



Educator's Guide

The Gulf War: Gas Masks and Bomb Shelters

Back in the first Gulf War, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein attacked Iran, resulting in thirty-four countries entering an alliance against him. Hussein's response? Threatening to start a war with Israel if anyone attacked Iraq.

Rather than striking Iraq in defense, the Israeli government issued gas masks to all citizens and instructed them to keep them on hand at all times in case of chemical attack.

When the US-led coalition attacked Iraq in 1991, Iraqi missiles rained down on Israel. While the Israeli death toll was low during the second Gulf War, the experience had a lasting impact on the country. The weaknesses that had been revealed during the experience inspired the invention of the Iron Dome, the installation of bomb shelters in all new homes and a massive overhaul of Israeli security.

[Link to video](#)

Big Ideas

1. Sometimes it can be more courageous to show restraint than to fight back..
2. The Gulf War inspired Israel to upgrade its security system with additions such as reinforced/protected rooms and eventually the Iron Dome.
3. Israel has often faced existential threats.

Essential Questions

1. What was the Gulf War's impact on Israeli society?
2. When is it appropriate to fight back and when is it appropriate to show restraint?

Review Questions

1. Who was the dictator of Iraq during the events of 1991?
 - Mahmoud Ahmadenijad
 - **Saddam Hussein**
 - Nebuchadnezzar
 - Ayatollah Khomeini
2. Why did 34 countries form a coalition against Iraq in 1991?
 - Iraq refused to pay back debt to Gulf States
 - Iraq invaded Kuwait
 - Iraq threatened Israel
 - **Both A and B are correct**
3. Why did Iraq threaten Israel in 1991?
 - Antisemitism
 - Iraq's bruised pride
 - Iraq wanted to get back at Arab states who joined the US-led coalition against him
 - **All of the above**
4. How did the Jewish community fare in Iraq during WWII?
 - They thrived
 - **They faced intense persecution**
 - They were unaffected
 - They were welcomed by the Nazis
5. What did Israel do to Iraq in 1981?
 - Invaded Iraq
 - **Destroyed the Iraqi nuclear reactor at Osirak**
 - Supported Iraq's war with Iran
 - None of the above
6. Why did Iraq join other Arab countries when they attacked Israel?
 - Iraq typically joined other Arab countries when they attacked Israel
 - Iraq wanted to help its neighbors
 - Iraq wanted to defeat Israel

- **All of the above**
- 7.** How did Saddam's attack on Israel change the nature of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians?
- It brought the conflict to a close
 - It made the conflict more intense
 - **The Palestinians had to change their diplomatic strategy vis-a-vis Israel**
 - The conflict was not affected by Saddam's attack on Israel.
- 8.** How did Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir respond to the launching of scud missiles on Israel?
- He attacked Iraq with scud missiles of his own
 - **He showed restraint**
 - The missiles were intercepted by the Iron Dome
 - Shamir declared war on Iraq

Discussion Questions

1. Restraint vs response

Prime Ministers Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir both faced threats emanating from Iraq in 1981 and 1991 respectively. Menachem Begin was concerned about the [Iraqi nuclear program](#) while Yitzhak Shamir deliberated responding to Iraq's scud missiles.

- When is it best to exercise restraint and when is it best to respond militarily? What considerations should be considered?
- Do you think Shamir should have responded to Saddam Hussein's missile attacks on Israel or did he do the right thing by showing restraint?
- Do you view the situations Begin and Shamir faced as similar or different?
- What do you think would have happened if Israel had responded to Saddam's attack?
- What's the difference between standing by and standing down?

2. Against the grain as a Jew and a Zionist

After the Gulf War, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir reflected on his choice not to respond militarily to Iraq when he said: *"I can think of nothing that went more against my grain as a Jew and as a Zionist ... This was one of the hardest tasks I ever imposed upon myself."*

- Why do you think Shamir believed that the choice to not respond militarily went against his grain as a Jew and Zionist?

3. Barbecue and war

In the Unpacked video, Noam says Israelis are always ready for two things: barbecue and war.

- What does this statement teach us about Israeli society?
- How can a society be simultaneously prepared for war and a party?
- What about Israeli and Jewish history makes this possible?

4. Kishinev and the Gulf War

Known as Israel's national poet, Chaim Nachman Bialik wrote a famous poem called "In the City of Slaughter" after a horrific pogrom against Jews in Kishinev, Moldova in 1903 (See our video about the Kishinev pogroms [here](#)). In the poem, he intentionally made the Jews of Kishinev look pathetic in how they responded to the pogrom. The poem was used as a rallying cry to adopt Zionism, aliyah to the land of Israel and the importance of Jewish self-defense.

- What's the connection between Kishinev and Israel's situation during the Gulf War?
- How would Kishinev have affected the thinking of Shamir, the Israeli government and population during this time?

5. Impact on Israel and the Middle East

How did the Palestinian response to Saddam's war impact the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the international community's opinion on it? Did the Palestinians do the right thing or make a mistake by siding with Saddam? Why or why not?

Learning Activities

1. Podcast listening party

Facilitate a podcast listening party with your students by listening to our [Unpacking Israeli History podcast episode](#) about the Gulf War. Download our [podcast listening party PDF](#) to engage your students with the content. Alternatively, flip your classroom and assign your students to listen to the podcast episode in advance of your class or session.

2. Political cartoon

Create a political cartoon that illustrates the reasons for Saddam's attack on

Israel in 1991. You can use this [resource](#) for support in your planning and implementation.

3. Journal entry

Write a journal entry from the perspective of an Israeli living during the time of Saddam's attack in 1991. In the entry, answer some of the following questions:

- What's going through your mind when you rush to the bomb shelter? How is it affecting your family?
- How do you feel about gas masks and the fact that the whole country now has them?
- What are your feelings towards the Israeli government's response?
- What are your feelings towards Iraq and Saddam Hussein?

4. Debate the issues

Divide the students up into two groups, one in favor of showing restraint in face of the Iraqi scud missile attacks and one in favor of fighting back. Have each group prepare a five-minute argument. After, debrief with the students. Were any of the arguments compelling? What would they have done if they had been prime minister?

5. Kahoot: Play our [Kahoot](#) about the Gulf War!

Reflection Questions

1. Put yourself in Shamir's shoes

Put yourself in the shoes of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir during the Gulf War with scud missiles raining down on Israel. If you don't respond militarily, Israelis will end up sitting in bomb shelters, waiting for bioweapons to rain down from the sky. But if you *do* respond, the US-led coalition against Iraq will fall apart, and the war would get a whole lot nastier.

- What decision would you make? Would you respond or not?
- What is the rationale for your decision?

2. Bomb shelters in Israel

Since 1992 (after the Iraqi scud missiles), every home in Israel is required by law to have a bomb shelter. Israel also developed the famous missile defense system, the Iron Dome, which intercepts missiles in mid air.

- Does this make you feel safe or concerned when it comes to Israel's security situation?
- Can you imagine having a bomb shelter in your own home or having an Iron Dome protecting you at all times? How would that make you feel?
- Do you have relatives in Israel who have shared with you their experiences being forced to enter their protected room while under attack? What was their reaction? What was your reaction?

3. Quote reflection

Choose one of the following two quotes and reflect on what lesson you take from it for your own life. Alternatively, explain why this quote relates to Prime Minister Shamir's response to the Iraqi missiles:

- "Who is mighty? He who subdues his natural inclinations." - [Pirkei Avot \(Ethics of the Fathers\), 4:1.](#)
- "If you overcome others, you are powerful. If you overcome yourself, you have strength." - Lao Tzu, founder of Taoism

4. Important lessons learned

What do you think is a salient lesson that the Jewish people can learn from the Gulf War and Israel's response, even today? What is the major lesson that you personally learned from this important moment in history?

5. Pride and power

How does this event make you think about the role of pride and power in conflict? Did the leadership of restraint Shamir demonstrated offer you an inspired view of leadership or as an example of weak leadership?

Further Learning

1. Unpacked for Educators:

- [Saddam Hussein's Gulf War legacy is still felt in Israel](#) (podcast)
- [The Farhud: The Nazi fueled pogrom in Iraq that led to the Jews leaving the country](#) (podcast)
- [How Iraq's nuclear program forged Israel's "Begin Doctrine"](#) (podcast)
- [The Kishinev Pogrom](#)

2. [Shamir: War, Peace and a Dream trailer](#) (Yitzhak Shamir documentary film trailer)

3. Hadida, Avi (Lt. Col). ["The Reflection of Israeli Society in Popular War-Songs."](#) June 2015

4. [“Gulf War Saddam Hussein Scud Attack On Israel Tel Aviv | Prince Hassan Bin Talal | This Week | 1991.”](#) Youtube. Uploaded by Thames TV.
5. Gross, Judah Ari, et al. [“‘We’re Going to Attack Iraq,’ Israel Told the US. ‘Move Your Planes’.”](#) The Times of Israel
6. staff, TOI, et al. [“‘Saddam Gave Orders to Fire Chemical Weapons at Tel Aviv If He Was Toppled in First Gulf War’.”](#)
7. [“The Gulf War in Israel, Explained.”](#) YouTube, uploaded by Israel Defense Forces
8. [“When Saddam Hussein fired salvos of Scud missiles into Israel 1991.”](#) (video)
9. Khalidi, Rashid I. [“The Palestinians and the Gulf Crisis.”](#) Current History, vol. 90, no. 552, 1991, pp. 18–37.