

Research Briefing

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Israel-Iran April 2024: UK and international response

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Summary

On 13 April 2024, Iran launched more than 330 drones and missiles against Israel in what it said was in retaliation for an attack on its consulate in Syria. The Israeli Defence Forces say that 99% were intercepted and that minimal damage was inflicted. One Israeli civilian was severely injured.

Since the [7 October 2023 assault on Israel by Hamas](#) (officially designated a terrorist organisation by the United States and the UK), Iran-supported armed and terrorist groups have carried out attacks against Israel and US bases in the Middle East. The 13 April action was Iran's first direct attack on Israel since the Islamic Republic of Iran was established in 1979.

The UK, alongside the United States, European partners and the G7 group condemned the Iranian attack as escalatory and called for restraint. The UK, US and France provided military support in intercepting Iran's attack.

This briefing provides background to the attack, existing and new sanctions against Iran, debates over proscribing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist group in the UK, and information on the Israeli response.

Why did Iran launch the attack?

On 1 April 2024, [Iran's consulate in Damascus was attacked](#). Iran accused Israel of conducting the strike, which Israel has neither confirmed nor denied. The strike killed seven members of Iran's [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC), a 200,000-strong armed force of the Iranian state which also works overseas to support Iranian proxies and other allied groups and coordinate military action.

[Iran has a long-standing presence in Syria](#) to support President Bashar al-Assad during the Syrian civil war and to maintain a [corridor to provide Hezbollah in Lebanon with weapons](#) to threaten and [attack Israel](#). Israel has conducted several attacks on Iranian targets in Syria in recent years. Attacks escalated in late 2023 following the Hamas assault of 7 October and missile and other fire from Hezbollah against northern Israel. Iran's Government said [it would respond to the strike](#). This [took the form of the Iranian missile and drone attack](#) on 13 April.

How has the UK responded?

The UK already has [RAF and other military assets in the Middle East region](#) as part of Operation Shader (against Islamic State/Daesh) in Syria and Iraq. Additional UK forces have been deployed since 7 October 2023 to deter

conflict in the region from escalating. The UK Government says some of these additional [RAF jets and refuelling aircraft intercepted several drones targeting Israel](#) during the attack on 13 April, alongside the United States and Israel. [Jordan also destroyed some projectiles](#) over its airspace.

The government said it will implement the [“strongest” sanctions against Iran](#), including [new trade sanctions against Iran](#) to limit its drone production. The [UK Government has said it “does not support a retaliatory strike by Israel”](#) (except in self-defence). It called for de-escalation and has urged Israel to focus on securing the release of hostages held by Hamas in Gaza.

In July 2024, Foreign Secretary David Lammy said on the actions of the IRGC and UK response, he would [“review the context of terrorist activity and state threats”](#), including from Iran, over the “coming weeks and months”.

How are the US, G7 and UN responding?

President Biden says [US support for Israel is “ironclad”](#) and convened a G7 meeting to establish a “united diplomatic response” to Iran.

G7 leaders have issued [statements condemning the Iranian attack](#), committing to further sanctions and other measures against Iran, and calling for countries [to stop supplying Iran’s missile and drone programmes](#). European Union leaders will [implement further sanctions against Iranian drones](#). The US is applying [new sanctions](#) and called for [further UN action](#).

The UN Security Council met on 14 April. The UN Secretary General, [António Guterres, condemned the escalation by Iran](#) and called for an immediate cessation of hostilities. No statements or resolutions were debated.

Risks of further escalation

On 13 April, the Iranian Government said it now considered the issue “concluded” but if Israel retaliates [Iran’s next action will be “much stronger”](#). Iran maintains a network of proxy and aligned groups in the Middle East: Hezbollah in Lebanon continues to [launch attacks against northern Israel](#) and the [Houthis in Yemen are targeting shipping in the Red Sea](#). Militias have also been [attacking US military bases](#) in Iraq and Syria since October 2023.

On 19 April, unnamed US officials said [Israel launched a missile against Iran](#) in response to Iran’s action. No damage or casualties have been confirmed and media reports say [Iran has “downplayed the strike”](#). The Israeli Government has also [called for more sanctions against Iran](#).

The Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza continues. Talks on the release of hostages taken by Hamas and for a ceasefire are ongoing.

1

Iran–Israeli actions of April 2024

Background on Middle East conflicts in 2023/24

Following the Hamas assault on Israel on 7 October 2023, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shia militias in Iraq and Syria, and the Houthis in Yemen and the Red Sea have been attacking Israel, US military bases in the Middle East, and civilian shipping. These groups have received support from Iran. The following Commons Library research briefings provide more information on the topics:

- [Israel-Hamas conflict 2023/24: UK actions and response](#)
- [Israel-Hamas conflict 2023/24: US, UN, EU and regional response](#)
- [Houthi attacks in the Red Sea 2024: UK and international response](#)
- [Iran’s influence in the Middle East.](#)

1.1

Israeli attacks on Iranian personnel in Syria

Iran’s long-standing presence in Syria

Syria is a long-standing ally of the Iranian government, and Iranian advisors have been active in providing military and other support to the Government of Bashar al-Assad during the country’s civil war.¹

In addition to supporting President Assad, Iran uses its presence in Syria to facilitate the flow of arms through Syria to support armed groups such as [Hezbollah in Lebanon](#) (a proscribed terrorist organisation in the UK), which has been conducting attacks against northern Israel since 7 October 2023.²

Reflecting the military threat posed to Israel, the Israeli Defence Forces have long carried out airstrikes against Hezbollah and the Iranian [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) (IRGC) based in Syria as acts of deterrence.³ Analysts judge that Israeli strikes against Hezbollah and the IRGC in Syria

¹ See Commons Library research briefing, [Syria’s civil war in 2023](#), section 2.3.

² [Where Syria fits into Iran’s Middle East strategy](#), Radio Free Liberty Europe, 24 February 2024; Brookings Institute, [Will Israel and Iran go to war in Syria?](#), 5 October 2018; Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), [The escalating conflict with Hezbollah in Syria](#), 20 June 2018

³ Arab Center Washington DC, [Israel-Iran shadow war in Syria intensifies](#), 23 March 2022

increased during the Israel-Hamas conflict of 2023/24, in response to Hezbollah's attacks against Israel in support of Hamas.⁴

Strike on Iranian consulate

On 1 April 2024, seven senior officers and advisers of the IRGC were killed in a strike on the Iranian consulate (diplomatic building) in Syria.⁵ These included a senior figure in the [IRGC's Qud's Force](#), which operates outside Iran and coordinates support for armed groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon.

The IRGC is an Iranian state military and intelligence service, founded after the Iranian revolution of 1979 as a balance to Iran's regular armed forces. The UK currently sanctions the IRGC in its entirety. There is ongoing debate in the UK on whether to proscribe it as a terrorist group: see below, section 3.3.

Iran said it would respond to the consulate strike

Iran accused Israel of carrying out the attack on the consulate. Israel has neither confirmed nor denied involvement.⁶

The Iranian President, Ebrahim Raisi, said the attack "would not go unanswered". The Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, Mohammed Bagher Ghalibaf, said Iran would carry out a "severe punishment" against Israel.⁷

The UN Security Council did not issue a collective statement on the strike

The UN Security Council discussed the consulate strike on 2 April. Russia, which alongside Iran provides military support to the Assad government in Syria, condemned the consulate attack and said it was one of a series of "incessant missile and bomb attacks" by Israel in Syria.⁸

Representatives of France, the UK and United States said that consulates should be protected. They also said Iran must also end its "destabilising" support for Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza, Hezbollah in Syria and Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and militias in Syria and Iraq.

⁴ Chatham House, [The strike on Iran's consulate in Syria could be the spark that ignites the Middle East](#), 12 April 2024; [Iran's guard pull officers from Syria after Israeli strikes](#), Reuters, 1 February 2024; [Five IRGC officers \[...\] killed in Damascus strike blamed on Israel](#), 20 January 2024

⁵ [Iran accuses Israel of killing generals in Syria strike](#), BBC News, 1 April 2024

⁶ As above

⁷ [Israel's heinous crime will not go answered: Raisi](#), Times of Tehran, 2 April 2024

⁸ This section from UN, [Briefing security council on reported Israeli attacks against Iran's diplomatic premises in Syria \[...\]](#), 2 April 2024 and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), [The UK is deeply concerned about the potential for escalation in the Middle East](#), 2 April 2024

The UN Security Council did not issue a collective press statement condemning the strike on the consulate, as requested by Russia, due to the lack of consensus among members of the council.⁹

Speaking separately to the UN meeting, the United States Administration said its longstanding policy is that “Israel has freedom of action to protect itself and defend itself in Syria and elsewhere”.¹⁰

The “shadow war” between Israel and Iran

Iran and Israel have fought what has been described as a “shadow war” or “war between the wars” for decades through attacks on land, sea, air, and cyberspace. Analysts warn recent actions have brought this into the open.¹¹

This “shadow war” has included Israeli attacks on Iran-linked sites in Syria, cyberattacks against Iran’s nuclear programme, and targeting of IRGC and other leaders. Iran, through its allies and proxies groups, has presence and influence in Lebanon, Gaza, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, from which these armed and terrorist groups have long conducted attacks on Israel and US forces with one aim being to compel the US to leave the region. Iran has also conducted attacks on foreign shipping, threatening freedom of navigation.¹²

1.2

Iranian missile and drone attack on Iran

On 13 April 2024, the IRGC launched around 330 missiles and drones against Israel from Iran, flying over Syria, Jordan, and Iraq. These included around 120 ballistic missiles, 170 drones and 30 cruise missiles.¹³

Hezbollah in Lebanon, which is supported by Iran, also said it launched a series of strikes against Israeli positions in the occupied Golan Heights,¹⁴ while the Houthis in Yemen and Shia militias in Iraq also launched attacks.¹⁵ Hezbollah retains a large arsenal of missiles and rockets capable of targeting Israel, estimated to number over 100,000.¹⁶

⁹ [UN Security Council fails to condemn strike on Iran in Syria](#), Reuters, 3 April 2024

¹⁰ White House, [Background press call by senior administration officials \[...\]](#), 14 April 2024

¹¹ [Israel is ratcheting up its shadow war with Iran](#), The Economist, 4 April 2024; [Iran and Israel have a long history of clandestine attacks](#), New York Times, 2 April 2024

¹² US Institute for Peace, [Israel: The Iran threat and options](#), 11 September 2023 and [Timeline: Israeli attacks on Iran](#), 30 January 2023

¹³ [Israel says Iran launched more than 300 drones and missiles \[...\]](#), AP, 14 April 2024

¹⁴ [Hezbollah strikes Israeli military bases with dozens of rockets](#), Al Mayadeen, 14 April 2024

¹⁵ Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Large scale Iranian attack against Israel](#), 14 April 2024

¹⁶ [Lebanon’s Hezbollah: What weapons does it have?](#), Reuters, 15 April 2024

Iran has also been accumulating a substantive stockpile of missiles, rockets, and drones for several decades, many of which can target Israel.¹⁷ The UK, among other European states and the United States, sanctions Iran's missile, nuclear and other weapons programmes (see below, section 3).

Aside from a 2018 missile attack launched against the [Israeli-occupied Golan Heights](#) (recognised by the UK Government as Syrian territory) by Iranian forces based in Syria, Iran had not used its own missiles directly to attack Israel before.¹⁸ The 13 April action is the first time Iran has launched missiles directly at Israel from Iran and not through proxies or allies.

The Israeli Defence Forces say 99% of the missiles, drones and rockets were intercepted with only a “few” ballistic missiles entering Israel. Damage was limited, with an air force base in southern Israel sustaining minor damage. One civilian, a child, was seriously injured (others sustained minor injuries).¹⁹

The attack is the first time since 1991 that Israel has directly come under attack from another state (as opposed to an armed group). In 1991, Iraq under Saddam Hussein launched missiles against Israel during the First Gulf War (US-led coalition forces were already engaged militarily against Iraq).²⁰

Iranian seizure of civilian ship, 12 April 2024

On 12 April, Iran's IRGC also seized a commercial ship with links to Israel, MSC Aries, in the Strait of Hormuz.²¹ Iran has a history of targeting shipping in the region and had seized a ship, St Nikolas, in January 2024. It has also been providing support for the Houthis to target shipping in the Red Sea.²²

1.3

UK and foreign participation in Israeli defence

The Israeli military intercepted most of the attacks before they reached Israeli airspace through its “[Iron dome](#)” and other anti-missile systems used to track and intercept in-bound rockets. Israel was also supported by other states:

- The UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) says that RAF fighter jets were deployed over Iraq and Syria to shoot down Iranian drones.²³ The UK also provided intelligence and surveillance support.²⁴

¹⁷ CSIS, [The Iranian missile threat](#), 30 May 2019; US Institute for Peace, [Iran's missiles: Timeline of attacks](#), 12 April 2024

¹⁸ Washington Institute for Near East Policy, [Iran's miscalculated escalation in the Golan](#), 10 May 2018

¹⁹ [Young girl seriously injured in Iran attack](#), Times of Israel, 14 April 2024

²⁰ [Iraqi missiles strike Israel](#), The Guardian, 18 January 1991

²¹ [Iranian troops descend from helicopter to seize Israel-linked ship](#), 13 April 2024

²² Commons Library research briefing, [UK and international response to Houthis](#), section 2

²³ [RAF shot down 'a number of drones' in Iran's attack on Israel](#), Sky News, 14 April 2024

²⁴ HC Deb, [15 April 2024](#), c23

- The MoD also said that it had deployed additional RAF jets and air refuelling tankers to the region before 13 April to support the [existing Operation Shader](#) (the UK’s counter-Daesh/Islamic State operation).²⁵
- Speaking on [the Today programme](#) on 15 April, the Foreign Secretary Lord Cameron said that the UK’s role should not be overstated and that the UK had provided aircraft “when the Americans asked us to backfill for them” on Operation Shader. Those aircraft had also been given approval to shoot down any drones or missiles coming into their area of operation over Iraq and Syria.²⁶
- The US Department of Defence says it intercepted “dozens” of missiles and drones launched against Israel.²⁷
- French aircraft also participated in patrol operations, according to the Israeli Defence Forces.²⁸
- Jordan’s forces intercepted some projectiles over their airspace.²⁹
- Saudi Arabia and the UAE reportedly provided intelligence.³⁰

US, UK and European military assets in the region

Since the Hamas assault on Israel on 7 October, the UK has been among the countries to deploy additional military assets, including personnel, Royal Navy ships and aircraft, to the Middle East as deterrence against escalation by Iran and its aligned armed groups and proxies. Additional military forces were also deployed in the week running up to Iran’s attack on 13 April 2024.

Sections 3.2 and 5.2 of the Commons Library research briefing, [Israel-Hamas conflict 2023/24](#) and sections 3.2 and 4.1 of the [UK and international response to Houthis in the Red Sea 2024](#), provide more information on what military assets have been deployed to the region by the UK and its partners.

²⁵ Ministry of Defence, [UK military activity in the Middle East](#), 13 April 2024

²⁶ BBC Sounds, [Radio 4 Today Programme 14 April 2024](#), from 2:12:00

²⁷ US Department of Defence, [Statement by Secretary of Defence](#), 13 April 2024

²⁸ [IDF: France helped in defence of Israel \[...\]](#), Times of Israel, 14 April 2024

²⁹ [Jordan “dealt with projectiles” to protect own safety \[...\]](#), BBC Monitoring, 14 April 2024. Jordan signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1994.

³⁰ [How the US forged a fragile eastern alliance to repel Iran \[...\]](#), Wall Street Journal, 15 April 2024

1.4

Initial statements on retaliatory Israeli action

Israeli statements on potential responses

The Israeli war cabinet met to consider a range of responses to Iran’s missile attack, but no public decisions were issued. An attack on Iran on 19 April has been widely linked to Israel (see below, section 1.5).³¹ A military response was expected: following the Iranian attack, Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz said that “if Iran attacks Israel, Israel will attack Iran”.³²

The Israeli Foreign Ministry has also urged countries to impose additional sanctions to ensure “Iran [...] pays a price for its aggression”. These include:

- Recognizing the IRGC as a terrorist organisation (neither the UK nor European Union proscribe the IRGC as a terrorist group, while the US did so in 2019, but all three apply sanctions).³³
- Applying new sanctions against Iran’s missile programme.
- Applying the “snapback” provisions of the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran (see below, section 3.1), which would include an UN embargo on conventional arms transfers from Iran (this embargo expired in 2020).³⁴

The Israeli Foreign Ministry also emphasised that the attack demonstrated why Iran “must never obtain nuclear weapons” (Iran has consistently denied that its nuclear programme is for military purposes). While talks on restoring the nuclear agreement with Iran have stalled since 2022, the UK, US, EU, and other states agree that Iran should never have nuclear weapons.³⁵

The US will not participate in any attack on Iran

As summarised by US Administration officials, President Biden told Prime Minister Netanyahu that the United States has an “ironclad commitment” to Israel and that the country “came out far ahead” in its exchange with Iran.³⁶

Israel took out the IRGC’s — the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ leadership in the Levant. Iran tried to respond, and Israel had clearly demonstrated its military superiority, defeating this attack, particularly in coordination with — with partners.

³¹ [Israel at war: What role does its war cabinet play?](#), DW, 16 April 2024

³² [Israel’s foreign minister says reprisal against Iran is possible](#), Wall Street Journal, 14 April 2024

³³ White House, [Statement from the President on the designation of the IRGC \[...\]](#), 8 April 2019

³⁴ Commons Library research briefing, [What is the status of the Iran nuclear deal?](#), section 4.3

³⁵ Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Large scale Iranian attack against Israel](#), 14 April 2024; FCDO, [We remained determined that Iran must never develop a nuclear weapon \[...\]](#), 18 December 2023

³⁶ This section from White House, [Background press call by senior administration officials \[...\]](#), 14 April 2024

The US Administration said while Israel can count on its full support in case of further attacks by Iran or its allies, its “goal remains to de-escalate immediately and halt further attacks”. It said the United States will “not be part of any response” the Israelis undertake against Iran.

The US was also in discussions with Israel on its potential response which it said should be thought “carefully and strategically about”.

UK opposition to a “retaliatory strike” on Iran

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has condemned the “reckless attack” by Iran and said that its scale risked “catastrophic” consequences for Israeli civilians and regional security.³⁷

He said that UK action will be guided by three priorities:

- Ensuring the security of Israel
- Supporting a two-state solution and reforms to the Palestinian Authority so it can govern the West Bank and Gaza
- Removing Hamas from Gaza and ending the conflict there.³⁸

Mr Sunak also noted the increasing ties between Russia and Iran, with Iran providing Russia with drones for use in Ukraine. He said the UK would continue oppose their actions, in both Ukraine and the Middle East.³⁹

In a phone call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, on 16 April Mr Sunak “stressed escalation [following the Iranian attack] was in no one’s interest and [...] this was a moment for calmer heads to prevail”.⁴⁰

Speaking on 15 April, Foreign Secretary Lord Cameron said that the UK Government does not support a retaliatory strike by Israel and called for de-escalation:

We are saying very clearly we don’t support a retaliatory strike. We don’t think they should make one [...] if they [Israel] come under attack, that’s a different issue [...]

What we are saying very clearly to the Israelis is ‘we respect your right to take action, you are an independent, sovereign country’ [...]

³⁷ Prime Minister’s Office, [PM statement on Iranian regime’s reckless attack \[...\]](#), 13 April 2024; HC Deb, [15 April 2024](#), c23

³⁸ HC Deb, [15 April 2024](#), c23

³⁹ HC Deb, [15 April 2024](#), c24

⁴⁰ [Prime Minister’s Office, PM call with Prime Minister Netanyahu](#), 16 April 2024

The right thing to do, the tough thing to do now is not to escalate further but to switch the focus back on to getting the hostages [held by Hamas] home [...]⁴¹

Lord Cameron also condemned the Iranian attack in a call with the Iranian Foreign Minister, Amir-Abdollahian, on 14 April. Lord Cameron told the Minister that “Iran must stop these reckless attacks” and “deescalate”.⁴²

Iranian statements and actions

Iran’s mission to the UN said that its attack was a direct response to the strike on its consulate in Syria, and it now considered the matter “concluded”.⁴³

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi warned that the “tiniest invasion” by Israel in response to the attack will produce a “massive and harsh response” by Iran.⁴⁴ Iranian Foreign Minister, Amir Abdollahian, also said that if US bases or the airspace of Middle Eastern states were used to attack Iran, “we would have no choice but to target American bases in those countries”.⁴⁵ He also warned that:

In case the Israeli regime embarks on adventurism again and takes action against the interests of Iran, the next response from us will be immediate and at a maximum level.⁴⁶

Iran and its network of allies maintain a significant capacity to attack Israeli, American and other targets in the Middle East, as well as further abroad.⁴⁷

On 14 April, Iran also summoned the ambassadors of the UK, France, and Germany to question what it termed their “irresponsible stance” on its attack. All three countries have condemned the Iranian attack on Israel.⁴⁸

Statements by Arab states

In the Gulf Cooperation Council, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, all issued statements calling for restraint and to avoid military escalation. Egypt and Jordan have offered similar statements. In line with earlier statements issued by these states during the Israel-Hamas conflict, several also reiterated calls for a ceasefire in Gaza.⁴⁹

⁴¹ [“RAF jets could defend Israel again, says Lord Cameron”](#), (9:14) The Telegraph, 15 April 2024

⁴² Lord Cameron on X/Twitter, [Today I formally condemned in the strongest terms \[...\]](#), 14 April 2024

⁴³ [Iran to respond “more severely” if Israel reacts to embassy attack retaliation](#), 14 April 2024

⁴⁴ [Iran president warns of “massive” response](#), Asharq Al-Aswat, 17 April 2024

⁴⁵ [World leaders urge restraint as Israel weighs retaliation](#), New York Times, 15 April 2024

⁴⁶ [Iran’s military response will be “immediate and maximum level”](#), CNN, 18 April 2024

⁴⁷ Atlantic Council, [Four ways Iran could retaliate against Israel’s latest strike](#), 10 April 2024

⁴⁸ [Iran summons the British, French and German ambassadors \[...\]](#), Reuters, 14 April 2024

⁴⁹ [Arab states call for “restraint” after Iran’s attack on Israel](#), BBC Monitoring, 15 April 2024

Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza

Fighting in Gaza continues. No pause was implemented following the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 2728, which called for an immediate ceasefire and the immediate and unconditional release of hostages by Hamas.⁵⁰

Negotiations between Israel and Hamas are ongoing.

1.5

Explosion in Iran, 19 April

On 19 April, two unnamed US officials were quoted in international media saying that Israel had [launched a missile striking Iran's Isfahan region](#) (where Iran has several military and nuclear facilities). An unnamed Israeli official said it was “intended to signal to Iran that Israel can attack its territory”.⁵¹

Israel has neither confirmed nor denied the attack. Iran has acknowledged that an explosion took place but says this was linked to its air defences intercepting drones. Iran's Foreign Minister told the media that “it has not been proved to us that there is a connection between these [attacks] and Israel”. This statement has been widely interpreted as meaning Iran will not respond any further. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken says the US was “not [...] involved in any offensive operations” by Israel.⁵²

Further reading and analysis on Iran's attack

- Atlantic Council, [Israel just conducted a limited strike on Iran. Is this the end of the tit for tat?](#), 19 April 2024
- Foreign Policy, [Iran shrugs off Israeli strike \[...\]](#), 19 April 2024
- International Institute for Strategic Studies, [Iran-Israel confrontation heads down perilous path](#), 18 April 2024
- US Institute for Peace, [Iran's attack and the new escalatory cycle in the Middle East](#), 16 April 2024
- Brookings Institute, [The impact of Iran's attack on Israel](#), 15 April 2024
- Chatham House, [Iran's attack on Israel was not the failure many claim but it has ended Israel's isolation](#), 15 April 2024

⁵⁰ Commons Library research briefing, [Israel-Hamas conflict 2023/24](#), section 4.2

⁵¹ This section from [Israeli missile hits Iran, US officials confirm](#), CBS News, 19 April 2024; [Iran's foreign minister downplays drone attack](#), Reuters, 20 April 2024

⁵² US State Department, [Secretary Antony Blinken at a solo press availability](#), 19 April 2024

- Middle East Institute, [\[...\] Israel should draw the right lessons from its success](#), 14 April 2024
- DW, [Why did some Arab countries appear to help Israel?](#), 14 April 2024

1.6

UK Parliament statements on Iran’s attack

[The Prime Minister made a statement in the Commons](#) on 15 April 2024.

The Leader of the Opposition, Keir Starmer, condemned the attack by Iran and backed the actions of the Government to defend Israel and the deployment of additional RAF forces to the region. He said the Labour Party supported measures to de-escalate and called on Israel to show restraint.⁵³

While stating nothing could justify Iran’s actions, he called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and the release of hostages, an increase in humanitarian aid to Gaza, and renewed diplomatic engagement. He also said the principle of not targeting diplomatic premises should be respected.⁵⁴

The Shadow Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, also renewed Labour’s call for the proscription of the IRGC (see section 3.4) and for additional sanctions against Iran, including its drones.⁵⁵

Scottish First Minister and Leader of the SNP, Humza Yousaf, condemned the Iranian action and called for a “political and diplomatic solution”.⁵⁶ The SNP leader in Westminster, Stephen Flynn, said that the “bedrock” of stopping regional escalation is an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.⁵⁷

The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Alicia Kearns, said Iran continues to pose a “significant threat”, and that the UK should develop a “comprehensive strategy” against Iran internationally to address its actions.⁵⁸ The Prime Minister committed to lead this action internationally.⁵⁹

Liberal Democrat Leader Sir Ed Davey condemned the Iranian attack and said that the UK must be focused on preventing escalation and arranging an immediate bilateral ceasefire and the release of hostages in Gaza.⁶⁰

⁵³ HC Deb, [15 April 2024](#), c25

⁵⁴ HC Deb, [15 April 2024](#), c25

⁵⁵ [Labour calls for further sanctions on Iran after attack](#), ITN, 14 April 2024

⁵⁶ [Humza Yousaf calls for ‘diplomatic’ solution after Iran strikes](#), The Herald, 14 April 2024

⁵⁷ Stephen Flynn MP on X/Twitter, [“Just as we rightly hold Israel to account \[...\]”](#), 14 April 2024

⁵⁸ Alicia Kearns MP X/Twitter, [“The threat from Iran as a de-establishing \[...\]”](#), 13 April 2024

⁵⁹ HC Deb, [15 April 2024](#), c27

⁶⁰ HC Deb, [15 April 2024](#), c28

2 Statements of G7, UN, Russia, and China

2.1 Statement of G7 leaders

Following the Iran attack, US President Joe Biden convened a meeting of G7 leaders on 14 April.

In addition to the United States and United Kingdom, the G7 includes Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the European Union.

The group issued a collective statement condemning the Iranian attack.⁶¹ The G7 also said it was ready to take further measures now and in response to further destabilising initiatives.

The group said they remained committed in Gaza to work “towards an immediate and sustainable ceasefire and the release of hostages by Hamas, and [to] deliver increased humanitarian assistance”.⁶²

The US said at the G7 it is seeking “a coordinated effort” on new sanctions targeting Iran. Discussions have included designating the IRGC as a terrorist group (which is currently not the case in the UK and European Union).⁶³ In a meeting of 19 April G7 leaders also reiterated their position that Iran should never be allowed to obtain a nuclear weapon and called on other states not to supply Iran with material for its drone and missile programmes.⁶⁴

G7 members also issued individual statements condemning Iran’s attack.⁶⁵

2.2 UN and UN Security Council

UN Secretary General statement

On 13 April, the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, condemned the “serious escalation” by Iran and called for an immediate cessation of hostilities. He called for all parties to exercise “maximum restraint” to avoid “major military confrontations on multiple fronts” in the region.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Prime Minister’s Office, [G7 statement on Iran’s attack against Israel](#), 14 April 2024

⁶² Prime Minister’s Office, [G7 statement on Iran’s attack against Israel](#), 14 April 2024

⁶³ White House, [Background press call by senior administration officials \[...\]](#), 14 April 2024

⁶⁴ FCDO, [G7 foreign minister’s meeting communiqué: Middle East](#), 19 April 2024

⁶⁵ [How world leaders responded to Iran’s drone attack on Israel](#), Euro News, 14 April 2024; [Iran’s attack on Israel: World leaders react](#), Reuters, 14 April 2024

⁶⁶ UN, [Statement by the Secretary General](#), 13 April 2024

He also said the principle of “inviolability of diplomatic and consular premises and personnel must be respected” (in reference to the 1 April strike on the Iranian consulate in Syria) and that “acts of reprisal involving the use of force are barred under international law” (Iran had claimed to act under self-defence provisions in the UN Charter).⁶⁷

Following the reported explosion in Iran on 19 April, the spokesperson for the Secretary General said he “condemns any action of retaliation”.⁶⁸

UN Security Council meeting

At Israel’s request, the UN Security Council met on 14 April 2024. No resolutions or statements were debated.⁶⁹

The Israeli representative condemned the attack and called for new sanctions against Iran and for the “[snapback sanctions under the 2015 nuclear agreement](#) to be applied (see below, section 3.1).

Iran’s delegate said the attack was in “self-defence” and “necessary and proportionate” and that Iran does not seek “escalation or war”.

The US condemned the Iranian attack and said the Security Council must act against Iranian support for Hezbollah, the Houthis, Hamas, and its transferring of drones to Russia. They said the US will be seeking additional measures to ensure the accountability of Iran at the UN.

The UK Ambassador to the UN condemned Iran’s attack and said Iran had long supported armed groups which are destabilising to the Middle East. She called for “all parties” to “exercise maximum restraint” and reiterated UK support for UN Security Council resolution 2728, for an immediate ceasefire and unconditional release of hostages in Gaza.⁷⁰

The French representative also condemned Iran and said they were committed to finding a settlement to the situation.

2.3

Response of Russia and China

Both China and Russia have been strengthening ties with Iran:

⁶⁷ UN, [Secretary Generals’ remarks to the Security Council \[...\]](#), 14 April 2024

⁶⁸ UN, [Statement attributable to the spokesperson for the Secretary General](#), 19 April 2024

⁶⁹ The below section is sourced from UN, [Warning Middle East at full scale conflict \[...\]](#), 14 April 2024

⁷⁰ FCDO, [The UK condemns unequivocally Iran’s reckless attack](#), 15 April 2024

- With Russia, this is primarily a security relationship: Iran has provided drones for use in Ukraine (both countries deny this).⁷¹
- China is an increasingly important economic partner. Despite US and other sanctions against Iran, China is the main market for Iranian oil.⁷²

Neither Russia nor China condemned Iran's attack on Israel, but both called for restraint:

- China said it was “deeply concerned” and that it was the “latest spillover” from the Israel-Hamas conflict. It said [UN Security Council Resolution 2728](#) for an immediate ceasefire and the unconditional release of hostages should be immediately implemented:⁷³
 - China's delegate to the UN Security Council also cited Iran's statement on the matter being “concluded”.⁷⁴
- Russia called on all sides to “show constraint” and said the lack of resolution to the conflict in Gaza would “lead to growth in instability”.⁷⁵
 - At the Security Council meeting on 14 April, Russia criticized other council members, arguing they should have agreed a Russian-drafted statement condemning the strike on the consulate on 1 April.
 - Russia's representative noted Iran's statement that it considers the matter “concluded” and called on Israel to reject the use of force.⁷⁶

Further reading on the response of China and Russia

- Chatham House, [Iran-Israel exchanges are test of China's influence in the Gulf](#), 19 April 2024
- Washington Institute, [China's response to Iran's attack is an opportunity for Washington](#) 16 April 2024
- [How the Kremlin stands to gain from Iran's attack on Israel](#), Radio Free Liberty Europe, 15 April 2024
- [Russian weapons help Iran harden defences against Israeli airstrike](#), The Washington Post, 15 April 2024

⁷¹ US Institute for Peace, [Iran-Russia collaboration on drones](#), 10 August 2023; [Iran admits providing drones to Russia but denies involvement in Ukraine](#), Politico, 5 November 2022

⁷² US Institute for Peace, [Iran's deepening strategic alliance with Russia](#), 25 April 2023; Atlantic Council, [China doesn't have as much leverage in the Middle East as one thinks \[...\]](#), 1 February 2024

⁷³ People's Republic of China embassy to Norway, [Foreign Ministry's spokesperson's remarks on Iranian attack on Israeli territory](#), 14 April 2024

⁷⁴ UN, [Warning Middle East at full scale conflict \[...\]](#), 14 April 2024

⁷⁵ [Russia urges 'restraint' after Iranian attack on Israel](#), The Moscow Times, 14 April 2024

⁷⁶ UN, [Warning Middle East at full scale conflict \[...\]](#), 14 April 2024

3 Current and potential sanctions on Iran

3.1 “Snapback” and nuclear agreement sanctions

In response to the Iranian attack, at the UN Security Council in April 2024 the Israeli Government called for the “snapback” measures in the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran to be implemented (see above, section 2.2). Restrictions on Iranian arms have gradually expired under the timetable of the agreement, and snapback measures would re-apply these restrictions.

What UN measures have expired?

The nuclear agreement with Iran (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)), intends to restrict Iran’s nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions relief. Under its terms, two restrictions on Iranian arms have expired:

- UN arms embargo, in 2020. This banned Iran from importing conventional weapons and any state from exporting most conventional weapons to Iran. In August 2020, China and Russia vetoed a US-proposed extension at the UN Security Council, while the UK and all other members except two abstained.⁷⁷ The UK supported an extension but said it abstained on the vote as “it was clear that it would not attract the support” of the council.⁷⁸
- Missiles and drones, in October 2023. This prohibited Iran from exporting or importing certain missiles, drones, and related technologies without the permission of the UN Security Council. Russia has said it would not observe the resolution; the UK and others have judged Russia to have broken the resolution by importing Iranian drones since 2022.⁷⁹

What are “snapback” measures?

Under the terms of the JCPOA, all previous UN sanctions related to Iran’s nuclear programme, including the embargo on conventional arms transfers and the restrictions on missile and drone technologies, can be re-imposed in the event of “significant non-performance by Iran of JCPOA commitments”

⁷⁷ [UN Security Council votes not to extend arms embargo against Iran](#), CBS News, 14 August 2020

⁷⁸ PQ HL8919 [[Iran: Arms trade](#)], 22 October 2020

⁷⁹ International institute for Strategic Studies, [Experts on the expiry of UN limitations on Iran’s missile exports](#), 24 October 2023

(the ‘snapback’ provisions). This provision remains in place until the tenth anniversary of the agreement (“termination day”), in October 2025.⁸⁰

Analysis for the Washington Institute think tank has argued the use of the mechanism would suggest negotiations on restoring a nuclear agreement have failed.⁸¹

Alternatives to the snapback mechanism are a state deciding to implement its own sanctions or the UN Security Council passing a new resolution imposing sanctions against Iran. This would require the support of at least nine of the 15 council members and could be vetoed by any of the five permanent members (US, UK, France, China, Russia).⁸²

The EU, UK and US have continued these sanctions

While the UN measures have expired, individual states, including the UK, US and European Union have continued the measures:

- Conventional arms embargo: From October 2020, all three continued an arms embargo against Iran, as well as against the proliferation of weapons to armed and terrorist groups it supports in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen.⁸³
- Missiles and drones: The UK, EU and the United States were among those to announce they would continue these sanctions in their domestic law from October 2023.⁸⁴ This included sanctions targeting their export to Russia for use in Ukraine (see below for sanctions by these states). A total of 47 states, including Argentina, Bahrain, and Japan, also signed a statement committing to “take steps to counter Iran’s destabilizing ballistic missile-related activities” when the UN sanctions expired.⁸⁵

US and UK statements on snapback, April 2024

On 15 April 2024, the Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said the UK Government was committed to “using all diplomatic tools to ensure that Iran never develops a nuclear weapon”. He said this included using the snapback mechanism, if necessary.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ EU External Action, [Nuclear agreement-JCPOA](#), 18 August 2021; US State Department, [JCPOA](#), July 2015, Annex 5

⁸¹ Washington Institute, [Snapback sanctions on Iran: More bark than bite?](#), 25 October 2022

⁸² Security Council Report (not an official UN organisation), [UN Security Council working methods](#)

⁸³ See section 3.2 to 3.5 of this research briefing for sanctions by individual states.

⁸⁴ FCDO, [UK to bring UN sanctions on Iran into UK law](#), 14 September 2023; FCDO, [UN Security Council resolution 2231 transition day: Joint statement](#), 18 October 2023

⁸⁵ US State Department, [Joint statement on UNSC Resolution 2331 transition day](#), 18 October 2023

⁸⁶ HC Deb, [15 April 2024](#), c27

The US Administration says snapback “remains in place and it is an available option” but would not “preview [its] actions”.⁸⁷

Iran’s nuclear programme is now well-developed, though it denies seeking nuclear weapons. The Commons Library research briefing, [What is the status of the Iran nuclear deal?](#), has an assessment of Iran’s nuclear programme and current status of the stalled negotiations.

3.2 United States

Current sanction regime and designation of IRGC

The United States has imposed an extensive sanctions regime against Iran since the overthrow of the last Shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. As set out in the US Congressional Research Service briefing on US sanctions, they:

- Ban most US trade and investment with Iran (except food and agricultural commodities, medicine, and humanitarian-related goods). This includes Iran’s energy sector.
- Prohibit foreign assistance (aside from humanitarian aid) and the trade of arms and other military goods to and from Iran.
- Target the country’s nuclear programme, drone programmes, and ballistic missiles.⁸⁸

Many elements of Iran’s Government, including the supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, and the IRGC, are also subject to US sanctions. The US also imposes sanctions on human rights grounds and because of Iran’s support for armed and terrorist groups abroad.⁸⁹

The Trump Administration designated the IRGC a [foreign terrorist organisation](#) in 2019. The Biden Administration has retained the designation. The US has also designated groups supported by Iran and the IRGC, including Hezbollah, Iraqi militias including Kata’ib Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad as foreign terrorist organisations. The Houthis in Yemen are designated as a [specially designated global terrorist group](#).⁹⁰

⁸⁷ US State Department, [Press briefing-17 April 2024](#)

⁸⁸ Congressional Research Service, [US sanctions on Iran](#) (PDF), 20 July 2023 [three page summary] and Congressional Research Service, [US sanctions on Iran](#), February 2022, Annex A [99-page document]

⁸⁹ As above

⁹⁰ Congressional Research Service, [US sanctions on Iran](#), February 2022, p6; Commons Library research briefing, [UK and international response to the Houthis in the Red Sea 2024](#), section 6.3

The Biden Administration says it has sanctioned around 600 individuals since 2021, in addition to new missile and drone sanctions against Iran.⁹¹

For a timeline of US sanctions on Iran from the mid-2000s, see the US Institute for Peace, [Timeline of US sanctions](#), April 2024 and [US sanctions and Iran's drones to Russia](#), February 2023.

Statements and debate on further actions

The Biden Administration says it will announce further sanctions, both in coordination with its allies but also unilaterally. It will not preview these sanctions in advance, but officials have confirmed they will include Iran's missile programme and new sanctions against organisations supporting the IRGC and Iran's Defence Ministry.⁹²

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has also said her department "will not hesitate to work with our allies to use our sanctions authority to continue disrupting the Iranian regime's malign and destabilizing activity".⁹³

Updates can be found on the US Department of State, [Iran sanctions](#), website.

As noted by analysts, the extent of existing American sanctions means there are few options to expand these further, and the focus could lie on better enforcement or encouraging US partners to introduce similar restrictions.⁹⁴

In the United States, Republicans in Congress have argued the Biden Administration should strengthen or re-impose sanctions in two areas to weaken Iran's economy:

- Iran's export of electricity to Iraq: in 2018 and 2023, the US has allowed Iran to access funds held in Oman generated from electricity shipments to Iraq. The funds are only allowed to be used for humanitarian purposes, but critics argue this frees up spending elsewhere for Iran.⁹⁵
- Iran's export of oil, especially to China: US sanctions on Iran's oil were re-instated in 2018 when the Trump Administration announced it would withdraw from the 2015 nuclear agreement. However, Iranian oil exports have grown and are currently at level seen in 2018 (around US\$35 billion a year). Strengthening sanctions may push up global oil prices and

⁹¹ White House, [Statement by national security advisor Jake Sullivan](#), 16 April 2024

⁹² White House, [Briefing by press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre \[...\]](#), 15 April 2024; [Statement by National Security advisor Jake Sullivan \[...\]](#), 16 April 2024

⁹³ [Yellen warns of new sanctions against Iran \[...\]](#), Voice of America, 16 April 2024

⁹⁴ [What are US sanctions?](#), Reuters, 16 April 2024; Washington Institute, [Coordinated Iran sanctions require coordinated enforcement](#), 19 April 2024

⁹⁵ [Joe Biden told to cancel \\$10bn sanctions relief for Iran](#), The Telegraph, 15 April 2024

create tensions between China, which is Iran's main buyer, and the United States.⁹⁶

The Biden Administration says it has not removed any sanctions against Iran and continues to enforce them, though it acknowledges some UN sanctions have expired since it has been in office.⁹⁷

New sanctions announced in April and June 2024

On 18 and 25 April, the US introduced sanctions against those involved in the manufacture of drones and the attack against Israel. In coordination with the UK and Canada (see below), it sanctioned 24 individuals and 18 entities (organisations and companies), including manufacturers of drones, companies providing material to the IRGC and drone manufacturers, and new restrictions on Iran's access to related technologies.⁹⁸

In June, the US introduced more measures against drone manufacturers.⁹⁹

3.3

United Kingdom

Current sanctions regime

In December 2023, a [new UK sanctions regime against Iran](#) came into force.

The legislation expanded the criteria under which entities and individuals linked to Iran can be sanctioned. These include:

- Iran's undermining of peace and stability in the Middle East.
- The use and spread of weapons and technologies from Iran.
- Hostile threats towards the UK and its partners emanating from Iran.¹⁰⁰

The first designations under the new regime were made in December, and whose targets included IRGC members.¹⁰¹

The Government says it currently applies more than 400 sanctions against Iran. These sanctions allow for asset freezes and travel bans.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ [Iran exports hit 6-year high as west prepares sanctions](#), Financial Times, 18 April 2024

⁹⁷ US State Department, [Press briefing-17 April 2024](#)

⁹⁸ US State Department, [Targeting Iran's UAV programme, steel industry \[...\]](#), 18 April 2024; Treasury Department, [Treasury targets networks facilitating illicit trade \[...\]](#), 25 April 2024; [US issues new Iran-related sanctions](#), Reuters, 25 April 2024

⁹⁹ US State Department, [US announces designations on Iran's UAV industry](#), 3 June 2024

¹⁰⁰ FCDO, [New Iranian sanctions regime comes into force](#), 14 December 2023

¹⁰¹ As above

¹⁰² FCDO, [UK and US step up action to tackle domestic threat from Iran](#), 29 January 2024

The UK applies sanctions against the entirety of the IRGC, an arms embargo, and restrictions on Iranian drones (including in relation to Russia), missiles, and nuclear programme.¹⁰³

The UK also applies sanctions against arms exports to Iran-supported groups such as Hezbollah and the Houthis, as well as on human rights grounds.¹⁰⁴

Further sanctions announced and expected in 2024

Following the Iranian attack on Israel the UK Government said it is “campaigning” in the G7 for coordinated sanctions against Iran.¹⁰⁵ The Foreign Secretary, Lord Cameron, said the UK will impose the “strongest package of sanctions” against the country.¹⁰⁶

On 18 and 25 April, the UK announced it had sanctioned:

- Seven individuals and six entities (organisations) who have played a destabilising role in the Middle East. This included further sanctions on the IRGC navy, the Armed Forces General Staff of Iran, and Iran’s Defence Minister.
- Individuals and companies in Iran’s drone and missile industries.¹⁰⁷

On 25 April, the Government also announced it plans to expand trade sanctions against Iran by introducing bans on the export of components used in drone and missile production. Companies already subject to sanctions include those involved in the production of Shahed-131 and Shahed-136 drones which were used in Iran’s attack against Israel and by Russia in Ukraine.¹⁰⁸

3.4

UK debate on proscribing the IRGC

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

Activity in the Middle East in support of armed and terrorist groups

The IRGC is an Iranian state military and intelligence service, introduced following the 1979 revolution as a counterweight to Iran’s regular armed forces. The IRGC has ground forces in Iran totalling more than 100,000 personnel, as well as naval and air forces.¹⁰⁹ It also controls the [paramilitary Basij force](#), which can mobilise up to 600,000 volunteers, and supported the suppression of the protests that followed the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, [Iran’s revolutionary guards](#), 8 January 2024

As set out in the US State Department [country report on terrorism: Iran](#), the IRGC's Qod's Force ([its external arm](#)), designated a foreign terrorist organisation by the United States in 2019, is Iran's "primary mechanism for cultivating and supporting terrorist activity abroad", including in Syria and Iraq.¹¹¹ In December 2023, the UK and US also announced new sanctions in response to the IRGC Qod Force's support for Hamas in Gaza.¹¹²

As set out in section 2 of the Commons Library research briefing on [Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea since November 2023](#), both the US and UK governments judge that the Houthi attacks have been supported by Iran. Media reports say IRGC support has included training and providing intelligence to the Houthis to help them identify and target shipping.¹¹³

IRGC threats and actions in the United Kingdom

In the UK, the IRGC has also been linked to kidnap and assassination plots.

In February 2023, UK counter-terrorism police said there had been 15 such plots by Iran since 2020.¹¹⁴ These included threats to journalists and attempts to collect intelligence on UK-based individuals linked to Iran or Israel.¹¹⁵ In January 2024, the Charity Commission also launched an investigation of antisemitic speeches by members of the IRGC, given to students in the UK.¹¹⁶

What is proscription?

There has been a long-standing debate in the UK over whether to proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organisation under the [Terrorism Act 2000](#).

Proscription would put the IRGC on the same standing as Hezbollah and Hamas, two groups supported by Iran. Proscription creates offences such as being a member or encouraging support for the organisation and allows

¹⁰⁴ Commons Library research briefing, [Iran's influence in the Middle East](#), section 3.2

¹⁰⁵ FCDO, [Foreign Secretary to urge G7 partners to hold firm \[...\]](#), 17 April 2023

¹⁰⁶ [Netanyahu rebuffs Cameron's call for restraint over Iran](#), The Times, 17 April 2024

¹⁰⁷ FCDO, [The UK and US sanctions leading Iranian military figures \[...\]](#), 18 April 2024; FCDO, [UK targets Iran's ability to launch drones \[...\]](#), 25 April 2024

¹⁰⁸ FCDO, [UK targets Iran's ability to launch drones \[...\]](#), 25 April 2024

¹⁰⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, [Iran's revolutionary guards](#), 8 January 2024

¹¹⁰ Italian Institute for International Political Studies, [The IRGC and Iran's \[...\] uprisings](#), 4 January 2023

¹¹¹ US State Department, [Country reports on terrorism 2021: Iran](#), 2022

¹¹² FCDO, [New Iranian sanction regime comes into force](#), 14 December 2023; US Treasury Department, [US and UK target IRGC-QF support to Hamas and other proxy groups](#), 14 December 2023

¹¹³ [Houthi rebels who attacked British ship trained at elite Iran academy](#), The Telegraph, 10 January 2024; [Iranian and Hezbollah commanders help direct Houthi attacks \[...\]](#), Reuters, 21 January 2024

¹¹⁴ [Hostile-state threat probes grown fourfold—police](#), BBC News, 16 February 2023

¹¹⁵ HC Deb, [20 February 2023](#), c50

¹¹⁶ [UK officials probe Iran generals' antisemitic talks to students](#), BBC News, 23 January 2024

sanctions to be applied against it (though these are already applied in the case of the IRGC – see section above).

Proscription is a decision for the Home Secretary, if they judge an organisation meets the criteria under the Act. These include the threat of actions involving serious violence against a person or property or creating a serious risk to the health and safety of the public or a section of the public (this is not an exhaustive list of the criteria).

For an explanation of the Act and the criteria, see the Commons Library research briefing [Proscribed terrorist organisations](#).

What arguments have been put in favour of proscription?

The IRGC meets the definition of terrorism and it would send a message

Research for the Tony Blair Institute think tank in 2023 argues that the group meets the criteria for proscription under the Terrorism Act 2000 and that proscribing the IRGC would “send a clear message” that Iranian activity in the UK “will not be tolerated”.¹¹⁷

Analysis for the Washington Institute think tank notes the practical effects of the US decision to designate the IRGC a foreign terrorist group in 2019 were limited in the context of wider sanctions already been applied, but also argued it sent, and continues to send, an important message to Iran about its actions both abroad and at home.¹¹⁸

Logical extension of existing sanctions

Previously, in 2020, the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee argued proscribing the IRGC was “a logical extension of the existing restrictions placed” on IRGC members.¹¹⁹

It is in the UK’s national interest as the IRGC supports other proscribed groups

In September 2023, the UK’s Commissioner for Countering Extremism, Robin Simcox, argued it was in the “national interest” to proscribe the IRGC as it supports proscribed groups around the world and it currently remains legal to be hosted in UK institutions.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, [Making the case for the UK to proscribe Iran’s IRGC](#), 17 January 2023

¹¹⁸ Washington Institute, [What will IRGC designation actually do?](#), 8 April 2019 and [Don’t drop Iran’s revolutionary guards from FTO list](#), 21 March 2022

¹¹⁹ Foreign Affairs Committee, [No prosperity without justice: The UK’s relationship with Iran](#), HC 415, 2020, para 50

¹²⁰ RUSI, [Countering extremist threats in the UK: An address by Robin Simcox](#), 19 October 2023

What arguments have been put cautioning against proscription?

The UK already sanctions the entirety of the IRGC

The IRGC is currently sanctioned in its entirety by the UK Government. These sanctions apply asset freezes and other financial measures against the IRGC and individual members.¹²¹

Proscription may threaten diplomatic relations with Iran

The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Alicia Kearns, supports IRGC proscription (see above). However, in January 2024 she warned “Iran will see it as an act of war [...] [and] we will likely have to close our embassy”.¹²²

Iran’s Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, has previously said labelling the IRGC as a terrorist organisation would be interpreted by Iran as a “serious escalation”.¹²³

In November 2022, the government said retaining diplomatic relations with Iran is important for allow the UK to address issues such as human rights, UK security, consular cases, and Iran’s role in the region.¹²⁴

It would risk “upsetting” the definition of terrorism in the UK

In January 2023, the Independent newspaper cited an assessment by the UK’s Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, Jonathan Hall, that advised proscribing the IRGC, as a state entity of Iran, under the Terrorism Act would be “at the risk of upsetting the settled meaning of terrorism in domestic law” which had, to date, excluded the armed forces of nation-states.¹²⁵

He reiterated this position in September 2023, arguing that “proscription is saying that these groups shouldn’t exist at all [...] no one is saying that Iran should not have a security department, we just need to change its behaviour”.¹²⁶

What is the position of UK parliamentarians?

In January 2023 and February 2024, the Commons debated, and agreed to, motions on Iran which included a request for the Government to proscribe the IRGC.¹²⁷

¹²¹ HM Treasury, [Financial sanctions, Iran relating to nuclear weapons](#), updated 14 December 2023

¹²² HC Deb, [24 January 2024](#), c361

¹²³ [Terrorist’ designation for Iran’s IRGC would harm EU security](#), Al-Jazeera, 23 January 2023

¹²⁴ PQ 83808 [[Iran: Diplomatic relations](#)], 16 November 2022

¹²⁵ [Declaring Iran’s IRGC a terrorist group would destabilise UK’s definition of terrorism \[...\]](#), The Independent, 11 January 2024; Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, [IRGC](#), 11 January 2023

¹²⁶ [Iran guards ‘shouldn’t be treated as a terror group’](#), The Times, 20 September 2023

¹²⁷ HC Deb, [12 January 2023](#), c772; HC Deb, [1 February 2024](#), c1094

Members from across the House of Commons have called for the proscription of the IRGC:

- The Shadow Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, has said Labour would support proscription, “either by using existing terrorism legislation or by creating a new process of proscription for hostile state actors”.¹²⁸
- The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Alicia Kearns, has said the group should be proscribed.¹²⁹
- The former Defence Secretary, Dr Liam Fox and former Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, have argued the IRGC should be proscribed.¹³⁰
- The SNP Foreign Affairs Spokesperson, Brendon O’Hara, and the Leader of the Liberal Democrats, Sir Ed Davey, have also backed proscription.¹³¹

What is the UK Government’s position?

In January 2023, both the Telegraph and the BBC reported that the UK Government was preparing to designate the IRGC a terrorist organisation.¹³² However, no change in policy was announced.

In February 2023, the Minister for Security, Tom Tugendhat, cited the potential for an international agreement on proscribing the group:

It is interesting to note that, of the so-called E3+3 [UK, US, China, France, Germany and Russia], Germany and France appear to be looking at proscribing the IRGC, as the United States has already done. It seems that not only is there international agreement on the point the hon. Member [Virendra Sharma] raises, but that action is absolutely ready to go.¹³³

However, neither France, Germany, nor the European Union has since announced plans to proscribe the IRGC.¹³⁴

In July 2023, when announcing the new sanctions regime against Iran, the former Foreign Secretary James Cleverly also expressed caution on proscription. He said he recognises some see this as the “desired outcome”:

¹²⁸ HC Deb, [31 January 2023](#), c186

¹²⁹ HC Deb, [24 January 2024](#), c361

¹³⁰ HC Deb, [16 October 2023](#), c37, HC Deb, [16 April 2024](#), c30

¹³¹ HC Deb, [6 July 2023](#), c1001; HC Deb, [16 October 2023](#), c28

¹³² [Iran’s Islamic revolutionary guards set to be proscribed as terror group](#), The Telegraph, 2 January 2023; [Iran’s revolutionary guards set to be labelled as terrorist group by UK](#), BBC News, 3 January 2023; White House, [Statement from the President of the designation of the IRGC as foreign terrorist organisation](#), 8 April 2019

¹³³ HC Deb, [6 February 2023](#), c638

¹³⁴ Verfassungsblog, [Why declaring the IRGC a terrorist group is trickier business \[...\]](#), 2 February 2023

without necessarily understanding that much of what they suspect they want to see [as] [...] the outcome of proscription is actually already in place, such as asset freezes and travel bans [under the sanctions regime].¹³⁵

In November 2023, the government also emphasised new powers under the [National Security Act](#) and the existing sanctions regime for Iran:

The National Security Act will provide another significant toolkit in the fight against individuals working for state entities such as the IRGC; it criminalises a wide range of hostile activities conducted by, for or on behalf of foreign powers. Materially assisting a foreign intelligence service in any activity in or related to the UK will be a crime.

We continue to make use of any and every opportunity to call out Iran’s malign activity [...].¹³⁶

In December 2023, Foreign Secretary Lord Cameron restated the Government’s position, saying proscribing the IRGC was “not something that either the intelligence agencies or the police are calling for”.¹³⁷

In response to the Iranian attack on Israel in April 2024, the Prime Minister said on proscription that the UK has strengthened its sanctions regime:

[...] we have already sanctioned over 400 Iranian individuals, including the IRGC in its entirety. We put in place at the end of last year a new sanctions regime that gives us more extensive powers to designate sanctions, and of course, the National Security Act 2023 created new offences for espionage and foreign interference, and means that our security services have the powers that they need to deter, disrupt and detect threats of a more modern nature from states such as Iran. [...]

[...] I am confident that the police, security services and courts all have the tools they need to sanction, prosecute and mitigate the threats from Iran. We strengthened our sanctions regime recently, including sanctioning the IRGC in its entirety.¹³⁸

On taking office in July 2024, the Foreign Secretary, David Lammy, said he “stood by” what he said in opposition on the IRGC. He said he would be working with the Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, to “review the context of terrorist activity and state threats” over the “coming weeks and months”.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ HC Deb, [6 July 2023](#), c1001

¹³⁶ HL Deb, [29 November 2023](#), cc1082-3

¹³⁷ David Cameron: [When Rishi asked me to do this job, my instant reaction was to say yes](#), The Telegraph, 23 December 2023

¹³⁸ HC Deb, [16 April 2024](#), cc26 and 30

¹³⁹ HC Deb, [19 July 2024](#), c304

3.5 European Union

Existing sanctions against Iran

The EU has a wide range of measures in place which target Iran over its human rights abuses, nuclear proliferation activities and military support for Russia. These are listed on the Council of the European Union page, [EU sanctions against Iran](#) and include:

- Sanctions targeting Iran’s support for Russia, including on drone-related technology and an export ban from the EU to Iran of components used in the construction of drones.
- Sanctions on Iran’s nuclear proliferation, including on those involved in Iran’s ballistic missile programme.
- Bans on the export of arms to Iran and material that could be used for military purposes or in nuclear enrichment activities.
- Bans on the import of Iranian oil, the sale of equipment used in the energy sector, and limits on transfer of funds to Iranian banks.

Under its human rights sanctions regime, the EU sanctions 42 entities (organisations and groups) and 227 individuals, including both the IRGC as an organisation and individual members. The sanctions include asset freezes, and prohibition on making available any funds or economic resources.¹⁴⁰

Commitment to introduce new sanctions

Following the Iranian attack in April, on 17 April the European Council said it had agreed to take additional measures against Iran, “notably in relation to unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) and missiles”.¹⁴¹

On 22 April, the EU High Commissioner for Foreign policy, Josep Borrell, said EU leaders had reached an agreement to expand its existing sanctions regime to cover Iranian missiles and their potential transfer to Russia and the whole of the Middle East (covering Iranian supported groups such as the Houthis in Yemen), as well as components used in Iranian drone production.¹⁴²

In May 2024, the EU expanded its sanctions regime against Iran to specifically target its actions in the Middle East.¹⁴³ It listed six individuals and three

¹⁴⁰ European Council, [EU sanctions against Iran](#), accessed 18 April 2024

¹⁴¹ European Council, [Special European Council, 17-18 April 2024](#), 17 April 2024

¹⁴² EU External Action, [Press remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell](#), 22 April 2024

¹⁴³ European Council, [EU sanctions against Iran](#)

organisations in Iran for their role in transferring unmanned aerial vehicles, both to Russia and to groups across the Middle East.¹⁴⁴

Debate on proscribing the IRGC

Like the United Kingdom, the European Union applies sanctions against the IRGC and many of its individual members but does not proscribe it as a terrorist organisation.

In April, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borell, said some EU states had raised the possibility of designating the IRGC as a terrorist group, but said this would first require the decision of an EU court.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ European Council, [EU lists more individuals and entities for the transfer of drones](#), 31 May 2024

¹⁴⁵ [EU plans sanctions, urges calm after Iran strikes Israel](#), DW, 18 April 2024

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