

Iran's Kurdish Coalition and the Future of the Opposition

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Washington appears to have decided, at least for now, against formally partnering with Iran's Kurdish opposition. Early reports of preliminary U.S. intelligence contact with Iranian Kurdish groups have gone quiet. No formal engagement has followed the February 22 announcement of the Coalition of Political Forces of Iranian Kurdistan—a six-party unified bloc with an operational charter, a joint command structure, and an explicitly national democratic vision.

If the expectation was that the Kurds would wait, the past several weeks have demonstrated otherwise. The coalition has continued to expand and consolidate without American encouragement. Even if Washington chooses not to partner with the Kurds directly, it should build on the coalition's demonstrated model by pushing the broader opposition toward the inclusive, multi-ethnic unity any credible transition will require.

The Coalition No One Else Has Built

On February 22, five Iranian Kurdish opposition parties—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—announced the formation of the [Coalition of Political Forces of Iranian Kurdistan](#) after eight months of sustained negotiations. On March 4, a sixth party joined—the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan. The announcement produced not merely a joint statement but an operational charter: a joint command center for the coalition's armed wings, a diplomatic committee for international engagement, rotating leadership, and a framework for administering free elections in liberated areas during any transitional period.

The ideological distance the coalition bridged should not be understated. PJAK's democratic confederalism—rooted in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)'s ideological tradition—and PDKI's traditional Kurdish nationalism represent distinct and historically competitive political traditions. Bringing them under a single operational framework required years of groundwork, including a dedicated dialogue center, a September 2024 joint conference, and a January 2026 joint statement coordinating action ahead of a general strike. Critics who point to past Kurdish fragmentation—factional splits, rival Komala branches, historical armed clashes—are describing a real history. But that history is precisely what makes the February 22 coalition significant. These parties knew each other's fault lines intimately. They chose to subordinate them to a shared objective anyway. They did so without American facilitation and against a backdrop of active U.S.-Israeli military operations that might have fragmented rather than consolidated their ranks, which serves as an early bellwether of the coalition's resilience.

A Fragmented Opposition Landscape

The Kurdish coalition's self-sufficiency matters most when set against the state of the broader Iranian opposition. As Sanam Vakil and Alex Vatanka recently [noted](#), Iran's opposition broadly resembles “an

archipelago of political islands divided by geography, generation, ideology, and exposure to repression.” That characterization is not a critique of any single actor—it describes a structural condition shaped by decades of regime repression and the inherent difficulties of diaspora politics.

Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi has demonstrated genuine organizational energy in recent years. Initiatives associated with his camp have included the [Iran Prosperity Project](#); the [Convention of National Cooperation to Save Iran](#); a [defections campaign](#) for regime security forces; and the first-ever coordinated [call for protests](#) inside on January 8 and 9, 2026, which brought demonstrators into the streets across thirty-five provinces. More recently, Pahlavi has moved to establish governance structures for a post-regime Iran—[announcing](#) a “Transitional System” under his leadership and [forming](#) a Committee for Drafting Transitional Justice Regulations, to be chaired by Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi. He has also [called](#) on Iranian security forces to “vacate the streets,” so Iranians can celebrate Chaharshanbe Suri, the traditional festival preceding Nowruz, the Persian New Year, peacefully on March 18. These are substantive initiatives that reflect serious post-regime planning and connection to Iranians in Iran.

But two structural problems remain. First, coalition-building and mobilization are distinct capabilities, and the former has proven elusive. In March 2023, eight prominent Iranian exiles launched the [Mahsa Charter](#), designed to unite republican, monarchist, and other voices around shared democratic principles. It collapsed within six weeks, the victim of ideological differences, strategic disagreements, and the personal rivalries that have long hindered diaspora politics. In the three years since, coordination among the opposition’s major currents has not meaningfully improved. Second, neither Pahlavi’s Transitional System nor his Transitional Justice Committee includes representatives from Iran’s Kurdish community or its other ethnic minorities. A governance framework that does not incorporate the country’s minority communities at the design stage will struggle to present itself as a credible foundation for a multi-ethnic transition—regardless of its other merits.

The exchange that followed the Kurdish coalition’s announcement illustrated the current gap between Iranian Kurdish groups and Pahlavi. Immediately after February 22, Pahlavi issued a statement denouncing unnamed “[separatist groups](#)” and warning against threats to Iran’s territorial integrity. Whatever its intent, the statement introduced a public rift at the moment the opposition most needed to project unity—and deployed language that the Kurdish coalition has spent years trying to move beyond.

On Self-Determination

Critics argue that the Kurdish coalition’s stated commitment to self-determination signals separatist intent incompatible with a stable post-regime Iran. The coalition’s own words tell a different story. PDKI spokesperson Khalid Azizi, speaking in Washington this week, framed the Kurdish vision in explicitly national terms: “Iran is a multi-ethnic society,” he [said](#), adding that “the path and the roadmap for rebuilding Iran must be based on the participation of all ethnic groups.” Komala’s Abdullah Mohtadi [said](#) the Kurdish parties are “not for secession and are not separatists” and that all Iranians need “a broad, democratic opposition.” The coalition’s charter [commits](#) to “cooperation and alliance with other oppressed nations and peoples in Iran on the basis of mutual respect and shared democratic goals.” That is the language of federalism and minority rights—aspirations Washington has supported successfully in neighboring Iraq through the Kurdistan Regional Government—not the language of partition.

It is also worth noting the genealogy of the separatism charge itself. Ayatollah Khomeini declared the PDKI “[the party of Satan](#)” and launched a holy war against Kurdish communities within months of the Islamic Revolution—not because the Kurds sought independence, but because they represented organized, armed, Sunni opposition that his consolidation of power could not tolerate. The regime has wielded the separatism accusation as an instrument of repression ever since. When the same framing migrates into Washington policy debates, it is worth asking whose analytical tradition it is actually drawing on.

Complications Are Not Disqualifications

None of this is to suggest that engaging the Kurdish coalition is without complications. PJAK's organizational ties to the PKK—a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization—and ongoing [sanctions](#) from the U.S. Treasury represent a genuine policy constraint requiring careful navigation. Turkey, currently in the midst of a fragile peace process with the PKK, has raised pointed objections. The Kurdistan Regional Government, wary of Iranian retaliation, has made clear it will not allow its territory to be used as a base for operations against Tehran. These are real constraints that any engagement strategy would need to address seriously.

But complications are not a disqualification—and they are not unique to the Kurds. The Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK)'s history—including its [internal workings](#), its [support](#) for Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War, and its [history](#) of terrorist activity against Americans and Iranians—has left it with deep credibility deficits among ordinary Iranians. The diaspora monarchist current, despite its organizational energy, has yet to demonstrate durable coalition-building capacity or resolve fundamental questions about post-regime governance—including how it intends to incorporate the country's minority communities into a post-regime governance framework. Every actor in this landscape carries liabilities. The question is never whether a given partner is without complications. It is whether it is more organized, more coherent, and more genuinely rooted inside Iran than the alternatives. On that question, the Kurdish coalition's record is clear.

What Washington Can Do

Washington need not reverse its posture on Kurdish partnership to act on what the Kurdish coalition's formation actually demonstrates. The coalition has shown that durable organizational unity among Iran's opposition is achievable—not just in the aspirational sense, but in practice, with a charter and a command structure to prove it. That demonstration creates a specific opportunity Washington can seize without formally endorsing the Kurds as partners.

First, Washington should use its relationships across the Iranian opposition to quietly discourage the kind of public infighting that has repeatedly undermined opposition credibility. The exchange that followed the Kurdish coalition's February announcement illustrates a dynamic the Islamic Republic has long exploited. Washington need not take sides in that dispute. But it can privately reinforce that opposition actors need not agree on every constitutional question now; what they must avoid is rhetoric that entrenches divisions the regime is eager to exploit. The Kurdish coalition's own charter—with its explicit commitment to democratic governance and multi-ethnic cooperation within a unified Iran—provides the basis for de-escalation if all sides choose it.

Second, Washington should facilitate structured contact between the Kurdish coalition and other secular democratic opposition figures. The gaps between these currents have proven unbridgeable without external encouragement. Washington does not need to convene a formal opposition conference or designate preferred partners. But facilitated dialogue—through diplomatic consultations, track-two engagement, or quiet encouragement of civil society intermediaries—could help bridge distances that opposition actors have not been able to close on their own. The Kurdish coalition's explicit charter commitment to multi-ethnic cooperation within a unified Iran provides a workable foundation for that kind of engagement.

Third, Washington should revisit the 2009 Treasury sanctions on PJAK in light of the changed strategic environment. Maintaining sanctions on a group that has now embedded itself within a unified democratic coalition, committed to elections and minority rights within a unified Iran, and positioned itself against a common adversary requires a clearer justification than the original 2009 designation provides.

A future Iran free of the Islamic Republic will need a broad, multi-ethnic coalition reflecting the country's full diversity. The Kurds have demonstrated the political will to build one. The question now is whether Washington will recognize that—and help the rest of Iran's opposition move in the same direction.