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Policy Brief

Pathways to diplomatic and civil engagement: the Iranian Kurds

M. Broomfield

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Recommendations

The new Foreign Secretary should:

Engage with political and civil-society as well as military Kurdish actors on a multilateral, multi-ethnic, multi-national basis

Prioritise direct, legitimacy-building engagements with Kurdish political parties and civil-society organisations

Encourage state partners to pursue peace talks and negotiated settlements with Kurdish actors

Reconsider the proscription of Kurdish opposition groups

Learn from Syria and Iraq to facilitate diverse political engagement toward a durable post-war settlement

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It summarises findings from an ODI working paper based on fifteen interviews with leading Iranian Kurdish military, political and civil-society representatives based in exile in in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), as well as in London and online. It also draws on the author's prior experience observing and participating in Kurdish diplomatic engagements in the UK and Syria

About the author

Matt Broomfield[ID]
Matt Broomfield is an ODI Global Research Associate, doctoral researcher at the University of Sussex, and freelance journalist.



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1 Introduction

In March 2026, US officials signaled plans to arm Kurdish groups in the course of the newly-launched US-Israeli war on Iran (Rodgers, 2026). Weeks prior, exiled Iranian Kurdish parties based in the neighbouring Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) had formed an unprecedented, non-partisan military and political Coalition (Jalal, 2026). Coalition representatives immediately indicated their potential willingness to cooperate with the US-Israeli operation, while also voicing concerns over the plan (KDP-I spokesperson, interview, 2026; Komala spokesperson, interview, 2026; PAK spokesperson, interview, 2026).

Due to a combination of strenuous Turkish opposition, US reservations over these groups' military capabilities, and Kurdish forces' disinclination to act without firm guarantees from the West, the plan rapidly foundered. US President Donald Trump soon stated his opposition to the plan, and the newly formed Kurdish Coalition never fired a shot in anger. This didn't stop Iran from targeting Kurdish opposition groups in the KRI with over 700 retaliatory strikes killing dozens – more than any other non-combaȼtant country (Shafaq, 2026). Iran's estimated 7-15 million Kurds (UK Government, 2026) now face deadly domestic retribution, as Iran repeats prior policies of scapegoating its long-repressed Kurdish minority for a US-Israeli offensive (KDP official, 2026).

The widely publicised incident repeated patterns familiar from other Western engagements with Kurdish actors across four countries and five decades, demonstrating the need for long-term political engagement rather than reliance on short-term security partnerships alone. Developing these relationships can benefit Britain, its global and regional state partners, and the Kurds themselves.

The UK's stated policy objectives in Iran are achieving a 'negotiated settlement', ending domestic repression, and preventing escalation affecting regional UK allies (Starmer, 2026). The formation of a new British government thus provides an opportunity for Foreign Secretary Ed Miliband and Middle East Minister Stephen Doughty to continue pursuing these goals via exploring broader political and civil-society engagement with the Kurds, other minority groups in Iran, and Kurdish groups elsewhere in the region.

The UK can build on and learn from its prior engagements with Kurdish actors to develop more constructive, substantive, non-militarised relationships. This approach can contribute to a distinctive British policy in the Middle East, with the UK building on the security partnerships prioritised by the US and Israel to advocate for and pursue political relationships with Kurdish actors – thus furthering broader Western interests in the region.

2 Background

2.1 The UK's Kurdish partnerships: Securitisation and 'double delegitimisation'

The UK has developed military partnerships with representatives of the Middle East's estimated 30 million stateless Kurds in both Iraq and Syria, to combat both the Iraqi Ba'ath regime and ISIS (Parliament, 2017). These partnerships have been spearheaded by the US, and advocated by Israel, with the UK's other Western partners also joining these generally successful military partnerships. At the same time, the UK's relationship with Kurdish groups have been opposed by the UK's regional state partners in Baghdad, Damascus, and especially Ankara, all of whom have historically repressed their own Kurdish populations and violently opposed their political aspirations.

This situation can result in a 'double delegitimisation' of Kurdish actors. While states opposed to the UK (such as Bashar al-Assad's Syria, Saddam Hussein's Iraq and the current Iranian regime) naturally target, harass and delegitimise their domestic Kurdish opposition, the Kurds are just as frequently targeted by the West's regional partners. Western powers have needed to listen to the security concerns of their state partners, but thus tend to repeat the assumption that all Kurdish representatives are illegitimate political interlocutors – with the partial exception of their partners in Iraqi Kurdistan. While only some Kurdish groups are criminalised, notably the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its Iranian counterpart the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), even those allied to the UK lack diplomatic access. This process has recently played out in Syria, where a successful anti-ISIS partnership with PKK-aligned Kurdish groups was confined to the battlefield and not used as the basis for deeper political engagement, as occurred in the KRI following the anti-Saddam partnership.

Recent examples of this 'double delegitimisation' have included the West and Russia concurring on the exclusion of Kurdish representatives from UN negotiations over Syria's future; the US intervention to prevent Syrian Kurds from holding 2024 elections also opposed by Assad; the similar Western opposition to the 2017 independence referendum in Iraq; and a shared focus on building relationships with the region's military commanders rather than political representatives, common to the US, UK and Russia alike.

2.2 Iranian Kurdistan: Heart of the crisis

In Iran, Kurds were tortured and executed by the 1923-79 monarchist regimes amid successive, abortive bids for autonomy. The Islamic Republic established after Iran's 1979 Revolution expanded these policies, killing thousands of Kurds as it repressed another Kurdish uprising and continuing to marginalise the Kurdish population thereafter. These policies have continued into the 21st century, with Tehran executing hundreds of Kurds in 2025 alone and remaining strongly opposed to any greater degree of autonomy for the country's Kurdish-majority provinces (UK Government, 2026).

Opposition is principally organised through a constellation of half-a-dozen political parties, all illegal and highly repressed within Iran, with party members and supporters facing execution, torture and forcible disappearance (UK Government, 2026). These parties include the institutional, Western-aligned, social-democratic Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDP-I); their traditional rivals, the historically leftist Komala; the militant, PKK-aligned PJAK, generally more sceptical over co-operation with the West; and smaller groups more open to direct cooperation with the US, Israel and UK. These forces are seen as by far the most effective armed opposition actors in Iran. Kurdish Coalition members can field an estimated 10,000 fighters while claiming extensive networks of activists and supporters in Iranian Kurdistan, though only PJAK has fighters on the ground in Iran and extensive recent military experience (Van Wilgenberg, 2026).

The 'double delegitimisation' of these groups is especially noteworthy since British and Iranian Kurdish representatives share similar objectives in achieving a democratic transition in Iran, while remaining alert to the risks of military escalation. Yet the anti-Kurdish policies of regional powers and Kurdish fears of suffering battlefield losses without political gain have combined to contribute to the present impasse in Iran.

Simultaneously, however, ongoing regional developments are creating new room for expanded cooperation with these groups, beyond the fraught question of battlefield partnership. Newfound global recognition for the the Iranian Kurds has developed simultaneously with regional rapprochements between both Ankara and the PKK, and Damascus and the Syrian Kurds. These positive developments create room for the UK to advocate for a lasting, durable peace not guaranteed through unstable, militarised proxy relationships, but rather secured by a broader regional consensus. The UK can thus model and advocate for a continued shift away from the militarisation of inter-related Kurdish-state conflicts in the region, toward political and diplomatic forms of engagement.

3 Recommendations

In the KRI, an originally military UK-Kurdish partnership has gradually been expanded into a deeper-rooted political cooperation, resulting in more stable and enduring outcomes than experienced in Syria. A careful, pragmatic engagement learning from these experiences to develop Kurdish groups as legitimate diplomatic interlocutors can thus advance the UK's stated policy objectives in Iran, encourage these groups to pursue peaceful rather than militant agendas, and mitigate polarisation between the Kurds and the UK's state partners.

3.1 Engage with political and civil-society as well as military Kurdish actors on a multilateral, multi-ethnic, multi-national basis

Western policy towards the Kurds has often followed a circular logic: Kurdish (and other) non-state actors are excluded from formal political processes because they are *de facto* considered illegitimate and thus remain confined to the shadows of proxy warfare and insurgency.

Engagement with political and civil-society representatives can help counter this perceived illegitimacy. Kurdish political representatives can be consulted and incorporated in ways that might provoke an initially hostile response from Tehran but can nonetheless gradually be normalised – if not in Tehran's eyes, then at least in the eyes of other Iranian opposition groups and ordinary Iranians.

First, as in Iraq then UK engagement with military actors can offer a stepping-stone to broader engagement with political representatives. Rather than engaging with Kurdish actors on a purely military basis or conversely imposing the unrealistic expectation of a sanitised civil-society politics unrelated to armed activity, the UK can have civil-society, military and political representatives in the same room for both private and public events. Including both military and political actors is reflective of regional realities; ensuring political representation can help the UK reassure Ankara and other regional partners that the UK is not abetting armed Kurdish separatism, but committed to a negotiated, non-militarised settlement.

Second, trans-national engagements incorporating Iraq's constitutionally established, internationally recognised, UK-allied Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) can help break the taboo around Iranian Kurdish groups and facilitate their participation in regional dialogue. Albeit Iraqi Kurdish representatives remain wary of trading on their hard-won broader international legitimacy in support of smaller Iranian Kurdish parties (KRG representative, 2026), any future transition in Iranian Kurdistan will necessitate coordination with the KRG.

Third, the UK can facilitate discussion between Kurdish and broader Iranian opposition organisations, encouraging these groups to overcome their mutual antagonism and military and strategic differences. By hosting multilateral, intra-opposition discussions, the UK can again send

a clear message that it respects Iranian sovereignty (rather than backing Kurdish separatism) but for this very reason prioritises diverse, representative political participation. This could include bringing together politically non-aligned human rights organisations linked to the Kurdish and broader Iranian opposition. Similarly, facilitating discussion on more specific issues, such as the sanctions regime on Iran or documenting rights violations, could prove more productive than agendas focused on the currently distant question of the Kurdish position in a post-transition Iran, which can prove a flashpoint for intra-opposition disputes.

Notably, the 2022 'Woman, Life, Freedom' protest movement following the death in Iranian police custody of Kurdish woman Jina Mahsa Amina crystallised a national and international movement around Kurdish political activity, winning the Iranian Kurds newfound global recognition and legitimacy (KHRN representative, 2026). Events organised around 'Woman, Life, Freedom' discourse can help situate Kurdish participation as a central component of broader opposition political activity, facilitating the indigenous development of opposition structures capable of developing a legitimate, locally-rooted alternative to the Iranian regime.

3.2 Prioritise direct, legitimacy-building engagements with Kurdish political parties and civil-society organisations

Direct, formal, face-to-face interactions with Kurdish political representatives not only acknowledge their status as relevant regional players, but also encourage these groups to adopt less militant approaches as they professionalise, compromise, and pursue political pathways toward their desired outcomes, to the benefit of UK interests in seeing a negotiated non-military settlement. For example, the UK could assist the Kurdish Coalition in establishing broad-church, non-partisan diplomatic representative structures, as participants have indicated is a next step, encouraging this formalisation with the promise of public engagement thereafter (PJAK representative, 2026). Such an approach would enable the UK to move into closer alignment with the policies of its key security partners in Washington and Paris, where governments are more comfortable speaking and meeting openly with Kurdish representatives, as opposed to prior UK protocol characterised by informal, off-the-record discussions (SDC representative, 2026).

Second, while it is presently unfeasible for Iranian government and Iranian Kurdish representatives to meet, there may be future opportunities for indirect, Track II engagement facilitated by the UK. As in other conflicts, the organisation of 'expert meetings' around humanitarian issues such as demining or child soldiers can provide an opportunity for initial, indirect meetings between Iranian and Iranian Kurdish representatives, with each side potentially attracted by the rare opportunity to garner first-hand information from their opponents in a 'neutral' setting (Heffes and Somer, 2020).

Similarly, Iranian Kurdish parties have worked with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the NGO Geneva Call to demonstrate their commitment to International Human Rights Law (IHL) and gender protections, and opposition to recruitment of child soldiers (Delarue

et al., N.D; Hofmann, 2016). Albeit these processes may not always result in concrete reforms (Sarmadi, 2026), they serve an equally important subsidiary function in introducing Kurdish actors to semi-formal diplomatic and international engagements. Initiatives such as the NGO Independent Diplomat's 'Meet The Parties' project, bringing non-state actors face-to-face with UN Security Council (UNSC) representatives, offer another pathway toward legitimising opposition groups, including by encouraging them to pursue non-military agendas (IPI, 2025).

3.3 Encourage state partners to pursue peace talks and negotiated settlements with Kurdish actors

The UK has limited political leverage over Tehran, but enjoys close relationships with Ankara, Damascus, the KRI and to some extent Baghdad. Positive, ongoing regional developments mean the UK now has an opportunity to encourage these partners to continue ongoing processes reconciling, incorporating and realigning with their domestic Kurdish oppositions, with positive knock-on effects for a future, peaceful transition in Iran. Given the UK is seeking a 'negotiated settlement' bringing an end to domestic repression in Iran, it is logical that regional partners are encouraged to pursue similar agendas.

Most significantly, peace negotiations are underway between Türkiye and the formally disbanded Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Given that Ankara has opposed and obstructed coordination between the UK and Kurdish partners in Syria, Iraq and now also in Iran, the UK should encourage Ankara to adopt an open and constructive position in these negotiations. In the light of these negotiations, Türkiye has opposed both Western plans to arm Iran's Kurdish opposition and Tehran's reactive strikes against these groups, a pragmatic approach which should be encouraged as aligned with UK interests (Soylu, 2026). Conversely, Turkish airstrikes against PJAK, reportedly conducted in coordination with Iran, should be discouraged as a clear instance of cooperation between a UK ally and Tehran in opposition to UK interests (PJAK co-chair, 2026).

Similarly, the KRG should be encouraged and supported to I) continue offering space for Iranian Kurdish political and diplomatic representatives to operate, potentially including the provision of closer protection from retaliatory Iranian strikes; and II) resist growing Iranian pressure for Iranian Kurdish opposition groups to be disbanded or exiled (van Wilgenburg, 2026b). Finally, by facilitating the complex, ongoing negotiations between the Syrian Kurds and Damascus, and the KRG and Baghdad, the UK can help model the peaceable incorporation of Kurdish interests within national frameworks, thus paving the way for a future Iranian settlement.

3.4 Reconsider the proscription of Kurdish opposition groups

PJAK is assessed as the most effective armed group capable of countering the Iranian regime on the ground (Van Wilgenberg, 2026). However, this group is currently proscribed in the UK due to its links to the similarly proscribed PKK. These proscriptions came about as a result of security coordination with Türkiye, rather than any direct threat to the UK or US (Gunter, 2022).

The proscription does not only affect PJAK itself but has a broader chilling effect in painting all Iranian Kurdish political activity as illegitimate, thus pushing Kurdish actors toward military pathways to change. Conversely, the decriminalisation of Kurdish politics contributes directly to its de-miliitarisation, encouraging Kurdish actors to pursue newly opening political channels. Factors suggesting the time is right for PJAK's proscription to be subjected to formal review include Türkiye's ongoing peace negotiations with the PKK; PJAK's explicitly anti-Iranian rather than anti-Turkish alignment (PJAK co-chair, 2026); the fact PJAK have never posed a direct threat to the UK; and the UK's recent, formalised and successful battlefield collaboration against ISIS with PKK-linked Syrian Kurdish forces (Gunter, 2022).

There are also multiple relevant precedents. The UK's Iraqi Kurdish partners were proscribed in the US until this designation was removed in 2015 (MEE Staff, 2015). Four separate organisations have previously been de-proscribed in the UK via court appeal and formal review, including another (non-Kurdish) Iranian opposition group, offering clear precedents for reassessing PJAK's proscription (UK Government, 2022). Similarly, the force which recently took control in Syria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), was de-proscribed via parliamentary order as it formed the new Syrian government, indicating that de-proscription is feasible and practical as a step toward 'genuine progress' in light of tangible changes on the ground (UK Government, 2025b). Another precedent comes from Belgium, where the highest court recently reviewed the PKK's proscription to find the PKK was not a terror organisation since it had never threatened Belgian interests, and on the contrary should be considered a legitimate party to a civil conflict within Türkiye – albeit the Belgian government subsequently stated it would ignore the ruling (Geerdink, 2022).

Rather than letting these groups 'off the hook', as with HTS then a formal review would demonstrate the UK is interested in developing deeper relationships based on shared expectations and commitments, pursuing a policy of inclusion rather than exclusion. As lawyers in the Belgian case successfully argued, any such re-definition means Kurdish groups could in fact be held to a higher standard of international law and rights conventions, rather than *de jure* excluded from these forums and thus encouraged to pursue more militant policies (Geerdink, 2022). Similarly, the HTS de-proscription was intended in part to enable closer monitoring and engagement over rights issues (UK Government, 2025b). Should it fail to continue pursuing a peaceable, non-conflictual policy toward the UK and its regional allies, PJAK could be re-proscribed at the government's discretion.

'Delisting the PKK would challenge both it and Türkiye to take a serious attitude toward restarting [or implementing] the peace process and encouraging meaningful compromise,' arguments equally applicable to PJAK (Gunter, 2022). Indeed, beginning with a review of PJAK's proscription would be less politically controversial, while potentially paving the way for broader reviews in future.

3.5 Learn from Syria and Iraq to facilitate diverse political engagement toward a durable post-war settlement

Following Assad's ouster, UK shifted to a partnership with the new Syrian government, drawing-down its security partnership with its Syrian Kurdish partners on the expectation the latter would be incorporated under Damascus' rule. Simultaneously, Syria faced repeated bouts of inter-ethnic violence resulting in thousands of deaths especially concentrated among minority communities (Guerin, 2025; Loft, 2025).

As Damascus faced off with Kurdish forces, repeated US-brokered ceasefire and integration deals could not prevent January 2026 violence in the formerly autonomous, Kurdish-governed north-east, as Damascus seized primarily Arab-populated regions constituting 90% of the formerly Kurdish-held territory.

While the US could ultimately intervene to halt the bloodshed, the fact the post-Assad settlement was reached through violence has resulted in continued tensions, grievances and instability, working against UK interests in establishing a secure, stable and durable settlement. The crisis thus underscores the need for an inclusive political process, incorporating diverse actors into complex processes of post-conflict reconstruction and state reformation. The Syrian process was closely watched by Iranian Kurdish representatives, with one activist reflecting: 'if international society is serious in bringing about change, they have to... understand Iran as a plural, multi-ethnic, deeply resourced society' (KHRN representative, 2026).

This need not mean adopting an Israeli-style 'periphery doctrine', prioritising minority communities and reactively excluding Iran's Persian majority from political processes. For example, the post-Saddam transition was marked by the empowerment of Iraq's long-repressed Shia majority at the expense of the previously ruling Sunni elite, alongside the regional empowerment of (Sunni) Kurdish parties. The greater degree of autonomy accorded to Iraq's Kurds has allowed the UK to secure the KRG as a loyal partner in an otherwise friendless region. But overall, a minority-led approach to post-conflict resolution did not engender a sustainable peace settlement, instead paving the way for sectarian violence, ISIS' emergence, and enduring Iranian influence in Iraq.

Rather, the most fundamental lesson to be learned from both transitions is the need for the prior, thought-through incorporation of both majority and minority communities into an indigenous, self-directed, broad-church coalition representing center and margins alike. Learning from their experiences in Iraq and Syria, the UK and its partners can begin work today in facilitating doubtless fraught, challenging and long-term discussions between Kurdish and other opposition actors, and potentially also reformist elements of the Iranian regime. All parties can be incorporated in a negotiated, peaceful transition defined not solely by security cooperation, but also meaningful political dialogue.

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