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Pope Francis at lectern, above St. Peter's Square, hand raised in blessing.

Pope Francis gives his blessing to people gathered in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican April 14, 2024, for his midday recitation of the "Regina Coeli" prayer. The pope pleaded with nations to exercise restraint and avoid an escalation of violence in the Middle East. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Cindy Wooden

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Vatican City — April 15, 2024
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The morning after Iran launched hundreds of drones and missiles at Israel, Pope Francis pleaded with nations to avoid a further escalation of the violence.

"I make a heartfelt appeal for a halt to any action that might fuel a spiral of violence with the risk of dragging the Middle East into an even greater conflict," the pope said April 14 after reciting the "Regina Coeli" prayer with visitors in St. Peter's Square.

According to the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, Iran launched 330 exploding drones and missiles at Israeli military facilities late April 13 and early April 14. The vast majority of the weapons were intercepted.

Francis told thousands of people gathered in St. Peter's Square, "I am following in prayer and with concern, also sorrow, the news that has come in the last few hours about the worsening of the situation in Israel because of the intervention by Iran."

"No one should threaten the existence of others," the pope said. "Instead, all nations should take the side of peace, and help the Israelis and Palestinians to live in two states, side by side, in security."

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Israelis and Palestinians have a "deep and legitimate desire" to live peacefully and independently, he said, "and it is their right! Two neighboring states."

Once again Francis urged Israel and Hamas to stop the fighting in Gaza "and let the paths of negotiation be pursued with determination."

"Let that population, plunged into a humanitarian catastrophe, be helped; let the hostages kidnapped months ago be freed at once," he said, referring to the hundreds of Israelis taken hostage by Hamas in October.

"So much suffering," he said. "Let us pray for peace. No more war, no more attacks, no more violence! Yes to dialogue and yes to peace!"

Later in his remarks, addressing children and inviting them to participate in the first celebration of World Children's Day at the Vatican in May, Pope Francis said everyone needs young people's joy and their hopes "for a better world, a world at peace."

"Brothers and sisters, let's pray for the children who are suffering because of wars — there are so many — in Ukraine, in Palestine, in Israel, in other parts of the world, in Myanmar," he said. "Let's pray for them and for peace."