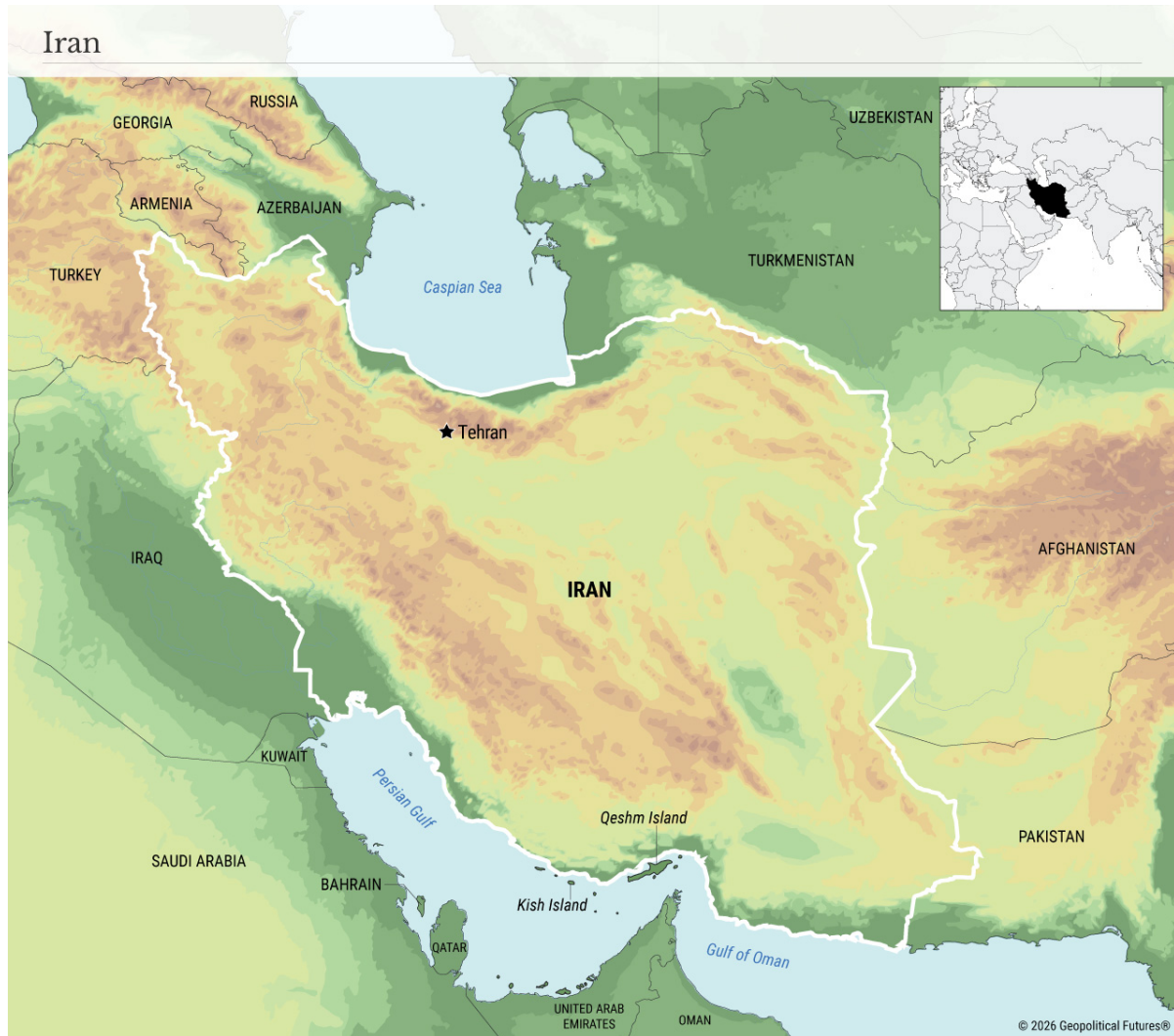


# Iran: Regime Erosion and Frontier Fragility

by Kamran Bokhari - January 15, 2026

The foundations of the Iranian regime are eroding and probably will continue to do so for a long time. In a bid to accelerate this process and shape the outcome, the Trump White House is reportedly considering a limited strike against the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), aiming to weaken the paramilitary force and create space for the regular army (Artesh) and more pragmatic elite factions to assert greater influence. However, calibrating such kinetic action to produce this specific outcome is exceedingly difficult and carries significant risk of unintended consequences.

More likely is an extended period of internal contestation, with rival elites and social groups jostling for power and pursuing competing objectives, while the regime's ability to enforce its writ across the country weakens. This will have major geostrategic consequences for neighboring regions. Iran is the Middle East's second-largest state by territory (after Saudi Arabia) and, with approximately 93 million people, has the region's second-largest population (trailing only Egypt). More important, Iran occupies a pivotal geopolitical position at the crossroads of the Middle East, the former Soviet space and the India-Pakistan subcontinent. Consequently, any sustained weakening of central authority in Tehran would quickly reverberate along Iran's western, northern and eastern frontiers.



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## The Western Flank

To the northwest, Iran shares a long and strategically consequential border with Turkey – a fault line along which Turkic and Persianate powers have competed for over a millennium. This enduring rivalry has positioned Ankara and Tehran as the two principal regional competitors shaping the geopolitical space spanning the Mediterranean, the Black and Caspian seas, and the Arabian and Red seas.

Since the establishment of the modern nation-states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria in the early 20th century, each has contended with the challenge of Kurdish separatism, navigating persistent pressures from their respective Kurdish populations and the insurgent groups that have arisen from

them. The threat is most acute for Turkey, where nearly 15 million Kurds – almost one-fifth of the population – concentrate in the southeast, creating both a domestic security challenge and a cross-border dimension given the Kurdish presence in neighboring states.

The 2003 U.S. intervention in Iraq, leading to an autonomous Kurdish region in the north of the country, was a challenge that Turkey eventually managed by leveraging the rivalry between the two main Iraqi Kurdish factions. Turkey was still dealing with the situation in Iraq when the 2011 Arab Spring uprising led to the emergence of a Kurdish self-ruled region in Syria's northeast, supported by the United States. The Turks were very concerned about the close relationship between the Syrian Kurdish separatist movement and Turkey's main Kurdish rebel force. However, the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria a little over a year ago allowed Ankara greater space to manage the Syrian Kurds.

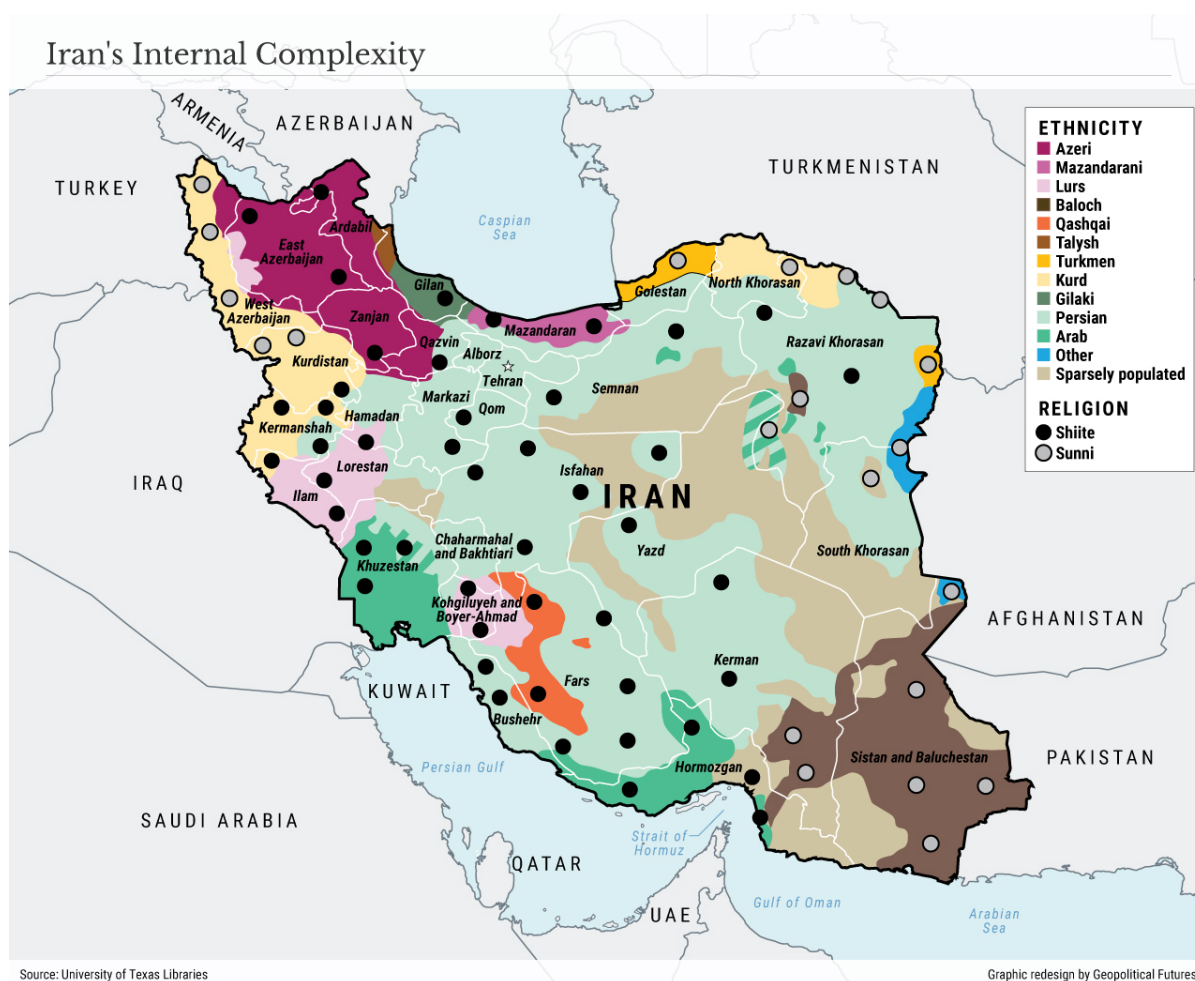
With the Iranian regime showing signs of internal decay, Turkey now faces the challenge of managing four distinct Iranian Kurdish factions seeking to exploit the Islamic Republic's descent into instability. (Reuters reported Jan. 14 that Turkey's intelligence service had warned the IRGC that Kurdish militants had crossed into Iran from Iraq, seeking to exploit the nationwide protests and exacerbate internal instability.) From Ankara's perspective, this has created a fragile arc spanning three major neighbors – Iraq, Syria and Iran – where instability could spill across borders. Should Tehran lose the ability to enforce its authority, a contiguous Kurdish zone could emerge, stretching from northeastern Syria through northern Iraq and into northwestern Iran. However, Ankara could also exploit this instability and assert itself as a dominant regional power across a volatile and strategically critical swath of the Middle East.

Iraq runs along the bulk of Iran's western border. It fell into Iran's sphere of influence as an unintended consequence of the 2003 U.S. move to overthrow the regime in Baghdad. Tehran, largely through Iraq's Shiite majority, has controlled the fate of its western neighbor. A weakening of the Islamic Republic means the disparate political parties and militias that constitute its proxy network will start to spar with each other, producing two key outcomes. First, it will create space for Iraq's Sunni minority, buoyed by the rise of a Sunni regime in neighboring Syria, to challenge the Iraqi Shiites. Second, it will allow the Kurdistan regional government in the north to enhance its room to maneuver because of a weakened Baghdad.

## **Northern Flank**

Azerbaijan, Armenia and the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan stretch along the full length of Iran's northwestern frontier west of the Caspian, forming a borderland of exceptional strategic

consequence. Nearly a quarter of Iran's population is ethnically Azeri, concentrated across four provinces, making this region both demographically significant and politically sensitive. Much of what is now Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia and parts of the North Caucasus were historically part of the pre-modern Persian Empire, which ceded these territories to Russia during a series of wars in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Notably, the Safavid Empire – the first major Persian imperial dominion to emerge after the rise of Islam – was founded in the early 16th century by an Azerbaijani Turkic dynasty, underscoring the deep historical connection between ethnic Azeris and the Iranian polity.



[\(click to enlarge\)](#)

Since Azerbaijan's 2020 defeat of Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh war, achieved with Ankara's support, Turkey has punched a strategic hole in what was – even three decades after the Soviet collapse – a Russian sphere of influence. Historically, the Turks had never been a major actor in the

South Caucasus, even at the height of the Ottoman Empire, yet they have now established a presence on Iran's northwestern frontier. For Iran, the defeat of its ally Armenia and the concurrent weakening of Moscow due to the Russia-Ukraine war created an arc of vulnerability along its northern border. The August 2025 U.S.-brokered agreement between Baku and Yerevan, including the establishment of the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity, further cemented Washington's foothold on Iran's northern flank, intensifying Iran's strategic exposure in the region.

Meanwhile, Azerbaijan is emerging as a middle power with the capacity to shape developments on its southern border. Baku is concerned about a potential influx of Iranian Azeri refugees if the Islamic Republic loses control, but it also sees an opportunity for Iranian Azeris to gain significantly greater influence within a future Iranian regime. Historically, Iran's Azeri minority has pursued integration and dominance within the state rather than separatism, reflecting a pattern of elite ambition rather than nationalist rebellion. Taken together, these dynamics suggest that Iran's instability could open space for expanded Azerbaijani – and, by extension, Turkish – influence over Tehran's political trajectory.

## **The Eastern Flank**

To understand the situation to Iran's east, it's important to note that the country shares a long border with Turkmenistan, formally established under the 1881 Treaty of Akhal between the Qajar and Imperial Russia. On the Iranian side of the border are ethnic Turkmens, a Turkic minority that, unlike the Azeris, adheres to Sunni Islam, adding a distinct ethno-sectarian dimension to the region. Any unrest here is of immediate concern to Turkmenistan, whose capital, Ashgabat, lies just 15 miles (24 kilometers) north of the border. This area, which includes the provinces of Golestan, North Khorasan and Razavi Khorasan, links seamlessly into Iran's eastern flank, running along Afghanistan in the north to Pakistan in the south, all the way to the Arabian Sea.

Iran's eastern border with Afghanistan has become especially sensitive in light of the Taliban's return to power in 2021. Afghanistan is likely to remain a long-term source of instability, exporting Sunni Islamist extremism that Tehran has sought to contain for the past several years. Any further weakening of the Iranian regime would leave its long and porous eastern frontier exposed. And though the Taliban could see Iran's turmoil as an opportunity to expand influence westward, they must also contend with the fact that theocracy at home is at risk when Iran's theocracy has already failed, despite its vast oil revenues. In this scenario, destabilization could spread in both directions.

Iran's southeastern border with Pakistan, meanwhile, is a constant source of security concern that links Baloch separatists, Islamist militants and transnational criminals. The government in Islamabad is already struggling to manage a Baloch insurgency of its own, so it will be limited in its efforts to

contain cross-border spillover. Iran is likewise contending with a Baloch rebellion, but the fact that the rebels are Sunni Islamists complicates Tehran's internal security calculations. The threats here are amplified by ideological overlap with the Taliban's Deobandi strain of Islam, reflecting the proximity and permeability of the Afghanistan-Pakistan-Iran border region.

Regime instability will create pressure on Iran's periphery. Militancy, separatism and weak state control will imperil these border regions, but they won't translate to sudden central collapse. State and non-state actors alike are testing the limits of Iranian authority, seeking either insulation or leverage from instability. The result is a prolonged period in which Iran becomes a contested geopolitical space linking the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia and South Asia.

**Author: Kamran Bokhari**

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