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Analysis

Middle East and
North Africa Desk

June 2026

State Management of Kurdish Armed Actors in the Middle East



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Executive Summary

Oliver Quatermaine

Kurdistan refers to an area that includes parts of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Armenia. It is home to the world's largest stateless ethnic group, whose lives differ significantly depending on which side of a border they find themselves on. The threat landscape for Kurds in the region is particularly unique since the profound interdependence between these communities means no Kurdish group lives in isolation and no development in one country fails to have impacts across the others.

The Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI) represents the closest approximation to Kurdish statehood anywhere in the region since it operates as a federal entity with substantial autonomy. Nonetheless, recent developments, such as substantial amounts of unpaid federal entitlements, imply that Baghdad may be trying to rein in the KRI's independence to protect its sovereignty. Despite the rising friction between the central government and Kurdish governance at the moment the most immediate threat the KRI faces is external, as Iran has targeted Iraqi Kurds who are seen as American proxies in the region.

Iranian Kurds themselves have been facing systemic discrimination for a number of decades. Repression has increased since Iranians took to the streets in the back end of 2025 protesting the collapse of the Iranian rial. Tehran justifies its suppression and collective punishment of Kurds by framing the prospect of a Greater Kurdistan as a threat to Iranian territorial integrity. Iran also pays a significant amount of attention to the Kurds located outside their national borders, having already pressured Baghdad to relocate Iranian Kurdish opposition groups based in Iraq.

The Syrian civil war which came about after the Arab Spring allowed Kurds to establish the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), only for renewed conflict with the incoming transitional government to bring about its dissolution. The ceasefire which followed led to a historic presidential decree which placed Syrian Kurds within Syrian's national identity. While highly symbolic, the decree does not hide the fragile trust both actors share for each other. The central tension remains around the Kurdish desire for a federal model similar to the one in Iraq, while the government insists on a centralised structure. Over the coming period factors such as the integration of SDF forces into the national army will be critical to follow in order to build a picture of what the immediate future holds for Syrian Kurds.

In Türkiye, the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) 2025 dissolution marked a significant shift from armed insurgency toward political engagement, reducing the immediate threat of militant attacks. However, Ankara is now faced with the possibility of new splinter factions appearing which are more favourable to the use of violent tactics. Türkiye's emphasis remains on the containment of the Kurdish issue, by framing Kurdish aspirations through their counter-terrorism policy and coordinating with neighbouring states accordingly. However, the lack of a pathway towards the political recognition of Turkish Kurds does raise questions about the durability of such an approach.

Beyond the immediate region, the Kurdish situation carries consequences that are directly relevant to international audiences. Indeed, the Kurdish diaspora is global as there are an estimated 1-2 million Kurds living across Europe with significant groups also present in North American and Australia. What happens to Kurdish communities in the Middle East directly affects families and political mobilisation in cities worldwide. Aside from that, instances of escalation or attacks on Kurdish communities have produced significant refugee movements, with Europe as one of the primary destinations. Finally, in the context of a particularly volatile geopolitical landscape in the Middle East in 2026 it will be interesting to see how Western powers interact with Kurds in the region. Kurds provided important ground forces for the US against groups such as ISIS in previous years, yet Western support for Syrian Kurds was withdrawn when it was no longer deemed convenient. It raises the question of whether Kurds in the region will respond in the context of a Western call for military intervention.

1. Iraqi State Management of the Kurds

Oliver Quatermaine

The Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) is an autonomous region located in northern Iraq, bordering Türkiye, Iran, and Syria. In 2005, the Iraqi constitution was [amended](#) to officially recognise the KRI as Iraq's only federal region with its own regional government, granting the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) power to govern largely independently of Baghdad.

This oil-rich region is mainly inhabited by Kurds who [constitute](#) around 15-20% of Iraq's population. In 2026, the KRI maintains a state of limited autonomy, despite ongoing tensions characterising the relationship between the central government and the KRG. Baghdad has been accused of instrumentalising budget allocations as a form of leverage over the region. In January 2026, the KRG released a statement [explaining](#) that it only received 41% of its federal entitlements from 2023 to 2025. At the same time, restrictions on the KRG's ability to export oil independently during this period significantly increased the region's reliance on federal budget transfers. This situation has prompted accusations that Iraqi leaders are using these allocations as a political tool of coercion. Through the provision of conditional funding and the reduction of the KRI's sources of independent revenue, the central government has sought to gradually reassert its authority over the region.

The government seems to be doing so to avoid the threat of an outright move for Kurdish statehood. This seemed a possibility in 2017, when the KRG held a referendum on independence from Iraq, which passed with overwhelming support but [triggered](#) immediate national and international condemnation. At the moment, Baghdad is depriving the region of the economic means to achieve independence whilst awarding them enough autonomy to mitigate widespread unrest. Despite the political tensions that have surfaced, Iraq's management of the KRI will likely remain effective over the short term as long as it still benefits from fiscal leverage through access to the KRG's oil revenues and control of the region's budgetary allocations.

Current Threats

The main threat to Kurds in Iraq is Iranian proxy forces that are targeting the military of the KRG. In the days preceding the war in Iran, Kataib Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed militia operating out of Iraq and Syria, had [warned](#) the KRG not to "support hostile foreign forces" in a war on Iran. The KRG Peshmerga forces are widely seen as United States (US) backed proxies which ensure Western presence in the region. Iran also has been [targeting](#) Kurdish forces in the KRI through drone and missile attacks. Kurds based

in the KRI pose the most notable threat of a ground invasion to Iran, therefore they will likely continue to be targeted in the war.

The US-Israeli war against Iran is especially concerning for the Iraqi central government as it could undermine their control over the Kurdish region and bring further violence to the country. Indeed, as a financial backer of the Peshmerga, the US could be inclined to encourage Kurdish forces in Iraq to launch a ground invasion into Iran, leading to further escalation of the war. In early March 2026, the wife of the Iraqi president [issued](#) a statement urging Kurds not to become involved in a war under US direction.

Factors to watch over the coming year

The majority of the risks Iraqi Kurds are facing over the coming period are tied to the war in Iran. Firstly, Iraq [announced](#) the closure of the oil pipeline linking the KRI to Türkiye due to the conflict. As an oil-dependent region, with a reported 85% of its fiscal revenue derived from oil, this pipeline is [critical](#) to the economic well-being of the KRG. It was only [reopened](#) in late 2025 and contributes to the livelihoods of millions in the KRI. A protracted closure of the pipeline would be problematic for the central government, as it would have to contend with the reality of growing economic precarity and dissatisfaction in the region.

Furthermore, the central government might be forced to allocate a larger share of the national budget to the KRG in 2026 if the pipeline remains closed due to the war. At the same time, Türkiye has announced plans to [expand](#) its crude oil pipeline agreement with Iraq, currently set to expire in July 2026, to also include gas, petrochemicals, and electricity. However, Ankara is also likely to push for revised terms that encourage full utilisation of the pipeline and [prevent](#) prolonged periods of inactivity, as was the case in 2023. When negotiating these terms, Baghdad will also have to weigh the importance of its economic revenue for stability in the KRI.

2. Iranian State Management of the Kurds

Artyom Papyan

Throughout history, Kurds have endured increasing state-imposed restrictions under the Islamic Republic of Iran, a pattern that intensified significantly in 2025 and early 2026 amid major nationwide protests. These developments underscored the persistent marginalisation of the Kurdish population. Estimated to number between ten and fifteen million, Iranian Kurds have had comparatively less international political exposure than the Kurdish populations in Iraq, Syria, and Türkiye.

Escalating Repression of Kurdish Communities in Early 2025

Against this backdrop, in 2025, repression against Kurds [escalated](#), with increased Kolbar crises, tighter cultural restrictions, and a nationwide surge in executions. Dozens of Kurdish kolbars (border couriers) were killed or wounded in intensified border crackdowns, and arbitrary arrests rose sharply among activists, students, and journalists, many detained without due process. Cultural and linguistic rights were further eroded as Kurdish language education and celebrations like Newroz were criminalised, and artists and teachers faced reprisals. These trends, alongside a record number of executions disproportionately targeting Kurdish political prisoners, suppressed civic life in Kurdish regions.

Meanwhile, later in June 2025, tensions also rose between the US, Israel, and Iran, peaking during June's 12-day war. The conflict shaped the Islamic Republic's messaging, with officials increasingly portraying minorities as aligned with foreign enemies, fuelling suspicion and securitised rhetoric. Within ten days, authorities [arrested](#) at least 900 people nationwide, including more than one-third who were Kurds, on charges such as "espionage for Israel" and "propaganda against the state."

In late December 2025, the sudden collapse of the Iranian rial to a record low of 1.45 million rials per US dollar [triggered](#) popular uprisings across all 31 provinces and more than 200 cities. From this spark, the unrest quickly expanded from Tehran's Grand Bazaar to major urban centres, including Tehran, Isfahan, Mashhad, Shiraz, Karaj, and Ahvaz. Meanwhile, according to the state statistics centre, the average annual inflation rate in December rose to 42.2% from the same period last year, up 1.8% from November. During this period, point-to-point inflation reached 52.6%, and food inflation for staples such as dairy and bread rose to 72%. This crisis was the tipping point after years of state mismanagement, repression, and worsening living conditions, including water shortages, electricity blackouts, and environmental neglect. Discrimination against ethnic minorities, especially the Kurds and Baluchis, further fuelled unrest in marginalised regions.

Nationwide Economic Collapse and the December 2025 Uprising

As the movement spread, these protests, which started in Tehran's Grand Bazaar in December 2025, quickly spread nationwide, drawing participation from a wide range of groups, including merchants, students, workers, and women. While their initial organisation focused on some sectors, specifically the retail and commercial hubs of the bazaar, the demonstrations soon became spontaneous and broad-based, reflecting widespread frustration. Over the following weeks, the movement's focus shifted from economic grievances over inflation and living costs to calls for systemic political change and the end of the Islamic Republic.

Amid escalating unrest, by January 2026, the crisis [escalated](#) further, with state repression reaching unprecedented levels. Tehran's government deployed targeted security crackdowns to counter the ongoing public discontent. During this period, the protests evolved into a unified, nationwide demand for comprehensive political change. This uprising became one of the gravest threats to the Islamic Republic's authority in decades, distinguished by both the vast scope of demonstrations and the brutality of the government's response.

In response to the mounting protests, the authorities responded with escalating force, moving quickly from policing to the widespread use of lethal weapons against protesters. Mass arrests, including minors, and expedited, unfair trials followed, along with a nationwide internet blackout to suppress information. The state justified its crackdown by portraying protesters as rioters and blaming foreign influence, while targeting civil society leaders and imposing strict curfews to stifle further dissent. These measures underscored the government's resolve to suppress dissent and the heavy human toll exacted by the struggle for Kurdish and broader Iranian rights. Consequently, at least 240 Kurds have been [killed](#) during the protests. Amid widespread protests and harsh state crackdowns across Iran, several Iranian Kurdish political parties, including the Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK), the Khabat Organization of Kurdistan of Iran, the Komala Party of Kurdistan of Iran, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, [issued](#) a joint open letter. They urged the international community and human rights organisations to respond to the Islamic Republic's crackdown by listening to the Iranian people, taking action to stop abuses, and recognizing that decades of opposition show the people's desire for freedom, making global support vital to the world's historical responsibility.

By late December 2025, tens of thousands of protesters had been detained, including many children. Allegations of torture, enforced disappearances, and incommunicado detention have since been reported. Martial law-like conditions reinforced by curfews, checkpoints, and surveillance technology have intensified the climate of fear and repression. Human Rights Watch have [found](#) evidence of detainees being denied access

to independent legal representation and facing unfair judicial proceedings, with some subjected to forced confessions and even capital punishment. The scope of the crackdowns extends far beyond protesters. Journalists, lawyers, medical workers, students, and minority groups have similarly been affected.

Regional Kurdish Dynamics and Cross-Border Pressures

Regional dynamics also played a significant role during this period. The fate of Iranian Kurds is closely tied to developments in neighbouring Kurdish regions. When northeast Syria's Kurdish administration [reached](#) a truce agreement with the Syrian Government in January 2026, addressing tensions over Kurdish autonomy. Kurdish-majority Syrian Defence Forces were integrated into the Syrian Government as part of this agreement, sparking protests in Sanandaj, which were met with a forceful response by security forces. Threats against Kurdish populations in Syria or Iraq frequently trigger solidarity protests in Iranian Kurdish cities, which the state met with preemptive, harsh crackdowns to prevent wider instability.

Building on uneasy regional dynamics, security measures carried out by Türkiye and Iraq have further restricted Iranian-Kurdish movements. This follows the August 2025 security agreement between Tehran and Baghdad, which [required](#) the disarmament and relocation of exiled Kurdish groups to camps deeper within Iraq. As a result, these opposition groups lost their strategic bases and safe areas along the border. Meanwhile, Iraqi and Turkish military operations intensified. Iranian Kurds then shifted to clandestine organising within Iran. Tehran also exploited Türkiye's "anti-terror" rhetoric and synchronised repression with its neighbours, deepening Kurdish isolation.

These interconnected developments help explain why Tehran uses the 'Greater Kurdistan' concept. The regime frames any Kurdish progress in nearby countries as a domestic threat and equates cultural rights with separatism. In reality, Iranian Kurds are mainly concerned with discrimination and rights. Even so, the state uses Kurdish gains in the region to justify crackdowns, showing how outside developments fuel repression at home.

3. Syrian State Management of the Kurds

Ammarah Ali

The Kurdish question in Syria is rooted in decades of neglect, political marginalisation, contested citizenship rights, and limited cultural recognition for the Kurdish population in the country. Before the civil war, the Kurds' status remained essentially unchanged under Bashar al-Assad's [rule](#), who did not address the past injustices against Kurds and maintained restrictive policies toward the Kurdish political movement and demographic engineering. The fragmentation of state authority after the outbreak of the [Syrian Civil War](#) in 2011, however, created an opportunity for the Kurdish political and military organisations to consolidate power in northeast Syria.

Kurds during the Syrian Civil War

Among these actors, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) quickly emerged as the most influential Kurdish political force. Closely linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Türkiye, the PYD had a well-organised political structure and an experienced armed wing. As state authority weakened during the early years of conflict, the PYD moved to fill the vacuum and gradually positioned itself as the dominant authority across the Kurdish-majority areas of northeastern Syria.

These Kurdish political and security structures later evolved into more formalised institutions through the creation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in 2015, with extensive support from the United States. The [SDF](#) was designed as a multi-ethnic coalition that incorporated Kurdish, Arab, and Christian fighters but was primarily dominated by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which was formed in 2012 by PKK veterans including SDF Commander-in-Chief Mazloun Abdi. SDF's close cooperation with the US-led coalition against the Islamic State (ISIL) contributed to its recognition as one of the most effective ground forces in the military campaign against the extremist group.

These victories enabled the SDF to achieve a de facto level of autonomy by establishing a governance structure known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). While the Kurds viewed this arrangement as a model of decentralised governance, Syrian political actors rejected such institutionalisation of Kurdish autonomy.

It is worth noting that the YPG (the predecessor of the SDF) is widely understood to be influenced by the ideas of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, which focus on decentralised governance based on local councils and cooperation among various ethnic and religious groups, rather than advocating for an independent Kurdish state. This partly reflects the

fact that many areas under SDF control, including Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, have Arab majority populations. That is why the Syrian Kurdish political model differs from the more nationalist and territorially defined autonomy pursued by Iraqi Kurds under the Kurdistan Regional Government.

Kurdish Question Under Ahmed al-Sharaa

2026 marked a decisive shift in the Syrian state's approach to the Kurdish question. The collapse of the Assad government in 2024 and the subsequent consolidation of power under the interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa marked a departure from the previous model. Despite being sceptical of al-Sharaa's intentions, given his reported affiliation with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which had evolved out of Jabhat al-Nusra (formerly linked to al-Qaeda) and had fought against Syrian Kurds in the past, the Syrian Kurdish leadership, under immense US pressure, agreed to sit at the negotiation table with Damascus. Yet, al-Sharaa reverted to the same [offensive measures](#) against SDF-held areas.

After weeks of fighting in early January, the Syrian government [expanded](#) its territorial presence over vast swathes of northeast Syria, previously held by the Kurdish-led SDF. This shift effectively ended de facto autonomy under AANES and significantly weakened the institutional foundations of the autonomous Kurdish governance model. Rather than negotiating a decentralised political settlement, Damascus adopted a strategy combining military consolidation with targeted political accommodation.

A [comprehensive ceasefire agreement](#) includes the phased integration of the SDF's military and administration into the interim government's institutions. Since the integration is expected to occur on an individual basis instead of the incorporation of whole SDF units, it reflects a disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) [approach](#) designed to dissolve the parallel chains of command on one hand and provide the state with the means to reassert central authority on the other.

Moreover, the interim government has issued [Presidential Decree No.13](#), which, for the first time in Syria's history, officially acknowledged Syrian Kurdish identity, recognised Kurdish as a national language, granted citizenship rights for Syrian Kurds, and designated March 21 as the date of the Newroz festival. Additional provisions include measures to secure civil and educational rights for Kurds, such as teaching Kurdish in Kurdish-populated areas, and to allow displaced Kurdish residents to return to their homes.

Although the ceasefire and the integration of the SDF mark progress, the trust between the two sides remains fragile. This mistrust exists notably because all the efforts made by the Syrian government, including the comprehensive agreement and the rights

decree, [fail](#) to mention the constitutional enshrinement of Kurdish rights, which has been a strong demand from Kurdish political leaders.

Furthermore, these developments are unfolding within a transnational government structure that deems centralisation as its ultimate objective. The Syrian government [maintains](#) a firm stance on centralised authority and resists the possibility of autonomous arrangements that would open doors for Kurds to establish independent security structures or to institutionalise Kurdish self-rule. Therefore, even though the discussed political concessions provide Kurds with cultural and civic recognition, they do not, however, equate to genuine autonomy.

Regional and Cross-Border Implications:

The contemporary developments surrounding the integration of Kurdish forces and government-led hostilities against Kurds in Syria have led to a surge of Kurdish cross-border grassroots solidarity. Momentarily, the [organised rallies](#) in Iraq's Kurdistan region and smaller demonstrations in Türkiye, the US, and Europe in response to the offensive in Syria showcase instances of the continued transnational character of Kurdish solidarity with chances of harnessing into a tangible change in the future.

At the elite level, [united](#) in their understanding that only through cooperation, Syrian Kurds could achieve their desired rights, the relationship between SDF leader Abdi and the President of Iraq's Kurdistan region, Masoud Barzani, has also strengthened. Ebril has also been serving as a diplomatic meeting point for the Syrian Kurdish officials and foreign diplomats, allowing Iraqi Kurdish leaders to act as intermediaries in discussions concerning the future of Kurdish governance in Syria. Still, the Kurdistan Regional Government has remained distant from involvement in Syria's internal affairs in order to maintain stable relations with its neighbouring states.

Equally important here is to consider the responses in Türkiye and Iran, where questions of Kurdish political rights and armed mobilisation are closely monitored. In 2015, Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [stated](#) that he would never allow a Kurdish statelet in Syria. Turkish officials consider the SDF to be a terrorist-linked force, reinforcing its position that the SDF is an extension of the outlawed PKK. Therefore, after the fall of the Assad regime, Ankara remained persistent in its opposition to the continuation of Kurdish-led local governance.

Nonetheless, consolidation of power by al-Sharaa has been met with cautious optimism in Türkiye, particularly due to expectations that he will resist granting meaningful autonomy to Kurdish groups and dismantle any experiment in Kurdish self-administration along Türkiye's border. Ankara has also [signalled](#) military support for

Damascus' efforts against SDF while simultaneously rejecting any plan to withdraw its troops and military outposts in northern Syria and Iraq.

Iran, like Türkiye, also opposes the emergence of autonomous Kurdish governance structures in Syria due to its own sensitivities regarding the possibility of mobilisation among its own Kurdish population in western Iran. Though Iran maintained low-key contacts with Syrian Kurdish actors during the Syrian conflict, its main concern remains preventing the strengthening of independent Kurdish political or military control along its borders. In this context, al-Sharaa's push towards [maintaining Syria's territorial unity](#) may help alleviate some of Tehran's concerns about the emergence of a Kurdish autonomous region in Syria.

"So What": Key Indicators to Monitor

In the coming months, several developments will shape the trajectory of the Kurdish question in northeastern Syria. One key factor will be the economic consequences of Kurdish forces [losing control](#) over major oil fields such as Syria's largest oilfield, al-Omar, which previously generated significant revenue for AANES and SDF. The loss of these fields may increase Kurdish economic dependence on the Syrian government, potentially encouraging them to uphold a more pragmatic approach toward the negotiation and political reintegration process. At the same time, failure to bring forth viable economic arrangements or meaningful political inclusion for the Kurdish regions could deepen grievances and push some Kurdish groups to stand against the Syrian government. Therefore, the success of such economic and political accommodations will be a key indicator shaping Kurdish responses in the months ahead.

Beyond these economic pressures, the broader effort by al-Sharaa to integrate multiple armed actors into a unified national army, estimated at roughly 100,000 personnel, remains a complicated process that could have an indirect impact on Kurdish forces. Complexities in maintaining cohesion within a diverse security structure can weaken central command authority, inviting interference from external actors seeking to shape the security landscape in Kurdish-majority areas. This remains crucial because security officials have [warned](#) that ISIL has rebuilt its strength to between 5,000 and 10,000 fighters across Syria and Iraq. In this context, extremist groups and other actors may exploit the already vulnerable transition process in northeastern Syria.

4. Turkish State Management of the Kurds

Ishaan Garg

Historical Context

Türkiye's approach to Kurdish armed actors has been shaped by the initial insurgency launched in 1984 by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). [Violence](#) between Kurdish armed groups and Turkish security forces has since cost more than 40,000 lives and fundamentally securitised Ankara's view of Kurdish mobilisation (Council on Foreign Relations [CFR], 2026). A peace process was established between both sides briefly from the period between 2013-2015, but collapsed soon after the resurgence of violence and regional instability, linked to the Syrian civil war. As the Syrian state and its security apparatus weakened in the course of the Civil War, [Kurdish groups](#) such as the People's Protection Units (YPG) emerged as significant local security actors in northeastern Syria (International Crisis Group, 2016). Since then, Ankara has institutionalised a counterinsurgency model combining domestic centralisation, cross-border operations, and legal counter-terror frameworks.

The [May 2025 announcement](#) that the PKK would dissolve marked a historic inflection point (Chatham House, 2025). The dissolution indicated a major shift in the PKK's strategy of moving away from an armed struggle to political engagement. The decision was significant, given the group's decade long commitment to insurgency and its strong ideological loyalty to its founder, Abdullah Öcalan, even in captivity. It suggested that the organisation was reassessing the effectiveness of armed conflict (given the change of regime in Syria in 2025 and Ankara's crackdown in northern Iraq) and considering political avenues to pursue Kurdish rights and representation. The move could potentially alter the trajectory of Türkiye's long-standing Kurdish conflict and influence the security and political dynamics of Kurdish movements across the wider region (Marcus, 2007; [Aydıntaşbaş](#), 2025). Despite this strategic shift, Kurdish pursuit for political autonomy has been met with a Turkish state doctrine of prioritising territorial integrity and threat elimination.

Management of Kurdish Actors

The PKK's declared [dissolution](#) in 2025 and withdrawal from Turkish territory reduced the likelihood of coordinated, large scale insurgent attacks (Associated Press, 2025). However, Ankara has maintained an active counter-terror approach against PKK infrastructure in northern Iraq and continues to frame affiliated networks as security threats (CFR, 2026). Establishing military bases in Iraq, routine drone surveillance activities, and periodic strikes remain core components of Turkish strategies.

Domestically, management of Kurdish political space continues through administrative and legal instruments. Elected mayors from pro-Kurdish parties have been replaced with state appointed trustees as a part of a wider counter-terrorism doctrine, thereby [reinforcing](#) central authority in predominantly Kurdish municipalities (Human Rights Watch, 2024). These mechanisms demonstrate that while armed confrontation may decline, on-ground governance and control at the civilian level persists.

Unlike Iraq's federalised Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) or Syria's recent conditional recognition of Kurdish linguistic and administrative rights, Türkiye has not institutionalised any autonomy arrangements. The Turkish state's red line has consistently been preventing the emergence of a contiguous Kurdish politico-military corridor spanning across Syria and Iraq. Ankara has maintained the view that elements of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) retain ideological and organisational links to the PKK (CFR, 2026), as the YPG later became a core component of the SDF. Türkiye perceived the [YPG/SDF's success](#) against ISIS during Syrian Civil War, not in isolation but through its organisational and ideological ties to the PKK, which Türkiye labels a terrorist organisation (CFR, 2023).

Thus, Ankara's security calculus linked ISIS, Kurdish militancy, and regional instability. It's not because Türkiye supported ISIS, but because the civil war created a vacuum for the armed Kurdish groups to gain territorial control. This could, in Türkiye's view, bolster the PKK's broader influence.

Conflict Recurrence and Cross-Border Dynamics

The PKK's dissolution lowers the probability of sustained insurgency inside Türkiye but does not eliminate the fragmentation risk. Historical insurgent demobilisations often generate derivative groups (also known as splinter groups) if reintegration frameworks are limited or contested (Chatham House, 2025). A widely cited comparative case is Afghanistan after 2001, when the Taliban fractured into multiple factions following the U.S. invasion. Although the main Taliban leadership remained cohesive, smaller affiliated jihadist groups reorganised under different banners (e.g., ISIS-K and Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan). Within the Kurdish-Turkish context, one such splinter group is the Kurdistan Freedom Hawks (TAK), which broke away from the PKK in the mid-2000s with a more uncompromising militant stance. TAK adopted a more uncompromising militant approach and claimed responsibility for several high profile attacks in major Turkish cities, including Ankara and Istanbul, often targeting urban and tourism infrastructure.

Given the current context of the tri-party conflict between Israel-US-Iran, the relevance of the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK) cannot be understated. The PJAK and PKK are closely connected Kurdish militant organisations, though they operate in different

national contexts. PJAK emerged in the early 2000s as an armed Kurdish group focused primarily on opposing the Iranian state. While it presents itself as an independent movement advocating Kurdish rights in Iran, many analysts and security institutions consider PJAK to be [closely linked](#) to the PKK in terms of ideology, leadership networks, and operational coordination (Marcus, 2007; International Crisis Group, 2011). The connection stems largely from their shared ideological framework developed by Abdullah Öcalan, whose political philosophy of democratic confederalism influences both organisations (Tezcür, 2017; Knapp, Flach, & Ayboga, 2016).

Additionally, recent Turkish security concerns regarding Kurdish militancy extending beyond its own territory and into neighbouring states (particularly Iran) were amplified. [President Trump engaged](#) the Kurdish leaders in Iran and encouraged them to pressure or potentially rise up against the Iranian government, thereby opening an internal front against Tehran (Ravid & Caputo, 2026). Ankara, although has refrained from taking part in the conflict, have urged [de-escalation](#) and denied any rumours of planned action till now. But Türkiye's current reluctance to participate directly in the regional conflict does not necessarily mean its role will remain limited to rhetorical positions.

On February 22, PJAK joined four other Iranian Kurdish parties to form a [coalition](#) aimed at what they described as the "liberation of Eastern Kurdistan," referring to Kurdish-populated regions of Iran (Rojhelat, 2026). This development has raised concerns in Türkiye, where [ultranationalist](#) outlets have warned that PJAK could attempt to establish a "terror corridor" along Türkiye's eastern border, similar to the Kurdish controlled zone that previously emerged in northern Syria (Karagül, 2026). If the conflict in the region continues for an extended period, such developments could increase pressure on Ankara to take a more active military role. In such a scenario, Ankara could consider deploying forces inside Iranian territory to prevent what it perceives as an emerging security threat.

Recent indicators suggest that Türkiye has already been preparing for potential cross-border operations if its leadership decides that intervention is necessary. Although Ankara has publicly opposed military action in Iran, it has allowed [NATO](#) airborne early warning and control (AWACS) aircraft to conduct surveillance flights over eastern Türkiye (Bloomberg, 2026). These aircraft are designed to track hostile aerial movements and provide early warning intelligence, giving Türkiye valuable situational awareness of developments in the region ([Namdar](#), 2025).

On the other hand, [continued Turkish operations](#) in Iraq and tensions around Kurdish governance in Syria preserve pathways to cross-border escalation, Baghdad's recent measures against PKK activity and growing Türkiye-Iraq security coordination could restrict militant mobility (International Crisis Group, 2025). However, developments in

Syria, particularly any perceived consolidation of Kurdish self-administration could recalibrate Ankara's threat perception and trigger a renewed intervention.

As a result, Kurdish politics increasingly intersect with wider regional rivalries involving Iran, Iraq, and Syria, complicating efforts to contain militancy through purely domestic measures.

Containment Approach

Türkiye's approach remains grounded in containment rather than political engagement. The government frames the Kurdish question primarily through national security and counter-terrorism standpoint and emphasising unity and territorial sovereignty (CFR, 2026). While Kurdish political actors continue to participate in national elections and parliamentary politics, broader reforms around decentralisation, cultural autonomy, or constitutional recognition remain limited (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Recent commentary surrounding Abdullah Öcalan's (the founder and long time leader of the PKK, who has held this position for 48 years [1978-2025]), calls for legal reforms highlights that a parallel political strategy has not yet been institutionalised (Associated Press, 2026). Without structured political guarantees, the durability of the post PKK landscape depends largely on sustained suppression rather than reconciliation.

In a comparative perspective, Türkiye exhibits the most institutionalised containment model among regional states, prioritising national security and sovereignty over neighbourhood issues, while even closely monitoring the movements of PJAK in and around the present US-Israel-Iran conflict. This may secure short-term stability and reduce coordinated insurgency. However, void of a structural political voice and recognition for the Kurds and a long-term settlement plan risks remaining conditional and stable, as long as coercive capacity and regional control mechanisms remain effective.

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