



U.S. Aircraft Combat Losses in Operation Epic Fury: Considerations for Congress

May 12, 2026

Overview

On February 28, 2026, the United States, in coordination with Israel, initiated military operations against Iran under the designation Operation Epic Fury (OEF). The conflict has involved air, maritime, and missile combat engagements across the Middle East. The pace of combat activity declined amid a ceasefire in April. Within weeks, some strikes resumed, and conditions remain fluid.

The Department of Defense (DOD, which is “using a secondary Department of War designation,” under Executive Order 14347 dated September 5, 2025) has not published a comprehensive assessment of combat losses in OEF. During an April 29, 2026, hearing, Acting Pentagon Comptroller Jules W. Hurst III testified that “we’re spending about \$25 billion” on OEF to date, with “part of that” for “equipment replacement” and that a supplemental appropriations request “will come to Congress once we have a full assessment of the cost of the conflict.”

Listed here are 42 fixed-wing or rotary-wing aircraft, including uncrewed aircraft (i.e., drones), reportedly lost or damaged in OEF, according to news reports and statements by DOD and U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). The number of aircraft damaged or destroyed may remain subject to revision due to multiple factors, which may include classification, ongoing combat activity, and attribution.

Reports of OEF Aircraft Losses and Damage

Four F-15E Strike Eagle fighter aircraft

- On March 2, 2026, CENTCOM reported that three F-15Es were shot down and destroyed by friendly fire over Kuwait; all six aircrew ejected safely and were recovered.
- On April 5, 2026, CENTCOM reported that one F-15E was shot down and destroyed during combat operations over Iran; both aircrew were safely recovered during separate search-and-rescue operations.

One F-35A Lightning II fighter aircraft

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN12692

- A March 19, 2026, news article reported that Iranian ground fire damaged one F-35A during combat operations over Iran.

One A-10 Thunderbolt II ground-attack aircraft

- In an April 6, 2026, news conference, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Air Force General Dan Caine stated that on April 3, enemy fire struck one A-10 that subsequently crashed and was destroyed during search-and-rescue operations; the pilot ejected and was recovered safely.

Seven KC-135 Stratotanker aerial refueling aircraft

- On March 12, 2026, CENTCOM reported that two KC-135s were involved in an incident over friendly airspace; one aircraft crashed in Iraq, resulting in the deaths of all six aircrew. The second KC-135 made an emergency landing at an undisclosed location in the region where U.S. forces are hosted.
- A March 14, 2026, news article reported that five KC-135s were damaged while on the ground at Prince Sultan Air Base, Saudi Arabia, during an Iranian missile and drone attack.

One E-3 Sentry airborne early warning-and-control system aircraft (AWACS)

- A March 28, 2026, news article reported that one E-3 was struck and damaged while on the ground at Prince Sultan Air Base, Saudi Arabia, during an Iranian missile and drone attack. A May 7, 2026, news article reported that the E-3 had been parked on an unprotected taxiway.

Two MC-130J Commando II special operations aircraft

- An April 5, 2026, news article reported that two MC-130Js supporting search-and-rescue operations for a downed F-15E were intentionally destroyed on the ground in Iran after becoming unable to depart; all aircrew were safely evacuated.

One HH-60W Jolly Green II combat search-and-rescue helicopter

- On April 6, 2026, General Caine said in a press conference that on April 5, one HH-60W sustained damage from small-arms fire supporting search-and-rescue operations for a downed F-15E in Iran.

Twenty-four MQ-9 Reaper medium-altitude long-endurance uncrewed aircraft

- An April 9, 2026, news article reported that the U.S. military had lost 24 MQ-9 Reapers since the start of U.S. military operations against Iran.

One MQ-4C Triton high-altitude long-endurance uncrewed aircraft

- An April 14, 2026, news article citing a U.S. Navy document reported that one MQ-4C crashed in a mishap.

Potential Issues for Congress

These reported incidents may raise several considerations for congressional oversight:

- **Information available to Congress.** It is unclear whether DOD has provided Congress an accounting of the aircraft lost in OEF. Congress may assess whether or not it has sufficient information and time to evaluate the potential effects of aircraft losses in U.S.
-

- military operations and potential DOD plans or programs to develop or procure replacements.
- **Budgetary impacts.** Aircraft losses could generate unplanned costs for their replacement, repair, or sustainment. Congress may consider whether or not to approve, reject, or modify potential reprogramming actions or supplemental appropriations or to make adjustments to planned procurement and readiness accounts.
- **Force sufficiency.** It is unclear how the extent of aircraft losses may affect DOD's ability to meet current operational requirements, maintain global force posture, and respond to unforeseen contingencies. Congress may assess whether losses in certain high-demand platforms that are aging and limited in number, such as the E-3 Sentry, create capability gaps or increase risk in other theaters.
- **Industrial base capacity.** Congress may assess whether current production lines and supply chains are capable of replacing lost aircraft within time frames needed to meet DOD operational requirements. Congress may seek information about the extent to which competing demands—including foreign military sales or production constraints—may affect DOD's ability to regenerate capacity.
- **Operational risk.** Reported losses may provide insights into the survivability of U.S. aircraft in contested environments. Congress may assess whether reported losses reflect changes in the threat environment or in adversary capabilities. Congress may also assess whether any changes to the threat might signal the need to adjust U.S. operational concepts, tactics, techniques, procedures, or basing posture.

Author Information

Jennifer DiMascio
Analyst in U.S. Defense Policy
Joshua Korzilius
U.S. Air Force Fellow

Daniel M. Gettinger
Analyst in U.S. Defense Policy

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.