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West must wake up to possibility that Iran's saber-rattling is real
By Lawrence J. Haas

The global reaction to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's recent comments about the Holocaust and threats to Israel is settling into a predictable pattern - denounce, rationalize, ignore - that illustrates the challenge of rallying the world to confront evil.

Ahmadinejad's comments, particularly his call that Israel be "wiped off the map," sparked initial outrage from global leaders and focused more attention on Iran's efforts to build nuclear weapons.

Before long, however, analysts in the United States and abroad were speculating about Ahmadinejad's motives. He was, they argued, rallying his conservative base or diverting attention from his administration's failings, or trying to boost Iran's standing in the Arab world.

When Ahmadinejad called Israel an anti-Islamic "Jewish camp" that Europe created to rid its continent of Jews, the media yawned. The New York Times buried the remarks in a story about Iran's nuclear program, and other leading newspapers didn't mention them at all.

Rather than turn away, however, we must focus ever more intently on the danger at hand. Rather than look for hidden motives, we must recognize that maybe, just maybe, Ahmadinejad means what he says.

Maybe the leader of a nation that's working feverishly to build nuclear weapons plans to carry out his threats when he has the means to do so.

After all, this former mayor of Tehran served in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Basij military, both devoted to the hard-core, anti-Western outlook that drove Iran's 1979 revolution, which toppled the shah and brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power. At one point, he ran the Ed Qods Brigade, which nurtured Hezbollah and other terrorist groups.

He campaigned for president with a slogan that called for returning to the "roots of the revolution." While in office, he has fired dozens of diplomats, provincial governors and other key officials who supported improved ties with the West or progressive reforms at home.

Nor is Ahmadinejad out of the mainstream when it comes to Iran's ruling class. His recent remarks represent the views of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and its ruling mullahs, and they drew strong public support from top clerics and government officials.

Presuming Ahmadinejad and, by extension, the mullahs, are serious, we must greatly increase the pressure on Iran to change course.

We should urge Great Britain, France and Germany to suspend negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program that give the West false hope of a diplomatic solution and give Iran more time to make progress.

We should press the International Atomic Energy Agency to take the issue to the U.N. Security Council.

We should push the Security Council to impose sanctions by convincing its members that an Iranian nuclear capacity threatens every nation, including theirs.

And, finally, we should make clear that the United States reserves a military option to end, or slow, Iran's march toward nuclear weaponry.

The case for action is clear. Iran remains the world's most aggressive state sponsor of terrorism against the West, providing funds and ongoing coordination.

As The Times of London reported, Iran Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki conferred with leaders of Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad last fall just days before the groups stepped up attacks against Israel.

And the time for action is now. By March, military analysts say, Iran may have the means to enrich enough uranium to build nuclear warheads - and that it may start building bombs in a year or two.

Israeli intelligence reported that Iran bought 12 long-range cruise missiles on the black market that can deliver non-conventional weapons.

As Herbert E. Meyer, former vice chairman of the CIA's National Intelligence Council, wrote for RealClearPolitics, "Allowing Ahmadinejad and these mullahs to get their hands on nuclear weapons is a risk the civilized world simply cannot take. It would be like allowing a bunch of escaped lunatics to roam the halls of your children's school, armed with rifles, in hopes that maybe they really aren't as crazy as they seem to be and won't, after all, start firing into the cafeteria."

With our nonchalance to date, we risk making the same deadly mistake of an earlier generation. Some 70 years ago, the West assumed that Adolf Hitler was not serious about his goals and could be talked into peace.

The question is, will this generation act any differently?

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Lawrence J. Haas belongs to the Committee on the Present Danger, which advocates aggressive action in the war against terror.