

The United States Cannot Afford to Abandon the Kurdistan Region

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On September 7, three Iranian drones [struck](#) a base belonging to the Iranian-Kurdish organization Komala near the city of Sulaymaniyah in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The Iranian regime's campaign against the KRI has continued uninterrupted since the start of Operation Epic Fury. The latest strike comes amid reports that the Pentagon plans to end funding for the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) security forces and just weeks before the United States is scheduled to complete its military withdrawal from Iraq at the end of this month under an agreement reached with Baghdad in 2024. President Trump and his administration cannot afford to continue turning a blind eye to such blatant acts of Iranian aggression and should reconsider the planned withdrawal from Iraq to ensure that America's Kurdish partners are not left defenseless.

Last month, explosive drones [targeted](#) the office of KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani and the residence of the region's intelligence chief in Erbil. Kurdish authorities said the drones "[were launched from Iranian territory](#)" and described the attack as a dangerous escalation against the political leadership of one of America's closest partners in the Middle East. The target was not an Iranian Kurdish militia camp or a military installation. It was the office of the elected leader of the Kurdistan Region, struck during an [active ceasefire](#) between the United States and Iran.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi denied responsibility for the attack, claiming in a [post on X](#) that there was no justification for it and suggesting it had been staged to drive a wedge between Tehran and the Kurdistan Region. Speaking at a press conference after Araghchi's denial, Kurdistan Region Interior Minister Rebar Ahmed [said](#), "We have asked officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran to provide a convincing explanation for these actions." The Trump administration's only public response also came in a post on X by U.S. Special Envoy to Iraq Ambassador Tom Barrack, who "[strongly condemned](#)" the attack.

For months, the Kurdistan Region has tried to stay out of the war between the United States, Israel and Iran. Prime Minister Barzani has [repeatedly stressed](#) that the KRG does not want its territory used against neighboring states. Yet, according to the KRG, the region has endured [more than 1,000 drone and missile strikes](#) since the conflict began, damaging civilian infrastructure, disrupting trade, threatening energy facilities, and targeting both American interests and Iranian Kurdish opposition groups.

Over the past several months, Iran's campaign has evolved from one focused primarily on [Iranian Kurdish opposition groups](#) – including the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI), Komala, the Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK), and the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK) – to one that increasingly targets the institutions of the KRG itself. Many officials and observers in the Kurdistan Region now view this shift as more than an escalation against armed opposition groups; they see it as an attempt to intimidate and weaken the political institutions that underpin the Kurdistan

Region's semi-autonomous status. In their view, the objective of Tehran and its proxies in Iraq is no longer simply to suppress Iranian Kurdish dissidents, but to steadily undermine the autonomy, stability, and independent decision-making capacity of the KRG itself.

The Kurdistan Region has long served as one of America's most reliable partners in Iraq. It hosts U.S. forces, provides intelligence cooperation, protects critical energy infrastructure, and has repeatedly supported American operations against ISIS. It has done so despite sustained pressure from Tehran and repeated attacks by Iranian-backed militias. Weakening the Kurdistan Region weakens one of the few remaining areas of stability in Iraq that consistently aligns with American interests.

In what is likely to prove a profoundly shortsighted decision with grave strategic consequences, the United States-led international coalition against the Islamic State will [conclude its mission](#) in Iraq by the end of this month. The Iraqi Prime Minister's Office [confirmed](#) that "September 30 will be the fixed and final date for ending the military mission of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS in Iraq and completing the departure of its forces." As part of the withdrawal, the U.S. will remove its air defense systems from Erbil, the capital of the KRG.

[Reports](#) also suggest that the Trump administration is planning to cut funding for the KRG's armed forces, also known as the Peshmerga. The Peshmerga's contribution to the campaign against ISIS prompted the Pentagon to sign a memorandum of understanding in 2016 establishing long-term U.S. assistance. Despite fielding roughly 180,000 troops, the force received just \$61 million in fiscal year 2026 – a modest investment to retain a capable, pro-American partner on Iran's border. Coming at a time when Baghdad has sought to weaken the KRG economically, and threats from Iran and its proxies are intensifying, such a decision would amount to a death blow to the KRG's ability to defend itself from Iranian interference and influence while reinforcing Tehran's belief that sustained pressure can drive the U.S. out, thereby emboldening further attacks elsewhere in the region. Washington cannot afford to leave one of its most reliable regional partners without the means to sustain its own security architecture at a time of escalating pressure from Iran.

The United States should see Iran's attacks against the KRG as part of the broader Iranian strategy to preserve the regime, safeguard its path to renewed nuclear capabilities, and reshape the regional balance of power while testing American resolve. Failing to respond risks encouraging further attacks, not only against Kurdish opposition groups but against the institutions of the KRG itself. It is deeply troubling that Washington is prepared to retaliate when Iran threatens commercial shipping in the Strait of Hormuz yet remains silent as Tehran repeatedly attacks America's Kurdish partners in Iraq.

These attacks reveal something important about Tehran's thinking on what it considers an existential vulnerability. Even during periods when direct confrontation with the United States has ebbed, Iranian strikes against Kurdish targets have continued. That persistence suggests the regime regards organized Kurdish opposition as one of the few internal forces capable of exploiting external and aerial military pressure. The Trump administration must recognize that the Iranian regime has no intention of making a deal on terms acceptable to the United States and its regional allies. The regime has wasted every opportunity for a diplomatic solution, and it is time for it to be held accountable to its people. To this end, President Trump must revisit the plan to support armed Iranian-Kurdish opposition forces to open a military front against the regime in Tehran to empower the people of Iran to take back their country.

Washington should make clear that attacks on the Kurdistan Region and its leadership are unacceptable and will carry consequences. It should work with the KRG directly to strengthen the region's air defenses and improve protection for civilian infrastructure. Washington should postpone the September 30 withdrawal of U.S. forces and defensive capabilities agreed to with Baghdad and reaffirm its commitment to the defense of the Kurdistan Region. At a minimum, the United States should reconsider the reduction of its military presence or defensive capabilities in Iraqi Kurdistan while Iranian attacks continue.

Air campaigns can degrade military capabilities and destroy critical infrastructure, but they do not necessarily threaten regime survival. Tehran clearly believes that a capable domestic challenger does. That is why the United States should not only help defend the Iranian Kurdish organizations based in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, but also strengthen their defensive and operational capabilities so they can increase pressure on the regime from within.

Iran has demonstrated through its actions that it understands the strategic importance of Kurdish actors. The question now is whether Washington will reach the same conclusion. Protecting the Kurdistan Region is not merely about standing by a loyal partner. It is about preserving one of the few regional relationships that consistently advances American interests while denying Tehran an opportunity to weaken both a key ally and one of the few organized forces capable of increasing pressure on the regime from within. If the United States fails that test, the costs will extend far beyond Iraqi Kurdistan.