of confrontation and are not seriously considering a harsh response. Instead, there are suggestions of enhanced incentives for continuing negotiations, perhaps including explicit American security guarantees and acknowledgement of Iran's status as the regional hegemonic power. This, presumably in the expectation that Iran, in turn, would end its proxy war against the United States and Israel and give up its military nuclear plans.

If the international community is serious in its attempt to stop Iran's nuclear military program, it will have to abandon its convenient explanations for the failure to force Iran to suspend uranium enrichment – which simply demonstrate the impotence of the international community and allow Iran to buy time – and embark, instead, on determined action. Russia and China are usually considered the major obstacles to UN Security Council agreement on sanctions against Iran, and the long-standing reservations of these states are undoubtedly a serious constraint on action in that framework. But Europe's newly-expressed hesitations are equally if not more problematic, especially given the central role it would have to play in any effort to promote sanctions by an effective “coalition of the willing” outside the framework of the UN.

When it becomes clear that sanctions through

the UN Security Council are unlikely because of the continued objections of Russia and China and that even sanctions outside the Security Council framework are not feasible because of the basic unwillingness on the part of Europe to endanger its economic ties with Iran, Iran will move one major step closer to achieving military nuclear capability. At that point, the case for military action against Iran will almost certainly receive more focused attention.

However, an alternative direction that might be pursued by those intent on standing up to Iran is to try to build on the lessons of the Lebanon war drawn by some of the states in the Middle East. Having experienced the consequences of Iran's destabilizing policies, many in the region are more concerned than ever about the prospect of a nuclear Iran. It might therefore be possible to explore the possibility of addressing these concerns in a new and broader framework of Euro-American consultation with interested states in the Middle East. Building on the broad-based common interest to curb Iran's hegemonic and nuclear ambitions, discussions could include ideas such as those currently circulating in the Gulf for the creation of a Gulf Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone or other means of communicating the message that Iran will face growing regional isolation if it continues on its present course.

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