



Kurds, the Double-Edged Sword of the Iranian Crisis

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In the hours when, according to various journalistic reconstructions, Washington would have reconnected with the leaders of the **Iranian Kurds** and the CIA is considering whether to militarily support their militias along the **Iran-Iraq border**, an old script reemerges: when a power rift opens in the Middle East, the Kurds are courted again as a **“force on the ground”** — and, just as often, exposed to **reprisals** and abrupt **reversals** by allies. In this context, various sources describe the birth (or strengthening) of a **coalition** among Iranian Kurdish parties, the pressure from the **pasdaran**, and possible **regional repercussions**, from **Turkey** to **Iraqi Kurdistan**.

To understand why this “call” to the Kurds immediately reopens fears and hopes, a step back is needed: contemporary Kurdish history is, to a large extent, the history of an **unfulfilled promise of self-determination**.

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The Unfulfilled Promise of the Post-War Period

After World War I, the redefinition of the former Ottoman space and agreements between European powers contributed to setting borders that broke the territorial continuity of Kurdish communities between **Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran**. In that context, the **Treaty of Sèvres (1920)** proposed a path towards an autonomous/independent Kurdish entity; but the subsequent revision of the regional setup — with the **Treaty of Lausanne (1923)** — ended that prospect, leaving the Kurds in a condition that still often defines them today: one of the largest “**stateless**” peoples in the world.

In Iran, the most powerful historical symbol remains the **Republic of Mahabad (1946)**: an experiment of Kurdish self-government that lasted less than a year, then overwhelmed by the return of Tehran's control after the change in international balances. Mahabad has become, for many Kurds, the emblem of a window that opens when the **great powers** push and closes when the **great powers** withdraw.

Since the **Islamic Revolution of 1979**, the relationship between Tehran and part of the Iranian Kurdish galaxy has remained cyclically conflictual: phases of mobilization, **repression**, clandestinity, and **exile** (especially in Iraqi Kurdistan), with parties and acronyms often divided by different strategies — from the **federalism** claimed by many political components to the more militant option of other groups.

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From Internal Struggles to “Proxy Wars”

The issue that returns in 2026 is the combination of **operational unity** and **external interest**. According to various sources, in recent days a convergence between historical and/or armed acronyms of the Iranian Kurdish area (including **PDKI/KDPI, Komala, PJAK, PAK**) has been strengthened (or formalized), supported by the logic: “**we have men, knowledge of the terrain, and rear bases across the border**”.

The **cross-border** dimension is crucial: the bases and camps in **Iraqi Kurdistan** are strategic depth, but also political vulnerability, because Erbil must balance ethnic solidarity, pressure from Baghdad, and Iranian deterrence. And indeed, every time tension rises, Iran tends to strike

precisely that **rear base**.

This has been seen with missile and drone attacks: in **September 2018**, an IRGC attack hit headquarters of Iranian Kurdish parties in the Koy Sanjaq (Koya) area, in Iraqi Kurdistan; in **September 2022**, a new campaign of strikes (**missiles, drones, artillery**) targeted bases linked to Kurdish groups, in a context connected to internal Iranian protests.

In the Kurdish narrative (and memory), another constant weighs heavily: persecution has not always stopped at the borders. The killing of top Kurdish figures in Europe — particularly the assassination of Iranian Kurdish leader **Abdol-Rahman Ghassemlou (Vienna, 1989)** and the attack on the **Mykonos restaurant (Berlin, 1992)** — is often cited as proof of the “**long war**” between Tehran and part of the Kurdish opposition.

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Why 2026 is Different (and Why It Might Not Be)

The current phase has two new elements and an old risk.

Novelty 1: the regional crisis as a multiplier. If Iran is engaged on multiple fronts, the temptation to open an internal (or “border”) one grows: it's the logic of a possible “**second Kurdish front**” and attempts at coordination with external actors.

Novelty 2: the search for Iranian Kurdish unity. The unity among parties, born after years of rivalry, also aims to strengthen the public message: “**not separatism, but a democratic and federal Iran**”.

The old risk: being a tool and then a bargaining chip. It's the specter that has accompanied the Kurds for a century: promises of support when **boots on the ground** are needed, coldness when priorities change. In 2026, that risk intertwines with the reaction of regional actors: **Turkey** fears any dynamic that could strengthen the Kurdish national imagination; Baghdad and **Iraqi Kurdistan** fear reprisals on their territory; Tehran shows it considers Kurdish rear bases a legitimate target.

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In summary: the current Iranian chapter does not arise from nowhere. It is the continuation of a history made of unfulfilled international promises (**Sèvres/Lausanne**), brief experiments of self-government (**Mahabad**), **repressions** and **political assassinations**, and cyclical **proxy wars**. Precisely for this reason, the potential role of Kurdish militias against the **pasdaran** — however militarily “useful” — remains politically **explosive**: it can accelerate internal fractures in Iran, but also ignite the border area and confront the Kurds with the dilemma that has haunted them for generations: **fighting today knowing that tomorrow they might be left alone**.