

The Strategic Realignment: How Kurdish Abandonment Is Linked to Iran

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The Cost of Strategic Partnership

As Henry Kissinger once remarked, "It may be dangerous to be America's enemy, but to be America's friend is fatal." For some, this is a logical realist observation about the ever-changing interests of the United States. For others, it has become a brutal lesson learned too late. This observation, made during the height of American power in the 20th century, has proven prophetic time and again across various theatres of conflict and alliance.

The history of American foreign policy is replete with examples of abandoned allies: the South Vietnamese in 1975, the Afghan mujahideen after the Soviet withdrawal, the Iraqi Kurds in 1975 and again in the 1990s, and countless others who found themselves on the wrong side of shifting geopolitical calculations. Each instance follows a familiar pattern: initial support, military cooperation, promises of partnership, and then, when strategic priorities shift, a quiet withdrawal or outright abandonment.

This time, that lesson has been paid for in blood by the Kurds of north-eastern Syria. Once trusted allies of the United States and de facto guarantors of their own security, they were rapidly overwhelmed by the forces of al-Jolani, whose advance was effectively sanctioned by the United States and its allies after Jolani's diplomatic trip to the US. For many unfamiliar with the core strategic logic of American foreign policy, this was experienced as a profound betrayal. Yet for students of realpolitik and the historical record, it represents merely the latest chapter in a long and consistent pattern.

The Kurdish Nation-Building Project: Rise and Decline

The Kurdish nation-building project has now been set aside indefinitely. The autonomous administration in north-eastern Syria, established during the chaos of the Syrian civil war, represented perhaps the most successful Kurdish attempt at self-governance since the short-lived Republic of Mahabad in 1946. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-led coalition, had carved out a semi-autonomous region spanning approximately one-third of Syrian territory, establishing democratic councils, women's rights initiatives, and a pluralistic political system that stood in stark contrast to the authoritarian regimes surrounding them.

As allied Arab tribes quickly changed sides, and as the US air support and intelligence upon which the SDF depended failed to materialise, Kurdish forces found themselves exposed. The tribal dynamics of the region proved as fluid as ever. Arab clans that had allied with the Kurds against ISIS quickly recalculated their positions as the political winds shifted. Without American backing, the SDF's military advantage evaporated¹.

¹ France24. (2026, January 23). Pressured by Damascus to integrate into the state, what does the future hold for Syria's Kurds? France24. <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20260123-pressured-by-damascus-to-integrate-into-the-state-what-does-the-future-hold-for-syria-s-kurds>

They now exist at the mercy of Washington's broader regional interests, al-Jolani's reunification ambitions, and Türkiye's anti-separatist views alike. The broader lesson is stark. In geopolitics, goodwill and friendship are conditional. Adopting the language of democracy is not, in itself, a guarantee of survival. The Kurds had done everything asked of them: they fought ISIS house by house through the ruins of Raqqa and Kobani, they established inclusive governance structures, they protected religious minorities, and they aligned their rhetoric with Western democratic values. None of it mattered when the strategic calculus changed.

Historical Context: The Kurdish Experience with Great Powers

To understand the current situation, one must examine the long history of Kurdish interactions with major powers. The Kurds, numbering some 30 to 40 million people spread across Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, represent one of the world's largest stateless nations. Their geography has made them perpetually useful as tactical allies but inconvenient as strategic partners.

In 1975, the United States encouraged Iraqi Kurds to rebel against Saddam Hussein's government, providing covert support through Iran. When Iran and Iraq reached an agreement, American support vanished overnight, leaving the Kurdish rebellion to collapse. Thousands died in the subsequent reprisals. In 1991, after the Gulf War, the United States encouraged another Kurdish uprising, only to stand by as Saddam's remaining forces crushed it brutally. Only international outcry and the establishment of no-fly zones prevented complete catastrophe.

In 1996, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) invited Iraqi government forces into Erbil to help them against their Kurdish rivals, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), demonstrating how internal Kurdish divisions have repeatedly undermined their strategic position. In 2017, after the Iraqi Kurds held an independence referendum with over 90% support, the United States refused to back Kurdish statehood and stood aside as Iraqi forces, backed by Iranian-supported militias, retook disputed territories including Kirkuk.

The pattern is consistent: the Kurds are valuable allies when they serve immediate tactical purposes, particularly in fighting common enemies, but are expendable when broader strategic arrangements require their sacrifice.

The Iran-Centric Strategy: Understanding American Priorities

The question therefore remains: why would the United States turn its back on Kurdish allies who played a decisive role in the fight against ISIS? The answer lies in the fact that Iran has always been the central strategic focus. With Assad toppled, the regional balance of power has shifted significantly in favour of the United States and Israel.

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has been the primary adversary of American interests in the Middle East. The containment and rollback of Iranian influence has been a consistent thread across multiple administrations, whether Republican or Democratic. Every other consideration in the region is subordinate to this overarching objective. The Kurdish question, the Syrian civil war, the rise and fall of ISIS all are ultimately viewed through the lens of how they affect the balance of power vis-à-vis Tehran.

The fall of Assad's regime represents a catastrophic blow to Iranian regional strategy. Syria served as the crucial land bridge connecting Iran to its proxies in Lebanon, particularly Hezbollah. It provided Iran with strategic depth, forward operating bases, and influence in the Levant. With Assad gone, Iran's "axis of resistance" has been severed geographically, isolating Hezbollah and dramatically reducing Iranian leverage².

² Mansour, R., Al-Shakeri, H., & Haid, H. (2025, March 6). *The shape-shifting 'axis of resistance': How Iran and*

Washington is fully aware that many former ISIS elements are now integrated into al-Jolani's ranks, yet this reality is being subordinated to pragmatic interests. Intelligence assessments clearly indicate the presence of former Islamic State fighters within the coalition now controlling Damascus. However, the strategic calculation is that a Sunni-dominated Syria under al-Jolani, whatever its ideological complexion, is preferable to an Iran-aligned government³.

This represents a return to the Cold War logic where the ideological character of allied regimes was secondary to their geopolitical orientation. Just as the United States allied with authoritarian and even extremist regimes during the confrontation with the Soviet Union, it is now willing to overlook the composition and ideology of al-Jolani's forces if they serve the purpose of containing Iran⁴.

Al-Jolani: From Terrorist to Strategic Asset

Al-Jolani is increasingly positioned as a useful actor in countering Iran and its regional proxies. The transformation of al-Jolani from an al-Qaeda affiliate leader to a potential partner represents one of the more remarkable strategic pivots in recent Middle Eastern history. His group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), emerged from Jabhat al-Nusra, which was explicitly the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda. Al-Jolani himself fought in Iraq and has deep roots in jihadist networks.

Yet strategic necessity has driven a reassessment. Al-Jolani has proven himself a capable military leader and administrator. He has demonstrated pragmatism in governance in Idlib province, maintaining civil order and even engaging with international humanitarian organizations. Most importantly, he is a Sunni Arab leader with military capability and popular legitimacy who is deeply opposed to Iranian influence.

As Israel has demanded the demilitarisation of Hezbollah, it is well understood that a costly urban land war in Lebanon is not in Israel's interest, particularly in light of the experience of 2006. The 2006 Lebanon War demonstrated the severe limitations of conventional military operations against embedded guerrilla forces in urban terrain. Despite overwhelming military superiority, Israel suffered significant casualties and failed to achieve decisive victory against Hezbollah. The prospect of repeating such an operation, but on a larger scale and potentially including occupation, is deeply unappealing to Israeli military planners⁵.

It is therefore increasingly likely that al-Jolani, in exchange for legitimacy and recognition by the West and Israel, will be tasked with conducting much of the necessary ground-level confrontation within Lebanon, to confront Hezbollah on the ground. If Iranian forces or Iranian-backed militias attempt to establish themselves in Syria, al-Jolani would be the primary opposition. In effect, he would serve as a proxy force managing threats that the United States and Israel prefer not to confront directly.

This arrangement offers several advantages from the Western perspective. It reduces the need for direct Western military involvement, it creates a Sunni counterweight to Shiite Iranian expansion,

its networks adapt to external pressures. Chatham House.

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/03/shape-shifting-axis-resistance>

³ NBC News. (2024, December 15). *Past links to ISIS, al Qaeda raise fears for some about Syria's new regime.* NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/links-isis-al-qaeda-raise-fears-syrias-new-regime-rcna184104>

⁴ Hoodbhoy, P. (2005). AFGHANISTAN AND THE GENESIS OF GLOBAL JIHAD. *Peace Research*, 37(1), 15–30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24469676>

⁵ Rubin, U. (2007). *The Rocket Campaign against Israel during the 2006 Lebanon War.* Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep04280>

and it establishes a government in Damascus that is dependent on Western goodwill for international legitimacy. The human rights record and ideological orientation of that government become secondary considerations.

Military Preparations: The Gathering Storm

At the same time, the military build-up around Iran in recent days and weeks has been substantial. The scale and speed of this deployment suggest preparations that extend beyond routine posturing or deterrence. The United States is positioning assets for a potential conflict of significant magnitude.

USAF F-35A fighters, previously staged in Puerto Rico as part of operations related to tensions with Venezuela, are now en route to Morón Air Base in Spain, a key logistical hub for eastward deployment. The relocation of these fifth-generation stealth fighters from the Caribbean to the Mediterranean is particularly significant. F-35As provide capabilities essential for penetrating sophisticated air defence systems, such as Iran possesses. Their presence indicates preparations for operations in heavily defended airspace.

Additional Boeing KC-46 Pegasus aerial refuelling tankers and EA-18G Growler electronic warfare aircraft have been deployed to the region. The KC-46 Pegasus tankers are critical for extended-range operations, allowing strike aircraft to reach targets deep inside Iran and return safely. The number of tankers being deployed suggests planning for sustained operations involving dozens of aircraft simultaneously.

The EA-18G Growler is perhaps the most sophisticated electronic warfare platform in the world, capable of jamming radars, communications, and air defence systems. Their deployment in significant numbers indicates planning for Suppression of Enemy Air defence (SEAD) operations, which would be necessary precursors to any major strike campaign against Iranian facilities.

In the near term, a Boeing WC-135R Constant Phoenix aircraft is also expected. This airborne laboratory is used to detect traces of nuclear material in the atmosphere. Its deployment is deeply significant. The WC-135R is rarely deployed except in situations where nuclear testing is suspected or where nuclear facilities might be targeted. Its presence indicates that operations involving Iran's nuclear infrastructure are being seriously contemplated.

A C-130J Combat King II search-and-rescue aircraft has already arrived, typically deployed when the risk of aircraft losses and crew recovery becomes credible. Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR) assets are not deployed lightly. Their presence indicates that planners are accounting for the possibility of aircraft being shot down over hostile territory and crews needing extraction. This suggests operations in highly contested airspace where losses are considered possible.

Comparative Analysis: Desert Storm Redux

In practical terms, to assemble a strike grouping comparable to that of Operation Desert Storm, the only missing component is heavy bomber aviation. This includes the B-1B Lancer, B-52, and B-2 Spirit, with the latter reportedly expected within the next 48 hours. Almost all other elements are already in place.

Operation Desert Storm in 1991 involved over 2,000 aircraft from coalition forces. The initial air campaign lasted 43 days and involved systematic destruction of Iraqi air defences, command and control facilities, military infrastructure, and strategic targets. The comparison is instructive. While a similar operation against Iran would not necessarily follow the same timeline or approach, the force

structure being assembled suggests planning for a comprehensive campaign rather than limited strikes.

The B-1B Lancer is a supersonic strategic bomber capable of carrying the largest conventional payload of any American aircraft. Its low-level penetration capabilities make it effective against hardened targets. The B-52, while older, remains highly effective for standoff strikes using cruise missiles. The B-2 Spirit represents the ultimate in stealth bombing capability, able to penetrate the most sophisticated air defences to deliver precision-guided munitions.

The reported imminent arrival of B-2 aircraft is particularly significant. There are only 20 B-2s in the entire US inventory, and they are typically reserved for the most critical missions against the most heavily defended targets. Their deployment would indicate targets that cannot be effectively struck by other means precisely the profile of Iran's underground nuclear facilities.

The scale and composition of this air deployment, particularly when combined with allied capabilities, strongly suggests preparations for a renewed attempt to decisively cripple Iran's nuclear programme. This stands in contrast to former President Trump's public claims that earlier B-2 strikes had already achieved that objective. If the nuclear program had indeed been neutralized, the current military buildup would be unnecessary and inexplicable.

Defensive Preparations: Protecting Allied Assets

In parallel, the United States has begun relocating air and missile defence systems from within its own territory. This movement of defensive assets is as significant as the deployment of offensive forces. It indicates expectations that Iran will respond to any attack with missile strikes against US forces, bases, and allies in the region.

Over the past several days, approximately nine C-17 Globemaster III transport aircraft have departed, or are preparing to depart, from Fort Hood. The base hosts two THAAD batteries belonging to the US Army's 62nd Air Défense Artillery Regiment. In total, roughly sixteen US transport flights have already moved from this site to Europe alone.

The Terminal High Altitude Area defence (THAAD) system represents America's most sophisticated defence against ballistic missiles. Each battery can engage missiles both inside and outside the atmosphere, providing a critical shield against the kind of ballistic missile attack Iran is capable of launching. The deployment of multiple THAAD batteries from US soil to the Middle East is unprecedented in scale and indicates serious concern about Iranian retaliatory capabilities.

Iran possesses one of the largest and most sophisticated ballistic missile arsenals in the Middle East, including weapons capable of striking any target within 2,000 kilometres. The 12-day conflict in June 2025 between Iran and Israel have further underscored Tehran's growing missile and drone capabilities. Iranian strikes demonstrated an ability to repeatedly penetrate and overwhelm a dense, multi-layered air defence architecture incorporating Israeli systems as well as British, French, and US assets deployed across the region. Despite extensive early warning, integrated radar coverage, and the active involvement of allied interception platforms, a number of projectiles successfully evaded interception and reached their intended airspace targets. The episode highlighted not only the limits of even highly coordinated Western and Israeli missile defence networks, but also Iran's capacity to conduct complex, saturation-style attacks designed to exhaust and bypass defensive systems rather than relying on singular precision strikes⁶.

⁶ Rojhelati, Z. (2025). *The Twelve-Day War and the Silent Transformations of West Asia*. Rudaw Research

The current defensive preparations suggest expectations of a far more extensive Iranian response. Potential targets would include US bases in Iraq, Syria, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and the UAE, as well as Israeli territory and possibly Saudi oil facilities. The scale of defensive deployment indicates planning for a multi-day campaign involving hundreds of potential missile launches.

Up to six EA-18G Growler electronic warfare aircraft are reportedly heading toward Naval Station Rota, likely for onward deployment to the Middle East as part of preparations for potential strikes on Iran. These assets are being supported by KC-46A aerial refuelling tankers operating under the callsigns GOLD31, GOLD32, GOLD41, and GOLD42. The specific callsigns being tracked by aviation observers indicate operational security measures are in place but have not prevented detailed monitoring of the buildup by both adversaries and neutral observers.

Naval Power Projection: The Abraham Lincoln Strike Group

The centrepiece of this reinforcement effort is the arrival of the USS Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group. Previously operating in the South China Sea, the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier has now entered the area of responsibility of US Central Command and is operating in the Arabian Sea. The repositioning of a carrier strike group from the Pacific to the Middle East represents a major strategic commitment and indicates prioritization of the Iranian situation for the time being over other regional concerns, including tensions with China.

The carrier hosts Air Wing 9, a highly capable force designed for deep strike operations. Its composition includes F-35C Lightning II stealth fighters from VMFA-314, multiple squadrons of F/A-18E/F Super Hornets, and EA-18G Growler aircraft tasked with suppressing enemy air defences. A typical carrier air wing includes approximately 60-70 aircraft and can conduct sustained operations at high tempo for extended periods.

The F-35C is the carrier-variant of America's fifth-generation fighter, combining stealth, advanced sensors, and precision strike capability. VMFA-314, known as the "Black Knights," is a Marine Corps squadron with extensive operational experience. The F/A-18E/F Super Hornets provide additional strike capacity and are highly versatile multi-role fighters. Together with the EA-18G Growlers for electronic warfare, this air wing can conduct complex, coordinated strikes against heavily defended targets while protecting itself from air defences.

The carrier is escorted by three guided-missile destroyers from Destroyer Squadron 21: the USS Frank E. Petersen Jr., the USS Michael Murphy, and the USS Spruance. These Arleigh Burke-class destroyers are equipped with the Aegis combat system and carry substantial arsenals of Tomahawk cruise missiles, which could be employed in the initial phases of any strike campaign to overwhelm Iranian air defences and degrade their ability to respond to follow-on attacks.

Combined with the recent EU designation of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organisation, the conditions for a major confrontation appear increasingly set⁷. The European Union's decision to formally designate the IRGC as a terrorist organization removes diplomatic and legal obstacles to coordinated action against the group. It also signals European acquiescence to, if not support for, a potential broader confrontation with Iranian proxies as Hezbollah had already been

Center. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep71362>

⁷ Rankin, J., & Stacey, K. (2026, January 29). *EU formally designates Iran's Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist organisation*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jan/29/eu-formally-designates-iran-irgc-revolutionary-guards-terrorist-organisation>

designated a terrorist organization in 2012, with the last individual European country designating them a terrorist organization being Austria in 2021⁸.

Intelligence and Diplomatic Indicators

Beyond the visible military preparations, intelligence indicators and diplomatic movements suggest operational planning is advanced. There have been quiet consultations between Washington, Tel Aviv, and key regional partners including Saudi Arabia and the UAE. While publicly these consultations focus on regional stability and containing Iranian influence, the frequency and level of engagement suggest coordination on potential military action.

Gulf states have repeatedly stated that they will not permit their territory or airspace to be used for attacks against Iran⁹. Their position is driven by fears of direct retaliation and the risk that so-called limited strikes could rapidly escalate into a wider regional war. While maintaining close security ties with the United States, Gulf capitals remain acutely aware that any involvement in a strike on Iran would likely make them immediate targets, threatening internal stability and regional economic security.

Regional partners have quietly been advised to prepare for potential disruptions to oil supplies and shipping through the Strait of Hormuz. Approximately 20% of global oil supplies pass through this narrow waterway, and Iran has repeatedly threatened to close it in response to military attack. The United States maintains significant naval assets in the region specifically to keep the strait open, but any confrontation would likely cause at least temporary disruptions and insurance rate spikes that would affect global markets.

With demonstrations having been violently suppressed and significant bloodshed already having occurred, public opinion has been shaped and a *casus belli* constructed. The preparation of public opinion for military action follows familiar patterns from previous conflicts. Initial reports emphasize threat, allegations of weapons programs or support for terrorism, and humanitarian concerns. Media coverage gradually builds a narrative justifying action, while diplomatic initiatives are pursued that are structured to fail, thereby demonstrating that all peaceful options have been exhausted.

Regional Implications and Aftermath

Under these conditions, a response from the United States and its allies appears not only likely, but imminent. However, the initiation of major military operations against Iran would trigger consequences extending far beyond the immediate conflict.

Iran's retaliatory capabilities are substantial. Beyond ballistic missiles, Iran commands proxy forces throughout the region who could conduct attacks against American and allied targets. Hezbollah in Lebanon, despite recent setbacks, retains significant military capability. Iranian-backed militias in Iraq could target US personnel and installations. Houthi forces in Yemen could intensify attacks on Saudi Arabia and shipping in the Red Sea. The potential for regional escalation is severe.

The economic consequences would be immediate and global. Oil prices would spike as markets price in risk of supply disruption. Insurance rates for shipping through the Persian Gulf would become

⁸ ELNET. (n.d.). *Banning Hezbollah in Europe*. European Leadership Network. https://elnetwork.eu/banning-hezbollah-in-europe/?utm_source=elnetwork.eu

⁹ France24. (2026, January 28). *Gulf states try to de-escalate tension as US threatens Iran with military action*. France24. <https://www.france24.com/en/gulf-states-try-to-de-escalate-tension-as-us-threatens-iran-with-military-action>

prohibitive. Global supply chains, still recovering from pandemic disruptions, would face new shocks. The economic impact would be felt worldwide, with particular severity in energy-importing nations.

Politically, the conflict would reshape regional alignments. Turkey, despite its NATO membership, has cultivated relations with Iran and would face difficult choices. Pakistan, with its large Shiite minority and complex relationship with Iran, would come under pressure. China and Russia, both with strategic interests in Iran, would need to decide how far to support Tehran against Western action.

The humanitarian toll would be substantial. Any major military campaign would cause civilian casualties, even with precision weaponry. Iranian retaliatory strikes against regional targets could kill hundreds or thousands. Refugee flows would increase, placing additional strain on neighbouring countries and Europe.

The Logic of Empire

The Kurdish betrayal and the buildup toward confrontation with Iran represent two aspects of the same strategic logic. In the calculus of great power competition, tactical allies are expendable when strategic objectives require their sacrifice. Promises and partnerships are conditional, lasting only as long as they serve broader interests¹⁰.

For the Kurds, this represents yet another bitter lesson in the price of depending on external powers. Their role in defeating ISIS, their adoption of democratic governance, their alignment with Western values none of it provided insurance against abandonment when the strategic picture changed.

For Iran, the gathering military forces represent an existential threat. Whether actual strikes occur or whether the buildup serves primarily as coercive pressure remains to be seen. But the scale of preparation suggests that decision-makers in Washington and Tel Aviv believe a window of opportunity exists to fundamentally alter the regional balance of power, and they are prepared to act on that belief.

The coming weeks will determine whether decades of Middle Eastern policy culminate in another major conflict, or whether the military preparations serve their purpose as deterrence and coercion, achieving objectives without the costs of actual war. What seems clear is that the pieces are in position, the strategic decision appears to have been made, and events are moving toward a culmination that will reshape the region for years to come.

The Kurdish experience serves as a reminder of the fundamental nature of international relations: *there are no permanent friends, only permanent interests*. Those who forget this lesson, or who believe that shared values and past cooperation provide lasting security, inevitably discover their error at the worst possible moment. The Kurds are discovering this now. Who will be next?

¹⁰ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2001). *The tragedy of great power politics*. W. W. Norton & Company.