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Escalating Israel–Iran conflict damages science labs

Researchers in both countries are feeling the effects of a string of missile attacks exchanged between them.

By [Rachel Fieldhouse](#)





A residential area damaged by missile strikes in Rehovot, which also affected parts of the Weizmann Institute of Science. Credit: Abir Sultan/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

Missile attacks have damaged laboratories and hampered scientists' ability to do research in both Israel and Iran, as the conflict between the two countries enters its fifth day. In Iran, at least 224 people have been killed; in Israel, 24 have been killed, according to media reports.

Israel launched strikes against several Iranian cities early on 13 June, targeting nuclear facilities and killing several Iranian commanders and nuclear scientists. Iran – which is in talks with the United States about its nuclear programme – retaliated later that day, launching drone and missile attacks at sites across Israel. Both countries have since continued strikes.

Biologist Jacob Hanna was about to give a talk on a new technique for developing stem-cell-based mouse embryos at a conference in Hong Kong when his phone pinged with the news that Israel had attacked Iran.

“That threw me off balance a little,” says Hanna. Hours earlier, he had been informed by his university, the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, Israel, to evacuate all facilities, while his students scrambled to finish an experiment requested during the review process for a paper.

Flights to Israel had been canceled, so Hanna travelled to London to stay with a friend until he could work out how to get home. On that flight, he learnt from students that his lab had been damaged by a missile strike in retaliatory attacks launched by Iran. The Weizmann Institute is considered by Iran to be a military target.

Extensive damage

In the immediate aftermath of the strike, there was shattered glass everywhere, the computers weren't turning on, incubators fell and the power went out. In one lab, the ceiling had collapsed, and the staircase had detached, Hanna was told. His students managed to save hundreds of frozen mouse and human cell lines by transferring them to back-up liquid-nitrogen tanks that Hanna had stored in the basement. "I was always worried that if a war actually happens, I don't want to lose these."

He now plans to fly to Jordan and then drive to Israel from there. The damage to the lab has probably set his research back about six months, he says.

In a message to researchers seen by *Nature*, the Weizmann Institute said the strike had caused "substantial damage" and affected most buildings. It advised that only authorized people are allowed on campus until further notice.

A spokesperson for the institute says that it is "in contact with the relevant security and emergency agencies, and is taking all necessary steps to ensure the safety of employees and the campus".

Serious restrictions

Researchers in Iran have also been affected by the escalating conflict. They are avoiding in-person meetings at universities and have taken their work online, out of fear that their universities and research institutes could become military targets, says Abbas Edalat, a British–Iranian computer scientist and mathematician at Imperial College London. "It is a serious restriction" because researchers won't be able to continue their lab experiments, he says. The disruption comes on the back of years of on-and-off international economic sanctions that have hindered academics' ability to do research and travel to conferences, says Edalat. Iranian science is "paying a high price", says Encieh Erfani, an Iranian cosmologist now at the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics in Waterloo, Canada.

Rana Dadpour, an Iranian Australian researcher who studies migration at James Cook University in Queensland, Australia, says university students living in dormitories in Tehran have been ordered to leave, but many have nowhere to go. Some of her former students who had been accepted to study at European universities and planned to leave Iran are now stuck. “They’ve been waiting for visas,” she says, “but the embassies are closing, and some of them got their visas rejected” because of the conflict.

Some academics are angry with the Iranian government but are afraid to speak out, Dadpour says. She points to sociologist Mostafa Mehraeen at the Islamic Azad University in Tehran, who was arrested on 15 June after publishing an [open letter](#) urging Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei to surrender, stop expanding nuclear programmes and resign. “He’s now in Evin prison [in Tehran], and we don’t know what’s going to happen to him,” she adds.

The Israel Defense Force has publicly claimed that nine Iranian scientists were killed during missile strikes, including Fereydoun Abbasi, a nuclear scientist and former head of Iran’s atomic energy organization, and Mohammad Mehdi Tehranchi, a theoretical physicist and head of Islamic Azad University in Tehran. But Erfani says there is a lot of uncertainty, and a lack of official information, including about whether other individuals killed during Israel’s strikes actually were scientists. “Nothing is really clear,” she says.

Iran’s foreign ministry and the Israeli prime minister’s office did not respond to *Nature’s* requests for comment.