

 thinc. briefing

# Legal and Institutional Principles for a Democratic Transition in Iran



May 2026

thinc.

THE HAGUE INITIATIVE  
for INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

**Lead author: Alessandro Spinillo**

© The Hague Initiative for International Cooperation 2026  
All rights reserved.  
The Hague Initiative for International Cooperation  
[www.thinc.info](http://www.thinc.info)  
[info@thinc.info](mailto:info@thinc.info)

The Hague Initiative for International Cooperation is a charitable trust under Dutch law. Donations are gratefully accepted at:  
IBAN: NL 15 INGB 0007 8215 39  
BIC (SWIFT code): NLINGB2A  
ING Bank, The Netherlands

## Contents

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. KEY ISSUES .....</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1 LATEST DEVELOPMENTS.....	6
1.2 FOUNDATIONAL LEGAL PRINCIPLES FOR A DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION .....	9
1.3 INSTITUTIONAL REQUIREMENTS AND ROADMAP FOR A TRANSITION .....	9
1.4 THE ROLE OF EXTERNAL PARTNERS.....	10
<b>2. INTERNAL SELF-DETERMINATION AS THE FRAMEWORK THAT PRESERVES TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>3. HUMAN RIGHTS COMPLIANCE IN A TRANSITIONAL CONTEXT .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>4. IRANIAN OPPOSITION: ESCALATING DIVIDES AND STRUCTURAL RISK TO TERRITORIAL COHESION .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>5. A PROPOSED ROADMAP FOR POLITICAL TRANSITION .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>FINAL CONCLUSIONS.....</b>	<b>22</b>

## Executive Summary

This briefing sets out the legal, institutional, and political parameters for a potential democratic transition in Iran amid a period of acute strategic fluidity.

Recent U.S.–Israeli military operations have degraded key elements of the regime’s leadership structure, contributing to a leadership vacuum while accelerating the consolidation of power by Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) hardliners. At the same time, sustained repression—including reported mass executions and large-scale lethal responses to protests in 2026—underscores the need to embed human rights safeguards and accountability mechanisms in any transitional framework.

Two structural risks are central: the possibility of territorial fragmentation driven by deep Persian and non-Persian cleavages, and the absence of a unified opposition interlocutor capable of enabling credible pathways for de-escalation, governance transition, and structured international engagement. These dynamics unfold against a broader context of regional instability, contested conditions in the Strait of Hormuz, and uncertainty over Iran’s long-term economic viability.

Any lawful transition must be grounded in three principles of international law: **territorial integrity**, **internal self-determination**, and **human rights compliance**.

Internal self-determination—understood as meaningful political participation, cultural and linguistic rights, and forms of internal self-governance—offers the most viable framework for reconciling state unity with Iran’s multiethnic composition while limiting centrifugal pressures.

The opposition remains fragmented. Monarchist currents, including those associated with Reza Pahlavi’s Iran Prosperity Plan (IPP), generally prioritize centralized state continuity and institutional reform. On the other hand, non-Persian actors advocate stronger recognition of Iran’s multiethnic structure and guarantees of internal self-determination, with emerging coordination among Kurdish, Arab, Baluch, and Azeri groups, including the Kurdish Coalition of February 22. These parallel political alignments reflect increasing organization but also entrenched strategic divergence in the absence of a shared procedural framework capable of facilitating consensus and structured cooperation.

External partners—particularly European states operating through flexible formats such as the A3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom)—can play a facilitative role by enabling structured dialogue, identifying areas of convergence, and supporting the emergence of a representative transitional interlocutor. Gulf countries, now key regional actors, would also be welcome participants. Any engagement must remain firmly anchored in international law and avoid any perception of endorsing secessionist fragmentation or armed territorialization.

## 1. Key Issues

This analysis focuses on a proposed legal and institutional framework to support a democratic transition in Iran in the aftermath of recent regional developments.

It [revisits](#) the core principles of international law that should guide any lawful transition process, outlines approaches for facilitating dialogue and contact among Iran's diverse opposition currents with a view to enabling the emergence of a structured and representative interlocutor for the opposition, and considers possible alternatives for a transitional governance mechanism. It further examines the potential role of external actors in facilitating such a process in a manner consistent with international law without imposing predetermined political outcomes.

### *Fragmentation and territorial risk*

This briefing identifies a heightened risk of territorial fragmentation in Iran. The internal political environment relevant to this analysis is marked by deep divisions, encompassing republican and monarchist currents as well as ethnically based movements among non-Persian communities, including Kurdish, Baloch, Ahwazi Arab, and Azerbaijani Turkic groups.

Persian and non-Persian actors broadly converge on the objective of regime change, while differing significantly in their political objectives, organizational capacity, and visions for Iran's future governance. These divisions give rise to structural pressures that, in certain scenarios, could translate into challenges to Iran's territorial integrity.

### *Absence of a structured interlocutor and strategic consequences*

Likewise, the absence of a unified and structured opposition interlocutor constitutes a distinct and immediate strategic gap. In the current context of military escalation and regional instability, the lack of a coherent and universally-accepted alternative political voice limits the emergence of credible pathways for de-escalation and post-conflict governance, thereby contributing to continued uncertainty in both political and economic domains.

Addressing this gap is therefore not merely a matter of future institutional design, but an urgent and immediate priority—essential to ensuring that, even as issues such as Hormuz and ongoing de-escalation efforts dominate international attention, this equally critical gap is not sidelined.

### *Methodological framing and analytical caution*

The briefing does not predict the timing or form of political change in Iran; rather, it provides legally-grounded considerations designed to maximize the likelihood that, if and when a transition occurs, it proceeds in a manner consistent with recognized principles of international law, including territorial integrity, internal self-determination, and the observance of fundamental human rights. In doing so, it avoids speculative assessments,

reflecting that the current situation in Iran remains a political and analytical minefield for military and policy decision-making, requiring particular caution.

***Factual basis for subsequent legal analysis***

Before addressing the applicable legal principles, the following section outlines recent developments relevant to Iran’s internal and external context amid recent military escalation. These developments serve as a factual and contextual baseline for the subsequent legal and institutional analysis. They represent the constraints and drivers of a possible transition in Iran. The situation described below remains highly fluid and subject to rapid change.

**1.1 Latest Developments**

The developments are outlined as follows:

**Military operations**

Recent U.S.–Israeli military operations have significantly degraded Iran’s nuclear and missile infrastructure, creating a moment of acute political fluidity. These operations have also resulted in the elimination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and other senior officials of the Islamic Republic, producing an unprecedented leadership vacuum at the heart of the regime. A further strategic development is that Iran has expanded the scope of its retaliation, targeting not only Israel but also civilian and critical oil and gas infrastructure in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait.

While the United States has reiterated that it does not seek to pursue regime change or engage in internal political engineering, the consequences of the conflict have accelerated a structural shift inside Iran: remaining hardliners of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) have consolidated de facto control over the state apparatus. This consolidation constitutes an observable institutional reality. Some analysts [argue](#) that the Islamic Republic system is rapidly sliding into something even worse: a dictatorship led by remaining IRGC hardliners.

Since the United States and Israel have repeatedly indicated that they do not intend to deploy troops on the ground—aside from limited, targeted operations such as the recent U.S. mission to rescue downed pilots—military action alone appears unlikely, in itself, to bring about an end to the regime.

**A temporary and fragile ceasefire**

A temporary ceasefire brokered by Pakistan is aimed at pausing direct hostilities and reflects a mutual interest in avoiding further escalation, without altering the underlying strategic dynamics. The durability of the ceasefire remains uncertain. In either scenario, hostilities—whether ongoing or paused—are not sufficient, in themselves, to bring about an internal political transition in Iran.

### **Human rights deterioration inside Iran**

Hardliners within the IRGC—combined with the absence of a unified civilian political alternative—have entrenched a repressive security structure with minimal accountability. The regime has not altered its policy of executing demonstrators and dissidents. Media [reporting](#) indicates that at least 654 individuals have been subjected to capital punishment during 2026.

In addition, credible reporting on the January 2026 nationwide protests indicates large-scale lethal repression by security forces. Estimates of fatalities during the peak of the demonstrations vary significantly, ranging from several thousand confirmed deaths to figures exceeding 30,000 in some [reports](#), reflecting both the scale of violence and severe limitations on independent verification due to communications blackouts and restricted internet access.

These patterns of systematic repression, including widespread executions and lethal force against demonstrators, raise serious concerns under international human rights law and may, depending on the existence of the requisite contextual elements, amount to conduct capable of qualifying as crimes against humanity under international criminal law.

### **The situation in the Strait of Hormuz and uncertainty in oil markets**

The situation in the Strait of Hormuz remains highly uncertain, with differing official accounts regarding current navigation conditions. While Iran has stated that it has [reopened](#) the waterway to navigation, the United States has [announced](#) that its countermeasures restricting entry to and exit from Iranian ports remain in place, aimed at severely limiting Iran’s ability to export oil and gas—its principal source of external revenue.

In parallel, President Trump has [declared](#) that the United States will inject significant additional volumes of oil into the international market, primarily sourced from Venezuela, Nigeria, and the United States, with the stated aim of containing prices and potentially reducing the strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz. He has publicly [asserted](#) that the United States has the [capacity](#) to compensate for the loss of Iranian supply.

While escalation in Hormuz is not central to the present analysis, the capacity of Iran to maintain the flow of oil and gas exports is a relevant consideration for any post-regime governance framework, particularly in relation to its financial and economic sustainability.

### **Sensitive nuclear materials and international concern**

Continued international concern regarding the whereabouts, verification status, and potential disposition of portions of Iran’s enriched uranium stockpile, including material reportedly enriched up to 60%, remains a relevant background factor within the framework of UNSC Resolution 2231 and associated IAEA safeguards,

monitoring, and snapback mechanisms. During the recent U.S.–China summit in Beijing, President Trump [stated](#) in the presence of President Xi Jinping that both sides agreed Iran must not obtain nuclear weapons and that the Strait of Hormuz must remain open. This remark was neither confirmed nor refuted by China.

### **A fragmented opposition risks territorial integrity of Iran**

The Iranian opposition landscape remains fragmented. The absence of a coordinated interlocutor during the recent armed escalation exposed a structural gap in opposition leadership. While Prince Reza Pahlavi has articulated a coherent political alternative, he has neither secured broad-based acceptance nor outlined a clear pathway to achieve it. A credible and visible interlocutor is needed to signal a viable post-regime governance alternative and to coordinate expectations among internal elites, civil society, and external partners.

This fragmentation creates conditions in which any future transition—whether sudden or negotiated—could be captured by IRGC hardline actors rather than civilian institutions. It also limits the ability of external partners to engage purposefully with opposition. The core challenge, therefore, is to translate this fragmented landscape into a coordinated political space capable of supporting a structured and representative transition process.

In addition, certain factions within non-Persian communities continue to advance more far-reaching interpretations of self-determination and associated sovereign claims. Concerns about devolution or territorial fragmentation are not unfounded. External dynamics that inadvertently or deliberately encourage armed mobilization along ethnic lines risk exacerbating internal divisions rather than mitigating them.

Policy analyses, including those advanced by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, [warn](#) that external support for ethnic insurgencies in the absence of a coherent transition strategy could contribute to prolonged internal conflict, the erosion of central authority, and, in the worst case, fragmentation or “balkanization” of the state. Such an outcome would not constitute a democratic transition, but rather the disintegration of territorial integrity and the emergence of a security vacuum with broader regional implications.

The developments outlined above collectively define a constrained and highly dynamic environment in which any discussion of democratic transition must be situated. They illustrate the interaction between external pressure, internal governance structures, and political fragmentation, all of which shape both the feasibility and the potential modalities of institutional change.

Against this background, the following section sets out the foundational legal principles relevant to assessing the conditions for a democratic transition in Iran.

## **1.2 Foundational Legal Principles for a Democratic Transition**

Any credible transition framework in Iran must be anchored in international law, ensuring both internal legitimacy and external recognition. Three principles provide the necessary legal foundation:

### **a. Territorial Integrity**

The territorial integrity is a core principle of the UN Charter and a central pillar of regional stability. Fragmentation or dissolution of states is, unless based on established principles such as *uti possidetis*, to be avoided if possible. A transition process must therefore be designed to prevent fragmentation, avoid the emergence of competing armed authorities, and maintain the continuity of the state. This principle is essential to reassure internal constituencies, neighboring states, and the broader international community.

### **b. Internal Self-Determination**

Iran is a multi-ethnic society comprising Persians, Azeris, Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs, and others. International law recognizes the right of peoples to internal self-determination—the right to participate meaningfully in the political, social, and economic life of the state. This principle provides a legal basis for inclusive governance, decentralization debates, and the protection of cultural and linguistic rights, without implying external self-determination or secession. It offers a neutral, legally grounded vocabulary for addressing longstanding grievances while preserving territorial integrity.

### **c. Human Rights and Inclusive Representation**

A transition must be rooted in the protection of fundamental rights, equal treatment of all citizens before the law, and the participation of all communities in public life. These principles are essential for legitimacy, for preventing cycles of exclusion, and for ensuring that any transitional authority reflects the diversity of Iranian society. They also provide the normative basis for transitional justice mechanisms, including truth-seeking, accountability for international crimes, and guarantees of non-recurrence.

## **1.3 Institutional Requirements and Roadmap for a Transition**

Building on these legal principles, a democratic transition requires the emergence of structured, representative, and legitimate institutions capable of managing the transitional period. A roadmap for transition would include:

- organize a conference outside Iran with all national stakeholders
- a transitional council representing a broad spectrum of opposition actors, which could evolve into a government in exile, where circumstances so require
- procedural consensus on how future constitutional questions will be decided
- continuity of essential state institutions to prevent governance collapse

- mechanisms for transitional justice to bring to justice regime members accused of crimes against humanity and other grave international crimes
- coordination among opposition groups, including Persian and non-Persian constituencies
- international support that is facilitative rather than directive

These institutional elements do not predetermine the future constitutional order. Instead, they create the legal and procedural space in which Iranians themselves can decide—through democratic means—questions such as centralization vs. federalism, monarchy vs. republic, and the distribution of political authority.

#### **1.4 The Role of External Partners**

While the proposed transitional framework is grounded in Iranian agency, external actors can play a constructive role in supporting its development. Their primary objective would be to facilitate coordination among Iranian opposition groups in the context of ongoing regional instability. By helping identify and build common ground, external actors can support the emergence of a structured and representative interlocutor among the opposition, as well as the articulation of coherent post-conflict governance alternatives and structured political dialogue.

Among potential external actors, Europe—understood here as the European Union and the United Kingdom—possesses relevant diplomatic experience, normative commitments under Article 21 TEU, and established channels of engagement. For operational flexibility, the three major European states—France, the United Kingdom, and Germany—could coordinate in a format similar to that used in reactivating nuclear-related sanctions under the JCPOA in August 2025 (the “A3”), with the possibility of Italy joining where appropriate.

At the same time, any European initiative should remain open to participation by Middle Eastern and Gulf partners—whose involvement is essential for regional legitimacy and long-term stability—as well as a broader group of international actors committed to supporting a coordinated and inclusive transition process. This facilitative role is consistent with the broader framework of international cooperation underpinning the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, particularly its emphasis on preventing the commission or recurrence of serious human rights violations and mass atrocity crimes in Iran, including possible crimes against humanity, and addressing large-scale instability through timely diplomatic engagement and institutional support.

## **2. Internal Self-Determination as the Framework that Preserves Territorial Integrity**

The question of internal self-determination has been examined in greater detail in our July 2025 [briefing](#) on Iran's regime change and transition dynamics. The present paper builds on that earlier analysis by situating the principle within the latest strategic developments facing Iran's opposition and the broader international community. In particular, internal self-determination provides a constitutional framework capable of reconciling unity with diversity while remaining fully consistent with the principle of territorial integrity.

In international law, internal self-determination refers to the right of all peoples within a state to participate meaningfully in political life, preserve their cultural and linguistic identity, and exercise forms of self-governance. It is grounded in the UN Charter, human rights treaties, and contemporary state practice. Crucially, it is designed to preserve the territorial integrity of states by addressing the grievances that otherwise fuel separatist pressures. In this sense, internal self-determination is not an alternative to territorial integrity but its legal and political safeguard.

This principle has particular relevance in Iran, where half the population belongs to non-Farsi communities whose political, cultural, and economic exclusion has been systematic. Kurds, Azeris, Baluchis, and Arabs—among others—have long been denied meaningful participation in governance, and their regions remain underdeveloped. Several of these groups maintain organized political structures and, in some cases, armed formations. Excluding them from a transition process is likely to have a destabilizing effect.

Importantly, the long-term political aspirations of these groups are not uniform. While certain actors—most notably among Kurdish movements—have historically expressed support for independence, current positions often reflect a more pragmatic and negotiated approach, including demands for autonomy or federal arrangements within existing state borders. These positions should not be assumed to be fixed or universally held. However, they do indicate a willingness, at least in the present context, to engage within frameworks that do not necessarily entail immediate secession. This creates a viable basis for an inclusive transition process that remains consistent with the international system's general preference for territorial integrity, while not foreclosing future political developments.

A future constitutional order must translate this alignment into institutional design. Measures such as constitutional recognition of Iran's multiethnic character, education in minority languages, regional governance with real administrative authority, proportional representation, and legal guarantees for linguistic and religious rights are not only rights-based reforms. They are instruments for preserving the territorial integrity of the state by embedding pluralism into its constitutional fabric. When communities see a viable future within the state, the appeal of separatism diminishes; when they do not, fragmentation becomes a structural risk.

Internal self-determination also provides a unifying framework for the opposition. Monarchists, republicans, federalists, and civil-society actors differ in their visions for

Iran's political future, but all share an interest in preventing state collapse. Territorial integrity is a common priority, and internal self-determination is the only principle capable of meeting that priority while accommodating the country's diversity. It offers a shared legal language for negotiating the transition and a basis for inclusive coalition-building.

For Europe and the broader international community, territorial integrity is a central strategic concern. Regional stability, energy security, maritime access, and the management of cross-border spillovers all depend on the preservation of Iran's territorial coherence during and after a transition. External engagement must remain consistent with international law and cannot afford to be perceived as encouraging secession. Supporting internal self-determination—through inclusive constitutional design, minority rights, decentralized governance, and transitional guarantees—allows international actors to contribute to stability while upholding the principle of territorial integrity. It provides a lawful, politically defensible, and strategically necessary entry point for external support.

As contemporary scholarship [notes](#), internal self-determination is a dynamic process rather than a static entitlement. It evolves in response to historical injustice and democratic aspiration. For Iran, it offers a path toward a political compact that preserves the state while transforming it: one that honors diversity without sacrificing unity, and one that turns long-standing grievances into a foundation for shared governance.

### **3. Human Rights Compliance in a Transitional Context**

Any credible transition framework must be grounded in the protection of fundamental human rights and the continuity of Iran’s international legal obligations. This requirement is not merely aspirational but constitutes a binding legal condition for the legitimacy of any transitional authority and its recognition by the international community.

Systematic violations of international human rights law, including arbitrary detention, political persecution, and acts that may, in certain contexts, amount to crimes against humanity, underscore the necessity of embedding enforceable guarantees of non-recurrence and accountability within any transitional architecture. A future legal order must ensure compliance with core instruments of international human rights law, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

In practical terms, this requires that transitional institutions guarantee due process, prohibit extrajudicial violence, ensure freedom of expression and political participation, and establish credible mechanisms for transitional justice, including accountability for serious violations of international law committed by individuals within state security and political structures, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and senior officials of the former regime, where responsibility is established in accordance with applicable legal standards.

Human rights compliance is therefore not a parallel consideration to territorial integrity and internal self-determination, but an equally constitutive pillar of a lawful and sustainable transition framework.

The next section examines the widening gaps among the different groups and factions of the Iranian opposition and the resulting risks to territorial cohesion.

## 4. Iranian Opposition: Escalating Divides and Structural Risk to Territorial Cohesion

As noted earlier, the core challenge at this stage is to translate the fragmented Iranian opposition into a coordinated political space capable of supporting a structured and representative transition process.

The broad spectrum of Iranian opposition includes groups aligned with a monarchy-oriented vision associated with Prince Reza Pahlavi, as well as a range of republican, reformist, and ethno-regional groups representing Persians and non-Persian populations such as Kurds, Azeris, Baluchis, and Arabs. While these constituencies differ in their institutional preferences—ranging from centralized state continuity models to varying degrees of decentralization or autonomy—they converge on a fundamental premise: that the current regime has lost any credibility and should not be allowed to regenerate itself.

One articulated [framework](#) for transition is the **Iran Prosperity Project (IPP)** developed under the leadership of Prince Reza Pahlavi, which sets out a phased roadmap beginning with an interim stabilization phase, followed by a transitional governing period, and culminating in a nationally held referendum leading to the establishment of a new constitutional order. The proposed referendum is designed to allow the Iranian people to choose between a monarchical or republican system of governance. The framework emphasizes the preservation of Iran's territorial integrity, the continuity and restoration of essential state institutions, the establishment of a centralized and secular government, equal rights and individual freedoms for all citizens, and economic stabilization.

The IPP also calls for the preparation of the legal and institutional foundations for democratic change, including a repeal of laws incompatible with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. At the same time, the IPP defers detailed questions regarding internal political organization to institutional processes to be developed during the transitional phase. They underscore that, at this stage, all Iranians should prioritize the goal of toppling the regime.

In March 2026, Reza Pahlavi [announced](#) the establishment of a Committee for Transitional Justice tasked with preparing the legal foundations for a future transitional justice mechanism, including a Special Court to prosecute perpetrators of crimes against humanity and other major international crimes committed by the Islamic Republic, as well as a Truth Commission. This is important: when justice is done, the way to reconciliation opens.

In parallel, non-Persian political and civil society actors advocate for stronger recognition of regional and ethnic identities within Iran's political structure. These positions range from calls for enhanced cultural and linguistic rights to proposals for varying degrees of political decentralization or federal arrangements. Such approaches can broadly be framed within the principles of self-government or internal self-determination, while maintaining differing interpretations of how this should be institutionalized in practice.

A strategic [development](#) in this landscape is the **Kurdish Coalition of February 22**, a unified six-party [bloc](#) that has demonstrated a notable level of organizational cohesion, standing out among the broader Iranian opposition. It has established an operational charter consisting of a joint command center for the coalition's armed wings, a diplomatic committee for international engagement, rotating leadership, and a framework for administering free elections in liberated areas during any transitional period. Kurdish leaders [emphasize](#) that "Iran is a multi-ethnic society" and that Kurdish political parties are "not for secession and are not separatists".

Among the Arab, Azeri, and Baluch peoples in Iran, comparable dynamics appear to be emerging, though the degree of organization varies significantly. The Coordinating Council of the Ahwazi Organizations (CCAO) [unites](#) eight Ahwaz Arab groups, and there are [indications](#) of incipient coordination among several Azeri actors, although any structured alliance between them remains unclear in open sources. Baluch factions appear to be undergoing a similar [process](#). The "12-Day War" in June and the ongoing war seem to have contributed to a sharper pace of political mobilization across these communities. Overall, these developments remain preliminary and are not yet reflected in major international media reporting, but they may gain greater visibility as the situation evolves.

Recent [outreach](#) between Kurdish and Azerbaijani Turkic political factions further reflects an emerging pattern of interethnic coordination and shared transitional framing among non-Persian actors, reinforcing a broader alignment built around cooperation rather than fragmentation. This is important, as Azeris [constitute](#) the largest ethnic group after Persians in Iran, while Kurds form the third-largest.

By contrast, as noted earlier, certain factions in the non-Persian context continue to advance more far-reaching interpretations of self-determination and associated sovereignty claims. In the current environment, the key issue is how these positions may evolve in practice.

In the absence of a coordinated transition framework, such claims risk moving from political demands to competing structures of authority, particularly if reinforced by external support. This could shift the dynamic from negotiation to fragmentation on the ground, with different groups asserting control in parallel.

This concern is consistent with the analysis already referred to in this briefing, including that of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, which [cautions](#) that external support to armed ethnic groups, in the absence of a coherent transition strategy, can accelerate internal conflict and weaken central authority. Media reports [indicate](#) that on March 29, 2026 Turkey's President Recep Erdogan in a telephone call persuaded President Trump from implementing an imminent U.S.-Israeli plan to assist Kurdish militia to launch a ground offensive against Iran.

The main risk, therefore, is not only fragmentation as a possibility, but the gradual weakening of territorial cohesion through uncoordinated and competing governance

dynamics. This would undermine the prospects for a unified transition and could lead to a broader security vacuum with regional repercussions.

### ***Mutual distrust and accusations***

On the one hand, non-Persian political actors have raised concerns that the IPP does not sufficiently address Iran's ethnic and regional diversity. Critics point to no explicit recognition of constituencies such as Kurds, Azerbaijani Turks, Baloch, and Arabs, and the absence of clearly defined mechanisms to accommodate their institutional and political aspirations. This perceived gap remains a central obstacle to trust-building and broader opposition convergence. The scope of the proposed referendum is too narrow as it only includes the monarchy-republic option.

On the other hand, Persian and monarchy-aligned actors have expressed concerns regarding the discourse and positioning of certain non-Persian groups, in particular Kurds and Azaris. Their use of terms such as "[oppressed nations](#)," alongside continued [emphasis](#) on self-determination, is often interpreted by Persian actors as signaling potential separatist intentions and a risk of territorial fragmentation. Prince Reza Pahlavi has explicitly [characterized](#) certain Kurdish factions as "separatist," underscoring that Iran's territorial integrity constitutes a non-negotiable principle. These competing perceptions reflect a deeper mutual mistrust rooted in divergent visions of statehood, sovereignty, and political organization.

These dynamics illustrate a structural gap between two broad visions: on one side, a centralized state continuity model emphasizing territorial integrity and institutional restoration; on the other, a pluralist model emphasizing recognition of ethnic identities and varying degrees of decentralization or autonomy. Neither framework, in its current form, fully addresses the concerns of the other, which continues to impede the formation of a unified opposition front.

### ***Structural line of conflict: identity and perceived supremacy***

A deeper structural fault line shaping these [dynamics](#) is the long-standing perception among non-Persian constituencies that Persian political elites—across successive regimes—have maintained a hierarchical model of statehood that marginalizes Iran's other national groups. This divide is not fundamentally religious: Kurdish, Azeri, Baloch, and Arab actors articulate their claims primarily in terms of identity, recognition, and self-government.

Historical experience reinforces this perception. Earlier [experiments](#) in Kurdish self-government, such as the Republic of Mahabad in northern Iran (established in 1946 with Soviet support), and Azerbaijani self-administration under the Azerbaijan People's Government (also established in 1946 with Soviet support), were rapidly dismantled once central authority was restored under the Pahlavi monarchy. Similarly, the post-1979 order reproduced comparable patterns of strong centralized control.

Against this backdrop, non-Persian actors view the absence of explicit recognition of Iran's multinational character, and the lack of institutional guarantees for cultural or political autonomy, as a continuation of entrenched Persian dominance. Conversely, Persian and monarchy-aligned actors interpret references to “oppressed nations” and calls for self-determination as signals of separatist intent, reinforcing fears of territorial fragmentation. These mutually reinforcing perceptions sustain a structural mistrust: one vision prioritizes territorial integrity and centralized continuity, while the other seeks a pluralist political order that accommodates Iran's ethnic diversity. This identity-based divide constitutes the core line of conflict and remains a principal obstacle to building a unified opposition capable of supporting a coordinated transition.

### ***Bridging the gap***

There have been some initial, cautious attempts to bridge the divide between opposition groups. Recently, Azeri leaders welcomed the outreach between Kurdish and Azerbaijani Turkic political factions, [noting](#) that “Iran's future is only achievable through the united action of all democratic forces on the basis of equal rights, democracy, and social justice,” and describing the six-party Kurdish alliance as a positive step in that direction. In private, Kurdish leaders indicate that they would be prepared to participate in a transitional council in which Persians would be represented by Prince Reza Pahlavi, provided that all members—Persian and non-Persian—stand on equal footing. As noted earlier, Kurdish leaders emphasize that “Iran is a multi-ethnic society” and that Kurdish political parties “are not for secession and are not separatists.”

On the other hand, while the IPP speaks of equality and inclusiveness for all ethnic groups, it maintains its commitment to a centralized model of governance and does not concede on questions of meaningful decentralized authority. This gap between symbolic inclusiveness and concrete institutional guarantees remains a central obstacle to building trust and achieving broader opposition convergence.

Within the broader Persian political space, however, there also exists a significant [republican](#) and secular-democratic current, which advocates for a non-monarchical but institutionally structured state based on constitutional governance, civil equality, and political pluralism. While this current is less visible in external coalition-building narratives, it represents an important strand of Persian opposition thought and is generally more open than monarchist factions to forms of administrative decentralization, provided they are embedded within a unified constitutional framework rather than ethnic sovereignty models.

By identifying and building common ground, the Iranian opposition can then demonstrate to both IRGC hardliners and external actors that viable post-war governance alternatives are possible.

Such common ground would be helpful in encouraging defections across IRGC ranks, both senior and junior. According to an [analysis](#) published in *The Economist* by one of the founders of the IRGC, while the higher ranks of the Revolutionary Guards remain

largely loyal to the regime, lower-ranking members appear less committed, with many viewing their service primarily as employment rather than ideological attachment. This raises a key strategic question regarding the willingness and capacity of the IRGC and affiliated security forces to use lethal force against civilian demonstrators in the event of renewed mass protests.

## 5. A Proposed Roadmap for Political transition

Building on the international legal principles discussed above, a democratic transition requires the emergence of structured, representative, and legitimate institutions capable of managing the transitional period. A roadmap for transition supported by external actors could include:

1. Facilitate opposition convergence and coordination across diverse Iranian opposition groups. To this end, it would be useful calling all stakeholders to a conference outside Iran.
2. Support the emergence of recognized international interlocutor(s) among the opposition for credible engagement.
3. Support the **establishment of a plural transitional council** as a structured and representative political body, and prepare its legal and institutional framework. This council would comprise Persians and non-Persians and should begin operating prior to any possible regime collapse, serving as a platform for coordination and international engagement, and potentially evolving into a government-in-exile.

Both Persian and non-Persian participants need to come from their respective existing and established movements/alliances and avoid any “token representation” that is not recognized by either Persian or non-Persian movements.

Its foundation framework could be based on a limited set of shared principles, including commitment to democratic transition, equal treatment before the law and individual freedoms across all ethnic and religious sectors, territorial integrity, and inclusive representation, while deferring more contentious issues—such as the future constitutional structure of the state—to a later, democratic process.

From the perspective of non-Persian political actors, a central concern is that recognition of territorial integrity *without* parallel recognition of internal self-determination and meaningful self-government is viewed as insufficient. In this context, several Kurdish actors have [affirmed](#)—through their platforms, joint statements, and coordinated mobilization—that they would be unlikely to engage in a transition process that does not address internal self-determination. Such an outcome could strengthen separatist currents and increase the likelihood that secessionist aspirations—supported in some cases by well-equipped armed groups—gain additional political and operational momentum, with the immediate risk of fragmenting Iran in practice.

Within the Persian political space, as noted earlier, two distinct currents can be identified.

Persian monarchists aligned with Prince Reza Pahlavi favor a strongly centralized conception of the state and tend to reject claims of ethnic self-government, often

interpreting such demands as separatist and inherently incompatible with national unity. This position places them in a structurally difficult-to-reconcile relationship with non-Persian movements advocating internal self-determination.

Alongside this, there exists a Persian republican and secular-democratic current, which, while more fragmented and less institutionally consolidated, is generally oriented towards constitutional governance, civil equality, and political pluralism. This current tends to prioritize institutional solutions and in certain configurations may be more open than monarchist factions to forms of administrative or political decentralization within a unified constitutional framework.

In this configuration, the principal structural fault line lies between non-Persian movements advocating internal self-determination and the centralist orientation of Persian monarchist actors, which currently represents the most rigid and difficult-to-reconcile axis. By contrast, Persian republican currents tend to offer a more flexible constitutional space—one that may facilitate dialogue and reduce structural polarization—even if their positions do not fully align with non-Persian autonomy claims.

This differentiated structure suggests that opposition fragmentation is not uniform but asymmetric, and that any potential process of political convergence would likely depend on the ability to manage the core monarchist–non-Persian divide, while leveraging republican currents as a potential mediating or stabilizing factor. External actors may assist through good-faith facilitation, while the substantive resolution of these competing visions must ultimately emerge from within Iranian political society itself.

It is hoped that all opposition groups could converge on a procedural framework through which to discuss how to advance the democratic transition. This, by itself, would attract global public attention, engage external actors, and help contribute to de-escalation and the ending of the war between the Revolutionary regime and the United States and Israel.

### **Proposed transitional council in exile**

The proposed council could operate initially outside Iran while the regime is not yet definitively defeated, for obvious security reasons, thereby ensuring the transitional council's freedom of action. Parties may consider either a permanent or rotating presidency for the council. As discussed, it could subsequently evolve into a government-in-exile and obtain diplomatic recognition, with significant legal and political effects.

Parties may also consider entrusting Reza Pahlavi with an effective role in engaging with external actors and foreign relations, given his important international visibility. However, any such role for Pahlavi is currently strongly opposed by many non-Persian actors, although positions may evolve within a democratic framework as confidence-building and broader political understandings develop. Persian republican currents may

likewise favor, at least at this stage, a more collective and institutional model of representation.

### **From Transitional Council to Government-in-Exile**

As the council consolidates its role, it may progressively evolve into a government-in-exile, if necessary, depending on the security conditions on the Iranian territory.

This evolution would:

- Provide a clearer institutional framework for international recognition and engagement
- Strengthen the opposition's claim to legitimacy
- Enable more structured coordination with international partners

External actors could play a decisive role in this process by offering graduated political recognition, linked to the council's inclusivity, coherence, and adherence to democratic principles.

### **Ensuring Readiness for the “Day After”**

The ultimate objective of this roadmap is to ensure that, when and if the regime collapses, a prepared and legitimate political structure is ready to assume responsibility.

Without such preparation, the risk of a power vacuum is significant, potentially allowing fragmented or radical elements — particularly within the IRGC and Basij militia— to assert control. By contrast, a functioning Transitional Council would:

- Provide immediate political continuity
- Coordinate stabilization efforts on the ground
- Assist in the process of lifting international sanctions by facilitating engagement with the international community after years of sanctions and designation of Iran as a sponsor of international terrorism and support for proxy warfare. Monitor IRGC movements and maintain readiness to prevent its re-emergence.
- Prepare a definitive constitutional framework subject to approval by the people of Iran in a referendum.
- Call free general elections at the earliest possible date.
- Design and implement internationally supervised transitional justice mechanisms to prosecute individuals suspected of having committed crimes against humanity and other international crimes. The discussed Transitional Justice Commission appointed by Reza Pahlevi could be a useful initial point of reference.

## Final Conclusions

The analysis presented in this briefing underscores that a democratic transition in Iran remains possible but is constrained by a rapidly evolving and highly unstable environment. The combination of military escalation, institutional fragmentation, and the absence of a structured opposition interlocutor has created conditions in which political outcomes risk being shaped by force rather than by lawful and representative processes. Preventing such an outcome requires urgent steps to organize a coherent political framework capable of articulating a credible alternative to IRGC hardline control.

The **absence of a unified and structured opposition interlocutor** constitutes a most immediate strategic gap: without a coherent political counterpart, credible pathways for de-escalation, post-conflict governance, and international engagement cannot emerge. Addressing this gap is therefore not a matter of long-term institutional design but an **urgent priority**, essential to preventing the transition space from being captured by armed actors or overtaken by fragmentation on the ground.

Three principles emerge as essential to any viable transition. **Territorial integrity** must remain the anchor of the process, both to reassure internal constituencies and to maintain regional stability. **Internal self-determination** provides the legal and political mechanism for reconciling Iran's multinational reality with the preservation of the state, offering a structured means to address longstanding grievances without opening the door to secession. **Human rights compliance**, including accountability for grave violations, is indispensable for legitimacy, recognition, and the prevention of renewed cycles of repression.

Operationalizing these principles requires the emergence of a **representative transitional architecture**: a broadly inclusive council, continuity of essential state institutions, agreed procedures for constitutional decision-making, and credible mechanisms for transitional justice. External partners can play a facilitative role, but the political direction must remain in Iranian hands.

Ultimately, the feasibility of a democratic transition will depend on whether Iran's diverse opposition currents—Persian and non-Persian, monarchist and republican—can converge around a shared procedural framework rather than a predetermined constitutional outcome. Without such convergence, the risks of institutional capture, territorial fragmentation, and prolonged instability will remain high. With it, a lawful, inclusive, and territorially coherent transition becomes achievable.