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This is no time for the international community to dither over which calculated approach is most likely to persuade Iran to give up its quest for an atomic bomb. There must be no protracted debate over what diplomatic protests to file should Iran follow through with its recent threat to expel UN inspectors, no measured responses to its violations of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and no appeasement in the form of aid in return for co-operation. Short of full-scale war, the Western powers must do all they can -- together -- to make it clear to the ayatollahs that they will not be permitted to build or possess nuclear weapons. And if the West cannot present a united front, then the Americans -- again -- will have to take the lonely lead.

Iran clearly has the capacity to make nuclear weapons. A month ago, the United Nations' International Atomic Energy Agency disclosed that it had caught the Islamic republic using centrifuges at its Natanz reactor to enrich uranium beyond the level needed to generate power and up to the level needed to make bombs. Then this past week, the IAEA uncovered more highly enriched, weapons-grade uranium at a second site near Tehran. Iran is also clearly trying to hide its nuclear program from UN inspectors: Until the Natanz discovery, the Iranian government had emphatically denied using its centrifuges for "live" or "hot" tests that spin the impurities out of actual uranium ore.

Iran also has the means to deliver a nuclear warhead to any capital in the Middle East, including Jerusalem. At a parade last week commemorating the 23rd anniversary of the commencement of the Iran-Iraq war, the government paraded new medium-range ballistic missiles through the streets of Tehran. And the hardline Islamic fundamentalists in the Iranian parliament and government -- both institutions are split between a hardline majority and a reformist minority -- seem quite prepared, even eager, to detonate such a device.

In a prominent national sermon in December, 2001, former Iranian president Hashemi Rafsanjani declared that the day "the world of Islam comes to possess [nuclear] weapons" will be "the day ... global arrogance will come to a dead end." He added that a bomb used against Israel "would leave nothing on the ground" and would rid the world of much "extraneous matter," by which he appeared to mean millions of Jews.

The Iranian government has also repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to sanction murder with its nearly 20-year-long backing of Hezbollah and other terrorist organizations. Until 9/11, when the focus shifted to Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran was listed annually as the premier state sponsor of terror in the U.S. State Department's annual survey of global terrorism. By conservative estimates, Iran funnels US\$150-million a year into terrorists' coffers, buying them weapons and computers, paying for their training camps and providing bounties to the families of their suicide bombers.

Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Iran has also been harbouring a large remnant of the al-Qaeda leadership. Tehran claims they are detainees, but it refuses to permit American agents to question them, and it permits them to use phones, faxes and e-mail to transfer their funds electronically around the world, and to receive guests without restrictions. In other words, the al-Qaeda rump in Iran is free to go about plotting its next major assault.

The mullahs' coziness with terror masters also means that should they become squeamish about firing a nuke at Jerusalem themselves, they have plenty of friends ready to smuggle one in using less flashy and high-tech methods.

Words alone are probably inadequate to stop the Iranian threat at this point. Still, the major Western nations -- especially the United States -- and Russia should begin by categorically

denouncing Iran's efforts. They then must begin a concerted and systematic breaking off of trade and diplomatic relations -- followed by a quarantine of all traffic in and out of Iran, if the first two measures do not work. Finally, they must not be timid about following Israel's lead in destroying Iraq's Osirac reactor in 1981 before it could come on line and produce raw material for bombs. Special forces missions and surgical air strikes may be needed, given that China and North Korea have helped the Iranians build their reactors and laboratories deep underground.

Iran must be stopped, soon.

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