

Shamir to Saddam:

"Read My Lips"

by [Zeev Schiff \(/experts/zeev-schiff\)](#)

Nov 20, 1990

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

If it comes to war in the Gulf, Israel may well be dragged in. Saddam Hussein has repeatedly threatened that his first missiles would be aimed at Israel. By involving Israel in this way, Saddam Hussein might hope to unite the Arab coalition behind him. Unlike all other forces confronting Iraq, Israel's civilian population as well as its armed forces are endangered. Although Israel is unlikely to launch a heavy pre-emptive strike before Iraq sends off its missiles, Israeli retaliation is certain. If American policymakers imagine that Israel can be persuaded not to respond, they are mistaken.

Shamir's Warnings

Since the Gulf crisis started, not a week has gone by without Prime Minister Shamir warning Saddam Hussein against attacking Israel; and the warnings get harsher with time. When a red line is drawn, the time frame for reaction to the crossing of that line is not always clear. This is not the case with Shamir's warnings: it is clear from them that a harsh reaction will come, one way or another, very quickly. There is no vagueness here. Shamir has made a harsh and clear commitment on behalf of Israel. If Israel fails to act on its warnings, it could lose its power of deterrence and turn into a paper tiger.

For a time it was possible to think that Shamir was just engaging in loose talk -- primarily for internal consumption -- to calm the public. It has become apparent, however, that his warnings are premeditated and have been made with a sober mind. Shamir's remarks on this matter should be taken very seriously by all who have a stake in this affair. Even if leaders often tend to make off-hand warnings, in this case it is important that enemies as well as friends carefully listen to them. Jordan and Iraq, as well as the United States, had better understand the picture well.

Thomas Pickering, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, recently said that it is every government's duty to protect its citizens. No Israeli government can avoid taking severe action if many of its citizens are injured -- the pressure for it will come from the masses. The only difference is that Shamir's government will be less patient and will not wait for others to defend Israel's citizens. More than any government before it, this one tends not to disregard attacks. The current Shamir government is to the right of the second Begin government which decided to launch war in Lebanon. In this cabinet, Sharon -- the architect of the Lebanon war -- has been joined by other extremists, such as Rafa'el Eitan and Yuval Ne'eman. This line-up tends to adopt extreme positions and urge

harsher reactions.

If there is no coordination with Israel in advance on how to react to such an attack, it will be too late to coordinate positions once the fire starts.

Israel's Response

Although Israel would like to see Saddam Hussein crushed, Israel is unlikely to launch a pre-emptive strike at Iraq. This is not a case of the eve of the Six Day War revisited, when a nervous General Staff urged the government to take pre-emptive action. Israel would not wish to be the cause of a massive flare-up in the area. Not so in the case of a provocative Iraqi strike at Israel. The force of an Israeli reaction would depend on a number of factors and would mainly be determined by the extent of the damage inflicted on Israel. The higher the number of casualties, the greater the chance of a more powerful Israeli reaction. To avert a second blow, such as another missile attack, Israel will waste no time before striking back. The Israeli reaction would be particularly fierce if the Iraqis use chemical weapons, inflicting many civilian casualties. Such a blow could instigate war with unconventional weapons between the parties with fearful consequences.

At this stage there is no Iraqi threat to Israel's existence. As far as we know, Iraq does not have nuclear weapons. This, however, is not enough. It is obvious that Israel will in no way tolerate a chemical weapons attack that could cause numerous fatalities to its civilian population. The use of gas against Israel also carries symbolism -- it is a reminder of the Holocaust.

That is why such a painful attack could make Israel lose all its inhibitions and restraints. Whoever expects a routine Israeli reaction to such a situation will be surprised. It is worth mentioning the claim the Arabs made in the past, that chemical weapons are meant to counterbalance nuclear weapons. They were warned that the situation could be different: the use of chemical weapons could provoke a terrible reaction, not neutralize it.

The military problem facing Israel in the case of such an attack is quite complex. Israel will certainly order the Israel Defense Forces to do everything it can to prevent the attack from taking place. Israel cannot afford a repeat of the Iranian affair, where missile attacks lasted for many weeks, in the course of which more than 180 surface-to-surface missiles hit Iranian cities, 135 on Tehran alone. The last thing Israel wants is a war of cities. Israel will also have to decide how to deal with Jordan if it tries to foil Israel's response to an Iraqi attack.

Deterrence

Israel will also be concerned about the impact on its deterrent capability. Military circles have always maintained that if the Arabs cross a certain barrier of fear, nothing would stop them from heavier attacks on Israel. If they fire missiles at Israel and it does not react, much worse will follow. This means that any Iraqi attack on Israel will not only be assessed in terms of the damage it causes, but also with regard to the level of deterrence Israel's reaction would yield.

It is only natural for Israel to wish to restore its deterrent capability quickly. This means that a serious blow to Israel would require a much more massive and drastic reaction to deter any thought of another attack by Iraq or any other Arab army. A country that has to plan its strategy in this way finds it very difficult to give much weight to international constraints.

Zeev Schiff is the defense editor of Haaretz and an associate of The Washington Institute. His most recent publications include *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising—Israel's Third Front* (with Ehud Yaari, Simon and Schuster, 1990) and the Institute Policy Paper **[Security for Peace: Israel's Minimal Security Requirements in Negotiations with the Palestinians](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=85)** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=85>). ❖

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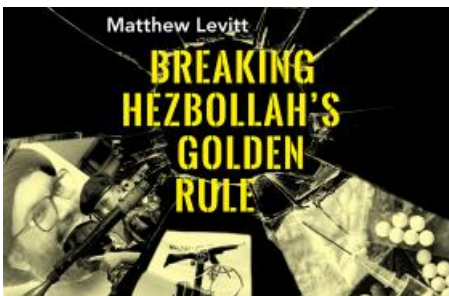
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