

# **The Iran-U.S.-Israeli War:**

## **A Survival Strategy for the Kurdistan Regional Government;**

Protecting Citizens, Reducing Vulnerabilities, and Identifying Limited Opportunities in a Dangerous Crisis

External Policy Brief to the Presidency of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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POLICY BRIEF

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## THE INITIATIVE

This Policy Brief is part of an initiative led by the Sbey Research Center (SRC). The initiative contributes to policy debates by providing research-based analysis and forward-looking perspectives on governance, political participation, and social development in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The Sbey Research Center produces research and analysis on key political, social, and economic developments, including party dynamics, governance, human rights, and demographic change. Its work aims to support evidence-based policymaking and informed public discourse in the region. The Center's activities are organized around three main areas: research; policy analysis and advocacy; and public outreach. Within this framework, the Policy Briefs are designed to be concise and policy-oriented, focusing on identifying key drivers of specific challenges, outlining their implications, and proposing actionable recommendations.

## THE POLICY BRIEFS

This Policy Brief is the second in a series of publications produced by the Sbey Research Center addressing current public issues in the Kurdistan Region and beyond. The series aims to contribute to ongoing policy discussions by offering structured analysis and practical insights into governance-related challenges.

This brief focuses on the escalating security and political risks facing the Kurdistan Region amid the ongoing Iran-U.S.-Israeli war. Sustained attacks on critical infrastructure, combined with fragile defense capacities and heavy dependence on oil revenues, have placed the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in a highly vulnerable position. These conditions increase the risk of economic disruption, prolonged instability, and the potential transformation of the region into a permanent battlefield. This policy brief provides a structured assessment of the region's core vulnerabilities and the limited opportunities emerging from the crisis. It frames the situation not as a moment of strategic gain, but as a survival challenge shaped by structural weaknesses, internal political division, and uncertain external support. By identifying immediate threats and constrained leverage points, the brief highlights the need for de-escalation, political unity, and contingency planning to mitigate risk and preserve stability.

## POLICY BRIEF 02

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In a context of escalating regional conflict and heightened insecurity, the need for clear, research-informed analysis is critical. This policy brief, *The Iran-U.S.-Israeli War: A Survival Strategy for the Kurdistan Regional Government*, provides a focused assessment of the region's vulnerabilities and their implications for stability and governance. It supports informed decision-making by emphasizing risk reduction, civilian protection, and institutional resilience under conditions of uncertainty.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## Executive Summary

The war between the United States, Israel, and Iran that began on February 28, 2026, has placed the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) on a path toward direct confrontation. From the start of the war through March 25, 2026, 450 drones and missiles have been fired into the Kurdistan Region, killing 14 people and injuring 85. More than 84% of these attacks targeted Erbil and have damaged airports, oil fields, and civilian infrastructure. Beyond these statistics, the core concern is this: the Kurdistan Region lacks a sophisticated air defense system, its oil infrastructure is highly concentrated and vulnerable, and a coordinated attack could cripple the economy within days. Through a realistic assessment of critical vulnerabilities, this policy brief argues that the KRG's primary priority should be survival. The main threats include the vulnerability of centralized oil infrastructure, the risk of becoming a permanent battlefield, the deepening internal division between KDP and PUK, and the possibility of an economic blockade by Baghdad. There are also limited opportunities: Baghdad's temporary need for the pipeline, which offers cautious negotiating leverage, and

### Key Notes:

1. The Kurdistan Region is a direct frontline in the Iran-U.S.-Israeli war, with sustained attacks on critical infrastructure.
2. The KRG's survival is paramount, given fragile defenses, reliance on vulnerable oil infrastructure, political division (KDP-PUK), and uncertain external support.

the possibility of requesting defense support from the United State

The brief recommends five immediate actions: (1) reduce tensions with Baghdad and Tehran; (2) request defense systems from the United States; (3) negotiate cautiously over the pipeline; (4) unite the KDP and PUK; and (5) prepare for worst-case scenarios.

## Introduction: Why the Crisis Is Dangerous

When the United States and Israel launched a large-scale offensive against Iran on February 28, 2026, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) immediately found itself on the front lines. The reason is straightforward: U.S. forces withdrawn from other parts of Iraq are now concentrated in the region (ACLED, 2026). Consequently, Iran and its affiliated militias view the region as a

legitimate target. The immediate results are clear. Between February 28 and March 25, 450 drones and missiles were launched at the region. Cities including Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Dohuk, and Halabja were targeted. These attacks killed 14 people and injured 85 (Rudaw, 2026a). Targets included airports, oil fields, hotels, and telecommunications stations (NPR, 2026; Rudaw, 2026a). Militia groups such as Saraya Awliya al-Dam, the Islamic Resistance of Iraq, and Ashab al-Kahf have claimed responsibility for many of these attacks (ACLED, 2026). However, the core concern extends beyond these statistics. This policy brief addresses five critical questions: (1) How can citizens and critical infrastructure be protected given the absence of advanced air defenses in the Kurdistan Region? (2) How can the Kurdistan Region avoid becoming a permanent battlefield? (3) How can a unified political front be established amid the KDP and PUK divide? (4) Are there meaningful opportunities for the KRG in this crisis, or only threats? and (5) What is Plan B if the situation escalates? For example, if Iran launches a ground attack, Baghdad seizes the pipeline, or the United States withdraws? These questions are not about heroism, but about survival.

## Approach

This study employs a qualitative, scenario-based approach. Its objective is to identify existential threats to the Kurdistan Region and to propose practical strategies for survival. The central question is: How can the KRG survive this crisis given its vulnerable infrastructure, limited defenses, and fragile political position? Data sources include Rudaw's daily reports on attacks, ACLED's analysis of militias' operational patterns, reports from NPR, and a published interview with Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani, who stated, "This is not our war" (Arraf & Inskeep, 2026), as well as information on the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline from Rudaw. The analysis prioritizes pessimistic scenario modeling, asking: What if the attacks further escalate? What if the Iranian regime does not fall and remains intact? What if the United States withdraws? What if Baghdad seizes the pipeline? These are essential considerations.

## Results: Three Critical Threats and Two Limited Opportunities

### Threat 1: Critical Vulnerability of Concentrated Oil Infrastructure

The concentration of 84% of attacks on Erbil is not coincidental; the city hosts an

international airport, a U.S. consulate, and U.S. forces (Rudaw, 2026a). More critically, the Kurdistan Region's oil fields are located within 200 kilometers of the Iranian border or militia-controlled areas. The Kurdistan Region lacks Patriot or C-RAM systems, and air defense systems are limited to locations where the U.S. is present. A coordinated strike involving 50 missiles could disable key oil fields for months, potentially leading to economic collapse, as the region depends on oil for 90% of its revenue, while already struggling to pay its bills.

### **Threat 2: The Risk of Becoming a Permanent Battlefield**

PMF militias have “maintained the ability to operate independently of Baghdad” (ACLEED, 2026) and have repeatedly stated that attacks will continue. If this pattern persists, the region risks becoming a permanent war zone. The consequences are catastrophic: international oil companies will withdraw, foreign investment will collapse, citizens will flee high-risk cities. This is what happened to Basra in 2004-2008; rebuilding from that crisis took decades.

### **Threat 3: KDP-PUK Division and Lack of Contingency Planning**

The Peshmerga remain divided between two separate forces under the KDP and PUK. In a crisis, this division becomes deadly, not just for military defense, but for political decision-making. In the event of escalation, if Iran launches a ground attack or Baghdad seizes the pipeline, the absence of unity could lead to systemic collapse. And the critical question is: What if the US pulls out, if the Iranian regime does not fall, if Baghdad imposes full sanctions? What should be done? What is Plan B? This policy brief is going to answer that.

### **Opportunity 1: Baghdad's Temporary Need for the pipeline (with limitations)**

The Strait of Hormuz is closed and Iraq's oil production has dropped by 70% (Rudaw, 2026b). Baghdad seeks access to the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline and has “promised to facilitate payment of royalties” (Rudaw, 2026b). This creates limited negotiating leverage. However, (1) this opportunity is temporary, as Baghdad's need will diminish once the Strait of Hormuz reopens. (2) Baghdad retains the capacity to seize the pipeline using the army and PMF; and (3) aggressive negotiation could force Baghdad to take military action. Therefore, the negotiating leverage is possible, but it must be approached with caution.

## **Opportunity 2: Potential U.S. Defense Support (with conditions)**

The presence of U.S. forces in the region offers an opportunity to request enhanced air defense systems. However, this opportunity is constrained with conditions: (1) the U.S. could withdraw at any moment; (2) defense systems are expensive and limited; and (3) even with them, 100% defense and full protection cannot be guaranteed. Therefore, this opportunity should be pursued, but security should not be made entirely dependent on it.

## **Conclusion**

This analysis has shown that the Kurdistan Region faces a highly volatile and dangerous situation. The threats are real and immediate: vulnerable infrastructure, inadequate defenses, internal division, and the possibility of becoming a permanent battlefield. The opportunities exist, but they are limited and temporary. It would be a serious mistake to interpret these limited opportunities as a “historic moment for heroism.” The reality is harsher: this is a moment for survival, not heroism. Success requires three things: realism about limitations, internal KDP-PUK unity, and the existence of a Plan B for adverse scenarios. The KRG must accept

that its primary duty is to protect its six million citizens in Iraq, rather than pursue idealistic goals that might endanger them.

### **Key Note:**

1. De-escalate tensions with Baghdad and Tehran and unify political leadership to reduce exposure to further escalation.
2. Immediately implement a comprehensive Plan B, including alternative revenue sources, emergency diplomacy, civilian protection, and contingency planning for U.S. withdrawal or intensified conflict.
3. Prioritize practical, short-term measures to safeguard citizens and critical infrastructure while preparing for worst-case scenarios.

## **Consequences and Recommendations**

### ***Consequences (if no action is taken):***

If the attacks continue and the KRG lacks a clear strategy: (1) A potential internal displacement crisis as citizens flee high-risk areas; (2) Economic collapse if oil fields are destroyed; (3) Flight of international companies and the cessation of investment; (4) Deepening of the KDP-PUK divide; (5) Loss of international trust.

*Urgent Recommendations that should be seriously considered in the short and long term:*

**Short-term:**

**1. Immediate de-escalation of tensions with Baghdad and Tehran:** The KRG should declare that it is not a part of the war and coordinate with Baghdad to control the militias. Even an informal channel with Tehran, through the PUK, which has historical ties, could send clear a message that the region does not pose a threat to Iran.

**2. Creation of a Plan B:** What if the United States withdraws? What if the Iranian regime does not fall? What if Baghdad seizes the pipeline? The KRG must have answers. These include diplomatic options with Turkey, emergency relations with Gulf states, and alternative sources of revenue.

**3. Prepare for worst-case scenarios:** This includes stockpiling food and medicine, establishing safe havens, and developing evacuation plans. While these scenarios may appear pessimistic, but they are necessary.

**4. Immediate KDP-PUK unity:** In times of crisis, division is dangerous. Leaders must meet and agree on a unified strategy, a coherent message, and

a commitment not to politically exploit the crisis. This is essential.

**Long-term:**

**1. Urgent request for defense systems from the United States:** these should be framed not as offensive tools, but as mechanisms

to protect civilians. However, it must be acknowledged that even with such systems, 100% security cannot be guaranteed.

**The bottom line:** This war is a test of survival, not an opportunity for victory. Success means preserving life, protecting citizens, and maintaining the gains of the past 33 years. Failure would result in severe consequences. The choice ultimately rests with the KRG leadership.

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