

# [***As Iran attacks Israel, Biden confronts an escalating Middle East crisis he had hoped to avoid***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BSY-HBP1-DY7V-G000-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; For President Joe Biden, an [*attack on Israel launched from Iranian soil*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/13/middleeast/iran-drones-attack-israel-intl-latam/index.html) amounts to a scenario he'd greatly sought to avoid since the start of the current Middle East conflict.

The reprisals heighten the risk of a wider regional conflict that could directly draw in the United States, along with other countries.

And they place Biden - again - in the tenuous position of pledging stalwart support for Israel while also trying to prevent a new conflagration from exploding with the United States involved.

What comes next is unknown. In the immediate aftermath of Iran's attacks, American officials acknowledged they were entering uncharted territory. One significant question mark is how proxies might potentially join Iranian efforts to target Israel and add a new layer of unpredictability. And with Israel's plans for a response still being formed, Biden administration officials are expected to continue advising their Israeli counterparts - with the desire for containment in mind.

In a call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Saturday night, in which Biden told Netanyahu to consider Saturday a win because the US assessed Iran's attacks had been largely unsuccessful and demonstrated Israel's superior military capability, Biden made clear that the US will not participate in any offensive operations against Iran in response, a senior administration official told CNN.

But in the hours following Iran's attack, it became clear the president faces a severe challenge putting a lid on the flare-up between Iran and Israel and stopping a full-scale regional war breaking out.

Israel will respond to Iran's attack, but the scope of that response has yet to be determined, an Israeli official told CNN's Jeremy Diamond on Sunday.

The official said Israel is yet to determine whether to try to "break all the dishes" or do something more measured.

Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant warned that the confrontation with Iran is [*"not over yet."*](https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/israel-hamas-war-gaza-news-04-14-24/h_9c12fbfd5c56e3a9937e8e10a1c7bc0c) The country's response options are expected to be discussed in detail during a meeting of Israel's war cabinet meeting on Sunday.

The Commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Hossein Salami warned that Tehran would respond directly if Israel retaliates saying a "new equation" had been created.

Biden is also operating within the fraught ***politics*** of an [*election year*](https://www.cnn.com/election/2024), lending outsized importance to his upcoming decisions. The eruption of the [*Israel-Hamas war*](https://www.cnn.com/world/middleeast/israel) on October 7 has hurt Biden at home, eroding his support with key constituencies as he has declined to call for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza.

One of the reasons Biden returned urgently to the White House from his beach house in Delaware Saturday afternoon was the ongoing nature of the attack, one official said, with the Situation Room better equipped for real-time monitoring of events.

Administration officials saw Iran's attacks on Israel Saturday as disproportionate to Israel's strikes in Damascus that prompted the retaliation, a US official told CNN.

That view has been an important factor in the discussions taking place in the White House throughout the day on next steps, particularly as Biden is set on preventing a full-scale regional conflict from erupting.

There is also a recognition that what Israel is likely to do in response will depend on a full damage assessment, including potential casualties, so the Biden administration's advice to Israel will depend on that picture coming into focus, the official added.

In the immediate aftermath of the Israeli strikes in Syria that killed top Iranian commanders, US officials monitored Iran gearing up to launch a major attack on Israel, seeing it as inevitable. As the US, in close consultation with Israel, sought to figure out exactly how, when and where exactly Iran would retaliate, administration officials never fully ruled out Iran trying to strike inside Israel as well as American personnel and assets in the region.

The most likely "worst case scenario," one senior administration official said in the days leading up to Iran's Saturday attacks, was a direct attack by Iran on Israel, and the eruption of a state-on-state conflict that could very well prompt the beginning of a wider regional conflict that the US has been working to prevent since the immediate aftermath of Hamas' October 7 attacks.

Despite his current tensions with Netanyahu over the war in Gaza, Biden and his top officials have sought over the past week to diminish any daylight between the US and Israel when it comes to Israel's defense against Iran.

In the hours before Iran launched its attack, the US defense secretary and national security adviser spoke with their counterparts in Israel to reiterate that support. And last week, Gen. Erik Kurilla, the commander of US Central Command, was in Israel discussing contingencies with officials ahead of the expected attack.

Biden kept to his Friday promise that "the US is devoted to the defense of Israel," with defense officials telling CNN that the US military successfully intercepted some Iranian missiles on Saturday.

Contained within the conversations about preparations for Iran's attack and coordinating a response were also implicit encouragement to the Israeli government to not allow the situation to spiral out of control if Iran's response was limited in nature, officials familiar with the matter said.

The US also sent messages publicly and privately to Iran warning about escalating the crisis further and pressed European and Arab allies to use their own leverage with Tehran to deliver similar messages.

As Iran's plans to attack Israel grew clearer, American officials increasingly assessed that Tehran was not seeking direct conflict with the United States. Ahead of the drone attack launched by Iran on Saturday, US officials said they did not expect the targets to include American forces in the region.

That is a change from earlier in the conflict, when Iran-backed militias regularly attacked US troops in the Middle East, including in a strike that killed three Americans stationed in Jordan. After the US launched retaliatory strikes, the attacks by Iranian proxies waned.

Yet the simmering tensions between Iran and Israel have not let up. Without any direct channels of communication between the two countries, the risk of miscalculation is amplified.

CNN's Oren Liebermann contributed reporting.

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