

Iranian Attacks on Iraqi Kurdistan Threaten a Vital U.S. Partnership

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Iran has fired [thousands of missiles and drones](#) into Israel and the Gulf states. Less noticed, however, have been the attacks Iran, and its Iraqi proxies, have launched against targets in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Many of these strikes have targeted the political entity that controls this part of Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

But these attacks against Iraqi Kurdistan have been qualitatively different than Iranian reprisals against other U.S. partners. Unlike elsewhere in the region, where the overwhelming majority of Iranian projectiles have been [intercepted by air defense systems](#), in Kurdistan, they have largely gone unchallenged due to the absence of comparable capabilities. Unlike Iranian attacks against Gulf energy infrastructure, these are not designed to create global economic pain to undermine the American war effort. And unlike the barrages fired against Israel, they are not retaliation for participation in the war. Instead, Iranian attacks on the KRG are an attempt to force one of America's closest partners in the region to abandon it, to drive the United States out of its last remaining foothold in Iraq, and to cement Iranian influence over its neighbors.

That Iranian objective is unfortunately being aided by the lack of a meaningful American response and support for the KRG amid these attacks. The United States should not cede this strategic partnership; it should come to the defense of the KRG.

Between February 28, when Operation Epic Fury began, and April 20, at least 809 drones and missiles have targeted [the Kurdistan Region](#). Iran's retaliatory strikes into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) have [continued](#) despite a U.S.–Iran ceasefire announced on April 8. A significant escalation occurred on March 28 when the home of Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani was [struck by a drone](#)—the same Shahed drones Iran has used to target U.S. bases, energy installations, and hotels across the Gulf during the U.S.–Israel war against Iran. “Despite the neutral stance adopted by the Kurdistan Region, it nonetheless suffered 20 martyrs,” the KRG's Department of Media and Information said in its latest [report](#).

Some Iranian attacks inside the KRI have targeted Iranian opposition groups based there. Iranian Kurdish organizations such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (PDKI), the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), and Komala operate from bases in the KRI near the Iraq–Iran border. These groups have long posed a challenge to Tehran and were [floated as a possible ground force](#) in the fight against the regime in the early stages of the war. Facilities linked to these groups have been struck with PDKI and Komala suffering casualties.

However, while Iran's strikes against these Kurdish groups can be understood as preemptive containment of these dissident groups, its sustained targeting of the KRG itself, even after the [Pakistan-brokered ceasefire](#), reflects a deeper agenda.

Since its inception, the KRG has been the most stable and prosperous part of Iraq. Its close ties with the United States and its cooperation on counterterrorism have been enduring pillars of this relationship. The region hosts all of the 2,500 U.S.-led coalition forces in Harir Air Base and Erbil International Airport after [Iraq announced the full withdrawal](#) of U.S. forces from its federal territory. Chevron and ExxonMobil hold significant stakes in the region, with the KRG announcing a [\\$100 billion energy deal](#) with two more American companies in 2025. The KRG is also the only part of Iraq where Iran and its aligned militias have been unable to penetrate and exert significant political and economic influence. This is one of the main reasons why the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and pro-Iranian Shiite factions in Baghdad have never fully internalized Kurdish self-rule in the north of the country.

While no official—or even informal public—relationship exists between the KRG and Israel, even a posture of non-hostility toward the only Jewish state in the world has been used by Tehran and its proxies as justification for attacks in Kurdistan. In 2024, a well-known Kurdish businessman’s home in central Erbil was [struck by Iranian ballistic missiles](#), killing him and several members of his family, including a baby. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) claimed responsibility, stating it had targeted a [“Mossad headquarters.”](#)

Since October 7, 2023, Iran’s proxies across the Middle East have been significantly weakened. As Hamas and Hezbollah stand severely degraded from Israeli operations, Tehran has become more reliant on its allies within Iraq’s PMF, which have remained relatively unscathed. Iraqi Kurdistan has now become the primary battleground for the PMF to target U.S. troops, interests, and partners, especially since the United States pulled out of northeast Syria. Senior U.S. officials already acknowledge that Iraq has become a [“major proxy battleground”](#) between Washington and Tehran, with over 600 attacks against U.S. facilities throughout the country.

Should a more hardline IRGC-aligned faction consolidate power in Tehran after the war, Iran is likely to double down on its political influence in Baghdad and reliance on financial networks and smuggling routes in Iraq. Although the [United States has welcomed and begun engaging](#) with [incoming Iraqi Prime Minister Ali al-Zaidi](#), urging him to take stronger action against pro-Iranian militias, the 41-year-old businessman who has no prior political experience, appears unlikely—at least initially—to succeed where more seasoned figures have struggled.

The only thing standing in Tehran’s way would be the KRG and the American forces still based there.

Iranian strikes over the last two months represent a more concerted effort by the IRGC to drive a wedge between KRG-U.S. relations in order to establish a foothold in the KRI. Meanwhile, Baghdad has consistently refrained from confronting PMF attacks against the KRG and has instead [weaponized budget transfers](#) by deliberately withholding the salaries of Kurdish civil servants to foment public discontent as leverage in its constitutional disputes with the semi-autonomous region and, more broadly, to erode the region’s autonomy.

Unfortunately, internal divisions within the KRG create favorable conditions for malign external actors to exert influence. Relations between the Kurdistan Region’s two main parties—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—have effectively collapsed, [according to a senior PUK official](#), amid an ongoing deadlock over forming the Kurdistan Regional Government’s next cabinet. The same official said that only when an international power intervenes do the two parties communicate. Washington must do so.

The United States must not cede the Kurdistan Regional Government to malign Iranian influence. State Department recently [inaugurated its largest consulate in the world](#) in Erbil—a clear signal of long-term

commitment. Yet without a corresponding political and security strategy to protect the KRG's stability, that presence could become increasingly untenable. During the opening ceremony of the new consulate building, President Nechirvan Barzani [acknowledged](#) that "the United States has consistently stood by the people of Kurdistan during their most difficult and critical moments." This is another such critical moment.

The United States must more fully commit to the defense of the KRI. One step would be to provide the region with air defense systems capable of countering drones and missiles from Iran and its proxies. KRG officials have long sought such support but are often frustrated by bureaucratic constraints that require approval from the federal government in Baghdad—even for defensive capabilities. Given the influence of Iran and its allies within Iraqi institutions, this process has [proven ineffective](#).

Washington should sustain pressure on Baghdad to curb pro-Tehran groups and Iranian influence, including by reconsidering financial mechanisms such as cash transfers and security assistance where appropriate. The United States should also side with the KRG in its constitutional disagreement with Baghdad on oil contracts and independent oil projects, effectively neutralizing a key lever of pressure from IRGC-aligned actors within federal ministries.

If negotiations with Tehran resume, and in the seemingly unlikely scenario that they result in a conclusive end to the conflict, the United States should ensure that the activities of Iranian-backed militias in Iraq are included as part of any broader agreement. On the flip side, if Iran's current leaders dig their heels in, the plans to support Kurdish groups in Iran should be revived.

Many actors, not least the KRG leadership, fear that a narrow agreement could reduce immediate tensions while leaving underlying structural problems unresolved. No region stands to lose more from such an outcome than the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The KRG has been one of Washington's most reliable partners in the Middle East, contributing to counterterrorism efforts and regional stability. Allowing it to become vulnerable in the aftermath of this conflict would not only undermine U.S. credibility but also weaken one of the few functioning models of Western-aligned governance in the region. A commitment to partnership with the United States should not carry existential risks in Iraq.

The Kurdistan Regional Government represents one of the last viable pillars of U.S. influence in Iraq and a proven partner in advancing regional stability. Allowing it to be weakened would hand Tehran a strategic victory that would be difficult, if not impossible, to reverse.