



## Iranian Kurds and Possible Support

Following U.S. and Israeli military operations against the Islamic Republic of Iran that commenced on February 28, 2026, press reports citing unnamed sources have stated that the Trump Administration may be considering possible efforts to provide material support to Iranian Kurdish groups to further weaken Iran’s regime. President Donald Trump has said he would embrace action by Iranian Kurds, but the Administration to date has not confirmed any U.S. support. Any such U.S. or Israeli support for Iranian Kurds, if confirmed, could form part of a broader campaign to decentralize and/or systemically change Iran’s political structure. A number of Iranian Kurdish groups actively oppose the Iranian regime, including some based in the neighboring Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Iranian state repression and economic marginalization appear to have prevented Iranian Kurds from mounting serious resistance to the Islamic Republic to date. Congress may seek clarity from Administration officials about any possible efforts, and evaluate potential plans, costs, benefits, and outcomes. Reportedly, U.S. and Israeli strikes have targeted Iranian military and intelligence facilities in Kurdish areas of northwest Iran (known in Kurdish as *Rojhelat*). Apparent Iranian attacks have struck some locations associated with Iranian Kurdish opposition groups in the KRI. Iraq’s Kurdistan Regional Government and the national government of Iraq have both issued statements denying their involvement with or support of any potential cross-border incursion by KRI-based Iranian Kurds.

Figure 1. Kurds in the Middle East



Source: CRS, based on open source material from the Central Intelligence Agency and the *Washington Post*.

Attempts to weaken or overthrow a foreign government via support to a geographically peripheral group that differs ethnically or religiously from the regime’s leading figures may find points of comparison and contrast with:

- **Afghanistan** and the 2001 defeat of the Sunni Islamist, ethnic Pashtun-dominated Taliban regime by the Northern Alliance (led mainly by a Sunni-Shia mix of ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras), with U.S. and

allied air and special operations forces support. The Taliban returned to power in 2021 after an insurgency.

- **Syria** and efforts after 2011 by the United States and other Western countries, Turkey, and Arab Gulf states to support various groups in Syria, whether against Bashar Al Asad’s Alawite-led regime or against the Islamic State (IS, alt. ISIS) organization. A Turkey-backed Syrian Sunni Islamist group deposed Asad in 2024, and has clashed since 2025 with Kurds who were U.S. anti-IS partners, as well as Alawites and Druze.

Unseating or irreversibly weakening the Islamic Republic could prove to be a formidable task. The Islamic Republic has survived external and internal challenges for 47 years. It has had access to the proceeds of vast hydrocarbon resources; it developed and frequently used a repressive apparatus; its security personnel have demonstrated acumen for advanced technology and cybersecurity; and the regime has dispersed institutional strength and patronage throughout Iran’s large and diverse geography and population (see **Figure 2**) via political, economic, military, and religious networks. Moreover, popular support for Iran’s territorial cohesion and opposition to ethnic separatism appears to extend beyond regime supporters.

Figure 2. Iran: “Ethnoreligious Distribution”



Source: U.S. government map 788033AI (G00987), October 2009.

The outcome of any possible efforts to work with Iranian Kurdish groups could depend on several factors, including (1) the groups’ capabilities, cohesion, and abilities to gain support within Iran; (2) the type of assistance, training, or direct military support provided, including with ground operations, continuing airstrikes, or establishing “no-fly zones”; (3) regime forces’ ability to maintain control in urban centers and beyond; and (4) whether an uprising by

Iranian Kurds (often estimated at close to 10% of Iran’s population of over 90 million) on Iran’s mountainous western periphery would foster or dampen opposition to the regime in key Iranian cities dominated by Shia Persians and Azeris. Around 60% of Iran’s Kurds are reportedly Sunni.

Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Iranians have resisted several efforts by outside powers (including the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union) to dictate or influence domestic leadership and governance. Key Iranian actors may weigh the widespread domestic political and socioeconomic grievances against the regime (apparent in 2025-2026 nationwide protests) alongside concerns that an armed uprising could foment instability similar to that in some other regional states over the past two decades. Some may also oppose the prospect that minorities backed by foreign actors could play an outsized role in shaping their country’s future.

### Kurds in Iran and Elsewhere: Some Historical Context for U.S. Relations

<b>1920s-1930s</b>	Separatist efforts by Iranian Kurdish tribes after World War I thwarted by Reza Shah Pahlavi, who sought to disarm Kurdish groups and suppress Kurdish identity (and whose son was the Shah overthrown in 1979).
<b>1946</b>	Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) established 11-month Mahabad Republic under Soviet protection after World War II, until Iranian government forces regained control of the area.
<b>1960s-1970s</b>	Israel, Iran, and the United States supported Iraqi Kurdish rebels against Iraqi government forces until a 1975 Iran-Iraq agreement, beginning a longtime association between Israel and Kurds in the region.
<b>1979-1984</b>	Iranian Kurdish groups sporadically controlled parts of western Iran amid fighting with the new Islamic Republic; government forces eventually prevailed.
<b>1991</b>	Iraqi forces killed thousands in Kurdish areas of northern Iraq after U.S. officials encouraged uprisings in the wake of the Gulf War; U.S. military operations and “no-fly zones” later stopped Iraqi forces from regaining control of these areas, leading to de facto autonomy and, later, a federal arrangement after 2003.
<b>1997</b>	United States designated the Turkish-origin Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK, which also has a presence in Syria, Iraq, and Iran) as a foreign terrorist organization.
<b>2014</b>	United States began assisting Iraqi and Syrian Kurds to counter the Islamic State organization; Turkey opposed U.S. assistance for PKK-linked Syrian Kurds.
<b>2023</b>	Iraq agreed with Iran to close bases of Iranian Kurdish groups in Iraq near the border area, although various groups reportedly remain in the KRI.
<b>2025</b>	PKK announced its dissolution amid negotiations with Turkey, pending future implementation.
<b>2026</b>	Regime forces in post-Asad Syria compelled an end to Syrian Kurds’ rule over much of northeast Syria, effectively ending their anti-IS efforts with U.S. forces.

### Iranian Kurdish Groups

Since February 2026, in the aftermath of a government crackdown on nationwide protests in Iran, the following

Iranian Kurdish groups have joined a Coalition of Political Forces of Iranian Kurdistan, with a stated aim to work with other opposition groups to overthrow the Islamic Republic.

**Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK).** Founded in 2004, the PJAK (designated in 2009 by the Treasury Department as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist for being a PKK offshoot) reportedly has been active against Islamic Republic forces, perhaps accounting for some 70% of the Kurdish attacks on the Iranian regime since 2014.

**Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI).** Formed in 1945, the socialist-oriented PDKI has helped lead past insurgencies in Iran, and it may have already carried out attacks against Iran’s regime in March 2026.

**Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK).** The PAK, founded in 1991, fought alongside Iraqi Kurdish forces against the Islamic State, and reportedly attacked Iranian security forces in early 2026 amid anti-government protests.

**Khabat Organization.** Formed in 1980, Khabat also fought the Islamic State.

**Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan and Komala – Reform Faction.** Two of the three main branches of the socialist Komala Party, which was founded in 1969.

One source posits that KRI-based Iranian Kurdish factions, taken together, have around 2,500 fighters. Another asserts that the groups may have sent hundreds into Iran in recent weeks.

### Issues for Congress

**Strategy and political-military plans, authorizations, and appropriations.** Members may seek information, conduct fact-finding, and consult with the Administration on U.S. goals and plans. They may assess how possible support for or partnership with Kurdish groups might affect U.S. interests and regional security. Members may examine questions related to (1) protecting any U.S. or partner forces; (2) formulating logistical and supply arrangements; (3) considering the effects on U.S. partners in Iraq and Turkey; (4) coordinating with other Iranian substate actors who may have differing views on mobilizing minorities in Iran; (5) preparing for tactics (including insurgency) that may be employed by regime elements; and (6) avoiding, preventing, or responding to human rights violations.

Congress could mandate, permit, condition, or prohibit U.S. military or intelligence support, as well as equipment and funding for—and vetting and training of—partner forces. Tools available to Congress include authorizations of military force, and authorizations and appropriations of aid.

**Effects on regional actors.** Possible efforts to partner with Iranian Kurds could result in prolonged U.S.-Israel-Iran military action in KRI areas with potential security, political, and economic consequences for **Iraq**. Potential U.S.-Israel support for the PJAK, owing to its PKK ties, could have implications for **Turkey and Syria**. Iranian retaliation would have implications for **Arab Gulf states**.

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