

## A CUFI PRIMER: Eli Cohen: Israel's Greatest Spy



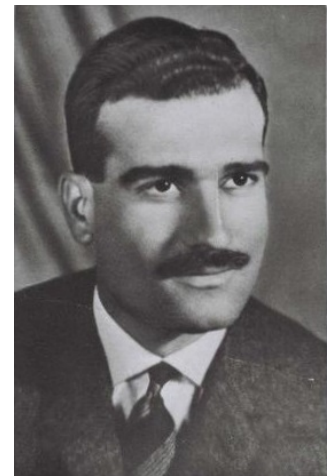
### Introduction

Israel's rebirth as a modern state to the present day, enemies pledged to its destruction have surrounded the Jewish State. In the decades after Israel gained independence, Syria wreaked havoc on the lives, property and security of Israeli civilians. From their vantage point atop the Golan Heights from 1948 to 1967, Syrian troops terrorized Israelis in the upper Galilee by raining mortar shells down upon homes, farms and communities. For 19 long years, those in Israel's northern region lived in the shadow of Syrian mortars. When the IDF captured the Golan Heights in 1967, the threat to Israeli communities was removed. Much credit for Israel's defeat of Syria and capture of the Golan Heights must go to Eli Cohen, Israel's greatest spy.

### Early Life

Eliyahu Ben-Shaul Cohen, or Eli Cohen, was born in Alexandria, Egypt to a devout Jewish family in 1924. His father had emigrated to Egypt from Aleppo, Syria in 1914. From a young age, Cohen's parents had instilled in their son the traditions of the Jewish people, Zionism, and the culture of Syria's Jewish community from where his father originated.

In 1949 when his parents and three brothers left for Israel, Cohen chose to remain in Syria to complete his degree in electronics and to play a part in Operation Goshen. As hostility increased toward Jewish communities all over the Arab world, Israel launched an operation to secretly smuggle Jews out of Egypt to be resettled in Israel. A military coup in Egypt in 1951 was followed by a state-initiated anti-Zionist campaign during which Cohen would be arrested and interrogated. While he took part in various Israeli covert operations in the country during the 1950s, the Egyptian government could never provide evidence of his actions and he was released.



He would go on to play a minor role in the ill-fated Israeli espionage network that was uncovered by the Egyptian authorities in 1954. Authorities uncovered the spy ring, arresting and sentencing two of the members to death. Cohen had aided the unit and was implicated, but they found no direct link between him and those convicted.



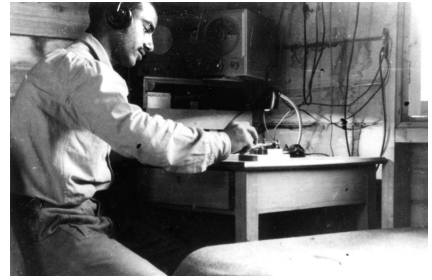
At the outbreak of the 1956 Suez War, wherein Israel reached the Suez Canal, Cohen was detained once again by Egyptian authorities, but this time he would be expelled from Egypt along with the remainder of the Jews of Alexandria. He would arrive in Israel early in 1957.

As Cohen was fluent in Arabic, French and Hebrew, the IDF recruited him to a military intelligence unit where he worked as an analyst, but he found this role unfulfilling and applied to the Mossad, Israel's top secret foreign intelligence service, which rejected him. He would eventually resign from his job at military intelligence and go on to work in a Tel Aviv insurance office as a filing clerk.

In 1959, Cohen married Nadia Majald, and they had three children together, settling in Bat Yam, Israel.

## Life in the Mossad

As the border with Syria began to heat up, with the Syrian army using their elevated position atop the Golan Heights to fire mortars at Israeli communities below, Mossad Director General Meir Amit began the search for a special agent to infiltrate the Syrian government.



After it was decided that none of the current agents were suitable, Amit came across Cohen's name while looking through files of applicants the agency had rejected. Cohen was born in an Arab country, was known for his fierce and selfless commitment to the cause and had knowledge of Arabic, French, English and Hebrew.

In 1960 Cohen was recruited to the Mossad and underwent six months of intensive training, covering weapons proficiency, topography, map reading, sabotage, evasion techniques, radio transmission and cryptography. His graduation report from the course would state he had all the qualities necessary for a field agent.

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## Kamal Amin Thabet

Cohen was given a completely new identity that was crafted by Israeli intelligence. Eli Cohen became Kamal Amin Thabet, born in Beirut to Syrian parents. The back-story that had been constructed for the agent stated that in 1948 Thabet had moved to Argentina with his family where they began a successful textile business. According to the cover-story, Kamal Amin Thabet's desire to return to Syria was motivated by a patriotic dream to support his homeland. To establish his cover, Cohen moved to Buenos Aires in 1961 to assume his new identity. When Cohen left for his mission, Nadia saw him off at the airport. She had been told he would be working for the Ministry of Defense, but she didn't know where or in what capacity.



Cohen quickly built up contacts in the Syrian Diaspora in Argentina throwing lavish dinner parties, attending social occasions and nurturing friendships with Syrian official

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## Syria

In February 1962, Cohen (under his alias Kamal Amin Thabet) moved to Damascus. Late the previous year, Syria had dissolved its three-year-old union with Egypt. As a result, the Ba'ath party was in the ascendancy in Syria, and Cohen saw an opportunity to gain influence among Syria's political elite if he was in Syria when they actually took power. He strategically cultivated contacts with the Ba'ath-ist leadership, which included the Syrian military attaché in Argentina General Amin al-Hafez.

In Damascus he was instantly welcomed after receiving glowing recommendations from everyone who was anyone in the Syrian community in Buenos Aires. While in Syria, Cohen picked up where he left off in Buenos Aires, spending time frequenting local cafes, listening to political gossip and gauging the atmosphere on the street.



Cohen ran a thriving import/export business that allowed him to further expand his political contacts. He began hosting lavish parties in his home inviting senior military officers, Syrian ministers, business leaders and others in senior positions of power in Syria. At these parties, highly placed officials would openly discuss their work and military plans. Cohen would pretend to be drunk to encourage such conversations, to which he paid close attention. He also acted as an unofficial advisor to government ministers who would call on him for advice and the occasional financial loan.

## Syria

Having ingratiated himself to the ruling elite in Damascus, Cohen was invited to military facilities with Syrian military officers, including tours of the Syrian-controlled Golan Heights, where he looked down on the farms, villages and roads of Israel that had been frequent targets of Syrian mortars.



Cohen's visits to the Southern frontier zone allowed him to provide Israel with photographs and sketches of Syrian positions. He memorized the location of all the Syrian bunkers and artillery pieces. He was able to describe to Israel troop deployments along the border in minute detail, and he focused on the tank traps that could prevent Israeli forces from climbing the Heights if war were to break out. In addition, Cohen was able to provide lists of some of the Syrian pilots as well as accurate sketches of the weapons mounted on their warplanes.



While touring the Golan Heights, an opportunity afforded to few during this time, Cohen collected intelligence on hidden Syrian fortifications. Feigning concern with Syrian soldiers being exposed to the sun, he suggested that trees be planted at every fortification to provide shade. Additionally, Cohen convinced the Syrians that trees would trick the Israelis into thinking there were no fortifications in the area. During the Six Day War, the Israel Defense Forces would use these trees as target markers. Cohen's valiance, quick-thinking and the intelligence he gathered were vital to Israel's successful capture of the Golan Heights in just two days during the 1967 Six Day War.

Cohen provided vast amounts of valuable intelligence to Israel by Morse code, secret letters and even in-person when he infrequently and covertly travelled back to Israel. His intelligence-gathering gave Israel an exclusive look into an enemy country long-thought to be impenetrable.

Due to the highly sensitive nature of his work, the entire time Cohen had been away from Israel his family believed that he was traveling abroad procuring goods for the Defense Ministry and that he was not in any danger. By sheer coincidence, one of the communications officers who handled the coded messages to and from Damascus was Cohen's own brother Maurice. Each brother did not know that the other was working for Israeli intelligence. Maurice would eventually conclude it was his brother's messages he was deciphering. During one of Cohen's visits home, Maurice hinted that he knew what line of work Cohen was in.

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## Discovery

Late in 1964, Cohen secretly returned home to Israel on leave, yet on his return to Syria he continued transmitting messages back to Israel. In January 1965, efforts led by Syrian Intelligence Colonel Ahmed Su'edani to find a high level spy in Syria began.

Enlisting Soviet experts with Soviet-made tracking equipment, the Syrians would observe periods of radio silence, hoping that they would be able to track any unauthorized transmissions.

Cohen often broadcasted messages back to Israel at the same time each day, an error that would make it easier for Syrian counterintelligence to trace his transmitter. Detecting large amounts of radio interference, they traced the source back to Cohen's apartment. In late January 1965 Syrian security services broke into Cohen's apartment where he was caught in the middle of a transmission to Israel.

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## Trial and Execution

Upon news of his arrest, the State of Israel worked tirelessly, hoping to get Cohen out of Syria or at least to keep him alive.

Cohen was repeatedly interrogated and tortured but did not give away any incriminating information about Israel.

Syria ignored pleas from Israel, world leaders and even the Pope. After a largely show trial for domestic consumption, Cohen was found guilty of espionage by a military tribunal and sentenced to death.

On May 18, 1965, Eli Cohen was hanged in Marjeh Square in Damascus, and the execution was broadcast on Syrian television. After his execution, a white parchment filled with anti-Zionist statements was put on his body, and his remains were left hanging for six hours.



## Burial

After the execution, Syria refused to return Cohen's body to his family in Israel, ignoring repeated pleas from Cohen's wife Nadia. In 2008 a Syrian official said that the Syrians had buried him three times to stop the remains from being brought back to Israel via a special operation. Bashar Assad's regime has declared privately that no one in Syria knew where Cohen was buried



In 2016 a Syrian group calling itself "Syrian art treasures" posted on Facebook a previously unseen video showing Cohen's body after his execution, before which it was thought that no video existed of the execution and its aftermath.

In 2018 it was announced that Cohen's wristwatch had been retrieved from Syria. His widow noted that the watch was up for sale months earlier, and the Mossad managed to retrieve the timepiece, bringing it back to Israel. Mossad director Yossi Cohen presented the watch to Eli Cohen's family in a ceremony. The watch is currently on display at Mossad headquarters.

## Legacy

Eli Cohen is a national hero in Israel, with many neighborhoods and streets named after him. A memorial stone for Cohen was erected on Mount Herzl, Jerusalem in the Garden of the Missing Soldiers. There have been a few adaptations of Cohen's story, the most recent being the Netflix series *The Spy*.

Former Mossad Director Meir Amit said Cohen "succeeded far beyond the capabilities of most other men." His work provided the Israelis with information that would prove crucial in 1967 during the Six Day War when Israel successfully captured the Golan Heights, silencing the constant barrage of Syrian mortars and bringing peace to the communities in the Galilee.

