Arming Kurdish Resistance Fighters in Iran with Drones

Description

CNN reported on March 3rd that the Central Intelligence Agency had begun arming the Kurdish resistance as a ground force to support Iranian resistance. The situation remains fluid, with reports indicating Iranian Kurds have begun taking combat positions, but have not yet begun fighting, despite Iranian attacks on Kurdish bases. Although overall American and Israeli goals and strategy remain opaque, this is consistent with the approach of targeting Iranian security services and political leadership to enable a domestic opposition to take over, or, barring that, at least change the political calculus on nuclear weapons negotiations.

As part of this effort, the United States and Israel should provide the resistance elements with unmanned systems to provide close air support, long-range strikes, logistics support, and improved reconnaissance. The United States should also provide training and operational guidance from lessons learned around the world.

The benefits of a resistance force trained and equipped with unmanned systems are multifold: carrying out aerial strikes, providing persistent ISR and actionable intelligence, intimidating and disrupting the regime security apparatus, sustaining resistance forces, and providing visible evidence of the Iranian regimeâ??s weakness. Opportunities exist to support the effort with technology and knowledge from Ukraineâ??s expanding drone export business, with support from Gulf state financial resources and commercial networks.

Force Multiplier of Unmanned Systems

Drones offer non-state resistances affordable and operationally effective air support for tactical engagements, reconnaissance, and strategic strikes. A DJI Mavic 3 quadcopter can be bought for $2,000, equipped with a small explosive, and launched from almost anywhere ranging from the back of a pickup truck to an apartment building. This cheap technology and its operational effectiveness would be perfectly suited for the asymmetric approach of a Kurdish resistance effort.

Drones can readily maneuver over fences, bollards, checkpoints, and other ground-based defenses to access and strike hard-to-reach places. They would assist Kurdish forces in seizing territory and holding these positions. According to the Institute for the Study of War, Ukraine employed drones to

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deny Russian vehicles from getting within 20 to 25 kilometers of the frontline, and denied Russian infantry movement within one kilometer of the front. In the Kurdish case, even holding small amounts of territory would be significant. This would help defend against and neutralize Iranian forces, highlight Iranian weaknesses, and, most importantly, draw Iranian government/military resources and attention away from a potential popular uprising.

To do so, the Kurds would likely need a mixture of drone forces, ideally sourced from the region. This would include high-speed, medium to large-size first person-view drones for striking armored vehicles, simple quadcopters like the DJI Mavic 3 for battlefield reconnaissance and resupply, high-endurance reconnaissance drones like Elbit Systemsâ?? Hermes 450, and larger hexa- and octocopters like the Vampire for dropping heavy munitions and logistics support. Ground drones equipped with anti-tank mines could also create mobile minefields to deny Iranian movement and carry out urban ambushes.

Even without controlling significant territory, Kurdish forces could readily threaten Iranian forces throughout the country. Ukraineâ??s deep-strike drone program initially relied on commercial drones like the Chinese-manufactured Mugin-5, which can carry 50 pounds, fly 5 to 7 hours, cost around $50,000, and range over 500 kilometers. A Mugin-5 launched from Sanandaj, the capital of Iranian Kurdistan, could hit key targets in Tehran, approximately 400 kilometers away. For example, high-value targeting objectives could include airfields, oil refineries, military bases, security service buildings, and other essential infrastructure. Marcel Plichtaâ??s recent study in RUSI Journal concluded, â??Ukraineâ??s one-way attack drones imposed severe costs on Russia, despite their vulnerability to air defence.â?•

Drones cannot realistically compete with manned aircraft, which can carry tens of thousands of pounds payloads, but it is an efficient striking weapon system for a guerrilla force. Even though small, commercial drones like the Mavic carry a couple pounds at most, a well-placed bomb or two can neutralize a tank. A light, yet effective, payload combined with its low costs makes drones an asymmetrically efficient weapon that enables a resistance force to conduct harassing attacks and impose costs on Iranian forces attempting to consolidate control. By using the drones to â??bring the detonatorâ?• to Iranian fuel depots, ammunition dumps, and airfields, an armed resistance could create significant chaos and debilitate the regime. The small payload may also be a boon if the resistance evolves into urban conflict, enabling precision targeting that mitigates collateral damage.

Drones Enhance ISR Capabilities for the Resistance

The intelligence value of ubiquitous drones is considerable too. In Ukraine, battlefield transparency has made surprise and massing of forces quite difficult. Kurdish forces would benefit from such warnings to

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prepare defenses and prepare counter-attacks, including queueing American air power.

The intelligence value of drones would extend to civil resistance too. Resistance groups like N30 Black Bloc used human spotters to identify and avoid police response during the â??Battle of Seattle,â?• the major protests around the World Trade Organization in 1999. Compared to human intelligence collection, the unmanned systems could mitigate risks such that individuals concerned over direct confrontation or affiliation with the resistance network could still support operations and intelligence gathering.

Resistance forces can readily enhance those effects too: off-the-shelf drones like the DJI Mavic have built in â??follow meâ?• functions that could automatically follow security forces as they go about their daily routine. This could serve as a visible marker for resistance forces to either avoid or confront, while also adding a constant sense of being watched, feeding into a larger sense of a deteriorating Iranian regime.

Drone Logistics and Sustainment

Drones can also be used to provide resistance forces with critical supplies, especially in difficult to reach, and time-sensitive situations. Drones could be effective in supplying resistance forces in mountainous terrains, or where transit routes are monitored or controlled by Iranian forces. Although payload limits constrain what a drone can carry, a small drone can deliver communications equipment, medical supplies, and Semtex. In Ukraine, larger drones like the Vampire transport 70 pounds up to 25 miles in the air and unmanned ground drones expand capability by transporting 40 tons of cargo per week, supporting five battalions and representing 80 percent of frontline resupply.

For an urban resistance, such tactics as delivering a package through a rooftop or window could provide advantages over a conventional dead-drop. However, resistance forces will need to be sensitive to drone forensic techniques that can uncover data logs, video, and images that can be collected from drones, and may reveal sensitive information about the resistance. Resistance forces will also need to be sensitive to Iranian drone laws, which require registering the drone and flight plans with the police.

Unmanned Ghosts of Psychological Warfare

Drones can also enable information operations through collection, military deception, and psychological impacts. Drones capture high-quality images and videos of the resistance and security force response, such as violent oppression, that facilitate narrative warfare through positive messaging

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or condemnation. Small drones are often a visible, and audible presence. The very presence of drones in the sky lead to a myriad of psychological effects such as decision paralysis, paranoia, fear, confusion, and stress. All these effects could create time and space for tactical actions, manipulate enemy patterns of activity, deny battlefield space to the enemy, deter civilians from the battlefield, and contribute to psychological weariness of Iranian military forces that are still facing heavy bombardment from Israel and the United States.

The Nexus of Kurdish Resistance and Operation Epic Fury

Ideally, resistance forces should carry out both strikes and intelligence collection in cooperation with American and Israeli forces. Collected intelligence can support American and Israeli intelligence assessments, potentially providing useful insights for the larger campaign. The resistance force can also feed American and Israeli targeting by identifying mobile Shahed-136 launchers, which are hidden in trucks, or gathering on-the-ground information on Iranian key leadership. The United States and Israel can provide intelligence supportâ??such as artificial intelligence processing, SIGINT, and cyber collection that are inaccessible to the resistance movementâ??that further drives resistance operations and targeting.

Sourcing Drones and Deriving Best Practices from Ukraine

The United States and Israel could transfer successful technology and knowledge from Ukraine. Drones played a significant role in Ukraine successfully leveling the battlefield with Russia and deterring a much larger, better financed force. That led to growing demands from around the world for Ukrainian drones, with 10 export centers opening in Europe.

Ukraine has domestically produced a wide-range of highly effective drones, including the Furia for long-range reconnaissance, Terminal Autonomyâ??s AQ-400 Scythe for deep-strike, and Skyfallâ??s Vampire heavy bomber, which the Russians call â??Baba Yaga.â?• Besides the benefit of being battletested, purchasing drones from Ukraine could provide useful capital to support their war effort. The United States and the Gulf states are already reportedly in talks with Ukraine to acquire counter-drone interceptors to counter the Iranian Shahed-136; providing drones for a resistance could be part of the deal.

According to DroneSecâ??s 2026 Global Drone Threat Report, technical manuals are increasingly available online about how to operate drones, modify commercial drones for combat use, combat adversarial jamming, and counter-forensic techniques to thwart security services. The best manuals could be readily translated into Kurdish and Farsi, then provided to Iranian resistance forces with

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minimal risk. Ukraine has also provided foreign training in drone operations and even inadvertently trained drug cartels.

Opportunities for Sourcing Tech within the Gulf

Commercial and military drones are also available in regional Middle Eastern countries. Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar permit private drone use within their countries. In response to Operation Epic Fury, Iran conducted retaliatory strikes against Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, and Qatar. This may produce an intrinsic motive for the Gulf states to tacitly support or even cooperate on the U.S.-Israel operation against Iran.

Although the Gulf states have military forces, these countries have the largest advantage in their oil wealth. The United States and Israel could strongly encourage these countries to leverage their economic and commercial power to acquire drones for the resistance forces. This could occur through secret diplomacy and foreign military sales of drones to afford plausible deniability. Alternatively, the Gulf states could openly source the drones through commercial means, which would attribute active cooperation but also hasten drone acquisition.

Gulf states also increasingly are acquiring and building their own drones. EDGE group in the Emirates produces Reach-M medium-altitude, long-endurance drone for intelligence and light ground attack, and the Hunter 2-S swarming-capable loitering munition, although autonomous swarming drones have legal and ethical challenges. Other unmanned systems are being manufactured or acquired within the region. INTRA Defense Technologies in Saudi Arabia produce drones resistant to electronic warfare, Barzan Holdings in Qatar will produce Turkish combat UAVs (though providing Turkish drones to Kurdish resistance carries obvious political risks from Turkey), and several Gulf states submitted purchase requests for drone interceptors from a Ukrainian company after the recent Iranian Shahed strikes.

Prior to the conflict, Iran and the Gulf states had billions of dollars in trade, which could provide cover for moving drones into Iran. This indirect approach would allow the Gulf states to retaliate against Iran in a major way with minimal fighting.

Winning the Long Game of Irregular Warfare

Sustaining and adapting a Kurdish drone resistance will be critical, and it needs to continue until the resistance faces a critical juncture in which the movement gains enough traction to successfully subvert or overthrow the sitting regime, which could take months or years. Resistance forces will also

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need to adapt to Iranian countermeasures. The Iranian government could respond by eliminating drone pilots, denying transit routes, targeting training facilities, and degrading other support systems. Ukrainian forces reacted to countermeasures through communication relays that increase drone range and obscure pilot location, fiber-optic cables to maintain connectivity despite jamming, and encrypted communication channels.

Drone technology is increasingly empowering smaller fighting groups and leveling combat balances around the world. As the United States looks to build the Iranian resistance, it should look to drone technology to provide both Kurdish forces and civil resistance in Iran a broad range of affordable air support that maximizes operational gains. If the United States and Israel are going to fight an irregular war against the Iranian regime, they should do it right. That means drones.

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Main image: A Swedish K3 Ranger operates a first-person view (FPV) drone during Adamant Serpent 26 in Sweden in October 2025 alongside NATO forces and USSOF to locate targets and plan future strikes and troop movements (Source: DVIDs).

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