
The Handler

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Eli Cohen, the Israeli spy executed by the Syrians forty years ago this past May, occupies a special place in the history of Israeli espionage. Both the importance of the information he provided to the Israeli army—information crucial to Israel’s capture of the Golan Heights in 1967—and his tragic end have made Cohen a national hero, his name emblazoned on Israeli street signs, public squares, and parks. Yet for all that is known about the master spy’s exploits—his penetration of the highest echelons of Syria’s military establishment, for example, and his charming of the Syrian president—the most intriguing question remains unanswered: Why did Eli Cohen get caught? Does the blame for his capture fall to his Mossad handlers, or was it rather misplaced self-confidence that ultimately led to his arrest?

In the four decades since his ignoble hanging in Damascus’ Marjah Square, the tension surrounding the Cohen affair has yet to dissipate, particularly on the Syrian side. Cohen’s family and successive Israeli governments have pleaded for the return of his remains, only to be met with adamant rejection. Even when Syria engaged in peace talks with Israel, the request for the return of Cohen’s body as a gesture of goodwill was turned down. Apparently, Damascus is still smarting from the humiliation of Cohen’s infiltration.

Israelis, for their part, have nearly resigned themselves to closing the book on this unresolved chapter in their history, accepting that the reasons for Cohen’s demise would never become public knowledge. But now one of his Mossad handlers, on condition of anonymity, has decided to speak his

mind. At the urging of Meir Amit, head of the Mossad during the Cohen affair, “G.” agreed, for the first time, to divulge what he knows about Israel’s most famous spy. Shortly after Cohen’s execution, G. left his unit, and met with Cohen’s family several times in the ensuing months. The emotional weight of the affair, he says, has always lain heavily on him. Given the notoriously tight-lipped nature of the Mossad, the exclusive interview *Azure* conducted with him was exceedingly uncommon. While G.’s testimony may not necessarily lay the Cohen controversy to rest, it does shed important new light on the man most Israelis know only as a legend.

Cohen was born in December 1924 in Alexandria, the second of eight children. After completing high school, he went on to study engineering. In October 1949, his family, ardent Zionists, moved to Israel, leaving Cohen behind in Egypt, ostensibly to continue his studies there. In 1954, when the Egyptians captured Moshe Marzouk and Shmuel Azar, members of an Israeli network operating in Egypt under the auspices of a mission known in English as Operation Susannah, Cohen was also arrested. Yet while Marzouk and Azar were convicted of treason and hanged, and several other Egyptian Jews arrested, interrogators accepted Cohen’s version of events, according to which he had rented a flat to Israeli activists unknowingly. What is certain, however, is that in the summer of 1955, he secretly visited Israel.

Cohen moved to Israel permanently in December 1956, after the Sinai campaign. At first, he had trouble acclimating. He found work as an accountant in a department store, but it afforded him little personal satisfaction. In the summer of 1959, he married Nadia Majald, an immigrant from Baghdad.

A year after his marriage, Israel’s intelligence services paid him an unexpected visit. Cohen was particularly qualified for surveillance: He was, after all, born in an Arab country, had Oriental features, and was deemed to be “intelligent, industrious, quick-witted, and reliable under pressure.”

Soon he was sent to an intensive, six-month training course, where he first met G. “From the beginning,” recalls G., “Eli was designated to be what is now called an ‘Arab impersonator’ (*mista’arev*), someone who travels on a passport with an Arab name. He was also given training in the principles of Islam, Muslim prayer, etc.” The training for his assignment was standard, insists G.—no longer or shorter than usual. His superiors held him in high regard for his courage, integrity, and intelligence. Nonetheless, G. makes it clear that Cohen was not sent to Syria with any great urgency, or for a specific task. His assignment was rather to infiltrate gradually into the Syrian power structure. In this task, he would surpass his handlers’ wildest dreams.

When he had completed his training, and in order to create a convincing cover as a Syrian bachelor who had inherited a large fortune, it was decided to send him to Argentina, home to a large and affluent Syrian community. On February 6, 1961, Cohen arrived in Buenos Aires under the name Kamel Amin Tabet. He quickly became proficient in Spanish and began to establish his connections with the local Syrian community: He opened an account in an Arab bank, sported the flashy clothes typical of a young Syrian bachelor, drove a luxury car, and began to turn up at the favorite haunts of the community’s elite. In a short time, Cohen managed to befriend Abd a-Latif el-Hashan, the Ba’athist-inclined editor of an Arabic-Spanish weekly, and Amin el-Hafez, Syria’s new military attaché in Argentina and the man destined to become president of Syria two years later. His stay in the Argentinean capital was an immense success, and he returned to Israel nearly a year later for the High Holy Days, bade his young family farewell again, and prepared for his next assignment.

Before being sent to Syria, however, Cohen again traveled to Europe, where he met G. once again. While G. reports having been satisfied with Cohen’s condition, one conversation does stand out in his mind. “When we met,” he recalls, “he had brought along some of his equipment. I asked him, as usual, if everything was okay. He replied that it was. But I had a strange feeling about it, and so I persisted, asking, ‘Eli, what’s going on?’ Then he

kind of steeled himself to tell me that he had had a minor glitch with his equipment. Apparently the weather was exceptionally cold at his location, and his hotel was extremely well heated; he thought that because of the temperature difference, one of his instruments had developed a crack. I asked him why he hadn't told me before, but he insisted that it was nothing, that everything would be all right."

To G., the conversation provides a telling example of Cohen's character: In addition to his self-confidence, Cohen had a fierce will to succeed—even at the risk of his security. "To Cohen, it was like, 'Why should I bother you with things like this? It's only a small crack.' But I spoke with one of our representatives on site and we sorted things out, and in the end I gave him back the instrument repaired. But I was struck that Eli had wanted so much to do well on his assignment. He kept saying, 'Everything will be all right.'"

Despite the common tendency to idealize spies, it is widely accepted in the intelligence community that the definition of a successful spy need not necessarily include the traits of a "good guy"; one needs to be an actor of sorts, and certainly to display a capacity for cunning. As G. explains, "We grew accustomed to working with agents who occasionally pushed the envelope," such as including all sorts of things in their expense accounts ostensibly to help maintain their cover. "But Eli wasn't like those agents," stresses G. "He was straight with us." In fact, Cohen was remarkable for being at the opposite extreme: His expense account was quite frugal, and G. insists that he always behaved quietly and modestly and rarely asked for anything. In fact, his extreme reluctance to make requests of handlers and his insistence on managing on his own was, to G.'s mind, his one flaw. "I wouldn't call it excessive self-confidence, but he was always one to say, 'It'll be fine, don't worry, it'll all work out.'"

In January 1962, Cohen arrived in Damascus. On his handlers' orders, he rented an apartment in the fashionable Abu Romana district, near the

Syrian general-staff headquarters; through letters of recommendation from “friends” in Buenos Aires, he began to cultivate relationships with the Syrian elites. Among those who smoothed his entry into Syrian society were George Saif, a radio broadcaster, and Adnan el-Jabi, an air-force pilot. Finally, when el-Hafez returned to Syria, Cohen was treated as one of the family at the presidential palace.

From the beginning, Cohen’s intelligence output was impressive: Among other things, he reported on the bunkers in which the Syrians stored Russian artillery, passed along a draft of the strategic plan to cut off northern Israel during a future invasion, and even managed to supply Israel with a report on two hundred T-54 tanks a few hours after they landed in Syria. But his most important achievement was undoubtedly the wide range of contacts he established with key personnel in the Syrian army and government, ties soon to prove invaluable.

In March 1963, the Ba’ath party staged a revolution. Cohen’s close friends, many of whom had enjoyed his financial and moral support, became Syria’s new rulers. Soon Cohen’s home became a venue for senior officers, and the site of exclusive parties for the Syrian elite. Cohen, who had gained the trust of Syria’s most powerful men, was even invited to tour the Israeli border along with his air-force friend el-Jabi. There he visited a classified military area and dined in a Syrian officers’ mess. All that he had seen was communicated to the Israelis through a secret transmitter that Cohen kept concealed in his window blind. Back home, Cohen’s Israeli handlers read his reports with astonishment, amazed that the introvert from Alexandria had so convincingly taken up the part of “Kamel,” Damascus socialite extraordinaire.

G does not dwell on the psychological aspects of this change in character, however. In his view, the contrast between Cohen’s true self and the social animal that was Kamel is not unlike the difference between an actor and the part he plays. “To tell you the truth,” admits G., “if I had

just met him casually once or twice in a café, I wouldn't have been sure that he was up to the job. But he turned out to be an excellent actor. He played the part one hundred percent."

G. is a circumspect type. He knows that the spies who became household names are the ones who were caught, and it is important for him to emphasize that there were others who did crucial work who were never publicly acknowledged. There was, for example, an agent who infiltrated into Syria "a year or two after Eli Cohen had already gone there," he recalls. However, he does not underestimate Cohen's achievements, or the courageous connections he made with the Syrian elite. "Eli managed to meet with all kinds of officers," including, G. reveals for the first time, Syria's current minister of defense. Because of these contacts, Cohen was able to supply the Israelis with information crucial to their victory in the Six Day War.

Meir Amit, then head of the Mossad, says that Cohen's main contribution to Israeli intelligence was the fact that his finger was always on the Syrian pulse. "The information Cohen provided was largely cautionary. His flat was opposite the general-staff headquarters, and he would report on how many people were there at night, when the lights went out, and when motorcades left. He had all kinds of indications that something was about to happen. In my opinion, this was the most important information: The material about the disposition, intentions, and preparations" of the Syrian officials at headquarters and the mood of the political and military echelons at any given time. In a country like Syria, Amit stresses, this is an especially difficult task, since "when they're all dictators, the country's plans are in the head of one man, and no more than two or three assistants. If you can get close to the decision maker, it is of enormous importance." Yet in retrospect, Eli Cohen's achievement was even greater, since, as G. explains, "Initially, we didn't even intend for him to be an agent in the Syrian upper echelons. An agent is like a *cholent* [stew]. You know what you're putting into it, but you don't know what you're going to get out."

In August 1964, Cohen visited Israel for the last time. During this visit, his widow Nadia later reported, he appeared to be concerned about his

continued stay in Syria. After meeting with his handlers, however, he returned to Damascus, even increasing the frequency of his transmissions. To this day, there are differences of opinion between the Mossad and Cohen's family about his intuitions. His family claims that during his meeting with his handlers, he expressed fears about returning to Damascus, and only after they pressured him did he agree to go back. Amit, however, argues just the opposite: That during their talk, he ordered Cohen to be doubly careful, but despite this advice the spy continued to transmit often—too often.

Indeed, it was Cohen's insistence on transmitting so frequently that ultimately—so G. believes—got him into trouble. "Those agents who had wireless instruments had to be contacted by us at certain times. But Cohen also took the initiative himself. No doubt this was connected with his drive to succeed in his mission, but it may well be one of the things that led to his downfall." Indeed, G. is careful to stress that the real problem was not the way the transmissions were made, the times at which they were made, or the code used—but their frequency. "Even if you told him not to transmit unless he had something to report," G. says, "he would still transmit more than once a week."

If Cohen's life was endangered by these frequent transmissions to the Mossad, why was he not told emphatically that what he was doing was dangerous? Could it be that the information he provided was simply too useful, and his handlers were blinded to the consequences? G. recalls that there were certain misgivings among Mossad handlers, but nothing that reached the stage of a general warning. "We were worried, yes, but not sufficiently worried to take action.... In hindsight, it's easy to say that maybe I should have shut him down completely. In any case, we *had* warned Eli not to transmit so frequently. But he was his own man. Despite all our warnings, he simply said, 'Don't worry. It'll be okay.'"

It is difficult to ascertain just how sensitive the Mossad was to the psychological strain likely to develop in someone leading a double life. Eli Cohen was on the one hand a charming Arab millionaire who rubbed elbows with the rich and famous of Damascus; and on the other, a new immigrant from Egypt who worked as an accountant and lived in a modest flat in the Israeli town of Bat Yam. It is uncertain if his handlers understood that this difference was so striking, or that it was liable to lead to a breakdown of sorts that could have manifested itself in the increased frequency of his transmissions.

Either way, Cohen had now returned to a different, post-revolution Damascus, even more volatile, more suspicious, and more threatened by the Egyptian-Syrian alliance opposed to the new regime. The head of Syrian intelligence, Colonel Ahmad Suweidani, had decided to do his utmost to track down leaks, and was helped to do so by the Soviets. “They did all kinds of things to try to catch spies,” says G. “For example, they would cut off the electricity to specific areas of the city while transmissions were occurring. When the transmission suddenly stopped, they knew they had found the right neighborhood. In this way, they were able increasingly to narrow it down to a given spy’s exact location. In fact, one time they traced a transmission to Cohen’s very building—they broke in and searched the apartment of a UN officer who happened to be living next door.”

On January 18, 1965, however, they came for Cohen. His apartment was located by a wireless scanner supplied to the Syrians by the Soviets, and eight security officers burst in while he was transmitting. He tried at first to deny that he had engaged in espionage, but it was clear that nothing could save him. G. describes how he learned of Cohen’s capture. “The head of a certain unit at the Mossad called me to say that he wanted to tell me a certain name, and that I should tell him if it meant anything to me. I asked him to go ahead, and he told me. I told him to put the phone down, that I’d be over at his office right away. I asked him what this was all about, and

he told me that his unit had a report that this individual had been captured. I went back to my unit and said, 'Guys, it's over.' We all felt as if the ceiling had caved in. It was such a total, awful shock."

Both G. and Amit are convinced that Cohen's capture was pure chance: If he hadn't been transmitting at the moment the scanner was on, he may never have been caught. As the years passed, however, different reasons for Cohen's capture were put forward. Amin el-Hafez, for instance, then president of Syria, claimed some years ago that the Israeli spy had been caught because he was not well versed in the secrets of the Koran. Cohen once let it slip, he said, that he was going to pray in "a Muslim mosque," an expression that immediately aroused suspicion. Of course, el-Hafez had a clear interest in downplaying the extent of Cohen's ingenuity. G. rejects such claims, however, and insists that Cohen was caught only because his transmission frequency was identified.

Once Cohen had been captured, the Syrians attempted to force him to make misleading transmissions to the Mossad. The keying rate and the secret code he used, however, made it clear to the Mossad that these were not normal transmissions. "The Syrians didn't know that we had a signal, that we could know if it was him or not," G. reports. When the Syrians realized that Cohen was of no use to them, they sent a cable through the Mossad to then Israeli prime minister Levi Eshkol: The game was up. They had him.

While Cohen was being subjected to Syrian interrogation, back in Israel ways of rescuing him were being suggested. Israel appealed to world leaders, including the Pope and UN delegates. Military intelligence proposed kidnapping Syrian notables as a bargaining chip, an idea, G. says, "that was never put into practice." It was suggested that ransom money be transferred to the Syrians through the French, and that commandos be sent in to free him. Israel was even prepared to give the Syrians intelligence on internal Syrian matters, such as details of the plans of the regime's opponents to overthrow the president. But the Syrians would not be dissuaded. Cohen, who was forbidden to meet with anyone during his interrogation, very likely knew nothing of these discussions.

In February 1965, after a long interrogation during which he was severely tortured, Cohen was put on trial, and for the first time, the world learned of his capture. Amit points out, however, that even as Cohen's trial was under way, fresh agents were being sent on missions, including to Syria. "You can gather electronic intelligence and all kinds of things like that," he says, "but there's nothing like human intelligence." Notwithstanding the tragic end to the Cohen affair, G. agrees: "There is no substitute for human intelligence. At the end of the day, men like Cohen will still have to be sent" into the field. Indeed, G. tells us that a year or two after Cohen had first infiltrated Syria, another Israeli spy had been sent to Damascus, one about whom Cohen knew nothing. Immediately after Cohen's capture, the second spy was summoned back to Israel. "He was told to get out of there as quickly as possible," G. recalls, "and he didn't understand why." Only when he returned to Israel and learned of what had happened to Cohen did he understand that his hasty withdrawal from Syria had probably saved his life.

Unsurprisingly, Cohen was sentenced to death. Although the sentence was expected, the news of his execution surprised even Israel. Eli Cohen was hanged in Marjah Square on Tuesday, May 18, 1965. After his body had been left hanging for hours—a spectacle for thousands of Syrian passersby—he was buried at an undisclosed location. Just before his execution, he had been permitted to meet with the chief rabbi of Damascus. Cohen gave the rabbi a letter to Nadia and his children in which he gave consent for his wife to remarry, and asked them to forgive him.

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