



Principles for U.S.- Kurdish Partnership

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U.S. support for and cooperation with Iranian Kurdish groups against the Islamic Republic could be an effective tool in further weakening the regime and creating the conditions for its collapse. However, it also comes with significant risks for the United States and the Kurds. Entering into such a partnership is fraught, given the history of previous U.S. support for other Kurdish groups in the Middle East, which has inevitably ended with the United States withdrawing its support and Kurds left [feeling](#) that the United States did not live up to its promises. The objectives of such a partnership are unclear, the risks of confronting a still numerically greater and better-equipped Iranian force very high, the impact on other segments of Iranian society potentially counter-productive, and the possibility of sparking regional tensions—primarily with Turkey—significant.

Even with all these risks, working with Iranian Kurds can be successful and contribute to U.S. war aims in Iran. But it will require setting up the partnership according to certain key principles that can set it on the best course to navigate between the Scylla of providing insufficient support, which would doom the effort and risk Kurdish lives for little gain, and the Charybdis of too much support, which could fuel fears of Kurdish separatism, setting off a backlash inside and outside of Iran.

#1: Set Realistic Objectives, Start Small

Iranian Kurds cannot by themselves, nor should they attempt to, topple the Islamic Republic. The major contribution that Kurdish fighters can make is not in seizing territory, but in eliminating mass numbers of Islamic Republic forces. Expecting too much of them would set them up for failure. And the most important thing that they can achieve is success. Any success. Any demonstration of standing up to and defeating regime troops. Any area where Kurds can take down the Islamic Republic's flag and demonstrate control. The psychological impact of such success will far outweigh its tactical value. It is critical, therefore, to set realistic objectives, rather than dreaming big, from the outset.

Kurdish groups, though the best-organized opposition force, are no match for the regime. Armed Iranian Kurdish groups can muster an estimated [2,500–5,500](#) fighters—a figure that pales against the Islamic Republic's vastly superior numbers: between [150,000 and 190,000](#) in the IRGC alone, plus an additional [90,000](#) active Basij members. The Kurds' base of support is limited to mountainous regions in western Iran, but even getting there will be a challenge as many of the opposition groups and their fighters are based in Iraq.

Given this, the best contribution that Iranian Kurdish groups can make to ongoing operations is to demonstrate the Islamic Republic's vulnerability and Iranian people's courage. Revolutions, even when they are armed conflicts, are ultimately psychological struggles. They succeed when the opposition swells with the belief of its inevitable success, drawing in ever more people willing to risk their lives, and when the regime is crippled by doubt, with forces choosing to lay down their weapons or defect rather than spill blood. The Islamic Republic has survived, including the

[most recent round](#) of massive protests, because so far its ranks have held. Its thugs have been willing to mow down tens of thousands of their own people in the name of ideology or self-interest.

For now, that calculus appears to still hold. U.S. and Israeli air strikes are destroying the regime's infrastructure, but its personnel, many apparently [sleeping in tents](#) on the streets or [hiding](#) in civilian buildings, remain. They may assume that they might survive this, lying low until America's fury abates and then emerge ready to once again tighten their grip on Iranian society and economy. And Iranians, uncertain of U.S. objectives and support, might be reluctant to take to the streets as long as they believe the murderous resolve and zeal of the regime's enforcers have not flagged.

An Iranian Kurdish uprising can be the turning point in changing the perception of both sides. It can demonstrate to other Iranians that it is possible to take their destiny into their own hands, and it can, if effective, sow doubt in the minds of regime forces about whether they are on the winning side.

To achieve this, it is more important that the Kurds are successful than that they have a wide-ranging impact. Focusing forces on singular objectives is preferable to spreading them out. U.S. planners and Kurdish leaders must be brutally honest with one another about the capabilities each is able to bring to bear in this partnership and work to identify areas where those capabilities can be effectively used to seize and hold territory.

#2: Do Not Overpromise; Set Public Limits to Support

The last such [breakup](#) of a U.S.-Kurdish partnership happened just two months ago in Syria—where the United States ultimately chose the new government of Ahmed al-Sharaa over the Syrian Kurdish forces with which it had worked to defeat the Islamic State and which expected, in exchange, U.S. support for them maintaining some level of political autonomy. As a result, the greatest obstacle for the United States to establishing a working relationship with Iranian Kurds will be building trust.

The most tempting way to build a relationship—and what Iranian Kurds will likely want to hear—is by overpromising. Long denied rights and self-rule, Iranian Kurds will understandably want to secure the maximum amount of freedom possible in a new Iran, and they will want the United States to support, if not guarantee, their aspirations. Acceding to these demands would be the fastest way to motivate Kurds to join the fight. But it would prove futile and counterproductive.

Kurds are unlikely to be able to achieve sufficient battlefield victories to establish any sort of autonomous region, as they did in Syria. The United States will certainly not lend the man- and firepower needed to do so either. By supporting not even maximalist but unrealistic Kurdish aspirations, the United States would succeed only alienating both Kurds—who would once again inevitably feel betrayed—and the other Iranians it should be trying to encourage to take up common cause—who will instead see the United States as working to break up their county—all while dealing itself even greater reputational harm and making it hard to find other local partners to work with in the future.

Instead, U.S.-Kurdish trust and cooperation will have to be grounded in honesty. The United States must be clear in the support it is willing to provide, but even more brutally honest about the limits of that support. It is not enough to say, as the United States repeatedly did to Syrian Kurds, that the relationship is "[tactical, transactional, and temporary](#)," as those terms might mean different things to either side. The military objectives and political conditions the United States intends to pursue alongside the Kurds must be clearly spelled out and publicly

announced. This might include committing to support an inclusive and representative constitutional process that would include Kurds and other Iranian minority groups to delineate political, civic, ethnic, and linguistic rights in a new Iran. But it must include explicitly saying that the United States does not support an independent Kurdish state seceding from Iran—which Kurdish groups are not seeking.

Once made, America must also be willing to honor its commitment.

#3: Make Clear This Is for a Free Iran, All of Iran

Any U.S.-Kurdish partnership in Iran will be the result not of some American favoritism for the Kurds but the reality that the Kurds are the only organized and armed opposition force available to partner with. U.S. support for Kurdish groups would be for the sake of allowing Iranians, all Iranians, to topple and live free of the Islamic Republic. It is important that the United States publicly announce and describe the partnership in those terms.

The United States should require Iranian Kurdish groups to commit, and publicly announce, that only Iranians—and not Kurds from other countries—will enter and fight in Iran. This will help reinforce that this is an effort for and by Iranians, not a greater Kurdish project.

Even more critically, the United States must make clear that it is willing to offer the same support—including arms and air cover—to any Iranians who stand up to the regime for the sake of freeing all of Iran, rather than advancing extremist objectives. This would both reassure Iranians of U.S. intentions in working with the Kurds while doubling the psychological impacts of such cooperation.

#4: Engage Partners, Offer Clear Choice

President Trump has [reportedly](#) offered Iranian Kurds a binary choice: either the United States or Iran. That same choice should be put to the various regional actors who will be upset or even provoked by U.S.-Kurdish cooperation.

Foremost among those is Turkey, which has repeatedly acted to douse Kurdish aspirations around the region—at home in [Turkey](#), in [Iraq](#), and most recently in [Syria](#). In particular, it considered the U.S. partnership with Syrian Kurds—the primary organization of which is an outgrowth of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated terrorist group that waged a 40-year insurgency in Turkey—a major [security threat](#) and repeatedly threatened, and took, [military action](#) to erode Kurdish autonomy and territorial gains in Syria. Given that at least one of the groups, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), that has joined the broader [Iranian Kurdish coalition](#) with which the United States might partner is itself the [Iranian wing](#) of the PKK, Turkey will have similarly severe concerns to this partnership.

So, too, might the Kurdistan Regional Government, the political entity representing Iraqi Kurds. One of the two main parties in the KRG, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), has a close relationship with Turkey and values the region's stability, above all else. The other party, the PUK, has a historically close relationship with Iran. Both will likely see the United States now working with Iranian Kurds to potentially interfere with their interests.

Additional, although lesser concerns, might be shared by Azerbaijan. It is a Turkish partner that might feel pressured to adopt Ankara's line, although it also works closely with Israel. And with a large Azeri minority population in Iran, Baku might also wonder what a Kurdish offensive will mean for the future of its co-nationalists.

It is important that the United States engage all these partners as soon as possible, ideally before it announces any sort of partnership with Iranian Kurds. It should be clear about what its objectives are, and are not, and the extent of its support for the Kurds. Washington would ideally seek to reassure Ankara, Erbil, and Baku and gain their acceptance, however grudging, of this new partnership and pledge not to interfere. U.S. diplomats should make clear how these partners, especially the KRG, stand to benefit from the diminishment of Iranian power and influence and the opportunities for increased U.S. support as a result. Failing that, however, President Trump should make clear that failure to accept, or any attempt to interfere, with U.S. support for Iranian Kurds would be tantamount to choosing the side of the Islamic Republic in this conflict, with all the resultant consequences.

By setting realistic objectives, making clear and public limits to U.S. support, committing to a free Iran for all Iranians, and engaging with partners to address their concerns, the United States can make Iranian Kurds an important part of its campaign against the Islamic Republic, while mitigating the worst risks of such a partnership.