

# While Washington Pauses, Tehran Targets the Kurds

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Although the U.S.-Iran war has entered another round of making “[space](#)” for diplomacy after nearly two weeks of bombardments, Iranian Kurdish organizations – both inside Iran and in the neighboring Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) – appear to be exempt from the pause in hostilities. Since the United States halted its strikes on Friday, July 24, Iran has launched [dozens of strikes](#) against Iranian Kurdish bases in the KRI. Tehran’s continued attacks reflect its fear that Kurdish forces represent the most credible internal threat to the regime and could become decisive should the conflict escalate again. The United States should immediately make clear that continued Iranian strikes against Kurdish forces in the Kurdistan Region are unacceptable and will carry consequences.

This pattern of attacks by Tehran against Iranian Kurdish groups has been ongoing for almost as long as the war itself. Since the launch of Operation Epic Fury, Iran and its Iraqi proxies have [targeted the Kurdistan Region](#) over a thousand times using drones and ballistic missiles. A particularly disturbing incident occurred on July 19, when a Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK) camp was [reportedly](#) struck by drones carrying phosphorus munitions, injuring nine members. In a [statement](#), PAK said that eyewitness accounts, medical examinations of the wounded fighters, and the extensive wildfires caused by the explosions all indicated that prohibited chemical-incendiary munitions had been used in the attack.

But while all other direct Iranian attacks ceased when the United States paused its strikes on July 24, those targeting Iranian Kurds continued. PAK camps in the KRI were [targeted again on July 27](#), three days into the pause in fighting between the United States and Iran, when four drones slammed into their bases near the city of Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Iran also claimed to have [killed four members](#) of the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK) in an ambush near the western Iranian border town of Baneh. In a [post](#) on its official X account, the PDKI said Iran had carried out dozens of strikes against the Kurdistan Region in recent days.

Unlike elsewhere in the region, where the overwhelming majority of Iranian attacks target U.S. assets or the countries hosting them – and are largely [intercepted by air defense systems](#) – in the Kurdistan Region, Iran’s strikes are directed at dissident Kurdish groups it views as a direct threat to the regime, regardless of whether they have any affiliation with the United States or Israel. For this reason, even when fighting between the principal belligerents pauses, Tehran continues targeting Iranian Kurdish forces that it believes pose a more direct challenge to the regime than Operation Epic Fury itself, which, despite significantly degrading Iran’s military

capabilities, has not fundamentally altered the nature of the regime. Iran is seeking to contain Kurdish forces that, if called upon, could shift the balance.

The Iranian regime is well aware of the existential threat that Kurdish forces could pose to its survival – arguably more so than the United States appreciates their strategic value. This may explain why Tehran has continued to target Kurdish forces despite the current ceasefire, while Washington has largely remained silent as Iranian Kurdish dissidents in the KRI come under sustained attack. The U.S. must do more to protect both the Kurdistan Region and the Iranian Kurdish forces based there, particularly as the limitations of the current rules of engagement become increasingly apparent, and alternative plans need to be explored – or, more accurately, [initial plans](#) of a Kurdish front need to be revisited, with certain [modifications](#).

The vulnerability to Iranian strikes of Iranian Kurdish groups based in Iraq is itself the result of prolonged attempts by Tehran to weaken and isolate both Iranian Kurdish opposition and Iraqi Kurds.

Tehran made Iranian Kurdish groups into easy targets for itself by pressuring Iraq to require them to relocate to camps. In 2023, [Iraq and Iran signed a security agreement](#) under which Baghdad and Erbil committed to disarming Iranian Kurdish opposition groups and securing the border region. Tehran warned that it would resort to military action if the agreement was not implemented. As part of the deal, most Iranian Kurdish opposition groups were relocated to camps near the city of Sulaymaniyah and Koya in southeastern Erbil province. It is these very camps that Iran has been targeting since the beginning of the war. After the now obsolete Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the United States and Iran in June, [Iran applied pressure on the new Iraqi government](#) to clamp down on Iranian Kurdish dissidents based in the north of the country.

Iranian influence in Baghdad has also ensured that the KRG has not been able to procure sufficient air defenses to protect its territory. In response to a question about the drone attacks on the region governed by the KRG, Prime Minister Masrour Barzani [said](#), “It is deeply regrettable. The Kurdistan Region has never been a party to this conflict, yet it has been targeted and attacked.” He also lamented that the KRG still lacked adequate access to the air defense systems needed to protect itself. KRG officials have long sought to procure these systems but are often frustrated by bureaucratic constraints that require approval from the federal government in Baghdad – even for defensive capabilities. Given the influence of Iran and its allies within Iraqi institutions, this process has [proven ineffective](#).

Without a capable force able to challenge the regime from within Iran, Tehran will retain the capacity to launch ballistic missiles, threaten the Strait of Hormuz, and ultimately rebuild its nuclear program. The regime understands this, which is why it has continued to target the Kurdish forces most willing and able to take the fight to Tehran. The United States should make clear that any attack on the Kurdistan Region will be treated as an escalation and will trigger an end to the current pause in hostilities.