

The Iran War Through the Kurdish Lens

Giran Ozcan
JINSA Fellow for Kurdish Affairs

The U.S.-Iran Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) marked a [remarkable reversal](#) of the strategic gains Washington appeared to have achieved during Operations Epic Fury and Roaring Lion. The agreement granted Tehran sanctions relief, economic breathing room, and de facto security guarantees while imposing few durable constraints on its nuclear ambitions, ballistic missile program, or regional proxy network. That resulted in an emboldened Islamic Republic, weakened American deterrence, diminished Israeli security, and the abandonment of earlier promises to stand with the Iranian people against their rulers.

The MoU is now dead, as many predicted it would be, with the United States resuming strikes against Iran after President Donald Trump declared the ceasefire over on July 8. If this new phase of the conflict is to produce a lasting strategic outcome, rather than another temporary pause, Washington must fundamentally reevaluate its approach to the Kurdish question. This means engaging the full spectrum of Iranian Kurdish opposition forces and defining a clear role for them in Iran's political future.

The Kurdish Front That Never Was

In the first week of Operation Epic Fury, President Trump declared that he would “[be all for](#)” a Kurdish offensive against the Iranian regime. Yet Washington never converted that rhetorical support into a viable plan, in large part because it lacked a sufficient understanding of Iranian Kurdish capabilities and constrained its own options to accommodate the anti-Kurdish sensitivities of regional countries such as Turkey. The absence of a clearly defined and credible vision for Iran's political endgame further ensured that the Kurdish front would not become an operational component of the campaign. All three of these hurdles can and should be overcome in the next phase.

Before the war started, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [urged President Trump](#) to consider an Iranian Kurdish front as part of the broader war effort. Israeli intelligence assessed the various Iranian Kurdish organizations and secured the participation of groups like the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and Komala while deliberately excluding the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK). PJAK was left out over concerns that its involvement would provoke Turkish opposition and complicate the operation. [According to reports](#), Mossad officers and senior commanders from KDPI and Komala spent weeks preparing a plan that envisioned Kurdish forces seizing the border cities of Kermanshah and Marivan in the opening stages of the campaign.

On March 1, President Trump [talked](#) with several Iranian Kurdish leaders based in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), fueling speculation that their forces, based in camps in the region's mountainous areas, might become the ground component of a broader campaign to weaken – or even topple – the Islamic Republic. It was initially unclear whether the president was referring to Iranian or Iraqi Kurdish forces, prompting the two main Iraqi Kurdish parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which govern in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) – to [immediately declare](#) that they had no interest in fighting Iran. Their fear that the president's confusing remarks had

placed a target on their backs, however, proved well-founded. Within days, Iranian drones and missiles were [striking both Iranian and Iraqi Kurdish targets across the KRI](#).

However, less than a week later, on March 7, President Trump said he did not want Kurdish fighters to join the war against Iran, essentially shelving the idea after [reported pushback from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#). The president even went on to [claim](#) that the Kurds had taken weapons originally intended for the broader Iranian opposition, as if to blame them for the perceived ultimate failure of the Iran war. The statement quickly spread through both Kurdish and Iranian political circles despite the absence of any evidence whatsoever. Among Kurdish organizations, the accusation reinforced long-standing fears that they would once again be portrayed as unreliable partners whenever broader American objectives shifted. Among non-Kurdish Iranian opposition groups, it generated new suspicion regarding Kurdish intentions at precisely the moment greater coordination might have been possible. Rather than strengthening an already fragmented opposition movement, the episode deepened existing mistrust between its various components.

In a recent [interview](#), Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi acknowledged that Turkey had opposed any U.S. partnership with Kurdish groups against the Islamic Republic, laying bare the self-imposed constraints that defined Washington's campaign. Although a PJAK official unexpectedly [disputed this account](#), extensive reporting indicates that Turkish sensitivities did, in fact, play a decisive role in shaping the U.S. approach. President Trump [claimed](#) that he prevented Turkey from entering the war on Iran's side. Yet Turkey still managed to shape the conduct of the American campaign in ways that ultimately favored Tehran. Rather than mobilizing every available source of pressure against Tehran, the United States accepted limits dictated by a regional ally whose priorities differed fundamentally from its own. Araghchi also reiterated Tehran's warning that any insurgency launched from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq would be confronted. Both the KDP and PUK in Iraqi Kurdistan heeded that warning.

In an apparent effort to contain the fallout from President Trump's repeated claims that the Kurds had stolen weapons, U.S. Presidential Envoy to Iraq Tom Barrack [recently told Kurdish leaders](#) that President Trump had been misinformed about the alleged weapons shipments, describing the claims as untrue and assuring them that the administration was working to correct the president's understanding of the issue. However, the damage was done. For Tehran, the Trump administration's mismanagement of the Iranian Kurdish dimension of the Iran conflict handed the regime a strategic victory with minimal effort.

What Washington Got Wrong About the Kurds

Contrary to the established parties of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Iranian Kurdish parties that had long struggled to cooperate [formed an unprecedented coalition](#) last year to coordinate their political and military efforts in anticipation of a rapidly changing Iran and in preparation for hostilities with the regime. However, from the earliest days of the war, it was evident that Washington's inability to distinguish between Iranian and Iraqi Kurdish organizations was impeding the development of a coherent policy for integrating Kurdish political and military dynamics into its broader strategic objectives in Iran. While President Trump mentioned several times that the Kurds would enter the fray, he never once said which Kurds he was referring to – a distinction he also failed to make when accusing them of stealing weapons.

The Iran war also continued to underscore a deeper weakness in U.S. policy: Washington still approaches Kurdish politics primarily through the lens of neighboring states rather than Kurdish realities. There are several Iranian Kurdish parties that have been active for decades, each with different ideological traditions, military capabilities, and external relationships. Yet [American \(and even Israeli\) engagement](#) largely focused on organizations like the KDPI and Komala that were politically less objectionable to Ankara rather than those possessing the strongest military infrastructure inside Iran. Yet even this

deference to Turkish sensitivities, exercised at the expense of U.S. strategic objectives, [failed to secure Ankara's sign-off](#).

The most obvious – and ultimately damaging – omission was PJAK, [the most militarily experienced Kurdish force](#) operating against Tehran. Because of its historical links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – and because PJAK remains subject to U.S. sanctions – Washington largely avoided engaging with it. The United States contemplated using Kurdish forces against Tehran while deliberately sidelining the very group most capable of fighting the Iranian regime. As a result, the Kurdish dimension of the campaign was effectively stillborn.

Ultimately, the Iranian Kurdish organizations that were engaged by the United States understood that launching a large-scale offensive into Iran would face stiff resistance and provoke severe retaliation from Tehran. Their vulnerability was already evident during the conflict: while most Iranian projectiles fired elsewhere in the region were [intercepted by air defense systems](#), those targeting Kurdistan went largely unchallenged because the region lacked comparable defensive capabilities. An actual Kurdish operation against Iran would therefore have required assurances of sustained American military, political, and diplomatic support. Those assurances never came.

The second problem was political rather than military. Washington never articulated what a post-Islamic Republic Iran might look like. Would Iran remain centralized? Would ethnic minorities receive constitutional protections? Would Kurdish regions enjoy autonomy or decentralization? These questions are existential for Kurdish political movements that have fought the Iranian regime for decades. Asking Kurdish forces to assume enormous military risks without answering them was unlikely to produce enthusiastic participation.

In January 2026, Kurdish forces in northeastern Syria experienced what many Kurds across the region still regard as one of Washington's most consequential betrayals. After years of serving as America's principal partner against the Islamic State, Syrian Kurdish forces under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) found themselves exposed to a [lightning offensive](#) by the new government in Damascus led by former Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) fighters with tacit approval from the Trump administration. That experience inevitably shaped the calculations of Iranian Kurdish organizations. Few were prepared to commit themselves to an operation that could leave them confronting the Iranian state alone once Washington's priorities shifted elsewhere.

Preparing For the Next Round

Whatever direction American policy now takes, Kurdish resistance to the Islamic Republic is not going to end. However, unless Washington develops a coherent Kurdish strategy, the next phase against Iran will remain constrained by the same self-imposed limitations that blunted the last one. This would be a strategic mistake for the United States because 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.

Iran's Kurdish regions have experienced decades of political repression, executions, economic marginalization, and military confrontation. Kurdish political organizations have survived multiple waves of state repression and have repeatedly demonstrated an ability to reorganize despite arrests, assassinations, and exile.

That enduring Kurdish opposition is why the Islamic Republic is already moving to reassert control over its Kurdish regions. In the last few weeks, [clashes have occurred](#) across western and northwestern Iran,

including Paveh, Baneh, Marivan, and Mahabad, with Iranian security personnel reportedly killed in several incidents. IRGC-affiliated media described the attacks as “terrorist,” while Kurdish sources said the IRGC had launched operations around Mahabad that triggered fighting with PJAK’s armed wing. Separately, Iranian strikes [killed nine members](#) of the Iranian Kurdish group Komala near Sulaimaniyah in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The escalation suggests that Tehran, rather than being chastened by the war, is seeking to crush Kurdish opposition before it can organize more effectively.

If Washington intends to encourage political change inside Iran, it needs a coherent vision that begins with Kurdish political realities and extends beyond military operations. U.S. Kurdish policy is too often filtered through Washington's relationships with Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. Kurdish movements are assessed primarily according to how they affect other regional priorities rather than their own strategic importance. That approach may simplify the management of broader regional portfolios, but it not only consistently produces incomplete assessments of Kurdish capabilities and incentives but also undermines U.S. objectives. One way to remedy this would be for Washington to appoint a Special Envoy for Kurdish Affairs tasked with developing a coherent, cross-regional Kurdish policy that is integrated into broader U.S. strategy rather than subordinated to competing country portfolios.

Moreover, the United States requires sustained engagement with Iran's diverse opposition, credible security guarantees for partners willing to assume extraordinary risks, and a clear political roadmap for the country after the Islamic Republic. Should hostilities resume, the United States should stop fighting with one hand tied behind its back and engage the most capable indigenous force able to complement its air campaign inside Iran, regardless of diplomatic sensitivities. This means engaging and coordinating with PJAK rather than continuing to sideline it.

Across Iraq, Syria, and now Iran, Kurdish movements have repeatedly discovered that they are considered indispensable tactical partners during periods of conflict but expendable political partners once negotiations with central governments begin. The MoU may have ended one phase of confrontation between Washington and Tehran but the grievances that drive Kurdish opposition to the Islamic Republic remain unresolved, as do the demands of many other marginalized communities across the country. If unrest returns – as many expect – it is likely that Kurdish organizations will again find themselves on the front lines. Washington should recognize that the Kurdish front is not peripheral to its Iran strategy, but central to any serious effort to pressure the Islamic Republic from within.