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Iran nuclear talks: Citizen diplomacy would build trust

As the next round of nuclear talks between Iran and the world powers begins today in Almaty, Kazakhstan, both Iran and the United States should encourage their citizens – clerics, scientists, athletes, doctors, artists, businessmen, and teachers – to meet and work together.



EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton and Saeed Jalili, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, pose for a photo in Almaty, Kazakhstan, Feb. 26. Op-ed contributors William Green Miller and Seyed Hossein Mousavian write: 'The people of [the US and Iran] can engage directly without compromising the negotiating positions of our governments.' They call on the governments to 'encourage non-official civilian diplomacy.'

(Stanislav Filippov/AP)

By William Green Miller, Seyed Hossein Mousavian / April 5, 2013 at 8:48 am EDT

Washington, D.C. and Princeton, N.J.

After 34 years of hostilities between Iran and the United States, there is now an opportunity for settling their mutual differences. The Obama administration has reiterated its willingness to engage in direct bilateral talks with Iran. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has responded to this overture by indicating that Iran would be open to talks when America “proves its goodwill.” And even so, the next round of negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 world powers begins today in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

As former American and Iranian diplomats, we recognize that ultimately our two

governments must act together to make peace. But we believe that there are other ways than official diplomatic negotiations to bring our two nations and peoples closer and to build trust.

The people of our two nations can engage directly without compromising the negotiating positions of our governments. We propose that the Iranian and American governments once again encourage non-official civilian diplomacy: private citizens and groups undertaking a wide range of people-to-people activities that result in mutual understanding and normal, civilized behavior.

In his message to the people of Iran celebrating the Persian New Year, Nowruz, last month, President Obama quoted the Persian poet Hafez who counseled: “Plant the tree of friendship.” Mr. Obama expressed hope for “a new day between our nations that bears the fruit of friendship and peace.”

Indeed, there are many Americans and Iranians who have created strong personal friendships despite the hostile relations of their governments. Thousands of Iranian students study in the US each year, and the attitude in Iran toward the American people is generally friendly. However, because of the official hostility between the two governments, the isolation between Iranians and Americans is widening. There is demonization in the media in both countries.

In order for any agreements by the two governments to be supported by the populations of both countries, there must be opportunities for Iranians and Americans from all walks of life to meet face-to-face and work together. Both governments should enable individuals and groups of clerics, scientists, athletes, doctors, artists, businessmen, and teachers to meet, get to know each other, and work together for the mutual benefit of the US and Iran.

There are many Americans and Iranians who recognize the importance of these normal social and professional initiatives and are ready to act, if given the go-ahead by their respective governments.

But many barriers block this informal engagement, in law and as negative side effects of the official non-relationship between the US and Iranian governments. Visas for both countries are difficult to obtain. The legal and financial restrictions for American citizens make travel to Iran difficult. But these obstacles are surmountable.

“The Islamic Republic of Iran bears no hostile intentions towards Americans and the Iranian people not only harbor no enmity, but indeed have respect for the great American people,” says a September 1999 letter from Tehran in response to President Clinton’s letter to President Khatami in June 1999.

Many recent statements from the Iranian government have echoed this sentiment. And, as Obama said in his Nowruz address of March 2012, “There is no reason for the United States and Iran to be divided from one another....I want the Iranian people to know that America seeks a dialogue to hear your views and understand your aspirations....[T]he people of Iran should know that the United States of

America seeks a future of deeper connections between our people...in which mistrust and fear are overcome by mutual understanding and our common hopes as human beings.”

Both the Iranian and American governments claim that there is no tension between their respective peoples. We ask our governments to encourage people-to-people relations and enable their citizens to put what are now only words into positive deeds of friendship.

Facilitating tourism, academic, humanitarian, media, cultural, economic and social activities, and parliamentary exchanges will lay the foundation for a durable and sustainable relationship based on mutual respect and common interests.

While Iran and the US work toward serious negotiations, we call on the two governments to open the doors for the people of the two nations to engage now.

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