

Weapons of Mass Destruction and Their Impact

On 15 and 16 April 1987 the Iraqi airforce dropped bombs containing poison gas over Kurdish villages in the Jafati and Balisan valleys of northern Iraq. This was the first time in history that a nation-state had used chemical weapons against its own civilian population.

Afterwards, President of Iraq Saddam Hussein routinely ordered the use of weapons of mass destruction against Kurdish communities. His most notorious deployment of chemical weapons took place on 16 March 1988 in the Kurdish city of Halabja, near the Iranian border with Iraq. The Iraqi air force dropped bombs containing mustard gas and the nerve agents sarin and tabun on Halabja, killing around 5,000 Kurds and injuring more than 10,000.

This Teacher Pack serves as a companion guide to two short documentary films which examine the long-term impact of chemical weapons on the inhabitants of Halabja.

The first film, '**Eyewitness accounts of the 1988 chemical attack on Halabja**', uses archival footage shot during the attack on Halabja. It is narrated with commentary from the surviving villagers. Viewers should be made aware the film contains disturbing imagery that shows the after effects of a chemical weapons attack.

The second film, '**Lost children of Halabja: Zimnako's story**', tells the story of a child called Zimnako Mohammed Ahmed. He survived the attack on Halabja, but was separated from his family and taken to Iran, where he was adopted. Now an adult, Zimnako returns to Halabja where he is reunited with his biological mother a full 21 years after the attack.

The four units in this Teacher Pack are not intended to be taught in their entirety. Instead, they serve as a resource from which educators can select learning objectives, follow-up questions, and activities that will best meet the needs of their students. **The information is designed for students aged 16 and up.**



Unit 1

The Chemical Attack on the City of Halabja

'I remember the gas drizzling like rain. My eyes were red and full of blood, and I was fluttering around like a wounded bird.. That gas was so strong that it destroyed my life forever.'

– Ardalan Anwar Qadir

Focus of Lesson:

- ♦ Introduction to the Iran-Iraq war
- ♦ Discussing the difference between soldiers, peshmerga fighters and civilians
- ♦ Thinking about the use of chemical weapons during times of war

Learning Objectives:

- ♦ To understand why Kurdish civilians were targeted during the war between Iraq and Iran in the 1980s
- ♦ To think about why Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons as well as other weapons of war

Lesson:

Tell the students that they are about to watch two short documentaries about a chemical weapons attack on the city of Halabja in Iraqi Kurdistan on 16 March 1988. Warn the students that one of the two documentaries contains very graphic images, including grievous injury and mass death.

Show the films '**Eyewitness accounts of the 1988 chemical attack on Halabja**' and '**Lost children of Halabja: Zimnako's story**'.

Discuss why the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein was prepared to resort to such extreme measures to end Kurdish resistance to his rule. Refer to past examples where Iraq, Iran and Turkey used extreme military force to put down Kurdish uprisings, and discuss what the Kurds wanted and still want to achieve.

Explain to students the historical context of the attack on Halabja:

- ♦ **The war between Iraq and Iran lasted from 1980 until 1988.** The conflict was mainly triggered by the Iraqi regime's attempt to reclaim land it had conceded to Iran in 1975 along the two countries' southern borders. It had made these territorial concessions to end Iranian support for an Iraqi Kurdish uprising against Baghdad in an agreement with Iran known as the Algiers Accord.

- ♦ **Saddam Hussein had another motivation for going to war with Iran in 1980.** He felt threatened by Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979 and wanted to overthrow Ayatollah Khomeini's new regime before it challenged him. In other words, it was a preemptive strike.
- ♦ **In the final phase of the Iran–Iraq War the Iranians, supported by Kurdish peshmerga, drove Iraqi forces out of Halabja.** The Iraqis retaliated by attacking the city with poison gas on March 16 1988. Around 5,000 Kurdish civilians died in the attack, and a further 10,000 were injured. Many of the survivors suffered severe illnesses long after the initial gassing, and even today many are still affected.
- ♦ **Saddam Hussein's government flouted international law when the Iraqi army gassed Halabja, as the use of poison gas was banned under the Geneva Conventions.** This was not the first time the Iraqis had deployed chemical weapons against civilians, however. Eleven months earlier, Iraqi forces deployed poison gas in the Jafati and Balisan valleys, north of Halabja. The chemical weapons attack was revenge for the Kurdish villagers' support for the peshmerga and also for Kurdish leadership's cooperation with Iranian forces against the Iraqi army. Saddam's regime continued using banned chemical weapons in Kurdistan until late August 1988.

Follow-up Questions:

- ♦ How many people were killed in the attack on Halabja?
- ♦ How many people were injured?

Activities:

- ♦ Have students look up the definition of 'soldier,' 'peshmerga' and 'civilian'. Facilitate discussion on the respective roles of soldiers, peshmerga and Kurdish civilians living in the rural areas during times of war.
- ♦ Have students discuss why they think Saddam Hussein gassed the civilian population of Halabja. What is the purpose of killing civilians instead of soldiers? What effect might this have had on the Kurdish people? What impact did this have on the outcome of the war?
- ♦ Discuss and debate whether or not a population has the right to determine which country they want to be governed by. Allow students to explain their reasoning.
- ♦ Have students discuss and debate the value of land versus the value of the people living on it. Should this matter to political leaders? Why or why not?





Unit 2

What are Chemical Weapons?

'I could smell my skin, which was burnt like a sausage. My head was swollen and my face blackened. I was coughing and my eyes were bleeding.'

– Bethel Ali Hamabar

Focus of Lesson:

- ♦ Introduction to chemical warfare
- ♦ Understanding the immediate physiological effects of chemical weapons

Learning Objectives:

- ♦ To learn what chemical weapons are and how they are dispersed
- ♦ To understand how chemical weapons are different from incendiary, explosive, and projectile weapons
- ♦ To understand the immediate effects of chemical weapons on the human body
- ♦ To investigate what international law – in this case the Geneva Conventions – state about the use of chemical weapons in battle and against civilians
- ♦ To discuss the international community's response to Iraq's use of chemical weapons against the Kurds

Lesson:

This unit is primarily meant to accompany the film **'Eyewitness accounts of the 1988 chemical attack on Halabja'**.

Before you begin the lesson, turn to the back of this teacher pack and locate the information sheet titled **'The Effects of Chemical Agents on the Human Body'**. Make copies of or prepare to project the information sheet so students can follow along with the lesson.

Warn students that the film contains disturbing images of grievous injury and mass death.

Show the film alone or alongside the film '**Lost children of Halabja: Zimnako's story**'. After viewing the films, use the information sheet along with the follow-up questions and directed activities below to teach the students about the effects of chemical weapons.

Explain that chemical weapons are super toxic substances that are used to harm or kill human beings. Using the supplied information sheet, explain the different chemical gases that were used on the villagers in the documentary. Discuss the effects of these chemicals on the human body.

Follow-up Questions:

- ♦ Which toxic chemicals were used in the attack on Halabja?
- ♦ How were the chemicals released?
- ♦ What time of day did the bombings start? What time of year?
- ♦ Before the Iraqi army used chemical weapons, what kind of bombs did they use?
- ♦ What happened to the villagers who hid in underground cellars?

Activities:

- ♦ Using the information sheet, discuss the different chemical agents in the attack on Halabja and how they were dispersed. What were the short-term effects of each chemical used? What were the long-term effects?
- ♦ Ask students to discuss and debate why they think Saddam Hussein's forces used more than one chemical. What effect did this have on the residents of Halabja?
- ♦ For this activity you will need a timer. Assign each student a number between one and four. Adjust the numbers assigned depending on how many students are participating. Read this quotation from a Halabja survivor describing friends and loved ones – 'You see them walking and falling like leaves to the ground'. Tell students to begin walking around the room, shaking the hands of students as they pass them. After one minute, tell everyone assigned the number 'one' to lie down on the floor. After one more minute, tell all 'twos' to lie down. After one more minute, tell all 'threes' to lie down. Allow all remaining students to walk around for one more minute before instructing the students to return to their seats. Have students discuss their thoughts and feelings after taking part in this exercise.
- ♦ Give or have students look up the definition of 'incendiary weapons' such as napalm, 'explosive weapons' such as IEDs, and 'projectile weapons' such as bullets. Have students compare and contrast these types of weapons with chemical weapons. In groups, encourage students to discuss the immediate and long-term effects of each type of weapon. Discuss and debate which types of weapons are most harmful. Allow students to explain their reasoning.





Unit 3

The Long-Term Effects of Chemical Weapons on the Residents of Halabja

‘We found high incidences of shortness of breath due to pulmonary fibrosis, visual manifestations including chronic irritation or “burning” of the eye, and many neurological disorders. It is astonishing to see, in a matter of two days and in a population of 40,000, around 500 cases of diseases that were previously unusual in this community.’

– Fouad Baban, a Sulaimaniya doctor who grew up in Halabja, speaking in 1998

Focus of Lesson:

- ♦ Understanding the long-term physiological effects of chemical weapons
- ♦ Thinking about the long-term psychological effects of chemical weapons on the residents of Halabja
- ♦ Understanding the implications of the attack on Halabja

Learning Objectives:

- ♦ To learn about the devastating impact that chemical warfare can have on human biology across generations
- ♦ To consider how chemical weapons have affected families living in Halabja
- ♦ To consider the ways in which the victims at Halabja have been psychologically traumatised
- ♦ To think about how it would feel to witness the types of deaths and injuries caused by chemical weapons
- ♦ To discuss the impact of the chemical weapons attack on families

Lesson:

This unit encourages students to think about the effects of chemical warfare long after the war itself has ended.

After viewing '**Eyewitness accounts of the 1988 chemical attack on Halabja**' and '**Lost children of Halabja: Zimnako's story**' use the follow-up questions and activities below to examine the long-term effects of chemical warfare and how it has affected individuals and families in Halabja.

Distribute or project the information sheet '**The Effects of Chemical Agents on the Human Body**' to help students answer questions about the long-term effects of chemical weapons.

Follow-up Questions:

- ♦ What happened to the residents of the city of Halabja during the attack? And after the attack?
- ♦ How many children were missing after the attack?
- ♦ What happened to Zimnako's Kurdish family? Who died? How many survived the attack? How many are still missing?
- ♦ How did Zimnako learn who his birth mother was?

Activities:

- ♦ Using the information sheet, discuss the long-term effects of chemical weapons on the human body: cancer, infertility, birth defects, blindness, respiratory illness, genetic changes, and psychological trauma. Discuss and debate whether or not chemical weapons should be outlawed as a result of these effects.
- ♦ Using the information sheet, have students discuss the long-term and genetic effects of chemical weapons on the human body. Have students discuss whether or not they believe these effects were intentional on the part of the Iraqi army. If so, why? What impact might these weapons have on the Kurdish people as a race? What impact might this have on the desire of the Kurds to achieve independence?
- ♦ Ask the students to think about and discuss how they would feel not knowing if their family members were alive or dead. Have the students discuss and debate whether it is better for parents to know for certain that a child is no longer alive, or whether it would be better to not know their fate. Ask students to explain their reasoning.





Unit 4

Coping with Trauma

‘It is a very strange feeling to have your name on a headstone before you’ve died.’

– Zimnako Mohammed

Focus of Lesson:

- Thinking about the traumatic effects of the attack on Halabja
- Talking about the ways that the attack has affected families
- Considering the ways art and education can help victims of genocide find peace

Learning Objectives:

- To consider the experience of Zimnako Mohammad Ahmed
- To think about what it would be like to be one of the lost children of Halabja
- To think about what it would be like to be a parent whose children are missing
- To understand that the consequences of the attack on Halabja are still being felt today
- To discuss why it is important to commemorate and discuss tragic events

Lesson:

This unit is primarily intended for use with the film **‘Lost children of Halabja: Zimnako’s story’**.

After viewing one or both films, use the questions and activities below to facilitate discussion about how people cope with traumatic events. Encourage students to put themselves in the shoes of Zimnako Mohammed Ahmed and other survivors of the attack on Halabja.

Follow-up Questions:

- ♦ How old was Zimnako when he met his real mother?
- ♦ What if any difficulties did he experience as a result of the attack? For how long?
- ♦ Who took care of Zimnako after he was rescued?
- ♦ What happened to his Iranian mother? His Iranian brothers?
- ♦ How did Zimnako feel when he learned that members of his biological family might have survived the attack?

Activities:

- ♦ Ask the students whether they think it is possible that more children and infants could have survived the attack than the ones that have already been found.
- ♦ Ask the students what name was given to Zimnako by his Iranian mother. Ask them how old he was when he learned his original Kurdish name. Have students discuss the potential impact of having two separate names and two separate identities. How would students feel if they learned they had another name? Another family?
- ♦ Discuss the fact that some of the missing children may have been raised by adoptive parents, and may not be aware that they are survivors of the attack on Halabja. Ask students whether it would be better for any remaining children to learn about the attack and the fate of their families, or whether it would be better to live out their lives not knowing. Who does the truth hurt? Who does the truth help?
- ♦ Ask students to think of the statues seen in **'Lost children of Halabja: Zimnako's story'** that commemorate the attack on Halabja. What do the statues represent? Why were they created? Have students discuss how the survivors of the attack may feel when looking at the statues. Discuss and debate whether it is better to remember or to try to forget such a tragedy.



The Effects of Chemical Agents on the Human Body

Key facts

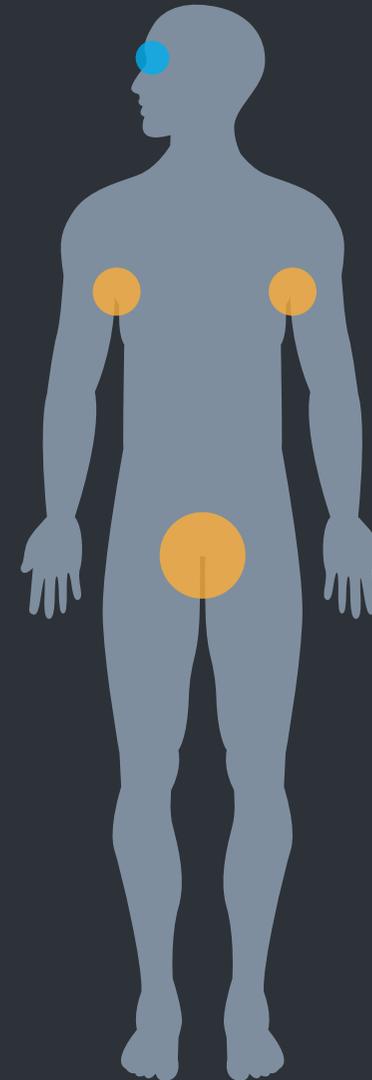
The Iraqi army used mustard gas and the nerve agents sarin and tabun against people in Halabja.

Mustard gas causes blindness and painful blisters on the skin. The worst affected areas are the armpits and the groin. If inhaled, it can cause massive damage to the lungs.

Mustard gas symptoms can take 48 hours to appear.

Eyes

- Blindness
- Inflammation
- Irritation
- Redness
- Burning



Skin

- Blisters
- Itchy
- Redness

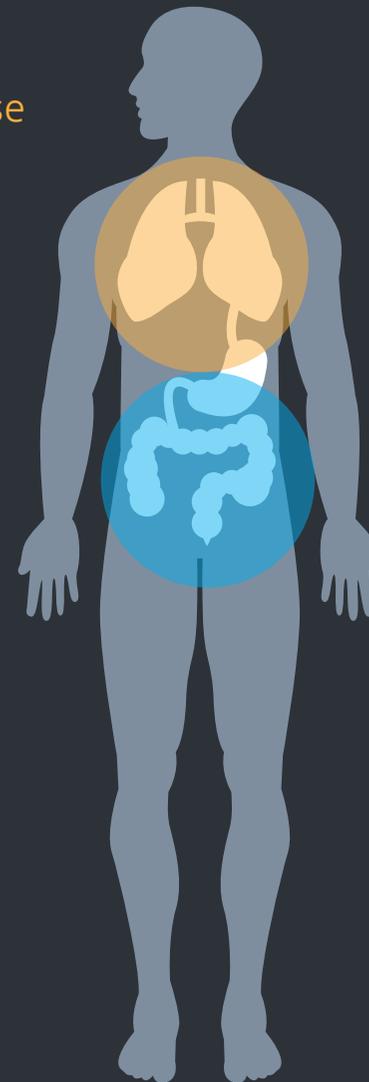
Key facts

The longer a person is exposed to mustard gas, the greater the damage to their body will be – and the less likely it is that he or she will fully recover from exposure to the chemicals.

Furthermore, mustard gas can damage the body's DNA, meaning that future generations could be harmed.

Respiratory System

- Runny or bloody nose
- Sneezing
- Hoarse throat
- Shortness of breath
- Coughing
- Sinus pain



Digestive System

- Abdominal pain
- Diarrhoea
- Fever
- Nausea
- Vomiting

Key facts

Tabun is a colourless liquid that can smell faintly of fruit or almonds in its impure form. This nerve agent is extremely toxic to the human body when ingested, inhaled or absorbed through the skin and eyes.

Sarin, which is an organophosphorus compound like tabun, massively disrupts the body's nervous system.

Upon exposure to a human being, death can occur within 10 minutes.

Eyes

- Constricted pupils
- Watery eyes

Mouth

- Drooling

Nose

- Running nose

Heart

- Changed heart rate

Lungs

- Asphyxiation

Stomach

- Vomiting

Nervous System

- Neurological damage

Other Symptoms

- Convulsions
- Lose control of bodily functions

