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The Rise of Iran's Kurdish Coalition

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The formation of the "Coalition of Political Forces of Iranian Kurdistan" on February 22—uniting five Iranian Kurdish opposition parties after eight months of negotiations—is among the more significant organizational developments in the Iranian opposition space in recent years. Iranian Kurds have been an active part of recent pushback against the Islamic Republic, including the 2022 "Women, Life, Freedom" movement and, most recently, the major protests that shook Iran in late 2025 and early 2026. They have also borne the brunt of the regime's brutal response. According to the Kurdistan Human Rights Network, the Iranian regime killed at least 240 Kurdish citizens, while at least 2,000 have been arrested, as of mid-February 2026. Against this backdrop, the Kurdish opposition has done something few other segments of Iran's fractured resistance have managed: it has organized.

This major move disproves a main talking point of American critics of a regime collapse strategy—that the Iranian opposition is either non-existent or too fractured to have any hope of toppling the Islamic Republic. It gives the United States an organized, capable, and effective on-the-ground partner with whom to work to weaken the regime. It also provides hope that other Iranian opposition groups can replicate this model of negotiated cohesion.

A Model Worth Examining

The coalition's membership—the Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK), the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI), the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), the Organization of Iranian Kurdistan Struggle (Khabat), and the Komala of the Toilers of Kurdistan—spans a substantial ideological range, from secular nationalists to leftists affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a Turkey-based, U.S.-designated terrorist group, to more traditional Kurdish democratic parties. Bringing these groups together required years of groundwork, including a dialogue center that preceded the creation of the formal coalition. PDKI leader Mostafa Hejri noted it took around eight months of negotiations for the five groups to "set aside" their differences.

This result was not a sudden development, but the product of sustained institutional effort, with each step building the procedural trust that political movements require before they can become consequential. A September 2024 joint conference—the first of its kind—brought PJAK, PDKI, PAK, and Komala together in support of the Women, Life, Freedom movement. A January 5 joint statement pledging coordinated action ahead of a general strike on January 8 built on that foundation before ultimately leading to the February 22 coalition.

The resulting platform reflects that breadth. In their joint statement, the member parties declared that "past differences have been set aside in order to build a coordinated and effective political framework," committing to "a joint struggle for democracy, justice, and the national rights of the

Kurdish people." The coalition's charter, adopted alongside the announcement, covers Kurdish self-determination, full gender equality, and democratic governance for Iran as a whole, including a commitment to "cooperation and alliance with other oppressed nations and peoples in Iran on the basis of mutual respect and shared democratic goals."

The charter also establishes a joint command center for the coalition's armed wings and guerrilla forces, a joint diplomatic committee for international engagement, and a detailed framework for administering and holding free elections in "liberated areas" during any transitional period.

The significance of this development extends beyond Kurdish politics. The ideological distance between the coalition's member parties is, in several respects, comparable to—or greater than—the divides separating Iran's mainstream opposition blocs. PJAK's PKK-derived democratic confederalism and PDKI's traditional Kurdish nationalism represent distinct and historically competitive political traditions, yet eight months of negotiations produced a functioning joint platform. That outcome underscores an apparent trend that fragmentation within Iran's opposition has been less a function of ideology than of political will. Personal rivalries, diaspora politics, and mutual suspicion have long hindered coordination among monarchist, republican, and other opposition actors—the same obstacles the Kurdish parties chose to subordinate to a shared objective. The coalition does not resolve Iran's wider divisions, but it demonstrates they are not insurmountable. In a landscape where fragmentation has been the regime's most reliable advantage, that alone is significant.

The process that enabled this Kurdish coalition might offer a roadmap to the rest of Iran's domestic opposition, which remains fragmented among rival groups with little organized presence inside the Islamic Republic. The protest movements of 2009, 2022, and the current wave have each demonstrated popular resilience while opposition groups have struggled to produce durable leadership structures and articulate credible governance alternatives. Protest movements can generate pressure, but organizations are needed to translate that pressure into political outcomes. The Kurdish coalition has at least begun to address both challenges, a step that few other Iranian opposition forces have taken. And unlike parallel rebranding efforts among Baluch opposition groups—where Salafist militant organizations with U.S. terrorism designations have attempted to reframe separatist goals in national democratic language—the Kurdish coalition represents a genuine multi-year negotiated political platform.

Of course, the Kurdish coalition formation was not without friction. The Komala party has splintered into multiple branches over the years—the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan led by Abdullah Mohtadi, the Iranian Communist Party led by Ibrahim Alizadeh, and the Komala of the Toilers of Kurdistan, which is the branch that joined the coalition. Mohtadi's faction chose not to participate, with Mohtadi publicly criticizing the coalition for lacking "a clear roadmap" and "executive mechanisms." However, the coalition now has a charter, a joint mechanism for political and media coordination, and a shared framework for administering Kurdish territories during a transitional period, should the regime fall.

The Policy Gap Washington Should Address

The Kurdish opposition's organizational progress sits in uncomfortable contrast with the absence of a formal U.S. relationship. As PJAK co-chair Peyman Viyan stated in an interview published on February 25: "Regarding powers like America and Israel, we have no relations until now."

This reflects a longstanding pattern across administrations. The Obama administration kept Iranian Kurdish parties at a distance as part of its Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) diplomacy, where engaging Tehran required avoiding provocations. The Biden administration's

posture was little different. Even as it expressed rhetorical support for the Women, Life, Freedom protesters in 2022, it stood by as the Iranian regime launched artillery and drone strikes against Iranian Kurdish opposition groups based across the border in Iraq—a pattern of targeting that has included assassinations, missile strikes, and drone attacks against Kurdish parties in Iraqi Kurdistan dating back to 2018.

That logic no longer applies. The Trump administration has adopted a confrontational posture toward the Islamic Republic, pursuing maximum economic pressure while leaving military options on the table. The strategic rationale for deprioritizing the Kurdish relationship has largely dissolved, yet the policy has not meaningfully changed.

If Washington is serious about pressuring the Iranian regime, it benefits from having organized partners with credibility, military capacity, and genuine roots inside Iran. The Kurdish coalition is the most plausible candidate among the current opposition landscape. Between 2014 and 2025, PJAK accounted for an estimated 70 percent of Kurdish attacks on Iranian forces, largely while maintaining a formal ceasefire, and its fighters have relevant combat experience from Syria and Iraq. The PDKI brings historical legitimacy and diaspora networks in Europe, with residual loyalty networks in the Kurdish heartland. Together, these groups offer geographic reach, organizational experience, and political credibility that other opposition forces currently lack.

Washington's existing Kurdish relationships run primarily through the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, which has served as a stable and institutionalized partner across multiple administrations. But the KRG operates under significant constraints when it comes to the Iranian Kurdish opposition. Seeking to avoid Iranian retaliation—Iran has conducted repeated missile and drone strikes on Kurdish opposition targets in Iraqi Kurdistan—the KRG signed a disarmament agreement with Tehran in 2023, and its Interior Ministry responded to the coalition's formation with a pointed warning that it would not allow its territory to be used against neighboring countries. Direct U.S. engagement with the Iranian Kurdish coalition would therefore represent a distinct and complementary track, not an extension of the KRG relationship.

But there is a relevant precedent for working with groups outside the KRG. When the Islamic State expanded across northern Syria and Iraq in 2014, Washington partnered with Kurdish forces—the People's Defense Units (YPG) and later the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—because they were the most organized and capable available partners, despite the complications that the relationship introduced with Turkey. The circumstances differ, but the underlying logic is similar: when strategic objectives require organized ground-level partners, capability and willingness carry significant weight. The Kurdish coalition has demonstrated both.

What Washington Should Do

The Kurdish coalition's formation creates a concrete opportunity for Washington to pursue a calibrated engagement strategy that strengthens opposition cohesion while preserving flexibility.

First and foremost, Washington should work to reduce public fragmentation within Iran's broader opposition. Days after the coalition's announcement, exiled Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi issued a statement denouncing unnamed "separatist groups" and warning against threats to Iran's territorial integrity. The Kurdish coalition responded sharply, labeling his words "hysterical and hateful." This exchange illustrates a dynamic the Islamic Republic has long exploited by portraying Kurdish political demands as separatism in order to isolate Kurdish dissent from the broader opposition.

Washington should privately signal that public infighting among opposition figures undermines the credibility of the broader anti-regime movement. Quiet diplomacy can reinforce that

opposition actors need not agree on every constitutional detail now, but they must avoid rhetoric that entrenches divisions the regime is eager to exploit. The Kurdish coalition's own charter emphasizes democratic governance within a unified Iran, providing space for de-escalation if all sides choose it.

Second, Washington should formalize sustained political engagement with the coalition itself. Such engagement would not represent an endorsement of any single opposition faction, but recognition that organized actors are more capable of constructive participation in any future transitional scenario than loosely networked protest movements alone. Structured dialogue—whether through regular diplomatic consultations or facilitated contact among opposition groups—could help bridge gaps between Kurdish parties and other secular democratic opposition figures.

Historical precedent demonstrates that sustained institutional engagement with established opposition movements—such as President Ronald Reagan's support for Solidarity in the 1980s—can strengthen political maturity and coordination without predetermining outcomes. Political training, civil society capacity-building, and media support can enhance organizational resilience while keeping the focus on democratic governance rather than armed confrontation. These tools are comparatively low-cost, scalable, and reversible—and they align with longstanding U.S. democracy-support frameworks.

Third, Washington should integrate the Kurdish coalition into a regime collapse strategy. Kurdish actors have already proven capable of standing up and weakening the regime. Engaging, planning with, and arming capable Kurdish groups inside Iran now would ensure that the United States has established working relationships with actors positioned to influence developments on the ground.

Any security-related dimension would require careful sequencing and coordination with regional partners. The objective would be to ensure that organized actors with demonstrable local legitimacy are better positioned to pushback against the regime while preventing fragmentation or extremist exploitation. That approach mirrors broader U.S. practice in fragile-state contexts: prioritizing capable local partners while avoiding overcommitment.

Informal lines of communication reportedly exist, but that is a limited foundation given the scale of the administration's stated Iran objectives. The coalition's formation represents a meaningful step forward in an opposition landscape that has seen relatively few. Taken together—reducing opposition fragmentation, formalizing engagement, strengthening institutional capacity, and incorporating the coalition into contingency planning — this approach constitutes a coherent strategy for maximizing its potential without overcommitting U.S. resources or credibility.

Washington would do well to treat this moment accordingly: not merely with rhetorical acknowledgment, but with the kind of sustained, multi-dimensional engagement that gives an emerging coalition the standing to grow into a credible partner.