

Roundtable: Strategic Challenges for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq during the US–Israel–Iran Conflict

Since February 28, 2026, the conflict between the United States, Israel, and Iran has marked **one of the most serious regional crises in years**. Although the primary military operations targeted Iran and its regional allies, the conflict quickly spilled over into Iraq, including the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Owing to its **important location, the presence of U.S. coalition forces, and its proximity to Iran**, the KRI became increasingly exposed to the consequences of regional escalation. Iranian missile and drone **strikes targeted locations in and around Erbil**, including **facilities associated with the U.S.-led international coalition, Iranian Kurdish opposition groups, and elements of the Kurdistan Region's security and energy infrastructure**. At the same time, Iran-aligned militias operating in Iraq intensified attacks and threats against similar targets.

Throughout **March 2026**, the **security situation remained highly volatile**. Drone attacks were reported near Erbil International Airport and facilities hosting U.S. personnel. At the same time, Iranian officials repeatedly stated that they would continue targeting Kurdish opposition groups if they were allowed to operate from Iraqi territory. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) repeatedly stressed that **it would not allow its territory to become a battlefield or a launching point** for attacks against neighbouring states, calling on all parties to pursue de-escalation. Although the intensity of direct military activity declined in the following months, the conflict **significantly altered the regional security environment and created new strategic challenges** for both Iraq and the KRI.

The regional crisis unfolded on the surface of several long-standing domestic challenges facing the KRI. Relations between Erbil and Baghdad remained strained over **federal budget transfers, hydrocarbon exports, constitutional competencies, and security coordination**. These structural disputes were further complicated by the enduring threat posed by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) remnants, the presence of multiple armed actors, including Iran-aligned factions of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), and growing uncertainty surrounding Iraq's future security architecture following the planned withdrawal of U.S. military forces from KRI by September 30, 2026. **Repeated attacks on energy infrastructure and continuing security threats also highlighted the vulnerability of the Kurdistan Region's economy**. Leaders from both Erbil and Baghdad have renewed diplomatic talks; however, despite these efforts to normalize

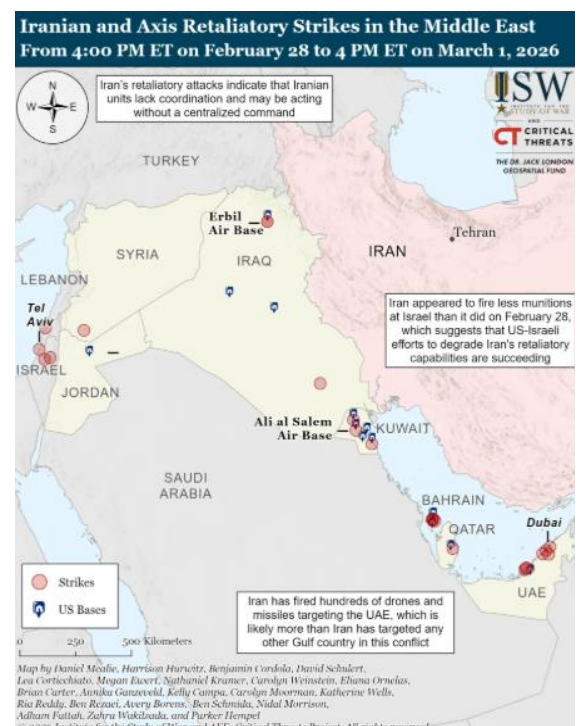


Fig 1: Iranian and Axis Retaliation Strikes,
Source: ISW

US-Israeli Strikes on Iraq

Between March 1, 2026 at 4:00 PM ET and March 2, 2026 at 4:00 PM ET

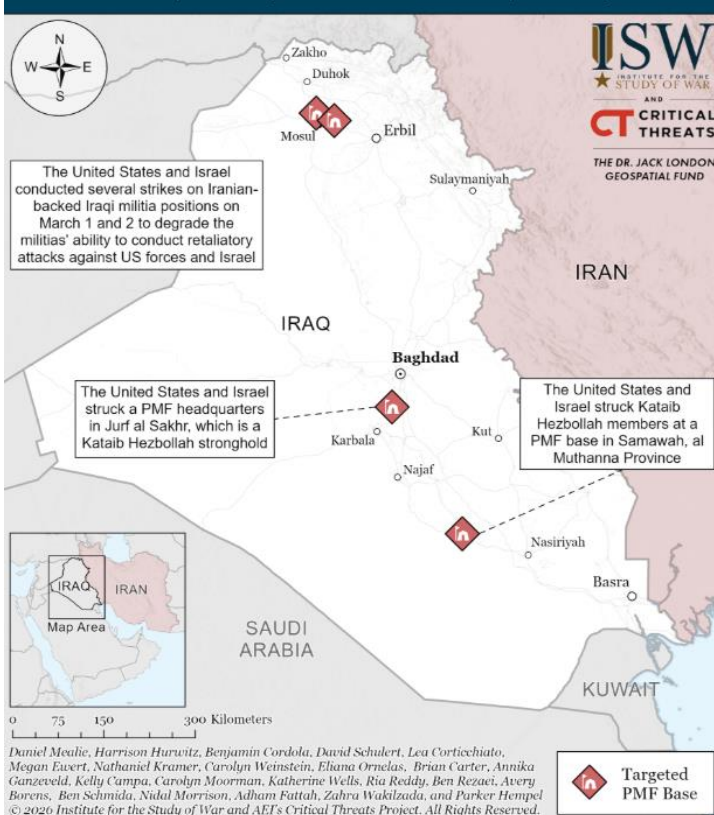


Fig 2: US-Israeli strikes on Iraq between March 1 and March 2, 2026

Source: ISW

their relations, disputes over various topics persist without a permanent settlement¹.

In this context, the KRI has been required to navigate an increasingly complex geopolitical and economic environment. The ongoing regional crisis has therefore reinforced the KRI's strategic importance as both a geopolitical actor and a contributor to regional order, while raising important questions about its future foreign policy, security strategy, and role within Iraq and the wider Middle East.

¹ For a broader analysis of Iraq's post-election political and security developments, see Richard Klauber's policy paper *Post-election Iraq: Key Political and Security Challenges*, PCMR Policy Paper, Vol. 6, No. 5, August 12, 2026.

TIMELINE

28 February 2026 – The United States and Israel launch coordinated strikes against Iran, marking the beginning of the conflict. Within hours, Iran retaliates by launching missile and drone attacks against targets in the KRI, including Erbil International Airport, the U.S. Consulate General in Erbil, and other facilities associated with the U.S.-led international coalition.

1 March 2026 – Iran expands its campaign by targeting bases of Iranian Kurdish opposition groups in the KRI and other organizations. The attacks highlight Tehran's determination to prevent Kurdish groups from exploiting the regional conflict.

2 March 2026 – Iran-backed militias in Iraq launch drone attacks against U.S. coalition facilities, including Victory Base near Baghdad International Airport, while additional strikes continue against coalition-related infrastructure in the KRI.

4 March 2026 – Reports emerge that Iranian Kurdish opposition groups may have initiated cross-border operations into Iran. However, both the groups themselves and officials from the KRG deny the claims. The incident underscores growing concerns that the KRI could become further entangled in the conflict.

5 March 2026 – Iran launches another round of missile strikes against Iranian Kurdish opposition bases in the KRI. The KRG reiterates that its territory will not be used to launch attacks against neighbouring states and calls for de-escalation by all parties.

11–12 March 2026 – Drone and missile attacks continue against coalition facilities in Erbil, including Camp Singara, Erbil International Airport, and areas surrounding the U.S. Consulate. Coalition air defence systems intercept several incoming drones, while U.S., British, and NATO forces report repeated attacks.

Mid April–May 2026 – Although the intensity of direct military confrontation decreases following ceasefire efforts, Iran and Iran-backed groups continue intermittent attacks against Kurdish opposition groups and strategic sites in the KRI. At the political level, discussions intensify regarding the future of the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq, the role of the PMF, and Iraq's evolving security architecture.

Summer 2026 – Strategic uncertainty persists as Baghdad, Erbil, Washington, and regional actors continue debating the future U.S. military presence, Baghdad–Erbil relations, and the broader regional balance of power following