The Kurdish factor and Turkey's involvement in the anti-Iranian campaign

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Annotation

ARVAK analyzes the actualization of the Kurdish factor in the context of the US-Israeli military campaign against Iran in March 2026. It examines the attempts by Washington and Tel Aviv to involve the Kurdish political elites of Iraq (Erbil, Sulaymaniyah) in military actions against Tehran and analyzes the risks faced by Turkey. The work argues that the use of Kurdish formations (Peshmerga, PJAK) serves not only to destabilize Iran from within but also acts as an instrument to coerce Ankara into abandoning its neutrality and joining the anti-Iranian coalition under the threat of a Kurdish autonomy emerging at its southern borders.

Keywords: *Kurdish factor, Iran, USA, Israel, Turkey, Iraqi Kurdistan, PJAK, Peshmerga, geopolitical destabilization, IRGC.*

1. Actualization of the Kurdish factor in the U.S. and Israel regional agenda

Against the backdrop of the U.S.-Israeli bombings of Iran and rising escalation throughout the Middle East, the Kurdish factor is once again being actualized in the U.S.-Israeli regional strategic agenda.

According to *Axios*, on March 1, 2026, U.S. President Donald Trump held telephone negotiations with Kurdish leaders in Iraq – Masoud Barzani and Bafel Talabani. It is noted that "*the calls were the culmination of months of behind-the-scenes lobbying by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu*". The *Axios* source refused to disclose details of the negotiations. The offices of the Kurdish leaders and White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt also refrained from commenting. However, experts believe that the essence of Trump's calls was an attempt to persuade the Kurdish leadership in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah to join the U.S.-Israeli military campaign against Iran.

Later, reports appeared stating that the U.S. leader issued an ultimatum to the Kurdish leaders, demanding they decide whose side they should take, as neutrality would "*no longer pass*". The fact of personal contact with Barzani and Talabani demonstrates Trump's significant interest in involving the Kurdish factor in current regional processes. In recent years, the U.S. has cooperated closely with the Kurdish leaders of Iraq; however, it avoided direct contact with them at the presidential level, obviously striving not to worsen relations with the central authorities in Baghdad and not to "overdo it" regarding the establishment of the political and legal status of Iraqi Kurdish autonomy.

2. The U.S. and Israeli strategy for the fragmentation of Iran

In this connection, information suggesting that Benjamin Netanyahu persuaded Donald Trump to establish personal contact with the Kurdish leaders seems well-founded. Tel Aviv has increasingly leaned toward the idea of a ground operation against Tehran, primarily using the Iraqi Kurdish "*Peshmerga*" formations. Together with the Iranian PJAK ("*Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistane*") units, they could create serious problems for the Iranian military and the IRGC in the northwestern *ostans* (Iranian provinces) – Kurdistan, West Azerbaijan,

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Kermanshah, Ilam, and Hamadan. The activation of the Kurdish "*liberation movement*" in Iran, along with a possible large-scale invasion by the Iraqi "*Peshmerga*", could stimulate the growth of separatist sentiments throughout the country, depriving the political authorities in Tehran and the military command of the ability to control the situation in the state.

Israel sees the disintegration of Iran as the most acceptable option, as Prime Minister B. Netanyahu almost directly stated on February 28, 2026, in his address to the peoples of Iran – Persians, Kurds, Azerbaijanis, Balochs, and Ahvazi – calling on them to "*throw off the yoke of tyranny and create a free Iran striving for peace*". It is noteworthy that Netanyahu's call for ethnic groups in the Islamic Republic to seek independence contradicts his own earlier statements regarding the future of a "*free*" and "*indivisible*" Iran.

3. Military-technical aspects of the escalation

In the current situation, a bet on the Iranian Kurds may seem the most promising for Israel and the U.S., given that, according to expert estimates, they are the most organized and combat-ready proxy force in the region. However, the question is whether Masoud Barzani and Bafel Talabani accepted the deal with D. Trump and B. Netanyahu or rejected it, deeming it dangerous for themselves.

There are no official confirmations of their consent to the American leader's proposals; however, numerous "leaks" have appeared in the information field regarding the activation of certain processes in Kurdish-populated areas on both sides of the Iran–Iraq border. Specifically, it is reported that since early March 2026, U.S.-Israeli coalition assault aircraft have been methodically destroying IRGC and "*Basij*" checkpoints and defensive infrastructure on the border with Iraqi Kurdistan, allegedly to open a path for "*Peshmerga*" assault groups into the Iranian districts of Sanandaj and Kermanshah. Simultaneously, reports circulate in the media that the CIA has organized "*smuggling*" of significant quantities of American weapons into western Iran to equip PJAK units. Rumors have also surfaced about a concentration of U.S. and Israeli transport helicopters in Iraqi Kurdistan, which may indicate preparations by the Pentagon and the IDF for ground assault operations in support of the "*Peshmerga*" and PJAK.

It is also reported that in anticipation of a massive Kurdish uprising in Iran and a "*Peshmerga*" invasion, the IRGC proactively reinforced its units in the Marivan province. Furthermore, by the evening of March 4, 2026, U.S. and Israeli media began disseminating information about an allegedly already begun "*Peshmerga*" offensive from Erbil into Iranian territory, though leaders from the Iraqi Kurdish Autonomy (specifically B. Talabani) categorically denied these rumors.

If the circulating information is reliable, then Erbil and Sulaymaniyah have acceded to D. Trump's demands or agreed to partial participation in the U.S.-Israeli plan. Consequently, the "Kurdish card" will inevitably be employed once more in the Middle Eastern strategy of the U.S. and Israel, this time within the context of the geostrategic confrontation with Iran. It is plausible that the impetus to involve the Kurds in the anti-Iranian front stems less from Washington and Tel Aviv's confidence in their ability to "undermine" Iran internally, and more from a calculated move to secure the direct involvement of a larger and stronger regional actor in the conflict against Iran. This refers to a complex, multi-stage strategy utilizing the Kurdish

factor as a "bait" for Turkey, a nation that has thus far managed to maintain a precarious balance and neutrality in the U.S.-Iranian confrontation.

4. The role of Ankara in the regional confrontation

Until recently, Ankara consistently endeavored not only to preclude involvement in the conflict itself but also to neutralize the very prospect of war, proactively extending mediation services and a negotiating platform to Washington and Tehran. Iran declined Turkey's proposition. The United States, potentially influenced by Israeli recommendation, also responded coolly to this initiative, a reaction that concerned Ankara regarding the potential loss of control over the deepening escalation and the capacity to influence the agenda of the opposing parties. Ankara recognized that being marginalized from the process positioned it vulnerably, which accounts for its cautious, almost silent demeanor during the initial phase of the anti-Iranian campaign. At the outset of the current escalation, Turkey refused the United States permission to utilize its territory for bombings of Iran, while simultaneously notifying Tehran that any strikes against American facilities located on Turkish territory would not remain unaddressed.

Maintaining a position of demonstrated equidistance from the opposing sides was the most judicious option for Ankara, as it endeavoured to avoid embroilment in the conflict. A mediation mission would have served to solidify its neutrality and safeguard its closest ally, Azerbaijan, from involvement. However, this calculation was seemingly ill-founded, given that the experience of Oman demonstrated that providing a venue for U.S.-Iranian contacts did not afford that country immunity from Tehran's strikes.

Nevertheless, Turkey's sidelining from the politico-diplomatic process signaled an impending danger for the nation. It is evident that in light of the systematic loss of U.S. military infrastructure in the Persian Gulf area, the escalating dissatisfaction of the allied Arab monarchies with the war's trajectory, and the consistent stability demonstrated by the Iranian authorities, the Turkish factor assumes particular significance for Washington and Tel Aviv. The involvement of Turkey in the conflict is becoming an imperative for the U.S.-Israeli coalition. The United States requires a regional ally to assume the burden of a ground operation against Iran, an operation deemed essential to dismantle the ruling "regime" in the Islamic Republic. Conversely, Israel gains the opportunity to instigate a large-scale war between its two most formidable regional rivals – traditionally "*hostile*" Iran and Turkey, which harbors aspirations of becoming Israel's principal antagonist in the future.

5. Risks of Turkey Being Drawn into the Anti-Iranian Coalition

Given the above facts, it can be assumed that the U.S.-Israeli tandem has already begun implementing a series of measures to push Turkey and its ally Azerbaijan into joining the anti-Iranian coalition. In this context, attention should be paid to reports of the interception of a presumably Iranian ballistic missile in Turkish airspace and attacks, again by presumably Iranian drones, on the Nakhichevan airport.

However, the main and most effective measure for involving Ankara in direct confrontation with Tehran should be considered the activation of the Kurdish factor. Turkey has always taken a hardline position regarding the Kurdish separatist movement in Iran, viewing it as a threat to its own security. The central military-political structure of the Iranian Kurdistan rebels – PJAK

– is a social-nationalist party based almost entirely on the ideology of the PKK and considers its founder, Abdullah Öcalan, as its inspirer. Against the backdrop of rising escalation around Iran in recent years, Turkish politicians and experts close to the government have repeatedly stated that the activation of PJAK in connection with external attempts to destabilize the integrity of the IRI would force Ankara to intervene in Iranian internal affairs, up to and including an intervention in the Kurdish-populated regions of that country.

Ankara signaled that the security of "*Southern Azerbaijanis*" is among its priorities in the Iranian agenda, and this circumstance, along with other factors, could influence the decision to intervene in Tehran's affairs. Similar signals have repeatedly come from Baku, especially after the signing of the "Shushi Declaration" on military-political alliance with Ankara on June 15, 2021.

The emerging overall picture allows for the conclusion that the Kurdish factor being played by Washington and Tel Aviv is already pushing Turkey toward the brink of involvement in a confrontation with Iran to achieve its own goals. This is also evidenced by the signals coming from Ankara. On March 5, 2026, the Turkish Ministry of Defense issued a statement expressing "*deep concern over the activities of the Kurdish organization PJAK on the territory of Iran*". The military department reported that Turkey "*reserves the right to respond to hostile actions regardless of where they originate*". Against this background, the statement made the same day by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte regarding the alliance's readiness to apply the "*collective defense article against Iran*" is noteworthy. It is telling that as recently as March 2, 2026, in an interview with ARD, Rutte assured that "*NATO has absolutely no plans to be drawn into this conflict, no plans to become a participant in it*". This radical change in position over a short period raises questions. The fact that NATO activation on the anti-Iranian front is fundamentally impossible without the active involvement of Turkey also points to certain conclusions.

Thus, it can be assumed that the Kurdish factor may push Turkey toward involvement in the current regional war—up to and including a ground invasion of Iranian territory by Turkey and its ally Azerbaijan. Obviously, Ankara realizes that this step could be costly for Turkey in the short term. However, on the other hand, Ankara cannot afford a voluntary withdrawal from participation in the processes aimed at the fragmentation of its eastern neighbor. The Syrian experience suggests to the Turkish leadership that only the creation of "buffer zones" will protect the country's sovereignty from the shock upheavals caused by the potential collapse of Iran, which would again actualize the U.S.-Israeli agenda to create a "*Greater Kurdistan*".