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# IW PERSPECTIVE



## The Kurds of Iran as a Strategic Factor in Western Approaches to a Changing Islamic Republic

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### Introduction: Iran's Political Trajectory and the Role of Minorities

Iran's political development has been marked by successive central governments that have marginalized peripheral regions, including Kurdish-inhabited areas, laying the groundwork for recurring unrest. [Research](#) shows that Kurdish-inhabited provinces have long been governed through a security-first approach, producing political exclusion and deep mistrust toward the central state. [United Nations](#) further confirms decades of structural discrimination and disproportionate repression against Kurdish communities, especially during periods of nationwide unrest. The centrality of Kurdish regions became visible again in 2022, when the death of

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Mahsa (Jina) Amini helped trigger nationwide protests – commonly referred as the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement (*Jin, Jiyan, Azadî*) – during which [Amnesty International](#) documented severe and disproportionate state violence in Kurdish cities. This essay examines how domestic unrest, regional dynamics, and the state’s treatment of minorities interact to shape Iran’s evolving security environment.

## Iran’s Regional Position and Its Strategic Ambitions

Iran’s contemporary regional strategy relies heavily on a transnational proxy network extending from Lebanon to Yemen. Through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its Quds Force, Tehran had entrenched military assets in Syria, supported Hezbollah, and backed various allied militias, an ecosystem long targeted by Israeli operations, as documented in [Washington Institute analysis](#). Tensions escalated sharply in April 2024, when Israel struck Iran’s consular building in Damascus, killing several senior IRGC commanders, an event detailed in [Chatham House](#). Iran responded with its first direct missile barrage on Israeli territory. According to the [Center for Preventive Action](#), Iran’s regional posture has become increasingly exposed to escalation risks.

## Iran’s Domestic Situation: Protests, Legitimacy Loss, and Crisis Dynamics

Iran’s 2022-2023 “Woman, Life, Freedom” protests – known by their Kurdish slogan *Jin, Jiyan, Azadî* (“*Woman, Life, Freedom*”), which originated in the Kurdish women’s movement and was popularized by Kurdish activists following the death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini – marked one of the most profound legitimacy crises for the Islamic Republic. [Human Rights Watch](#) documented widespread and often lethal force against demonstrators nationwide, including in minority regions. [UN investigators](#) later confirmed that Kurdish and Baluch communities were disproportionately targeted, facing systematic repression and rights violations. These dynamics resurfaced even more violently

during the renewed nationwide unrest of late 2025 and early 2026, when rights groups and major international media reported over 5,000 to 7,000 people killed during the state’s crackdown, far surpassing previous protest waves. This was reported both in a [PBS report](#) and [CBC investigation](#), despite extensive internet shutdowns that obscured the full toll. At the same time, Iran entered a precarious phase of nuclear diplomacy. Indirect talks with the United States resumed in early 2026, with Iranian officials signaling limited convergence on core issues while Washington insisted that “all options remain on the table,” as covered in this [Al Jazeera update](#). In parallel, the U.S. deployed one of its largest regional military buildups in decades, including multiple carrier strike groups and expanded airpower, creating a prominent backdrop of coercive pressure, as analyzed in [US News assessment](#). In April 2024, Israel conducted a strike on Iran’s consular compound in Damascus, killing senior IRGC commanders, a development examined in this [regional assessment](#). These developments indicate a convergence of domestic unrest and regional escalation, as reflected in a [Arab News report](#).

## The Situation of Minorities: The Kurds as Political and Social Actors

Iran’s Kurds live primarily in the country’s north-west across Kurdistan, Kermanshah, West Azerbaijan, and Ilam, with smaller communities in Lorestan and Hamadan. Despite linguistic (Sorani, Kurmanji, Kalhori, Gorani) and religious diversity (Sunni, Shi’a, Yarsan), they maintain a strong shared identity shaped by history, geography, and sustained marginalization, as documented in a [UNPO profile](#) and a [UK government report](#). This political cohesion has shaped Kurdish engagement in national movements, most recently visible during the Jina protests, whose dynamics are analyzed in the domestic-politics section, highlighted in [Atlantic Council analysis](#).

The Kurdish political landscape is broad. Longstanding parties include the PDKI and Komala, both of which operate largely from exile yet retain networks

inside Iran, with Komala emphasizing political organizing over escalation, as noted in this [Komala report](#). Another militant actor is the PJAK, responsible for most Kurdish armed incidents between 2014 and 2025 due to its PKK-linked structure and operational depth in the Iraqi border mountains, as detailed in this [National Context analysis](#). Additional groups include PAK, Xebat, Komala splinter factions, the KDPI-reunified, and more recently, a [coalition of Kurdish parties](#) formed to unify opposition efforts. All operate under increasing constraints: Iran has repeatedly pressured Iraq's Kurdistan Region to restrict, disarm, or relocate Iranian Kurdish groups, narrowing their operational space, as outlined in a [Washington Institute for Near East Policy analysis](#).

## External Powers and Their Policies Toward Iran and the Kurds

The United States has long partnered effectively with Kurdish forces: the Peshmerga were central to halting ISIS in Iraq between 2014 and 2017, as shown in this [study](#), while the Syrian Democratic Forces, built around Kurdish units, led the liberation of Raqqa and the collapse of ISIS's territorial control, detailed in a [CRS report](#). These precedents demonstrate that Kurds can serve as reliable ground partners when backed by Western airpower and logistics.

Israel has maintained a consistently sympathetic stance toward Kurdish aspirations. In 2017 it became the only state to publicly endorse Kurdish independence, reported in this [AP article](#). More recently, intensified Israeli strikes on IRGC infrastructure in Syria have disrupted Tehran's logistical networks, indirectly reducing pressure on Kurdish areas, as analyzed in this [Times of Israel report](#).

Turkey remains the decisive veto actor. Yet, in late 2024–2025, Turkish nationalist leaders signaled limited openness to exploring a renewed peace track with the PKK, including allowing Abdullah Öcalan expanded communication, developments described in this [Washington Institute analysis](#). While no policy shift materialized, Ankara may still tolerate non-armed

Kurdish civil initiatives in Iran if transparently deconflicted.

Arab states prioritize regional de-escalation and containment of IRGC proxies. The European Union similarly balances human-rights support with its relations to Turkey and Iraq; EU assessments emphasize that any Kurdish autonomy must fit within stable constitutional frameworks rather than fuel fragmentation, as noted in this [Euro Prospects analysis](#).

Taken together, these positions suggest that broad multilateral backing for Kurdish civil society is feasible, even if direct military assistance remains politically constrained.

## Strategic Assessment: Why Kurds Are a Suitable Western Partner

Past U.S.–Kurdish cooperation in Iraq and Syria has already demonstrated that Kurdish actors can operate coherently and align with Western military frameworks, as documented in the [Wilson Center](#) analysis and in [Jerusalem Post](#) assessment. These precedents matter because any future confrontation involving Iran, whether triggered by the collapse of nuclear negotiations, a regional war involving Israel, or internal regime breakdown, is expected to be long, attritional, and shaped by intense regional militarization, as outlined in a [US News analysis](#). Crucially, Kurdish autonomy represents not a threat to Iran's territorial integrity but a potential stabilizing mechanism. The autonomy model in Iraq, enshrined in [Article 117 of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution](#), which formally recognizes the Kurdistan Region, demonstrates the viability of decentralization within a unified state. A similar arrangement in Iran, centered on cultural rights, language policy, and empowered local administration, could serve both Kurdish aspirations and broader Western security interests by mitigating longstanding structural grievances and reducing the likelihood of future instability.

## Policy Implications and Recommendations

**First**, Western strategy toward Iranian Kurds should

prioritize strengthening civil society, as this is the most politically sustainable and least escalatory form of engagement. Effective measures include providing digital-security tools, training for human-rights defenders, medical support, and forensic documentation capacities. These forms of assistance help protect civilian actors who have repeatedly borne the brunt of repression, especially in Kurdish and Baluch regions, as confirmed by UN investigations. To reduce exposure to Iranian retaliation, such support should be channeled discreetly through Erbil and embedded within multilateral frameworks.

**Second**, the West should pursue structured political engagement with established Kurdish parties and civic actors. Dialogue should remain inclusive and pluralistic while maintaining a strict firewall against any organizations designated as terrorist entities. This approach enables political stabilization without empowering actors whose affiliations would undermine Western policy coherence or trigger Turkish pushback. In this context, preparing decentralization or autonomy arrangements as part of a possible future Iranian constitutional framework is prudent, not as an externally imposed blueprint, but as a rights-based option aligned with long-standing Kurdish demands.

**Third**, only under exceptional conditions, such as state fragmentation, extreme repression, or a wider regional war, should Western governments consider adapting the “by, with, and through” model – a U.S. military framework that enables operations via local partner forces supported by external training intelligence, and air power – to Kurdish security actors. Even then, any such engagement must be conditional on strict human-rights compliance, unified command structures, and robust deconfliction with Turkey, whose threat perceptions remain highly sensitive to Kurdish armed mobilization.

Finally, Israel can play a limited but strategically useful indirect role. Under U.S. coordination, Israel’s continued efforts to degrade IRGC capabilities, particularly those posing direct threats to Kurdish regions, can shape the strategic environment without placing Kurdish actors at risk of political stigma. Israel’s

posture toward Kurdish political aspirations, including during recent escalations, underscores the potential value of such calibrated support when kept unbranded and carefully separated from local Kurdish initiatives.

## Conclusion

Iran’s Kurds warrant Western attention because they combine three rare strategic advantages within the Islamic Republic: localized legitimacy, organizational capacity, and a proven willingness to cooperate with external partners. Their central role in the 2022–2023 protests, especially in cities like Saqqez and Sanandaj, demonstrated a level of political mobilization that endured even under intense repression. From a security-policy perspective, supporting Kurdish civil actors offers practical utility rather than symbolic alignment. Given Iran’s unpredictable trajectory, the West needs local actors that can provide continuity, access and stability. Kurdish civil society and political networks offer precisely these capabilities. Taken together, these factors position Iran’s Kurds as one of the few societal actors capable of providing continuity and access in moments of volatility. Engaging Kurdish civil society and preparing for potential autonomy arrangements within a future Iranian constitutional framework provide low-cost, high-leverage options. Such steps build regional resilience, offer reliable crisis contact points, and expand the West’s stabilizing tools should Iran undergo sudden political change. Supporting Iran’s Kurds is therefore not about taking sides but about strengthening Western awareness, crisis readiness, and long-term regional stability.

