



# The Kurdish Moment in Iran

**Giran Ozcan**  
*Fellow for Kurdish Affairs*

**Jonah Brody**  
*Policy Analyst*

If the United States wants [Operation Epic Fury](#) to produce more than a temporary setback for Iran's nuclear program, it needs organized partners on the ground — and it needs to arm, engage, and protect them now. The most capable candidates are Iran's Kurdish political and armed movements. Reports within the past 24 hours [indicate](#) that early contact between U.S. intelligence and Iranian Kurdish groups has begun. That is a welcome development — and it should be only the beginning. Three concrete U.S. actions are necessary: arm the Kurds; help defend them against Iranian airstrikes; and pair military support with political engagement.

Indeed, the big challenge to any U.S.-Kurdish cooperation in Iran is the bitter example of how the last such partnership ended, just weeks ago, in Syria. Syrian Kurdish groups feel that the United States, having promised political support, betrayed them to the new regime of Ahmed al-Sharaa. Syrian Kurdish groups, meanwhile, misunderstood U.S. commitments and overplayed their hand. For an effective partnership, both sides will have to overcome misgivings that might still linger from Syria and learn and apply the lessons of what worked, and did not, in that partnership. Most critically, the United States must make real and credible commitments of support for Iranian Kurdish aspirations, commitments that it will honor. At the same time, Iranian Kurdish groups must be realistic about what they can achieve and what the United States can deliver.

## Right Partner, Right Time

Just days before the United States and Israel struck Iran, 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 — united under a single [“Coalition of Political Forces of Iranian Kurdistan”](#) after eight months of negotiations. On March 4, the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan [joined](#) as the coalition's sixth member.

Since the strikes began, President Trump has personally called Kurdish leaders in Iraq — including the heads of the two main Kurdish factions, Masoud Barzani and Bafel Talabani — to discuss the war effort and what might come next. Iranian Kurdish forces are now preparing for a potential ground operation in western Iran, and American intelligence is in active discussions about providing them with weapons and military support.

The coalition's six member parties — ranging from secular Kurdish nationalists to democratic socialists with ideological roots in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a Turkey-based, U.S.-designated terrorist group — represent traditions that have spent decades in competition as much as cooperation. That sustained negotiation produced an operational charter with a joint command for armed wings, a diplomatic committee for international engagement, and a framework for administering free elections in liberated areas is itself a rebuttal to the common dismissal of Iran's opposition as too fractured to matter. While some protesters across Iran have taken to the streets since the strikes began, history suggests popular pressure alone rarely translates

into political change without organized actors capable of directing it. Kurdish forces offer something current protest movements cannot: defined territory, command structures, and the military capacity to hold ground.

The military dimension is not merely notional. 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 carry relevant combat experience from Syria and Iraq. The PDKI brings historical legitimacy and diaspora networks in Europe alongside residual loyalty networks in the Kurdish heartland. Together, these groups offer geographic reach, organizational experience, and political credibility that other opposition forces currently lack.

## Creating a Partnership: The Syrian Sticking Point

The main challenge to effective U.S.-Kurdish cooperation in Iran is managing expectations on both sides — shaped, in part, by how the last such partnership ended. When ISIS swept across Iraq and Syria in 2014, Washington ultimately turned to Kurdish forces as its primary ground partner, building the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into the backbone of the anti-ISIS campaign. The SDF spent years holding front lines, administering territory, and guarding thousands of ISIS detainees, losing more than [12,000 fighters](#) in the process. When Syria's political order shifted after Bashar al-Assad's fall, the alliance proved difficult to sustain, and earlier this year, Washington's Special Envoy for Syria, Thomas Barrack, declared it "[largely expired](#)."

Iranian Kurdish leaders have watched this with trepidation. As one senior Kurdistan Regional Government official [told CNN](#) this week: "There is no doubt that the Kurdish people overwhelmingly oppose the regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Yet they also fear being abandoned once again." Iranian Kurdish parties are therefore seeking political assurances from the Trump administration before committing fully to any resistance effort. Kurdish leaders need to know not just that Washington wants their help now, but what it is prepared to commit to afterward.

Iran is not Syria. The Syrian civil war unfolded over more than a decade of attritional conflict involving multiple foreign powers and proxy forces. Washington does not have that luxury here. Nuclear facilities can be rebuilt. Ballistic missile stockpiles can be replenished. Scientific expertise cannot be bombed out of existence. If the current campaign ends with the same political leadership in Tehran, the region will enter another cycle of escalation — not a resolution. Political transformation requires organized domestic actors capable of translating military pressure into sustained change: actors with territorial presence, operational coherence, and local legitimacy. The partners exist. The engagement has begun. What remains is to get it right.

## What Needs to Happen Now

To take this fledgling partnership to the operational level, three concrete adjustments are necessary.

First, the United States should provide material support to Kurdish forces capable of operating inside Iran: arms, communications equipment, intelligence sharing, and training to enhance their capacity to pressure the regime in Kurdish regions and coordinate with broader opposition networks. This "[by, with, and through](#)" approach proved effective against ISIS, and could again prove worthwhile against Iran.

Second, Washington must defend against and deter Iranian strikes against Kurdish opposition bases in Iraqi Kurdistan. Iranian missile and drone attacks against these bases have occurred with near impunity since [2018](#), and strikes have [consistently continued](#) since February 28,

causing [confirmed casualties](#). The United States maintains an [intelligence post](#) in Iraqi Kurdistan near the Iranian border, coalition forces in [Erbil](#), and the [operational infrastructure](#) to respond. What has been missing is the political will to use it directly against Iran.

Third, military cooperation must be paired with sustained political engagement. Kurdish actors in Iran will not commit fully to a struggle whose outcome leaves them isolated or internationally exposed — particularly given what they have [watched unfold](#) with the SDF. Washington should establish formal diplomatic dialogue with Kurdish political representatives and make clear the U.S. vision for a post-regime Iran. That vision needs to be articulated before political outcomes are decided, not after.

At the same time, Kurdish actors must approach this moment with strategic discipline. Iranian Kurds represent roughly [10 percent](#) of the country's population and cannot lead a national revolution unilaterally. Kurdish parties that push demands overplaying their hand risk alienating the Persian, Arab, and Baluch opposition constituencies whose cooperation any durable transition will require. Washington should reinforce the coalition's own democratic-national framing privately and consistently, and resist pressure from any faction to treat the Kurdish role as more than one critical — but not singular — component of a broader national coalition.

President Trump has [called](#) on the Iranian people to seize a “once-in-a-generation opportunity.” That call raises the question every organized partner inside Iran is now asking: What is the United States actually prepared to do? Air campaigns create pressure. Only organized political actors — armed, recognized, and sustained — can translate that pressure into lasting change. The operational infrastructure for engagement already exists in Iraqi Kurdistan. The partners have organized themselves. What remains is for Washington to decide whether this partnership will be built on a durable commitment or repeat the conditional, transactional logic that failed in Syria.