

Escalation of the Israel-Iran Conflict

Updated April 22, 2024

Overview

A series of strikes and counter-strikes between Israel and Iran in April 2024, including the first-ever direct attack on Israel from Iranian soil, represents a significant escalation in a [years-long “shadow war”](#) between the two countries. Until now, the conflict had been fought mostly in theaters outside of each country’s territory, between Israel and Iran-supported groups (such as Hezbollah in Lebanon), and/or by covert or non-kinetic means (such as cyberwarfare).

Israel-Iran escalatory attacks also come at a time when Israel faces international pressure to reduce the impact of conflict on the Palestinian population in Gaza, where [Israel and Hamas](#) (an Iran-supported group and FTO) have been engaged in warfare since Hamas-led attacks against Israel on October 7, 2023. Despite weeks-long U.S.-Israel tensions over Israel’s conduct of the war in Gaza, U.S. officials have communicated [“full U.S. support to defend Israel against any attacks by Iran and its regional proxies.”](#) One week after Iran’s direct attack on Israel, and one day after an apparent Israeli strike in Iran that may have been sufficiently narrow in scope to avoid additional immediate escalation, the House passed legislation that would appropriate additional U.S. military assistance to Israel (along with global humanitarian aid partly for Gaza), as well as direct the imposition of additional sanctions on Iran.

Iran’s Direct Attack on Israel

On April 13, Iran initiated the first-ever direct military action against Israel from Iranian territory in the form of aerial attacks (drones and ballistic and cruise missiles). Iran states that the attacks were in retaliation for an April 1 strike [reportedly by Israel](#) against [a building within the Iranian embassy compound](#) in Damascus, Syria. That strike killed high-level members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), an arm of the Iranian military and a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO).

In total, Iran and allied groups reportedly launched [approximately 350 drones and missiles](#) from [Iran, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen](#) toward Israel. Israel had already mobilized its air defense reserves, canceled schools, and closed its airspace. Once Iranian projectiles were airborne, Israel, along with the United States, [Jordan, France, and the United Kingdom](#), [reportedly intercepted](#) most of them, using an array of combat aircraft and missile defense systems. [The Israel Defense Forces said](#) that nearly all the estimated

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN12347

350 drones and missiles fired were downed outside Israeli airspace by Israel and its partners or were intercepted by Israel's Arrow missile defense system.

U.S. officials contend that Iran, given the scale of the attack, was seeking to cause “significant destruction and casualties,” explicitly arguing against analysis that “the Iranians meant to fail.” Those who align with that latter viewpoint contend that Iran could have used more drones and missiles and/or more advanced variants, and that Iran “did telegraph these attacks in advance which made them easier to deter.” In any event, Iran's demonstrated ability and willingness to launch missiles and drones directly at Israel marks a watershed in the two nations' conflict. Iranian military officials have said that the attack creates a “new equation,” with the IRGC commander stating, “From now on, if Israel attacks Iranian interests, figures and citizens anywhere, we will retaliate from Iran.”

Reactions and Subsequent Developments

Many Western countries denounced Iran's attack and a broader group of world leaders called for regional de-escalation. President Biden sought to “coordinate a united diplomatic response to Iran's brazen attack” while pledging to remain engaged with Israel and other regional counterparts. On April 18, President Biden announced additional U.S. sanctions targeting the IRGC and entities supporting Iran's drone programs, and stated that U.S. “allies and partners have or will issue additional sanctions and measures to restrict Iran's destabilizing military programs.” Israeli officials reportedly considered a range of responses to the April 13 attack, after President Biden told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu “that the U.S. will not participate in any offensive operations against Iran and will not support such operations.”

On April 19, Israel reportedly launched an air attack near an Iranian military base in the central province of Isfahan, and supposedly provided a few hours' advance notice to U.S. officials. Although the attack appeared to be relatively narrow in scope, it may have signaled an Israeli ability to evade and target Iranian air defenses—apparently damaging the radar on a Russian-origin S-300 system—in a province where some of Iran's nuclear facilities are located. Iranian leaders downplayed the strike's impact while reiterating pledges to retaliate against any “proven” and “decisive” Israeli action against Iran. The muted response from Iran, the relatively limited scope of the strike, and the lack of official U.S. or Israeli comment on the incident led many observers to conclude that the situation may have de-escalated for the time being. Nevertheless, heightened risks of direct Israel-Iran conflict may persist, with Israel likely to continue efforts to disrupt Iranian support for groups Israel deems as threats.

Issues for Congress

Israel-Iran clashes come at a time of congressional debate over U.S. support for Israel. In recent months, including after an Israeli drone strike in Gaza that killed aid workers from the private World Central Kitchen organization, some lawmakers have scrutinized U.S. arms sales to Israel and called for either conditioning, restricting, or halting security assistance to Israel. Other Members have rejected calls for conditioning U.S. aid to Israel and have criticized the Administration for pressuring the Israeli government amid ongoing hostilities against Hamas and Hezbollah.

On April 20, the House passed four bills, including two related to the Middle East. H.R. 8034 would provide approximately \$14 billion in Israel-related supplemental appropriations and \$9 billion in global humanitarian assistance funding. H.R. 8038 would, among other provisions, direct the President to impose a number of sanctions related to various Iranian activities, including its petroleum exports, its missile programs, and its human rights violations. President Biden hailed passage of the four bills, and urged the Senate to “quickly send this package to my desk.”

Author Information

Clayton Thomas
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

Jeremy M. Sharp
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

Jim Zanotti
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.