

ASSESSING IRAQ'S READINESS FOR NUCLEAR POWER

Shan Mohammed | July 11, 2026



Executive Summary

Iraq has strong reasons to pursue a nuclear energy program, as it continues to face long-standing electricity shortages, very high transmission and distribution losses, heavy dependence on oil and gas for power generation, frequent reliance on privately owned diesel generators, and repeated disruptions to natural gas imports from Iran.¹

At the same time, Iraq has already begun discussions on a potential peaceful nuclear development program, and by 2026 it identified a long-term goal of developing up to 10,000 megawatts of nuclear generating capacity.² However, a nuclear program would not provide an immediate solution to Iraq's short-term electricity shortage. Iraq's own public discussion of nuclear energy has likewise emphasized the long-term nature of such a program rather than presenting it as a rapid solution to current electricity needs.

Studies comparing the health risks of fossil-fuel electricity generation with nuclear power indicate that, when measured as deaths per terawatt hour and including accidents and air-pollution impacts across the energy chain, nuclear power generally has a lower mortality rate than coal and oil and often lower than gas as well.³

From routine air pollutants and accidents, fossil fuel-based electricity generation causes significantly greater public health damage than nuclear power. A World in Data compilation of peer-reviewed articles synthesizes estimated mortality rates for various types of fossil fuel-based electricity generation as approximately 24.6 deaths/TWh for coal, 18.4 deaths/TWh for oil, 2.8 deaths/TWh for natural gas, and 0.07 deaths/TWh for nuclear. The analysis further notes that the mortality rate estimates for fossil fuels may be underestimated, with actual death rates potentially 4 to 9 times higher than the figures presented.

In contrast to the significant health impacts from routine accidents associated with fossil fuel-based electricity generation, the primary concern with respect to nuclear power relates to the potential for catastrophic failures. Although extremely rare, such events can result in large-scale physical destruction and long-lasting political instability.

Policy Question and Analytical Frame

Iraq has initiated discussions on a possible nuclear program with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) since March 2024. Iraq's nuclear power program has been publicly documented by the IAEA, which has been discussing a possible nuclear power program with Iraqi government officials. The proposal includes the use of Small Modular Reactors (SMRs). The IAEA explained that Iraq wants to develop nuclear technology to enhance its energy security and support water desalination projects.⁴ In a 2025 report, the IAEA identified Iraq as one of five countries that considered using nuclear power during 2024.⁵

Iraq has established a high-level nuclear power objective as part of its overall electricity-generation planning. According to a 2025 assessment report produced by the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA), based on data collected from Iraq's Ministry of Electricity, the country intends to add approximately 2,400 MW of new nuclear capacity to the electric power grid by 2030.⁶ The assessment stated that the Ministry had outlined plans to construct multiple nuclear power plants that would supply baseload electricity to the grid, reduce the variability associated with intermittent renewable energy sources, and increase the reliability and stability of the grid. This evidence demonstrates that Iraq has publicly disclosed plans to integrate nuclear power into its electricity system.⁷

However, neither the referenced IAEA nor IRENA reports contain details describing a finalized reactor design, a selected reactor vendor, or a complete project financing arrangement. Additionally, the IRENA assessment did not include a detailed grid integration study specifying the plant's connection point, required transmission upgrades, reserve levels, frequency stability measures, or anticipated costs of implementing the upgrades.

The IAEA Milestones Approach

It describes the progression toward establishing a nuclear power industry as occurring in three distinct phases:

- Phase 1 consists of studies and evaluations conducted before a country's final decision on whether to launch a nuclear power program. Phase 1 concludes at Milestone 1, when the country is prepared to make an informed decision to pursue a nuclear power program.
- Phase 2 involves the preparatory steps taken before signing contracts and beginning construction of the first nuclear power plant; the following country has made a national policy decision. Phase 2 concludes at Milestone 2, when the country is ready to invite bids or negotiate a contract.

- Phase 3 includes the steps involved in implementing the first nuclear power plant, covering contracting, licensing, construction, and operational preparation. Phase 3 concludes at Milestone 3, when the country is ready to operate the plant.

Background on Iraq's Electricity System and Nuclear Interest

Iraq's energy challenges extend beyond merely ensuring sufficient generating capacity. According to the IEA, in 2025 Iraq lost roughly 50 to 60 percent of the electricity it produced. These losses and frequent outages drive consumers to rely on private neighborhood diesel generators. These neighborhood generators are costly and contribute to local air pollution. In addition, according to the IEA, in 2019, as part of an illustrative case study, an upper-middle-class urban household consuming about 16,000 kWh annually relied on neighborhood generators for roughly 25 percent of its electricity in 2018.⁹

IRENA's 2025 assessment of Iraq reported, in 2021, oil made up around 63% of total energy supply, natural gas 36%, and renewables just 1%. Renewables were estimated to account for less than 2% of all the energy consumption. The report also indicates that Iraq's grid infrastructure is outdated and suffers major energy losses. Addressing these challenges will require grid modernization and the addition of energy storage to support the transition toward a more diversified energy mix. Additionally, the report notes that Iraq's electricity roadmap sets a target for renewables to comprise 26% of new capacity additions by 2030.¹⁰

Fuel dependency remains a critical challenge. Iraq has frequently experienced disruptions in Iranian gas supplies. Iraq's Electricity Ministry reported that there was no sign of Iranian gas resuming in the near term. Other reports mentioned that, on February 25, 2026, gas supplies resumed at just 7 million cubic meters per day. In March 2026, gas

supplies resumed again after another interruption at approximately 5 million cubic meters per day.¹¹ This indicates that Iraq's electricity generation system remains dependent on external fuel supplies, including foreign imports, in addition to continuing to experience electricity losses caused by its domestic grid and security issues. Iraq's interest in nuclear energy has been developing, though it remains preliminary. On March 18, 2024, the IAEA reported that its director general met with Iraq's senior leaders to discuss the possibility of establishing a civilian nuclear energy program under strict non-proliferation norms.¹² Additionally, the IAEA reported that a group of Iraqi experts would visit Vienna to assist in outlining a roadmap.

In April 2026, regional business reporting stated that Iraqi analysts described a goal of eventually developing up to 10 GW (gigawatts) of civilian nuclear power capacity. They estimated that up to \$40 billion would be required to develop this amount of civilian nuclear capacity. They also indicated that the development process could take 10–15 years. These estimates have not led to a formal procurement decision; however, they are sufficient to consider nuclear preparedness a timely public policy matter in 2026.

Comparative Assessment of Policy Options and Risks

Option	Description	Main advantages	Main drawbacks	Overall assessment
Grid, gas capture, renewables only	No nuclear pathway; prioritize reducing transmission & distribution losses, ramping domestic gas use where viable, fast deployment of utility-scale solar + storage, and strengthening interconnections	Fastest route to increased supply and reduced outages; leverages Iraq's solar potential and short lead-times for solar/storage; avoids nuclear-specific regulatory and security burdens	Does not preserve a nuclear option; continued reliance on gas leaves fuel-price and emissions exposure; reliability gains depend on successful grid reform, loss reduction, and gas supply contracts	Strong near-term electricity policy is cost-effective and fastest to deploy, but narrower long-term diversification without low-carbon firm capacity
Phased nuclear readiness without construction decision	Follow IAEA Milestones: build regulator and legal framework, safeguards capacity, skilled workforce, security plans, and vendor-neutral feasibility studies before any procurement commitment	Preserves option value of nuclear while avoiding premature capital lock-in; enables evidence-based comparison with alternatives; consistent with IAEA-recommended practice for newcomer countries	Requires multi-year sustained political commitment and public funding before any electricity is produced; opportunity cost vs. near-term investments in grid/renewables	Balanced approach and best fit with international practice and Iraq's current institutional/security constraints, if political will is sustained

Immediate reactor procurement and construction	Negotiate vendor contracts and commit to site, financing, and construction now	Could provide large-scale dispatchable low-carbon power in the long term; signals strategic commitment to diversify supply	Very high capital cost and financing risk; long lead times (typically 8–15+ years); substantial governance, safety, and security demands; unresolved siting and security issues in Iraq increase risk; high politicization risk	Premature under current Iraqi conditions unless accompanied by major reforms, firm financing guarantees, and clear security arrangements
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Table 1. Comparison of Nuclear and Non-Nuclear Pathways for Iraq's Electricity Supply

Comparative Risk Assessment

A neutral explanation of how everyday fossil fuel plants may pose a greater risk than nuclear plants must describe both cumulative, ordinary threats vs. the extraordinary threat of "tail events." As opposed to fossil fuel-based plants, which cause death as a direct result of their ongoing combustion, air quality issues from burning, and mining/transportation, nuclear produces very little to no carbon emissions during its use cycle and thus is less likely to kill people directly due to its operation.¹³

However, unlike fossil fuels, the potential for a catastrophic accident at a nuclear plant represents a lower probability/higher-consequence event, while also being accompanied by other low-probability/higher-consequence risks related to long-lived waste, facility protection/safeguards, and the potential for malicious acts against those facilities.¹⁴

Risk dimension	Fossil thermal and diesel generation	Renewables with grid upgrades	Nuclear generation
Routine air-pollution deaths	Highest; coal, oil, and gas cause substantially more air pollution mortality per TWh than nuclear power.	Very low in operation.	Very low in operation.
Occupational and supply-chain accidents	Significant across extraction, transport, and the fuel chain (including mining, drilling, shipping, and refining).	Generally low though not zero (manufacturing, installation, recycling risks).	Generally low in routine operation; still requires mining and specialized handling along the fuel cycle.
Major-accident profile	More frequent routine harm; severe industrial accidents (mining disasters, refinery blasts) occur across the fuel chain.	Lower catastrophic tail risk for most technologies, though some site-specific risks exist (e.g., hydro dams).	Rare but potentially high-consequence accidents; probability is low, but consequences can be large and long-lasting.
Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions	Highest lifecycle emissions among the three.	Low lifecycle emissions for wind and PV; some technologies (CSP and bioenergy) vary.	Low lifecycle emissions compared with fossil fuel generation.
Water use	Often substantial for thermal plants (cooling water needs) and fuel processing.	Wind and PV are low; CSP/hydro can be higher.	Potentially high water use for thermal-cycle reactors depending on the cooling system and siting.
Waste	Large dispersed air pollution and combustion wastes (particulate matter, SO _x , NO _x , CO ₂) with ongoing public health effects.	Lower operational waste; materials and end-of-life recycling are important but smaller in scale.	Small volumes of high-hazard radioactive waste that require long-term management and disposal obligations.

Cost and time risk	Lower lead time than nuclear; subject to fuel price volatility and long-term externalities not always priced in.	Usually fastest to deploy and increasingly cost competitive; system integration and storage add costs.	Very large upfront capital, long lead times, high exposure to delay and financing risk.
Reliability	Dispatchable if fuel is available; vulnerable to fuel supply disruptions (domestic or imports) and network issues.	Variable output; requires grid upgrades, storage, and balancing to achieve high reliability.	Dispatchable baseload potential, but requires robust grid stability, contingency planning for offsite power loss, and resilient operations.
Fuel dependence	Exposed to domestic bottlenecks and imported fuel risks; extraction/transport chains carry geopolitical risk.	No combustion fuel during operation (sun/wind); dependent on component supply chains for manufacturing and maintenance.	Reduces combustion fuel dependence, but newcomer states depend on foreign vendor support and fuel cycle services (enrichment, waste management) unless domestically developed.

Table 2. Comparative Risk Profile of Fossil Thermal, Renewable, and Nuclear Generation

Comparative data supports the assessments listed in this table. Our World in Data, a free, nonprofit website, reports that mortality from accidents and air pollution per hour of production for fossil fuels is substantially higher than for nuclear energy and modern renewables. It adds significant uncertainty in estimating fossil fuel mortality from accidents and air pollution since most estimates are based on European power plants with strong pollution control and an older assessment of air pollution health impact.¹⁵

The National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) revised study found that the median life cycle GWP values for nuclear power and renewable technologies are lower than those for fossil fuels. Median GWP values for nuclear are about 13g CO₂e / kWh; compared with about 486g CO₂e / kWh for natural gas, 840g CO₂e / kWh for oil, and 1001g CO₂e / kWh for coal. NREL's water study shows that cooled heat technologies, such as nuclear, coal, and many gas-fired units, have significant operational water needs depending on their

technology. By contrast, wind and solar photovoltaic systems require far less operational water.

Iraq has additional factors to consider. For example, the reliability of nuclear power stations cannot be determined without first evaluating the reliability of the grid.¹⁶ The IAEA provides "Milestones" guidelines to help countries evaluate the reliability of a nuclear power station's output, the grid's ability to carry that output (if lost), the availability of offsite power, and the speed at which the grid could recover after a total grid failure caused by a nuclear power station.¹⁷ Contingency plans would also need to be developed to restore offsite power in case of a loss of grid capacity. In Iraq, the electrical system is experiencing high network losses and low overall reliability. Thus, extensive grid studies and upgrades would be necessary before, or simultaneously with, any decision to purchase a nuclear power station.

The IAEA points out that the costs of financing a nuclear program, as well as an individual nuclear power station, are extremely high. It also emphasizes that a commitment to a nuclear power plant extends over approximately one hundred years, covering construction, operating, decommissioning, and waste management. Additionally, some long-term waste management duties may extend beyond one hundred years.¹⁸

Security and Institutional Readiness

Beyond technical and economic considerations, Iraq's unique security environment significantly shapes nuclear readiness. The political sensitivity surrounding attribution disputes was evident again in the drone attacks on the Kurdistan region's oil fields in July 2025.¹⁹ Kurdish officials believed the Iranian-backed PMF (Popular Mobilization Forces) were behind the attacks; however, the Iraqi military was skeptical due to a lack of evidence.²⁰ No groups immediately claimed responsibility for the attack at the Khor Mor natural gas production facility. Therefore, it would be inappropriate for a neutral issue brief to assign responsibility for such acts when the publicly available information does not support this assignment.

The importance of nuclear security becomes even greater once nuclear infrastructure is established. Nuclear security refers to prevention, detection, and response to theft, sabotage, unauthorized access, and other malicious acts involving nuclear or radioactive materials and related facilities.²¹ Cyberattacks can compromise computer-based systems at a nuclear facility and degrade both nuclear safety and security. It has been emphasized that nuclear facilities must never be attacked, as such incidents can have serious consequences for both safety and security.²²

Security incident	Established in the public record	What remains uncertain
Khor Mor attack — April 2024	A drone attack killed four workers, halted production, and caused the loss of around 2,500 MW of electricity. No group claimed responsibility.	The perpetrators have not been publicly established.
Kurdistan oil-field attacks — July 2025	Multiple drone attacks disrupted oil facilities in the Kurdistan Region.	Kurdish accusations against PMF-linked actors were disputed by the Iraqi army.
Khor Mor attacks — November–December 2025	A fresh attack caused a shutdown and power cuts. Iraqi armed forces later described the perpetrators as “outlawed elements.”	The specific perpetrators have not been clearly or publicly identified.

Table 3. Timeline of Security Incidents Affecting Iraq's Energy Infrastructure

Institutional Readiness

Iraq has developed important legal and institutional foundations for future nuclear governance. Iraq's Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement has been in force since 1972, and its Additional Protocol entered into force in 2012.²³ Iraq has also acceded to key nuclear safety and waste-management conventions, though treaty participation alone does provide the institutional capacity needed to license or regulate a commercial nuclear reactor program.²⁴

Iraq's existing institutional framework appears to fall short of the broader infrastructure it expects for a new nuclear power program, especially in licensing, regulatory independence, and comprehensive program oversight. At the same time, Iraq's Radiation Protection Centre within the Ministry of Environment has received EU support for radioactive waste management, decommissioning, and remediation, indicating that Iraq does have a core group of professionals with relevant expertise in radiation and waste regulation.²⁵ That

capacity is important, but it is not by itself enough for the full institutional architecture needed to license and supervise a commercial nuclear reactor program.

In addition, workforce and waste management issues have yet to be resolved. According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) developing nuclear energy requires expertise from most all sciences and engineering fields; however, it also has unique requirements such as reactor physics, material science, safety, security, safeguards, radiation protection, and emergency response planning.²⁶ Furthermore, while it may take many years or even decades of training and hands-on experience before an individual can develop these types of nuclear-related professional skills, Iraq is still in the process of cleaning up radioactive contamination at Al Tuwaitha. In fact, a large quantity of radioactive contaminated waste remains at this site; therefore, the development of a new nuclear waste management plan should not be assumed to be simple.²⁷

Emergency response is also a threshold issue. According to the IAEA, although the risk of a large release of radioactivity is extremely small, emergency preparedness and response is an essential part of defense-in-depth, and emergency arrangements are to be completed and tested when the first load of nuclear fuel is delivered to the site. In Iraq, that will need credible federal-regional coordination, clear responsibilities for civil defense and health authorities, interoperable communication systems, and agreements that operate during conflict conditions instead of just on paper.

Recommended Phased Approach

The best defensible position should emphasize beginning readiness, not construction. By 2026 Iraq can make an informed decision about the nuclear option that preserves it as a future opportunity for energy production without obligating Iraq to sign a reactor contract with a vendor or commit to a specific site. This approach aligns with the

existing IAEA Milestone Framework, reflects Iraq's current position, and prevents nuclear power from being portrayed as an immediate fix to summer blackouts or reliance on private generators. It will allow for fair comparison of nuclear power versus grid loss reduction, gas capture, solar, storage, and interconnect.

Iraq Nuclear Infrastructure Roadmap

Phase	Period	Core actions	Why these matters
National decision and studies	2026–2027	Establish or empower a NEPIO; commission vendor-neutral energy, grid, water, waste, and economic studies; request IAEA review support; conduct a national threat assessment.	Creates a knowledgeable basis for any later choice.
Institution-building	2027–2029	Create or redesign an independent regulator; expand safeguards and accounting capacity; develop draft nuclear law and liability framework; launch workforce strategy; map emergency roles.	Builds the minimum state apparatus before procurement.
Security and site preconditions	2028–2030	Define airspace and site-protection concepts; assess drones, rockets, cyber, insider threats, and loss of off-site power; begin preliminary site screening only if security thresholds are met.	Prevents Iraq from choosing a site before it can protect one.
Decision gate	2030 onward	Compare nuclear against strengthened non-nuclear alternatives on cost, timing, security, and reliability; decide whether to proceed, pause, or stop.	Keeps procurement conditional on evidence.

The timeline is an illustrative schedule inferred from the IAEA milestones approach, Iraq's grid, waste, and security current institutional starting point, the 10–15-year newcomer timeline, and Iraq's still unresolved constraints.²⁸

Conclusion

By the end of 2026, Iraq will have sufficient reasons to begin a nuclear readiness program; its electricity grid is vulnerable, its supply mix is comprised mostly of fossil fuels, it continues to face high risk from disruption in imports of fuels, and nuclear power could serve as a viable low carbon, firm electrical generation option for the long term. Comparative evidence also supports the view that aspects of conventional electrical generation may be more hazardous than nuclear, particularly when routine air emissions and the impacts of the entire energy chain are considered.

The same evidence that indicates Iraq is prepared to proceed with reactor acquisition suggests that it would be inappropriate for Iraq to take this step immediately. Iraq still has unusually high levels of grid loss, must still clean up legacy nuclear sites, and has a relatively immature regulatory framework for commercial power reactors, and there are many threats from security risks that have caused damage to critical energy facilities and disputes over who was responsible. It would therefore be risky for Iraq to make a political commitment to build a reactor before making a mature, technical, engineering, and design decision.

A simple policy advice, therefore, is for Iraq to be prepared before purchasing. If Baghdad has an interest in keeping nuclear power as a viable option, the best step in 2026 is to build the regulator, strengthen safeguards, assess the workforce gap, harden the electricity system, complete threat and site studies, and test emergency plans. If these actions are carried out, Iraq will be able to evaluate the construction question on a better and more transparent foundation. If they are not carried out, the readiness process will still have merit, because it would show whether alternative investments such as grid reform, gas capture, solar, battery storage, and interconnectors provide a better return than nuclear under Iraq's real conditions.

ENDNOTES

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