Iran fires some 300 drones, missiles at Israel in first-ever direct attack; 99% downed

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Iran on Saturday night launched a large wave of around 300 attack drones and missiles from its territory toward the Jewish state, in the first-ever direct attack on Israel by the Islamic Republic, triggering air raid sirens throughout the country early Sunday as the military worked to intercept the Iranian projectiles.

IDF Spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari first confirmed at 11 p.m. that the attack, anticipated for several days, had begun. He later said Iran also fired missiles at Israel, while “numerous” fighter jets were in the sky countering Tehran’s attacks.

Sirens began sounding in southern Israeli communities around 1:42 a.m., and soon after extended to large swaths of the country. Loud booms sounded across the north and the south as well as in Jerusalem and many towns across the West Bank.

The Magen David Adom ambulance service said its medics were treating a young girl in southern Israel who was wounded by shrapnel following the interception of an Iranian ballistic missile over the area.

The 7-year-old girl, from a Bedouin town near Arad, was taken to Soroka Hospital in Beersheba, where she was listed in serious condition.

There were no other reports of injuries as a result of the Iranian attack.

Iran’s Revolutionary Guards confirmed launching dozens of drones and missiles against specific targets in Israel, Iranian state media quoted a statement by the elite force as saying. The state-run IRNA news agency quoted an anonymous official saying that ballistic missiles were launched as part of the attack.

Hagari said that in total, Iran launched more than 300 projectiles at Israel, comprising 170 drones, 30 cruise missiles, and 120 ballistic missiles, and that 99% of them had been intercepted by air defenses.

“This is a very significant strategic achievement,” he said in a morning press statement.

“The Iranian threat met the aerial and technological superiority of the IDF, combined with a strong fighting coalition, which together intercepted the vast majority of the threats,” Hagari said.

All 170 drones and 30 cruise missiles were downed outside of the country’s borders by the Israeli Air Force and its allies, he said. Not one drone or cruise missile managed to enter Israeli airspace.

The IDF said that the long-range Arrow air defense system managed to knock down the “vast majority” of the 120 ballistic missiles, although some penetrated Israel’s defenses and struck the Nevatim Airbase in southern Israel.

At Nevatim, “slight damage” was caused to infrastructure, but the airbase was running as usual, Hagari said.

“As you can see now, the base is functioning and continues to perform its tasks. In the picture, you can see the runway at Nevatim,” he said, showing live footage from the airbase during his press statement Sunday morning.

“Iran thought it would be able to paralyze the base and thus damage our air capabilities, but it failed. Air Force planes continue to take off and land from the base, and leave for offense and defense missions, including the Adir (F-35) planes that are now returning from a base defense mission and soon you will see them landing,” he said.

Sirens had sounded across Israel as a result of the Arrow interceptor missiles being launched and fears of falling shrapnel, according to the IDF.

The IDF’s Home Front Command later announced Israelis nationwide no longer need to stay near protected rooms, but said restrictions on gatherings and the cancellation of all educational activities and school trips remained in force as announced earlier.

Three US officials said the American military shot down Iranian drones headed toward Israel, without disclosing how many were shot down or the precise locations. Security sources told Reuters that US forces operating from undisclosed bases in the region shot down a number of Iranian drones in Sweida and Deraa provinces in southern Syria near the Jordanian border.

Jordanian jets downed dozens of Iranian drones flying across northern and central Jordan heading to Israel, two regional security sources said in a dramatic show of support from Amman, which has heavily criticized Israel’s prosecution of its war against Hamas in Gaza.

The sources said the drones were brought down in the air on the Jordanian side of the Jordan Valley and were heading in the direction of Jerusalem. Others were intercepted close to the Iraqi-Syrian border. They gave no further details.

Britain said Royal Air Force jets in the Middle East “will intercept any airborne attacks within range of our existing missions, as required.”

“In response to increased Iranian threats and the growing risk of escalation in the Middle East, the UK Government has been working with partners across the region to encourage de-escalation and prevent further attacks,” the statement added.

The incoming attack led Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon to shut down their airspace for several hours. Israel also announced that its airspace would shutter as of Sunday at 12:30 a.m. until an unspecified time, leading to various flight cancellations. Flights at Israel’s Ben Gurion Airport resumed at 7:30 a.m.

Egyptian military and security sources said Egypt’s air defenses were on alert. They added that Egypt’s military General Command formed a team to monitor the situation and make any necessary decisions regarding the country’s airspace.

Syria also put on high alert its Russian-made Pantsir ground-to-air defense systems around the capital Damascus and major bases in the event of an Israeli strike, Syrian army sources told Reuters, explaining they expected Israel to retaliate against army bases and installations where pro-Iranian militia were based.

Iranian Defense Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani meanwhile threatened a firm response to any country that “opens its airspace or territory for attacks on Iran by Israel,” Iran’s semi-official Mehr news agency reported.

Shortly after midnight, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and top defense leaders convened at military headquarters in Tel Aviv for a security assessment.

A “senior Israeli official” was later quoted by Channel 12 news pledging an “unprecedented response” to Iran’s attack and urging Israelis not to go to bed due to what was coming Tehran’s way.

The network also reported that the security cabinet authorized the war cabinet to make decisions regarding Israel’s response to the Iran attack. The decision meant that the war cabinet would not have to seek security cabinet approval for any moves it might make, thereby streamlining the process when quick decisions are required.

In an earlier press statement, Hagari said the Air Force was tracking the drones, while noting that they would take several hours to reach the country. He said there would be GPS disruptions as the military works to intercept the drones.

“The defense and offense systems of the Israeli Air Force are on alert, and dozens of planes are in the skies — prepared and ready,” said Hagari, adding: “We have an excellent aerial defense array, but the defense is not hermetic.”

Sirens will only sound if the drones enter Israeli airspace, at the relevant locations, Hagari said. He added that the IDF will seek to intercept the targets as early as possible.

He added that the military would update the public if there were any additional attacks that require a separate warning.

Channel 12 news said the US was the first to identify the launch and immediately notified Israel, leading to a flurry of activity in recent hours in Israel and its surroundings that led to widespread public assessment that an attack was imminent.

State-linked media in Iran reported that a second wave of drones had been launched at Israel.

Two security sources in Iraq said dozens of drones had been spotted flying from Iran toward Israel over Iraqi airspace in what Iranian Press TV called “extensive drone strikes” by the Revolutionary Guards.

Channel 12 aired video from Iraq that purported to show a wave of drones passing overhead in the night sky. Several such videos were shared on social media.

Earlier in the evening, presaging the attack, the White House announced that US President Joe Biden would cut short a weekend trip to Delaware to hold consultations with his national security team on the potential Iranian strike on Israel.

“I just met with my national security team for an update on Iran’s attacks against Israel. Our commitment to Israel’s security against threats from Iran and its proxies is ironclad,” Biden wrote on X, formerly Twitter, after returning to the White House.

Biden’s defense secretary, Lloyd Austin, called his Israeli counterpart Yoav Gallant for the second time in three days to discuss US support for Israel’s defense, the Pentagon said.

“Secretary Austin made clear that Israel could count on full US support to defend Israel against any attacks by Iran and its regional proxies,” read the statement.

The two later spoke again following the Iranian attack, with Gallant’s office saying he informed Austin “about Israel’s defense actions.”

The minister also thanked Austin for standing by Israel’s side, and “emphasized that the defense establishment maintains maximum readiness against further attack attempts.”

National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan also spoke with his counterpart Tzachi Hanegbi to reinforce Washington’s “ironclad commitment” to Israel’s security.

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak denounced Iran’s “reckless” attack against Israel, which he said showed that it was “intent on sowing chaos in its own backyard.”

“These strikes risk inflaming tensions and destabilizing the region. Iran has once again demonstrated that it is intent on sowing chaos in its own backyard,” Sunak said in a statement.

“The UK will continue to stand up for Israel’s security and that of all our regional partners, including Jordan and Iraq.”

France’s Foreign Minister Stephane Sejourne condemned Iran’s attack as a “new level” in the threat to security.

“France condemns with the greatest firmness the attack launched by Iran against Israel,” he said on the platform X.

“In deciding to take this unprecedented action, Iran has reached a new level of destabilization and is risking a military escalation,” he added, reiterating France’s commitment to Israel’s security.

Before the incoming attack was confirmed, the IDF’s Home Command issued new guidelines shuttering all schools and educational activity the next day — action that would not affect most schoolchildren, who started their vacation ahead of the Passover holiday at the weekend.

In addition to the closure of educational facilities, the military announced it would be forbidden for more than 1,000 people to assemble outdoors.

The IDF also canceled its planned enlistment day Sunday amid the Iranian attack on Israel. New conscripts will receive a new date for their draft at a later time.

Residents of the northern Golan Heights, the Nevatim area of southern Israel, Dimona, and Eilat, were instructed to remain close to bomb shelters until further notice.

“We have been at war on several fronts for over six months,” said Maj. Gen. Rafi Milo, the chief of the IDF Home Front Command, said in a video statement stressing that civilians should continue to follow its guidelines.

“Throughout the war we have faced and have confronted a large number of challenges in a very wide variety of threats, we learned and improved. We are prepared and strong in both defense and offense,” he said

“In light of the situational assessment, we have decided to change the defensive guidelines. Starting tomorrow, throughout the country, there will be no educational activity. Also, gatherings of over 1,000 people are prohibited,” Milo continued.

“You are required to continue to vigilantly adhere to the guidelines, they may change based on the situational assessment. So far, your conduct and adherence to the guidelines has been exceptional, keep it up, it saves lives,” he said.

“The alert system is prepared and ready, together with the heads of the authorities and the emergency response organizations, we will overcome this challenge,” Milo added.

As Israel braced for the Iranian drones and missiles, warning sirens sounded in the northern community of Snir, as the Hezbollah terror group claimed to have fired dozens of rockets from Lebanon at an Israeli army base in the Golan Heights.

The Iran-backed Hezbollah has been carrying out daily attacks on Israel amid the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip.

Security firm Ambrey said Yemen’s Houthi rebels had launched multiple drones at Israel in coordination with Iran, adding that the projectiles were likely timed to reach Israel simultaneously.

“Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVS) were reportedly launched by the Huthis toward Israel. The UAVs were launched in coordination with Iran,” the company said. “Israeli ports are assessed to be potential targets,” it added, and warned of “collateral damage” to shipping.

According to Hagari, drones launched from Yemen and Iraq amid the Iranian attack also failed to reach Israel.

Tensions between Israel and Iran had reached a new high in recent days as the Islamic Republic vowed to avenge seven Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps members, including two generals, who were killed in an alleged Israeli airstrike on a building near Tehran’s consulate in Damascus on April 1.

“In response to the numerous crimes committed by the Zionist regime, including the attack on the consular section… the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps fired dozens of missiles and drones at specific targets inside the occupied territories (Israel),” state television quoted an IRGC statement as saying as the strikes on Israel were announced.

Operation Honest Promise was “being carried out with the approval of the Supreme National Security Council under the supervision of the General Staff of the Armed Forces,” the IRGC statement said.

Within minutes of the launch, the account on X of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei reposted his pledge that the “evil (Israeli) regime will be punished.”

Defense Minister Gallant said in a video statement that Israel had “added new capabilities, on land, in the air, at sea, in intelligence, within the State of Israel, and together with our partners, led by the US,” in preparation for attacks from the “terror state” Iran.

Citing unnamed sources, CNN reported Saturday that the US expected Iran to target multiple sites inside Israel and in the region in the coming days, with one of the sources cited as saying that the US had observed Iran preparing as many as 100 cruise missiles to strike Israel. A senior US administration official told CNN that Iran’s proxies could be involved in the attack as well.

Also citing unnamed sources, Channel 12 reported that by the Israeli security establishment’s estimation, Iran would strike military rather than civilian targets.

On Saturday morning, the IRGC seized a Portuguese-flagged cargo ship, at least partially Israel-owned, near the Strait of Hormuz.

Following the incident, Foreign Minister Israel Katz called “on the European Union and the free world” to designate the IRGC as a terrorist organization and slap sanctions on Iran.

“The ayatollah regime of Khamenei is a criminal regime that supports Hamas’s crimes and is now conducting a pirate operation in violation of international law,” said Katz.

Several international entities have made adjustments to regular business amid the expected Iranian attacks.

Australia’s Qantas and Germany’s Lufthansa airlines on Saturday announced they would reroute flights in the Middle East, with the German airline saying it would avoid Iranian airspace altogether until Tuesday.

Canada on Saturday warned its citizens to avoid all travel to Israel, Gaza, and the West Bank, as Ottawa upgraded its risk assessment in the region.

The Netherlands announced it would keep its embassy in Tehran closed on Sunday, and would decide then whether or not to reopen on Monday.