Strengthening US–Iranian relations through public health

While global relations with Iran appear to be thawing in the wake of a landmark nuclear deal whereby Iran agreed to limit its nuclear capabilities in exchange for lifting sanctions, the jury is still out over whether the US Congress will accept these terms. We suggest that where formal diplomacy is faltering, global health diplomacy may be a means of promoting engagement and common ground.

Academic institutes should be more proactive in educational and research collaborations with Iranian counterparts since these institutions have the credibility to increase the likelihood of generating sustainable relationships. Much as sports diplomacy has at times been used to promote amicable relations between otherwise adversarial nations, global health diplomacy is increasingly being used as a neutral platform for easing tensions among countries that might otherwise find common ground.

One such example is a recent informal diplomatic mission between Iran and US health researchers at the University at Albany, State University of New York (UA-SUNY). After 18 months of negotiation, in May, 2015, the UA-SUNY president, Robert Jones, facilitated a week-long visit to New York State by Ali Jafarian and Gholamreza Asghari, Chancellors of Tehran and Isfahan universities of medical sciences, respectively, and signed an official memorandum of understanding.

This visit marked the first time in more than 35 years that an American university officially hosted a delegation of chancellors representing Iranian medical universities. Currently, there are no formal channels of communication between the US and Iran. The outcome of this visit and the main focus of the memorandum of understanding was a formal collaborative agreement involving US and Iranian universities that will create opportunities for faculty members and researchers to generate partnerships between the universities, to visit their counterparts, to hold conferences, and to present lectures within Iran or the USA.

This historic visit represents two types of global health diplomacy—informal and multistakeholder diplomacy—and has the potential to lead to a third, more binding form: core diplomacy, or negotiations between and among nations to resolve disputes and enact formal agreements. It is hoped that this type of informal diplomacy will soften the policy space to make room for formal negotiations by using the common ground of science as the basis for exchange.

The ultimate goal of this informal bilateral partnership is to improve the policy learning process through a two-way exchange of ideas and best practices. Iran totes many public health successes that the USA and other nations can learn from. Iran has developed an extensive network of primary health clinics and community health workers that has ensured widespread access to care even in rural parts of the country.

The state of Mississippi recently looked to Iran to develop a model of rural primary health-care delivery based on its health house model. Iran also has among the highest contraceptive prevalence rates among low-income and middle-income countries and has implemented HIV harm reduction approaches that cover a much larger population of injection drug users than in the USA. Triangular Clinics, which are now present in 67 Iranian cities and 57 prisons, offer a variety of integrated prevention and treatment services for HIV, sexually transmitted diseases, and substance abuse and were recognised as a best practice model by the WHO in 2004.

At the same time, Iranian researchers can learn from the US experience. Before the revolution, Iran adopted the American medical education model into its educational curricula, which continued to an extent after revolution since several distinguished Iranian professors were trained in the USA, but with significantly reduced interactions. A gradual opening of relations on both sides in the late 1990s created a policy space for a renewal of exchange. During this time, many US-based Iranian HIV researchers returned to the country to renew academic ties. It was largely through this process that many of the harm-reduction approaches, including needle exchange programmes, were introduced to Iran, which now boasts more clean needle coverage than either the USA or Canada.

Academic exchange has reduced again in recent years. The visit of Iranian academic officials seeks to end this stagnation. On the return of the delegation, Iran’s Ministry of Health and Iran’s medical universities posted photographs and a report of the visit, thereby memorialising the memorandum of understanding into official state policy.

In this regard, Iranian and American medical doctors and public health researchers have a role to play as global health ambassadors as a first step in moving from individual, informal diplomacy, to institutional diplomacy, and all the way to formal, core diplomacy. By some accounts, this form of soft diplomacy can be far more powerful in normalising relations than the use of hard power such as military force and sanctions.

Global health diplomacy can serve important symbolic purposes by providing neutral, scientific grounds to promote exchange and understanding, allowing nations to overlook differing core values. Much as a visit by a US table tennis team to China in 1971 has been credited with paving the way for US President Richard Nixon’s visit the following year in what has been referred to as “ping-pong” diplomacy, health...
diplomacy can open channels of communication between countries and break down self-interested barriers. As the fate of formal nuclear talks hangs in the balance, the informal diplomacy of a mission of academic health scientists is already making inroads into official state health policy.

We declare no competing interests.

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Kamiar Alaei, Arash Alaei, *Ashley Fox
afFOX3@albany.edu

Department of Public Administration and Policy (KA, AF), Global Institute for Health and Human Rights (KA, AA), and Department of Health Policy, Management and Behavior (AA), University at Albany, State University of New York, Albany, NY 12203, USA


