

# The Eli Cohen Files

## Part II: The Making of a Master spy

By Wesley Britton

[Abstract: Describes Eli Cohen's years in Israel from 1956 through his recruitment into the Aman. Provides an overview of his training, time in Argentina, and his insertion into Syria. Analyzes his contributions and achievements and explores myths about these accomplishments.]

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### Israel

During Egypt's rage over the 1956 Sinai loss, the British and French were declared enemies of the state. All with those nationalities were forcibly expelled. In addition, the Egyptian government subjected its remaining Jewish population to arbitrary house arrest, imprisonment, sequestration of their businesses and assets, expulsion from the country and denaturalisation. To encourage Jews to leave Egypt, families were bullied, doors were forbidden to be locked, and arrests were made in the middle of the night. Those deported were allowed to only take their clothing and the allowed sum of £10 per person.

Naturally, the mukhabarat (Egyptian secret police) focused on known or suspected Zionists and arrested them on charges of espionage if there had been any involvement in Zionist youth organizations. "The general procedure was for the authorities to detain one member of each family and then issue an order of immediate expulsion for all the family. The prisoner would be released on the condition he would leave the country immediately and was brought directly to the ship to join his family." (Barda)

In the space of just four months, 23% of Egyptian Jewry was forced out of their homeland. Between November 1956 and March 1957, 14,102 Jews departed for Israel. "When they were forced out of their familiar surroundings, they experienced not only the material loss of their possessions but also the emotional loss of the only home they knew." (Barda) A 1957 statement at the international conference of Jewish organizations summarized the situation:

Large numbers of Jews of all nationalities have either been served with orders of expulsion or were subjected to ruthless intimidation to compel them to apply for permission to depart. Hundreds who have reached lands of refuge have testified that they were taken in shackles from prison and concentration camps to board ships. In order to ensure that this deliberate creation of a new refugee problem should not evoke

protests from international public opinion, documents proving expulsion were taken away from expellees before departure. Furthermore, they were compelled to sign statements that they left voluntarily. The victims of this barbaric process were deprived of their possessions. (Peters)

So, Eli Cohen was far from alone when, in December 1956, the Ministry of the Interior expelled Eli from Egypt and deported him to Naples, Italy. “There we were received by a representative of the Jewish Agency, who put us up in a third-class hotel. Later, when all the documents were arranged, they brought us to Genoa by train, and from there we sailed to Israel.” A man by the name of Peretz met Eli when he got off the boat and gave him the address of his relatives. (Ben-Hanan 105) “Before I went to meet my family in Bat-Yam, I phoned my sister Odette. She, of course, was happy and moved to tears to hear my voice, and to learn that I was safe and sound, and in the Holy Land. All the time they had been worried that something had happened to me when I was expelled from Egypt.” (Ben-Hanan 106)

One story from Avraham Cohen shows an insight into the mindset of the new émigré. When Eli arrived in Israel, he temporarily lived in his parents’ house. For a time, he shared a bedroom with his youngest brother. Avraham recalls that Eli once left his suitcase on top of a piece of furniture. Eli placed some papers inside the suitcase when Avraham entered the room. Being curious, Avraham opened the suitcase to peek at his older brother's belongings when Eli wasn't present. “I left everything exactly as I found it.” When Eli came home later he asked his brother “Did you enjoy the tour of my things?” Avraham, completely awestruck at being found out, asked how he knew. “When I left, I put a small thread on top of the suitcase,” Eli told him, “and now it's on the floor.” (A2)

In addition, Avraham says, “Eli knew how to answer a question and tell you nothing. I once asked him about the Lavon Affair and he said to me: “You're asking me? You live in Israel.” (A4) The much younger brother admits getting only glimpses of what Eli was doing in Israel. “Someone told me that they saw Eli at the Persian Freemason Lodge Eliahu HaNavi in Haifa.” But Avraham couldn't explain why Eli would drive to Haifa when the main lodge was located in Tel Aviv. (A1) (**Note 1**)

Sources vary on what happened in the first months of Eli's experiences in Israel. With the declassification of Eli's CV and testimony in 2008, it's certain he applied for service in Israeli intelligence and offered to work in any Arab land to which he might be sent. (A7. See transcripts in Part 1.) According to Maurice Cohen, Eli “moved in with our parents in their apartment in Bat Yam and petitioned for a position as a translator for Israel Intelligence Operations. Despite his facility for languages, his extensive intelligence training and his role in the Israeli underground, he was turned down because he was not proficient in modern Hebrew.” (M2) However, Eli gave different details. Looking for work, Eli said he was directed to the Egyptian Immigrants Club in Tel Aviv. “The club director, Sirmano, who studied with me at the Jewish school in Alexandria, gave me the address of an office in Allenby Street.” The manager, an officer with the rank of captain, “wanted to know if I was fluent in Arabic. Then he arranged for me to translate Arabic newspapers. That same officer sent me to an adjacent office, where another officer gave me an Arabic newspaper.” According to Eli Ben-Hanan, the officer assigned him the task of indexing

newspapers after learning Eli's knowledge of modern Hebrew wasn't sufficient. (Ben-Hanan 106)

However, Avraham Cohen discounts claims Eli wasn't able to work with modern Hebrew. "Eli did fare well in modern Hebrew, even though he made some mistakes in spelling as a new immigrant. That was not the reason he quit his translation job, He was over qualified for that job – it was boredom. He who is acquainted with religious texts has deeper knowledge in Hebrew than a person who just use modern Hebrew without knowing the sources of the language. Certainly, there are new terms in modern Hebrew, and other differences, but it's not so difficult to manage." (A5)

At his trial, Eli Cohen maintained his duties included translating classified documents for the army as well as daily newspapers gathered from Arab countries. He told his questioners he didn't put much thought into what material crossed his desk. "I worked to support myself and did not want to get mixed up in things that didn't concern me." He said the translators were Jews from Egypt and Iraq and that he worked in a room with three other translators. "I earned 170 pounds a month." But after a few months, he was dismissed for a lack of work. (Ben-Hanan 106)

Whatever led to the change, Cohen himself maintained the Ministry of Labor sent him to one bookkeeping course and one in cost accounting. With the help of a friend from the Egyptian Immigrants, he got a job as an accountant in the supply department in an **insurance office** of the Central Cooperation Distributors of the "Hamashbir Hamerkzi" on Salame Street in Tel Aviv. (A7) "My job was to inspect the cooperative [retail] shops." (Ben-Hanan 108) Meanwhile, Maurice Cohen had become fluent in Hebrew and "made great strides in both my personal and professional life. In 1952, I married Hanna Shirazi and took a job as district substitute for all postmasters who were ill or on leave. A year later, Hanna and I had our first son, Shaul. Not long after, I became Postmaster of Eilat." (M2)

Then, after he completed an annual course in officer's school for Army reservists, Maurice said his class was asked if anyone wished to join intelligence. No one volunteered. The instructor asked Maurice, "What about you?" He responded he had a very good job, was now a father, and had good prospects with the post office. (M5) So he turned down all such requests. (M2) At least, for the present. In a few short years, Maurice Cohen would indeed become an intelligence officer for the Mossad.

## **Nadia**

In his trial deposition, Eli made a few remarks about finding his wife. "I met Nadia, through my sister-in-law. She was a young nurse of Iraqi origin. In 1959 we got married and bought an apartment on Rehov Hatehiya in Bat-Yam, on the Saving for Building Plan." They lived on Eli's income and Nadia helped out. (Ben-Hanan 107) Maurice Cohen was deeply involved in the match-making:

"One day, my wife called me at work asking me if I could stop over at her sister Hela's on my way back home, in order to bring the two dresses that her sister sewed for her. My sister in law, Hela was a salon dressmaker, well known in her neighborhood.

“When I arrived at Hela’s residence to pick up the dresses, I found her giving them the last finish. She asked me to wait a few minutes until she finished the final press. Meanwhile, a nice pretty young woman comes to fit up the dress, which Hela is sewing for her.

“The young lady turned to look me over, with a sweet inquisitive gaze and asked Hela oddly, addressing her in an Arabic language, Iraqi succulent locution, whence your acquaintance of this nice looking guy? Is he Ashkenazi?

“Hela answered her with pride on her face, ‘he is my brother in law, the husband of my young sister Hanina, he is Egyptian born, and he understands our Arabic language too.’ The young woman looked to me with a bit of embarrassment and shyness in her face. ‘If you were a bachelor, I could introduce you to my sister Nadia, apropos, she lives with her parents opposite this building, my parents are well acquainted with Hela.’” (M1)

Maurice said he smiled and told her, “If your sister Nadia is as pretty as you are, I will gladly arrange for her to meet my brother.” We made all the necessary arrangements, and when Nadia and Eli met, it was immediately clear that they were meant to be together. (M2)

Nadia Magled was born on September 14, 1935, a “shapely nice looking 23 year old Iraqi girl, slightly taller than Eli, with swarthy hair and skin color similar to Eli. She had pert brown eyes.” Her family had lived for generations in Baghdad “in the traditional Jewish quarter of extended family households in the ‘city of rooftops’, as her brother later described it. (Berg 4) Her father, Menashe, “a revolutionary type,” was a distributor of textiles and largely self-taught. In 1934, the family moved to the more spacious suburb of Bataween with its English parks, German avenues, and electricity. Menashe “established their own individual household as nonreligious and rarely went to services, but took care not to desecrate the Sabbath by smoking.” (Berg 5)

Nadia’s eldest brother, Sami Michael (born 1926 as Sallah Menasse), later to become a novelist of some renown, was responsible for the family’s ultimate move from Iraq to Israel. As a student, he’d become a Communist activist seeing the party as a means to address inequities in his country. In April 1948 the Communists failed in an attempted coup d’état, so Sami Michael fled Iraq to avoid his sentence of execution, having been tried in absentia. Almost caught in a coffeehouse, he initially escaped to his aunt's house in the Jewish Quarter and moved among his relatives' homes. His father hired a smuggler to help him steal across the border to Iran before he accepted the Jewish Agency's offer to be flown to Israel. (Berg 6) His father, “whom Nadia admired so much for his sagacity and good nature, decided to abandon every thing and to migrate to Israel as well, bringing with him five sons and two daughters.” (M1) Ironically, Nadia’s older brother “resisted efforts by the Israeli army to recruit him to spy in Egypt or Iraq.” (Berg 6)

Victoria Magled, Nadia’s mother, tried to discourage her daughter from marrying Eli Cohen, thinking he was too old for her. “Eli was 7 years older than Nadia, with good looks, deep chestnut hair with few lashes of gray hair, brown eyes, with a nice expression line in his face, very attractive.” (M1) Indeed, the couple had their differences. Nadia liked to wear simple sport dresses, belonged to a hachshara (youth group) kibbutz; she had formal education. She had

completed a nursing course in Tel-Aviv. “Eli was always dressed particularly elegant with fine bourgeoisie, intellectual, gregarious, and gallant with women.” (M1) Unlike Eli Cohen’s family, who observed Jewish tradition with strong links to Israel and Zionism, the Magled family did not observe kashrut and had not been involved in Zionist activities. (Zionism had been outlawed in Iraq in 1945.) In spite of the essential differences between the two families, Eli and Nadia were happy to be together. “They were married in August 1959 in a modest ceremony at a Sephardic shul in Tel Aviv and settled near our parents in Bat Yam. Eli, Nadia and soon their first daughter, Sophie, comfortably blended into the landscape of middle-class Israel.” (M2)

During this time, there were happy family moments. One occasion when Eli and his family visited Maurice in his apartment inspired this description:

Eli stood beside the gas range with a thin smile. He is an expert about to prepare a delicious stew, keeping his distance from the fire, stirring from time to time a large saucepan, wearing a kitchen apron on his chest. Under the apron he was dressed particularly elegant, pants, shirt, and necktie, strictly smart, suitably fitting his body. He wasn’t swank, but he always kept a neat clean appearance. Eli Cohen . . . was fanatic about order and sterility. I admired his typical Egyptian sense of humor. Despite his bashful timidity, he likes to recount surprising anecdotes or suddenly unsheathes a jest like a magician’s rabbit. (M1)

## **Becoming Intelligence Officers**

Avraham and Maurice Cohen differ on Maurice’s joining Army intelligence. In his notes, Maurice says it was in 1960 when he took a leave of absence from his post office job to accept an officer’s commission. Given his knowledge of many languages, he specialized in cryptology. (M3) But Avraham is certain Maurice’s communications training took place in early 1963. Avraham remembers that this was the year before he went into the IDF when Maurice “asked me to help him to practice code.” (A4)

The recruitment of Eli Cohen, like so much else in his story, remains a subject of even more conflicting stories. According to Samuel Katz, as a new immigrant, “Eli Cohen believed that his services as an intelligence operative would be urgently required. He offered himself to Israeli Intelligence twice, and was rebuked both times. He felt that he wasn’t even needed in the defense of the Jewish state, since he wasn’t conscripted for military service but placed in a reserve Israeli Air Force formation as a logistics clerk.” (Katz 163) Perhaps the most well-known account of what happened was published in Gordon Thomas’s *Gideon's Spies: The Secret History of the Mossad*—but this version of events is both impossible and a worrisome window into the official intelligence community’s spin on the Eli Cohen story.

For his 1996 book, Thomas interviewed Meir Amit, head of A’Man (military intelligence) from 1962 until his taking over the Mossad in 1963. Amit asserted that Cohen was recruited into Israeli military counterintelligence in 1957, but his work as an analyst bored him. He began to inquire how he could join Mossad, but was rejected. “Meir Amit recalled, ‘We heard that our

rejection had deeply offended Eli Cohen. He resigned from the army and married an Iraqi woman named Nadia.” (Thomas *Gideon* 59)

In this version of events, unknown to Cohen, his background later surfaced in a trawl by Amit through Mossad's “reject files” when Amit was looking for a “certain kind of agent for a very special job.” With no one suitable in the “active” files, Cohen seemed the only possibility. He was put under surveillance. “The weekly reports by Mossad's recruiting office described his fastidious habits and devotion to his wife and young family. He was hardworking, quick on the uptake, and worked well under pressure.” (Thomas *Gideon* 60)

However, General Meir Amit was the Head of the Central Command in the years 1958 – 1959 before being seriously wounded during parachuting, and was hospitalized for more than a year. He came to the Israel Defense Forces branch of military intelligence, known as Aman, first under director Chaim Herzog in 1961 before moving up to that post himself in 1962. As discussed in Part III of these files, Amit didn't become head of Mossad until 1963 when that agency took over Cohen's unit. So Amit was Cohen's chief from 1961 to 1965, but Cohen was an agent of Aman before being shifted to Mossad mid-way through his mission.

It's also questionable if Amit was involved in the initial screening of Cohen. According to Samuel Katz, it was in 1960 – before Amit's known involvement with AMAN – a man whom Nadia called the “Angel” (because of his handsome and benevolent appearance) knocked on the door of the Cohens' Tel Aviv home. The “Angel” was an AMAN headhunter, a talent scout looking to rerecruit Eli Cohen back into the ranks of its special force – Unit 131. (Katz 163)

Eli's trial testimony included his memories of recruitment. “One day a man named Zalman came to see me. He told me that they had kept an eye on my work and found that I was suited to a more responsible task. He asked me if I was willing to work for Intelligence and to go to Europe or an Arab country . . . I told him that I had just married, and didn't have the urge to travel. My wife was a nurse before we got married, but she had quit work when she became pregnant and I had to work overtime.” (Ben-Hanan 108)

One matter seemed certain in all accounts – Eli Cohen suddenly found himself without a civilian job. Whether this was accomplished by behind-the-scenes maneuverings remains an open question. However this came about, “Eli, now fluent in Hebrew, was also sought after by Israeli intelligence,” Maurice learned later. “He was recruited by the Agaf ha-Modi'in, a branch of the Israel Defense Forces known by the Hebrew acronym AMAN, meaning simply “intelligence branch.” Enjoying the idyll of home and family, Eli initially refused to enlist. Then, rather mysteriously, he lost his job at Ha Mashbir and, unable to support his family, finally accepted the offer from AMAN. Neither of us, of course, was aware of the other's espionage trade, and even if we had been, Eli and I could never have discussed our work.” (M2) Ironically, Eli Cohen later said he felt no pressure to join the AMAN. “I could have left at any time. Zalman himself told me, ‘Come and try intelligence work for six months. If you like it, stay, if not – you're free to do as you wish.’” (Ben-Hanan 108)

According to Samuel Katz, what made Eli Cohen so attractive to AMAN controllers were his high IQ, photographic memory, unbreachable integrity, and the social qualities that afforded him

acceptance and maneuverability in foreign surroundings. In the words of his handler, “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.’” (Florsheim and Shilon) He constantly impressed his instructors who observed his phenomenal memory which had come from memorizing tracts of the Torah as a young man. His graduate report stated he had every quality needed by a katsa – an agent in the field. (Thomas *Gideon* 61)

Still, psychological examinations revealed some troubling aspects to his personality. According to several sources, Eli showed a high IQ, bravery, and the ability to keep a secret. But the test showed “he had an exaggerated sense of self-importance and a lot of internal tension” and does not always evaluate danger correctly and was likely to take on risks beyond those that were necessary (Katz 165). Meir Amit claimed hesitation regarding Cohen. “I asked myself a hundred times: can Eli do what I want? I always showed him, of course, my confidence was always in place. I never wanted him for a moment to think he would always be one step from the trapdoor which would send him to kingdom come. Yet some of the very best brains in Mossad put everything they knew into him. Finally I decided to run with Eli.” (Thomas *Gideon* 62) Like other Amit claims, this notion is questionable. According to Avraham Cohen, “Amit told the family that he met Eli only once, and he declared the same in the Israeli TV and in the news papers in several occasions.” (A7) This would be but one of many bones of contention between the Mossad and the Cohen family.

Eli was quickly sent to an intensive, six-month training course where he was taught high-speed evasive driving techniques, weapons proficiency (especially with a wide variety of small arms), topography, map reading, sabotage, and, most importantly, radio transmissions and cryptography. (Katz 165) During training, he first met his handler, cited as “G” in some sources, “Gideon” in others. (Florsheim and Shilon) “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.” In a 2006 interview, G insisted Cohen’s training for his assignment was standard – no longer or shorter than usual. His superiors held him in high regard for his courage, integrity, and intelligence. Still, G claimed 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. (Florsheim and Shilon) (note 2)

One story recounted by Katz seems doubtful. At first, Katz claimed, AMAN wanted Eli Cohen to go to Egypt rather than Syria. “His controllers attempted to create a new identity for him, that of a rich businessman whose wealth and prestige would facilitate the flow of intelligence, much like Max Bennett before his fatal connection to the Susannah spies. Upon realizing that the Egyptians maintained meticulous registers of their citizens, and that Cohen had, indeed, been under Egyptian police surveillance, a man sought new plans for Cohen's espionage future.” (Katz 165) As it was already well established that Cohen was well known to Egyptian authorities, it seems unlikely such plans would have had serious consideration. In addition, both Mossad and AMAN already had a wealth of agents in Egypt. Israel had more than enough targets for its specialized

spies without endangering an agent by sending him where he was already on record as an enemy subversive.

## Syria

In particular, one arena of critical interest to Israeli intelligence was the government of the former Cohen family home – Syria. As detailed in a letter dated 25 February 1960 by Yosef Tekoah, the Acting Permanent Representative of Israel written to the President of the Security Council of the U.N., Israel had many concerns regarding Syria. Tekoah noted the two countries had signed a General Armistice Agreement which provided in article I for the establishment of peace on July 20, 1949. However, “In 1953, Syria started a campaign against the utilization by Israel of the Jordan waters for the generation of hydroelectric power” and, in 1955, Syria attacked Israel fishermen on Lake Kinneret (Tiberias), “compelling Israel to take action in self-defence.” In 1957, “Syrian forces carried out repeated attacks on Israel farmers and workers pursuing their peaceful activities near the border” and “In December 1958 and January 1959, Syrian artillery positions in the hills bombarded Israel villages in the Huleh valley.” As recently as February 12, 1960, two Israelis were killed and one wounded in the Huleh region. (Letter) As a result of this, the IDF raided Syrian gun positions at Tewfiq in February 1960.

At the time of Cohen’s insertion into the Syrian elite, the country was part of Nassar’s United Arab Republic, which had come into being on February 22, 1958. For the next three years, throughout the Middle East, there were two forces jockeying for dominance in the Arab world. On one side were the old forces of conservatism, including the oil sheikhdoms and Lebanon. On the other were the new winds of revolution, the Nasserite pan-Arabism and the growing Ba’ath Party in Syria and Iraq. “Of course, both Arab camps were rent with dissension and rivalry, but overall, this basic split was becoming the central dynamic of inter-Arab politics.” (Bass 78) But the union of Egypt and Syria was far from perfect. Knowing this, Nassar played “the perennial Israel card and exploited Arab fears over Israel’s nuclear program and plans to divert the Jordan River for hydroelectric power.” While the Republic lasted, Nassar’s trump card was that he still had the only army considered sufficient to take on Israel’s IDF. (Bass 78)

At the same time, the political competition between Syria and King Hussein's Jordan worried Israeli policy makers. Syria wanted to dominate her southern neighbor by undermining Jordan's political will by means of terrorism. For example, on August 29, 1960, the Jordanian Prime Minister, Haza'ah AlMajali, was assassinated when Syrian Muchabarat agents succeeded in planting a bomb in his Amman office. Syria, aligned with the Soviet bloc, began sponsoring guerrilla raids on Israel in the early 1960s as part of its "people's war of liberation", designed to deflect domestic opposition to The Ba'ath Party. With large shipments of Soviet-supplied weaponry, including MiG-21 "Fishbeds," T-54/55 main battle tanks, and scores of heavy guns, Syria was a very troubling radical Arab state. A closed society with limited access to the Western and the Arab worlds, Syria was indeed an enigma to the Israeli intelligence community. (Katz 165) To add to the danger of any Jewish agent in Syria, persecution of Jews trapped in the country after 1948 was common. They could not own property, and the few Jews permitted to travel for business purposes could not travel with family members as the government feared that they would flee and join the Israeli Army. (Roffé)

So, after deciding Syria would be Eli Cohen's target, his handlers turned their focus to the identity of Kamal Amin Ta'abet: Eli Cohen's new cover. To begin, Eli's Egyptian accent had to be changed. "According to several reports, his mentor at the Unit 131 training facility was a legendary figure named Sam'an, an Iraqi-born Jew who, during the 1948 War, was the shachar's chief expert on Arabic language and traditions and Moslem customs." (Katz 165) It was decided Cohen would first travel to Argentina, infiltrate the Syrian community there to establish his bona fides, and then return to Syria with a carefully crafted cover identity. The well-researched files in Unit 131 HQ were used to formulate Eli Cohen's Syrian identity, and, according to Maurice Cohen, the cover story was created to be as close to Eli's own background as possible. Dramatizing the scene, Maurice Cohen wrote:

"From now on, your name is Kamel. Your father was Amin Taabet. Your mother's name was Sa'ida Ibrahim. You were born in Beirut. Your family immigrated to Alexandria, Egypt when you were three years old. Don't forget that your parents are Syrian born. Your father was a wealthy textile merchant.

"In 1946, your uncle went to Argentina. A short time later he invited you to join him. In 1947, you came to Buenos Aires with his father, he went into partnership with your uncle in the textile business. After a while, they went bankrupt. Your father died in 1956. Six months later your mother also died. You went into business on your own. Naturally you were a great success." (M1)

Despite saying elsewhere he had met Cohen only once, Meir Amit told Gordon Thomas that he spent weeks creating this cover story with Eli. They would sit together, studying street maps and photographs of Buenos Aires so that Cohen's new background became totally familiar. Amit told Thomas, "Eli learned the language of an exporter-importer to Syria. He memorized the difference between waybills and freight certificates, contracts and guarantees, everything he would need to know. He was like a chameleon, absorbing everything. Before my very eye, Eli Cohen faded and Taabes took over, the Syrian who had never given up a longing to go home to Damascus. Every day Eli became more confident, more certain and keen to prove he could carry off the role. He was like a world champion marathon runner, trained to peak at the start of the race. But he could be running his for years. We had done all we could to show him how to pace his new life, to live the life. The rest was up to him. We all knew that. There was no big good-bye or send-off. He just slipped out of Israel, the way all my spies went." (Thomas *Gideon* 62)

## **Argentina**

Finally, Eli Cohen's marching orders were signed by AMAN's then director, Major General Chaim Herzog. On February 3, 1961, Eli Cohen took off from Lod Airport, near Tel Aviv, on an El Al flight to Zurich, where he switched his Israeli travel documents and became Kamal Amin Ta'abet. He was driven to the airport in a Ministry of Defense staff car. His wife was allowed to see him off, told that Eli would be working on a top-secret arms-procurement program for the Ministry of Defense and would be placed in absolutely no danger. Nadia Cohen believed this cover story until her husband was captured in Damascus. (Katz 165)

In Zurich, Eli Cohen allegedly boarded a flight for Santiago, Chile, which had a transit stop in Buenos Aires. This point provided an undocumented entry into Argentina. As a transit passenger, Cohen's passport would not be stamped in the airport, and he would not be required to register with the police. (Katz 165) This cloak-and-dagger maneuver was vital as, in the politically volatile period following the May 1960 Mossad/shin bet kidnapping of ex-Nazi Adolph Eichmann, Argentina was not receptive to the infiltration of Israeli secret agents. Until the U.N. brokered a peace deal in August of that year, Argentina had loudly denounced Israel for violating their national sovereignty. **(Note 3)**

Days later, Cohen met with his local control officer, a man known only as "Avraham." According to Katz, "They conducted their briefings in crowded Buenos Aires cafes. Slowly Kamal Amin Ta'abet developed into a distinctive character." With careful attention to detail, a generous budget, and a theatrical ability, Cohen became a prominent and respected "Arab" businessman in the Argentine capital. (Katz 165) He became proficient in Spanish and began to establish his connections with the local Syrian community. Cohen opened an account in an Arab bank, sported the flashy clothes typical of a young Syrian bachelor, drove a luxury car, and turned up at the favorite haunts of the community's elite. Cohen befriended 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. This connection became one of Eli Cohen's most important relationships. Col. Amin El-Hafaz was a bright officer who had commanded the training section in the Syrian army General Staff, but had been ousted from Damascus because his Ba'athist party leanings were not yet in political favor. (Katz 167) As it happened, he was a man destined to become one of the presidents of Syria two years later.

## **The Ba'athist Party**

Whether by design or good luck, these connections proved ideal for Cohen's mission. Founded April 7, 1947, the Baath Arab Socialist Party (spelled variously as Ba'th or Ba'ath – meaning in Arabic "Resurrection" or renaissance") was a quasi-socialist party interested in Arab nationalism in its formative years. But it had been disbanded in 1958 when Syria joined the United Arab Republic.

At first supporting the UAR but then resenting Egypt's domination, the Ba'athist members of the union government resigned in December 1959. At the same time, a handful of unhappy Syrian Baathist officers stationed in Egypt formed a secret military committee devoted to restore Syria's independence from being Nasser's "junior partner." Such rumblings would certainly have interested Israeli intelligence. Likely, no one could have predicted the complete takeover of Syria by this party but a year later. Certainly knowing their movements would be invaluable intelligence for Tel Aviv. So Eli Cohen was perfectly placed to express the zealous nationalism of Kamal Amin Ta'abet to any receptive ear as he professed his desire to visit his native Syria. Listeners were likely especially receptive to his willingness to invest large sums of his Argentine money in the Syrian economy. (Katz 167)

According to Maurice Cohen, Eli had a few minor close calls hiding his new identity. "We have family in that country," Maurice said, "and some years later, I met our aunt, our mother's sister, who told me she had seen Eli there. Eli had explained that he was merely a tourist who brought

regards from her nephews in the old country. She suspected, but never knew for a fact, that he was her nephew. What a risk my brother took being cordial with our family members.” (Note 4). As noted in Part 1, it was actually Cohen’s uncle, not aunt, that he visited in his nom de guerre.) But Maurice believed the family upbringing helped his brother’s mission. “Eli, like the rest of us, had spent his childhood absorbing the Aleppo-accented Arabic spoken at home and had heard enough stories about Syria to allow him to appear familiar with its intricate twists and turns.” (M2)

“Avraham,” Cohen’s AMAN controller in Buenos Aires, was impressed with the abilities of his agent. Details of his activities were conveyed to Tel Aviv, and arrangements for Kamal Amin Ta'abet's visit to Syria were accelerated. Kamal Amin Ta'abet announced to his new friends he was ready for his first visit to his homeland. He left Argentina equipped with letters of introduction, addresses, and promises of support for any endeavors he might wish to accomplish in Syria. (Katz 167)

There was now a new sense of urgency in placing Cohen in Damascus as quickly as possible. Events in Syria had taken dramatic turns. When the UAR pushed a sweeping nationalization program in the summer of 1961, Syrian business leaders and their military allies decided they had had enough. In late September 1961, a new anti-Nasser regime backed by both Syrian conservatives and army officers came to power in Syria. Their break from the Republic, known in Arabic as the infisal, humiliated Nasser and became a situation of international concern. The White House, for example, worried that Syria's secession might trigger a regional war. If Nasser attempted to force Syria back into the union, Jordan might come to the aid of Damascus. Washington wondered if Israel might capitalize on the chaos to seize the West Bank. (Bass 81-82) Within a day or two of the coup, the new Syrian leader, Ma'mun Kuzbari, began exchanging barbs with Nasser. Still, the war scare quickly dissipated. But factions immediately put the new Syrian government on shaky ground. In 1961, Syria went through three presidents, Ma'amun al-Kuzbari, Izzat an-Nuss, and finally Nazim al-Kudsi, who remained until the next coup in 1963. While various parties vied for compromise with Nasser, the Ba'athist secret Military Committee was also planning how to take power.

Before being sent to Syria, however, Cohen again traveled to Europe, where he met with the handler known as G once again. While G reports having been satisfied with Cohen’s condition, one conversation stood 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?’” Eli said 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.” (Florsheim and Shilon)

To G, the conversation provided 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.’” G had the

instrument repaired on site, “But I was struck that Eli had wanted so much to do well on his assignment. He kept saying, ‘Everything will be all right.’” (Florsheim and Shilon)

Cohen’s entry into Syria began on a sad and ironic note. Nine months after his secret arrival in Argentina, Eli Cohen came back to Israel as, in December 1961, his father Shaoul passed away. Joining the family for the traditional Jewish mourning period of Shiva, Cohen must have contemplated on the fact he was about to infiltrate the country where both his parents had been born, unable to tell anyone of what he was about to do. To add to the family grief, Avraham Cohen remembers that Eli couldn't even stay to finish shivah, leaving for Syria a day before the normal six-day mourning process ended. As this was most unusual, this stood out in the family. "He told us that he must leave for a business trip. He is a grown man. We cannot tell him what to do." (A4)

According to Samuel Katz, most of Eli’s short time was spent in Tel Aviv perfecting his cover story and being briefed on AMAN's requirements of him in Syria, as well as last-minute intelligence data needed for his mission. This was the tachlis (“real thing”) of his mission. The commander of Unit 131 acknowledged the danger, saying that “Not every agent was willing to travel to Damascus.” (Katz 167) Eli Cohen was armed with his mind and his technology:

A powerful miniature radio transmitter, the most advanced of its kind in the world, was hidden in the false bottom of an electric food mixer. The cord of Eli's electric shaver served as a long-range antenna. Cyanide tablets – for use on an enemy or, in dire circumstances, on himself – were disguised as aspirin. Chemicals for making high explosives were stored in toothpaste tubes and cans of shaving cream. His array of the finest Japanese camera equipment included facilities for making microfilm negatives. (Aldouby and Ballinger 105)

## **Our Man in Damascus**

On January 1, 1962, Eli Cohen boarded the liner *Astoria* in Genoa for the short journey to Beirut and then Damascus. (Katz 167) According to Katz, his first-class quarters and ability to part with money made him a favorite among the wealthy Arab passengers on board. One of those influential Syrians was so taken by Kamal Amin Ta'abet's financial resources and patriotic zeal that he offered to drive him from Beirut to Damascus. Katz maintains this happy accident allowed Eli Cohen to enter Syria without any scrutiny. (167)

On his handlers’ orders, Cohen rented an apartment in the fashionable Abu Romana district, near the Syrian general-staff headquarters. On the morning of February 25, 1962, the Unit 131 communications officer on duty at AMAN HQ in Tel Aviv received the first broadcast from Eli Cohen. According to Samuel Katz, “It was met with hugs and cheers in a military office usually devoid of emotion. A bottle of Israeli champagne was even opened in celebration.” (Katz 167) Cohen had set up an antenna along a pipe outside his study window; coded signals were tapped in deliberate bursts to develop a pattern that would become his signature. Any deviation from the norm would signal danger. Regular transmission schedules were established and Cohen was ordered not to broadcast long messages; the Syrian Muchabarat might be able to trace a prolonged electronic signal. (Katz 167) (note 5)

By all accounts, Kamal Amin Ta'abet became one of the most requested party guests on the Damascus nightlife circuit, in no small part due to his largess in providing loans to government officials and possible womanizing. 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. (Florsheim and Shilon)

Many published descriptions of Cohen’s interactions with these new “friends” may be more legend than plausible. For example, “He also held parties at his home, which turned into orgies for high-placed Syrian ministers, businessmen, and others, who used Eli’s apartment for assignations with various women, including Defense Ministry secretaries, airline hostesses, and Syrian singing stars.” (Geller) At these parties, one story has it, that Cohen could feign intoxication while picking up loose talk from his guests. In addition, “husband hunters” among the Damascus rich and influential eyed Ta'abet, “hoping that their almond eyes, Byzantine beauty, and olive skin would secure a future of wealth and power: He became the most sought-after bachelor in the Syrian capital.” (Katz 167) While it would be impossible to verify this claim, Samuel Katz reported that “he had seventeen lovers in Syria, all dazzling beauties with a fair degree of family power. Eli Cohen and his handlers believed that these women would help him escape in a time of crisis.” (Katz 167) One unlikely report was that “Eli used to photograph romantic scenes with hidden cameras, so he could reveal the photos to the high-ranking officials if their wives would not cooperate with him. But almost all the ladies who were enchanted by his charm liberally and voluntarily supplied him information of great importance.” (M1) Were all this to be true, James Bond would have to bow to Eli Cohen’s prowess with social graces, girls, and gadgets.

However, other accounts point to a very different personality. According to Cohen’s principal handler, “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. 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 Cohen always behaved quietly and modestly and rarely asked for anything. (**Note 6**) 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.’” (Florsheim and Shilon)

In court testimony, Syrian officer and Cohen friend Ma'azi Zaher a-Din provided details illustrating Cohen’s frugality. “I stayed at his house often and one thing amazed me. Five out of the seven rooms in the apartment weren’t in use at all. Besides that, I didn’t understand why Cohen, who spent money on all kinds of causes, refused to hire a maid, and cleaned the house, washed the dishes, and cooked his meals all by himself.” (Ben-Hanan 121) The head of Syrian Intelligence, Colonel Swidani, agreed, telling the court Cohen “didn’t keep a maid, a chauffeur, nor a cook. He did everything himself, washed the dishes, cleaned the apartment, and even did the laundry. Not only that, he was careful not to meet the same man twice in one day. With special visitors he instituted a system of special rings on the doorbell.” (121)

In late 2008, Avraham Cohen received a letter from a Syrian calling himself “Fareed” who claimed to have known Cohen during this period. The letter began: “I was in my twenties when I met Kamel. I met him occasionally because he was a friend of some of my relatives. I also heard a lot of conversations among my family and their friends concerning Kamel,” especially after the trial when many of them were incarcerated during the state’s investigations into Cohen’s contacts. (A6) While Fareed’s observations may never be confirmed, still some of his descriptions of Cohen’s behavior are in line with other sources and may shed light on matters not previously known about how Cohen’s unusual lifestyle impacted his mission.

According to Fareed, “Kamel lived in an apartment (not a villa) rented from Haitham Kutub who was an employee in the Central Bank of Syria. He used to pay 3500 Syrian Pounds a year for the rent. I visited this apartment many times.” Like other sources, Fareed noted Cohen’s frugality. “Kamel use to live very moderately. His furniture was: single steel bed, two- door cupboard, table in the bedroom used as a desk, a Canon camera, and a Zeneth expensive Radio. In the entrance, only a little table was there. The kitchen had a small refrigerator and a small gas range. Other rooms in the house were totally empty. Most of the time, his breakfast was a sandwich of cheese and [his] lunch used to be Maggi Chicken soup.” (note 7) This sparseness of possessions led to problems with Cohen’s cover. “At that time, his friends started wondering about what kind of a businessman he is! He came to Syria to do business in a time when Syrian businessmen were running out to do business some where else! His furniture is very poor for a businessman! He did not buy a car and rarely used public transportation. When he used to go to some restaurant with friends he would do every trick to make them pay the bill! I was there.”

During his first year in Damascus, “Kamel” “restricted his friendship to [a] few ordinary people namely: Waheed Kutub (a jobless womanizer and neighbor of Kamel and brother of Haitham), Haitham Kutub, Sulaiman Rujula (Security officer responsible for night clubs), the al Hamdi sisters (hostesses), Adel Sayeedi (Ex- security admin. Manager – retired), Mohamad Hamza (a small employee), Ely (a man of Greek origin), and Luis Dosan (Ex Belgium consul).

“During his first year, he managed to be part of the families of his friends. He was very polite and considerate. Everybody loved the man especially senior men and women. In many occasions he was participating in family activities. Um Waheed -the mother of his neighbor- used to cook and send him lunch almost daily knowing that he is alone. He, in return, treated her like a mother. Many families were friendly with him either to benefit from his future business, or to hunt him as a possible wealthy husband to a young lady in the family.”

Because of unstable Syrian politics, Fareed said not all of Kamel’s friends liked each other. “Later that year, old friends started feeling a great change in his attitude. He started friendships with Bathis (members of Baath Party) in a time when Damascenes were having great hatred towards Bathis especially businessmen. He made friendship with Minister Walid Taleb, Thabet Al Arees, Salah Jadid, and many that I don’t remember. His friend ship was most of the time with families.”

Fareed’s descriptions of Cohen’s social life are less fanciful than some sources. Yes, he claims to have seen women coming and going: “Most of these women used to come in black government

cars!” However, he doesn’t support the idea Cohen was known for lavish parties. “The only party he did was to two of his friends and to the Syrian Durzi Singer Fahd Ballan and a very small man called Mohamad Abdulkareem The Prince of Buzuk. At this stage, his old friends started being afraid of him because he was attending Baath Party gatherings, associate high officials, and also trying to avoid them. Suspicion became very high among his friends because that was not a behavior of a businessman and it became too much a period for a businessman to study the market.” (A6) With this many eyes on him, as explored in Part III of these files, it was inevitable that Cohen’s cover story would unravel.

## Achievements and Myths

Another debate regarding the work of Eli Cohen has dealt with the significance of his true importance in Israeli intelligence. Published accounts vary wildly, and certain myths have become commonplaces rather than fully explored possibilities.

For example, in their quite reliable *Israel's Secret Wars: A History of Israel's Intelligence Services* (1991), authors Ian Black and Lenny Morris claim Cohen’s contributions to the Israeli win in the 1967 Six Day War have been overstated. In their view, the most important contribution for Israel was the capture of a Russian MiG in Iraq which a team of Syrian defectors flew to Tel Aviv. In their view, Cohen’s observations about the Golan Heights weren't noteworthy as most of this information was obtained by normal air reconnaissance. And they point to the fact that his brother Maurice discovered his presence, evidence of obvious fatal carelessness.

On the other hand, not surprisingly, Cohen’s handler ranks Cohen’s work highly. “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.” (Florsheim and Shilon) But his most important achievement, in the handler’s opinion, was undoubtedly the wide range of contacts Cohen established with key personnel in the Syrian army and government, ties soon to prove invaluable. All that he had seen was communicated to the Israelis through a secret transmitter that Cohen kept concealed in his window blind. (Florsheim and Shilon)

Samuel Katz – labeling Eli Cohen a “Super Spy” – agrees, being among those who believe what Cohen saw and reported to Israel was extremely significant. In particular, he believes Cohen was able to pass on much information about the Syrian Air Force. “Indeed, Eli Cohen was able to get ‘up close and personal’ with the men and machines of the much-vaunted Syrian Air Force. He talked to pilots, asked them how they planned to defeat the IAF in air combat, and was even given technical briefings on their MiG and Sukhoi aircraft, as well as the weapons systems they carried.” (Katz 167) Hoping to one day secure business dealings with Kamal Amin Ta'abet, Katz claimed, the pilots explained their tactics and, in some cases, secret tricks they had learned from the Russians. Katz claims the pilots’ names were also sent back to Tel-Aviv. Other military officers who befriended Cohen took him to numerous weapons facilities, arsenals, and training camps. During a party or business meeting (which usually entailed Ta'abet handing over an

envelope filled with cash to a corrupt official or army officer), all Cohen had to do was vocalize his concern regarding potential Israeli attacks against Syria and he was ushered around top-secret facilities with the pomp and ceremony of a visiting head of state. (Katz 168)

Beyond reporting on military affairs, Cohen's connections inside high level politicians was impressive by any standards. At the beginning of his mission, Cohen had joined the Ba'athist party in February 1961, promising to become "a true example of the struggling Arab." (Yarid) (Note 8) According to the Arab press, Eli became a significant member of the Baa'th Party when it came to power. He appeared in public assemblies on their behalf and managed a great campaign for fundraising to support its activities. He allegedly went to great lengths to ingratiate himself with an old Argentinean friend, President General Amin El-Hafez, supposedly offering a fur coat to Mrs. El Hafez, the President's wife. (M1)

Beyond this, Eli allegedly secured a deeper friendship with Al-Hafiz when he was diagnosed with throat cancer and the new president wished to keep this secret for fear of another coup. According to Maurice, Eli connected Al-Hafiz with a French Jewish surgeon in Paris on the condition Al-Hafiz do nothing to hurt the Jew. Thus, Al-Hafiz owed Eli Cohen his life and thereafter Eli was the president's "shadow." (M5) As a result, Maurice Cohen maintained, Al-Hafiz often posed questions to Eli, who always responded he needed the night to sleep on the query. He'd radio the request to headquarters, they'd process an answer, and Eli would then pass along the AMAN answer to the president the next morning. The information was so reliable, Al-Hafiz told other ministers they should pose similar queries to Kamil who would later respond with what was needed. (M5)

While many of Maurice Cohen's notes regarding these years must remain questionable, one matter confirmed in various sources is that, by accident, Eli became somewhat of a radio personality. This unusual project began when Salem Saif, the Director of Foreign Broadcasting for Radio Damascus, approached Cohen to review propaganda material for foreign broadcasts. This led to a new show, *The Emigrant's Hour*, on which Cohen interviewed Syrian emigrants about themselves and their doings abroad. Avraham Cohen says the show was broadcast in Spanish, "aimed at exiles, modeled on Israel's broadcasts to its diaspora." (A5) According to Eli Ben-Hanan, "The Israeli Intelligence Services, following Elie's activity in Damascus, began listening regularly to the program. Elie incorporated information in the program" including news of his progress. "When he wanted to notify Headquarters in Tel Aviv that everything was going well, he would insert the last sentence from *Robinson Crusoe*, which he gave in French, and in inverted order." (Ben-Hanan 58-59) None of this information, however, was considered essential. With a touch of humor, Maurice Cohen claims, Eli read over the air *The Three Musketeers*, the very same text used to code and decode his transmissions. (M3)

One "side mission" Eli took on wasn't directly related to the Syrian government, but rather dealt with the discovery of a Nazi war criminal in Damascus. In the words of Maurice Cohen – who described the mission as "beyond the call of duty" – in 1962, Eli received a telegram asking him to locate and deliver an exploding letter to Nazi criminal Adolf Eichmann's negotiator, Franz Rademacher, who was in hiding in Syria. According to the trial transcripts, Rademacher was using the name John Rosalie, and Eli asked his friend Majd Sheikh ElArd, a well-known

merchant and businessman, to help find him. (Ben-Hanan 112-113) Eli reportedly told the court, “It was found that he had been responsible for the destruction of a considerable number of Jews, and it was decided to assassinate him. When I got the telegram, I turned to my friend Majd and asked him about Rosalie. He led me to him.” According to Eli Ben-Hanan, the job of disposing of the Nazi was then turned over to an unknown criminal, possibly for the cost of one thousand dollars. (Ben-Hanan 60-62)

However, Zwy Aldouby and Jerrold Ballinger’s account adds details that point to Cohen performing the assassination himself. In this version, after finding Rademacher, Cohen’s second report concluded “Offer myself to liquidate R.” He was, at first, told “Avoid any action on R. which could jeopardize principal mission.” In a later message, Eli suggested that Rademacher be disposed of by means of an “explosive letter” (a deadly incendiary device developed by Israeli intelligence). According to Aldouby and Ballinger:

One evening, following an affirmative answer from Mosad headquarters, he sat at his dining room table mixing chemicals. After liquefying a fine powder by heat, he thoroughly coated the inside of an envelope with the substance, inserted a tiny detonator and sealed it by a special process. That same night, he dropped the letter-bomb addressed to Thorn Rosello into the “Damascus Only” slot at the main post office near the Serail. (187)

The following morning, he got confirmation the bomb had worked. If this account is true, then this is the only known situation in which Eli Cohen was involved in any operation specifically designed to kill an enemy of the Jewish people. While the Mossad would later become best known for assassinations of terrorists, especially after the Munich massacre in 1972, Eli Cohen remains one of the names recognized for intelligence work, not murder.

Beyond this strike of revenge, in 1963, Cohen’s associations with the Ba'athist party reaped unexpected dividends for Tel Aviv. On March 8, 1963, after the Syrian party's military committee persuaded Nasserist and independent officers to make common cause with them, they successfully carried out a military coup. From 1963 on, the Ba'ath was the only legal Syrian political party. But it would not be a stable entity for some time. Factionalism and intra-party splintering led to a succession of governments and new constitutions. At first, a National Revolutionary Command Council took control and assigned itself legislative power. Salah al-Din al-Bitar became head of a “national front” government and Luai al-Atassi became Chairman of the Council. In July of that year, Amin al-Hafez – Cohen’s friend from Argentina – replaced him and remained until February 23, 1966.

It’s believed Eli Cohen was invited to attend the historic Sixth National Convention of the Ba’ath Party in March 1963. As a highly respected member of the Syrian National Council of Revolutionary Command and a volunteer for Radio Damascus, Eli no doubt had intimate access to both open and closed sessions at the convention. (M2) According to Hani Yarid, Eli may have met Michael Afflaq, the founder of the party, at this convention. (Yarid)

Thus, Cohen witnessed the important shift in power at the convention when the far-left hardliners gained control. The dominant Syrian and Iraqi regional parties joined forces to call for

more worker control over farm and industrial production based on the Soviet model. At the same time, in March and April 1963, this leadership hammered out a tripartite agreement in principle on a new and expanded United Arab Republic including Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. Still uneasy about Nasser, the Syrian Ba'athists looked to Baghdad to provide a regional counterpoise to Cairo, and as time progressed, the two Ba'ath states worked to compete to match Nasser's military strength. (Bass 124)

Before the collapse of this union, Israel greatly feared the resurging Pan-Arabism that might have swelled to include Egypt, Syria, and Iraq as well as a new government in Jordan, all of whom were staunchly opposed to the existence of Israel. Into the mix, Syria quashed a late-July 1963 coup attempt by local Nasserites, prompting Nasser to excoriate his Ba'athist partners in Syria, whom he denounced on July 22 as "secessionist, inhuman and immoral," and "fascist." (Bass 191) Shortly after, minor border incursions between Syria and Israel began. On November 5, 1963, a Syrian infiltrator was killed by the Israelis near the Galilee town of Kfar Ha'nassi; in November, two Israelis were shot and wounded by Syrians near Kibbutz Dan, close to the Syrian-held Golan Heights. (Bass 240)

## The Myths

While "Our Man in Damascus" undoubtedly fed his controllers considerable and detailed information about all these twists and turns, certain myths and legends have sprung up that are impossible to verify. Detractors can point to the episodes on which Cohen's reputation stands and see likely discrepancies between the plausible and the unlikely. For example, according to accounts published in several Lebanese newspapers, Kamal Amin Ta'abet was, after the 6<sup>th</sup> Congress, being considered for the post of Syria's deputy defense minister. (Katz 169) As has been repeated in many sources ever since, this put Eli Cohen in line to become the third-highest ranking member of the Syrian government. While it's clear Cohen was intimately familiar with those who could have elevated him to this position, there's one problem with the notion. The Lebanese reports appeared in the spring of 1963 and Cohen's cover wasn't blown until January 1965. For almost two years, Kamal Amin Ta'abet was not given any such post nor any similar.

In addition, much has been made of Cohen's reports over control of the waters of the Jordan River. The major claim is that Eli exposed Syria's plans to cut off Israel's water supply by diverting the headwaters of the Jordan in 1964. (Katz 169) Maurice Cohen was among those convinced that his brother was deeply involved in ferreting out the secret plans for the water diversion project. Maurice believed that at a celebration Eli threw on behalf of the 1963 coup, Eli devoted special attention to Ibn Laden, a Saudi Arabian public works contractor and engineer whom Salim Khatoum had introduced as the man in charge of the Jordan River deviation project. According to Maurice, this contractor turned out to be brother to Assama Ben-Laden, the future terrorist. Eli was able to talk with Ben-Laden, see the maps and the time schedule for the project. (M5) Later, Maurice asserts, Eli accompanied the head of the United Arab commandant, the Egyptian General Ali Ali Amer, during the expedition to survey the project. (M1) (note 9)

While in Syria, the story goes, Eli transmitted full details of the deflection program and was debriefed on it in Israel in October 1964 by different army officers in Zahal. "He spoke behind a curtain so none of them could identify him. The Israeli experts examined the Arab program and

came to the conclusion that the Arab plan would keep 100 million cubic meters of water from the country, a quantity equal to the third of the water flowed in the national conduit. This loss would be enough to increase significantly the percentage of salt in the Kineret Sea.” (M1)

Certainly, learning what Syrian planners were up to regarding Jordan waters would have been an important aspect of Cohen’s original assignment. For years, Israel had been watching Arab interests in this crucial matter. “Israel’s defense planners urgently needed reliable intelligence on the scope of the water diversion project – engineering plans, diagrams, maps, and other data – and up-to-the-minute assessments of Soviet influence in the Syrian capital, as well as detailed information on plans for the modernization, equipping, and retraining of Syrian forces.” (Geller) But it’s important to note there was nothing covert in the Syrians’ plans to divert water from the Jordan – indeed, it had been very publicly published after a 1964 Arab Summit by 13 nations and heatedly debated in the U.N.

Historically, between 1953 and 1955, a number of plans regarding sharing Jordan waters had been proposed, resulting in the 1955 Johnston Plan which the Arab states accepted unhappily. Between 1959 and 1964, Israel unilaterally diverted Jordan water as part of its National Water Carrier plan. (Murakami) Then, in 1964, as the work progressed, Arab governments met in two summit conferences to consider ways of combating the scheme and of eliminating Israel. The January 1964 gathering laid the groundwork for the PLO, the Palestine Liberation Organization. The second Arab conference, held in Alexandria on Sept. 13, 1964, declared a number of goals, including diversion of the Jordan River. Signers of this resolution included Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan, Yemen, Tunisia, Algeria, the Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Libya, Lebanon, Morocco, and Syria. They let it be known:

The Council adopted resolutions for the implementation of Arab plans, especially in the technical and military fields, including embarking on immediate work on projects for the exploitation of the waters of the River Jordan and its tributaries. (Isseroff)

Israel was quite alarmed by this resolution, and a series of letters were exchanged between the Arab League and Israel at the U.N. (Isseroff) Political considerations cited by the Arabs in rejecting the 1955 Johnston Plan were revived to justify the diversion scheme, pointing to the advantage Israel would gain at the expense of Palestinian refugees. In response, Israel stressed that the National Water Carrier was within the limits of the Johnston Plan. (Murakami) The Arabs started work on the Headwater Diversion project in 1965, after the capture of Cohen. After Israel declared that it would regard such diversion as an infringement of its sovereign rights, in a series of military strikes, Israel hit the diversion works. The attacks culminated in April 1967 in air strikes deep inside Syria. The increase in water-related Arab-Israeli hostility was a major factor leading to the June 1967 Six Day War.

Maurice was correct in one detail – Eli was in Israel in October 1964 when the de-briefing allegedly took place – the month after the Arab League made its proclamation known and protests from Israel in the U.N. began. What Cohen provided most likely gave the Israeli air force precise targets for the bombings that took place in November 1964, responses to the Syrian artillery attacks on three Kibbutzum which coincidentally pre-emptive strikes against Syrian

water diversion construction. Whatever Eli Cohen said that aided this successful air raid, he clearly did not expose any secret schemes.

The incident which seems to most define Cohen's legacy was his visits to the Golan Heights which has led to his being remembered for helping pave the way for Israel's quick victory in the 1967 Six Days War. Were it not for this idea, it's possible the name Eli Cohen would not have risen so highly in espionage lore.

Without question, the Golan Heights were and are of central importance in Middle Eastern history. In 1965 when the Syrians occupied the territory, the impregnable volcanic plateau "hovered majestically above northeastern Israel, from which the Sea of Galilee and much of central Israel could be easily seen in artillery gunsights . . . The Syrians had established a series of heavily fortified gun emplacements and forts, which would create a gauntlet of cannon and machine-gun fire against attacking Israeli forces; the artillery trap was so overwhelming, the Syrians believed it was deterrence enough to any Israeli military move." (Katz 164) While the Syrians held the Heights, their 130mm guns and mortars subjected the kibbutzim and moshavim to incessant and murderous artillery barrages.

So it was no small matter for Kamal Amin Ta'abet to visit every position in this "Maginot Line" of Syrian defense. With senior staff officers acting as guides, Eli Cohen was provided an in-depth intelligence briefing of monumental proportions. "He was even photographed with his Syrian military friends at a top-secret defensive position on the Heights, looking into Israel. He also photographed, in his mind, the positioning of every Syrian gun, trench, and machine-gun nest in each Golan Heights fortification; tank traps, designed to impede any Israeli attack, were also identified and memorized for future targeting." (note 10) This is the core of the legend of Eli Cohen – the information he gathered was said to be used to construct three-dimensional models of the Syrian positions. They would be used on June 9, 1967, to seize the Golan in an awe-inspiring blitz. (Katz 169) It seems few doubt Eli Cohen was able to acquire this important information and transmit it to Tel-Aviv. But the story expanded in the years after the Six Day War to the point many believe Cohen suggested the planting of eucalyptus trees to allegedly provide shade but also secretly serve as markers for Israeli bombers.

A romantic notion, but one that makes little sense. The attack on the Golan was far more complex and hard-fought than the idea of the IDF having easy targets in their bombsights. And other factors favored the Israelis. Perhaps Doron Geller's online lecture, "Israeli Intelligence in the 1967 War" best puts Cohen's contributions in context. Geller states Cohen's labors in Syria, alongside those of Wolfgang Lotz in Egypt, laid the intelligence groundwork, "but many other spies, both Israelis and Arabs – and sometimes European or American non-Jews – also worked on behalf of Israel." During the lead-up to the war, Meir Amit, who believed one field agent was worth a division of soldiers, had a network of informants that permeated the entire Egyptian military, providing key details for Israel's pre-emptive strike. (Thomas *Gideon* 62) In addition, they had accurate knowledge of Jordanian political and military installations as well. For example, after the war, Samir ar-Rifai (an assistant to King Hussein), "told Western reporters that a lone IDF Super Mystere had attacked King Hussein's office in the Royal Palace in Amman on the afternoon of 5 June. The Israeli plane 'machine-gunned the king's office at point-blank range with a precision and knowledge of its target that was stupefying.'" (Geller)

Electronic eavesdropping devices also played pivotal roles. Most significantly, one conversation between Nasser and King Hussein was tapped “by two veteran Aman (Military Intelligence) officers using Second World War vintage equipment” that revealed the lies Nasser was telling the King. While AMAN Chief Aharon Yariv opposed the publication of the conversation, fearing that it would reveal the extent of Israel’s eavesdropping capabilities, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan and Prime Minister Levi Eshkol overruled him, counting on a huge political bonanza. Which they got. (Geller) As it happened, such Arab mistakes helped the Israeli victory on a number of counts.

For example, while Israel didn’t know it at the time, they benefited from the Soviet Union’s bungled disinformation campaign pushing Egypt to join Syria against Israel. On May 13, 1967, a Soviet parliamentary delegation visited Cairo and told the Egyptian leaders that Israel had concentrated eleven to thirteen brigades along the Syrian border in preparation for an assault within a few days, with the intention of overthrowing the revolutionary Syrian government. This was a complete fabrication designed by the Soviets to destabilize the Middle East. (Bard) In fact, during the first two days of the war, Israeli leadership was divided over attacking the Golan Heights at all. Defense Minister Dayan, at first, feared Soviet intervention if Israel made any such move. Dayan changed his mind, apparently when intercepted communications revealed that the Egyptian army had collapsed and that the Syrian army could not offer serious resistance. (“Six Days, Definition”) The Syrians were handicapped by another lie when Nasser falsely broadcast he’d been successful defeating Israeli forces in his ill-fated Sinai campaign. Knowing he could turn his full attention to Syria, on the morning of June 9 Dayan authorized “Operation Hammer.”

By any standard, the battle was a major achievement in military history, accomplished with considerable coordination of air and land forces. The tank assault began after two days of heavy bombardment by the air force as the attacking force would face very difficult topographical conditions. The Israeli brigades had to scale steep, rugged and rocky heights and open a line for transportation while under constant fire from above. At first, the Syrian army sat safely in its strong fortifications consisting of cement pillboxes, six infantry brigades, five National Guard battalions and approximately 200 tanks. (“Six Days, Weapons.”) In a complex engineering operation, IDF soldiers from the Engineering Corps cleared the way of mines. Bulldozers then leveled a route for the tanks on the rocky face, suffering heavy casualties (“Six Days, Definition.”). At the same time, a force consisting of infantry and paratroopers purged a series of other posts overlooking the Hula valley in the southern sector of the Heights. (“Six Days, Weapons”) After several other assaults that evening and then on the 10<sup>th</sup>, the Syrian defenses had completely collapsed and a cease fire was imposed from international pressures. The victory came at a very high cost. In storming the Golan Heights, Israel suffered 115 dead – roughly the number of Americans killed during Operation Desert Storm. (Bard)

While this summary only hints at the achievement of the invading army, it should demonstrate that a single line of eucalyptus trees would have been of small benefit. As Black and Morris noted, finding the positions of Syrian fortifications would not have been a difficult matter for normal Ariel reconnaissance. Nonetheless, while two years old, Cohen’s intel regarding specific weaponry, ordnates, command structure, and decision procedures would have been

immeasurably valuable. It would be interesting to know what changes had been made in the Syrian defensive lines after Cohen's capture when the Syrians realized the extent of what he had provided Israel. Still, so many other factors were involved that it seems, as Black and Morris suggested, that mythmakers have given too much credit to but one participant in this lop-sided victory.

None of this – in the slightest – diminishes the numerous and extraordinary contributions Eli Cohen provided in his unquestionably self-sacrificing and, yes, heroic, tenure inside Syria from 1961 to 1965. Rather, knowing what he did and likely didn't do simply separates the man from the myth and allows for a more complete vista of his accomplishments. For example, Meir Amit didn't mention the Golan in his summation of Eli's work but said 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." (Florsheim and Shilon)

As Amit noted, in a country like Syria 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." (Florsheim and Shilon) In the end, Eli Cohen loses nothing by not being the man who alerted his country to water diversion plans or suggested trees as an unusual bombing target. Instead, he should be known as a spy who provided almost daily intelligence on his enemy for an intense and historic four year period.

## Notes

1 – lodge in Israel: Perhaps there were distinctions made for Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews; it could be that Haifa – a model of diversity even by today's standards – had an Arabic-speaking group while Tel Aviv did not. (Note from Helene Fragman Abramson)

2 n-purpose of mission. David Tinin and Dag Christiansen's *The Hit Team* ((1976)) describes departments in the Mossad dealing with Arab matters, indicating an Arab Affairs section with a distinctive Special Operations unit. In one passing mention of Cohen, they reported: "Once, when asked why Israel had taken the risk of placing Cohen in such a perilous position in Syria, a high-ranking Mossad officer replied, 'We wanted to increase the fear of Israeli intelligence.'"

3 – Argentina: As it happened, Cohen wasn't the only spy working in South America involved in Middle Eastern matters. Toward the end of 1960, Yco Bwoan was an Armenian-born Egyptian who became an agent for Egypt and went to Rio de Janeiro to establish his bona fides as a Jewish refugee. "A mirror image, curiously, of what Israeli spy Eli Cohen . . . was doing in the Arab community of Buenos Aires at exactly the same time in preparation for his mission to Syria." (Black and Morris 144-145.)

4 – Meeting aunt: In a slightly different version of the story, Maurice told Helene Fragman Abramson that Eli visited the Aunt saying he was a friend of Eli's from university and brought regards from the family.

5-. 1962 was a year of such good tidings for Israel. David Ben-Gurion had been working to improve relations with the U.S., a country that had kept the Zionist state at arm's length from its inception. In August 1962, the Kennedy administration decided to sell Hawk surface-to-air missiles to the Jewish state, marking the end of the embargo on major arms sales to Israel that had begun under Harry Truman. (Bass 5)

6 – expense accounts: Maurice recalls talking to Eli about filing expense reports, although it's unclear which job he was referring to: "There was an allowance for breakfast and lunch which Eli didn't take. I told him he needed to add it. Eli told me 'I have breakfast at home and bring my own lunch.'" (M2)

7-- I quote from the "Fareed" letter knowing it might well be some Syrian's attempt to send out disinformation on the work of Cohen, although it's difficult to pinpoint just any benefit this would glean. In addition, all accounts told from 44 year old memories are often unreliable. Nonetheless, this author felt the material may well contain new and credible information difficult to gain from Syrian sources.

However, I felt it best to include some Fareed material in the main text, some as notes. Here's a section from his letter dealing with what Fareed claims are Cohen's statements on the Jews:

**"Once** I was going to the cinema and by coincidence I met Kamel, Adel, and my relatives. They were coming to see the same film. They asked me to buy tickets. Adel told Kamel to give me money for the tickets. Kamel replied: you pay. Adel laughed and said "Kamel, you are a Jew (meaning he is not generous) your accent is similar to that of the Jews of Java ". Kamel was very angry and replied: Fuck you Adel don't ever call me a Jew." Everybody was laughing.!

"The only time I was alone with Kamel was when he came visiting our home to offer his greetings. I was alone so I received him waiting for the family. Out of pure suspicion, I had the following conversation (what I can remember):

- Why did you come to Syria since you were doing fine in Argentina?
- Being a stranger is very painful. I want to settle. I am fed up of being a stranger.
- Since you have an Argentina passport, have you thought of going to Israel?
- Are you crazy? why should I go there?
- Just to see how does it look?
- If I go there no Arab country will give me a visa.
- I heard it is a nice country Kamel.
- It might be. But, I heard from people visited there that the Israelis are living in a very hard conditions. The eastern Jews are treated like animals by the western Jews. Some eastern educated Jews can only find a job as garbage collectors or clean public gardens.

He looked very sad when he was saying this.

“Then, I was talking about Hitler. Kamal was very critical of Hitler (not like any Arab) and said: Poor Jews, they were mistreated all through history. They deserve a home land to live in. Arabs have a lot of land. These people have none. I had an argument about this with him. Kamel very politely asked me to change the subject because he doesn’t like politics!

“After that conversation, I had a strong feeling that this man is so strange.” (A6)

8 – “True Arab”: In Maurice Cohen’s files was the following note: “We can say with confidence that Eli was not active member of the Baa’th party, because his operators instructed him to keep his Argentina’s passport and not to accept Syrian citizenship to assure his escape from Syria in case of forthcoming danger. It was suggested that Eli remain in Syria as a tourist and not to identify himself with any political party, lest there will be a revolution resulting in Eli being purged by the opposite party.” While the source of this was not identified, it’s clear the purpose was to diminish Cohen’s presence in the ruling circles and defend the heads of the Syrian government in 1964. This is explored further in Part III of these files.

9n-diversion. There are comments on the diversion project in one book on the Mossad that’s considered outdated and not useful for serious researchers:

Eisenberg, Dennis, Uri Dan, and Eli Landau. *The Mossad: Israel's Secret Intelligence Service--Inside Stories*. (1979).

According to this title, Eli Cohen obtained specific information on the water diversion project from George Seif, chief propaganda broadcaster for Radio Damascus. Contrary to his testimony at Cohen’s trial where he claimed he had no access to confidential documents, this source says Seif’s job included using such documents to cull information for propaganda use. (p. 105) The construction contractor was a Yugoslavian based Energo-Projekt; the project managed by Col. Salim Hatoum who, based on a footnote, was a Druze and had an orthodox Jewish brother living in Israel. With such a connection, it’s possible he was a Mossad source himself.

10—photographs. If any of “Fareed”’s accounts are credible (see note 6), Cohen’s spycraft gained the spy information, but also put him in the spotlight. “. . . Kamel asked his friends to take him to al Himma (الحمة). He went with Haitham, Waheed, Muazza Zahruldeen – an army officer - , and Mohamad Hamza. Before they reach Hemma, they passed through the Golan Hights. Over there, he claimed that he likes the view and asked to take some pictures. Despite the objection of everybody because photography is prohibited, he insisted. In Hemma, Kamel made a big mistake. After a swim in the hot water of a swimming pool, he claimed fainting. His friends carried him to the military clinic which was the only one in that area. A military doctor checked him and Kamel opened his eyes and thanked the doctor. The doctor privately told one of the friends that there was nothing wrong with Kamel and that this was all faking and if this is right, it is a very bad joke. This act rose lot of suspicion and discussions among his friends.” (A6)

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## **Maurice Cohen Manuscripts and Tapes**

M1. "Reminiscences: Maurice Cohen's Reminiscences on his brother Eliahu Cohen, Most Famous Spy." A 47-page collection of notes written by Maurice with material gathered from unknown sources, apparently between 1998-2001.

M2. Cohen, Maurice as told to Carla Stockton. "Am I My Brother's Keeper?" Retrieved, June 5, 2007. A reworking of an earlier version of the same account, "A Brother's Story," published at the EliCohen.org website.  
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M3. From conversations between Helene Fragman Abramson and Maurice Cohen throughout 2006.

M4. Discussions with Maurice Cohen, Harvey Chertok, and Wes Britton in the home of Helene Fragman Abramson, Oct. 8-9, 2006

M5. Television interview from the collection of Belle Cohen, broadcast date unknown.

## **Interviews with Avraham Cohen**

A1. Avraham Cohen interview with Helene Fragman Abramson, Tel Aviv, November 15, 2006.

A2. Avraham Cohen interview with Helene Fragman Abramson, May 2007.

A3. Avraham Cohen phone interview with Helene Fragman Abramson, July 31, 2007

A4. Avraham Cohen telephone interview with Wes Britton and Helene Fragman Abramson, Aug. 2, 2007.

A5. E-mail to author, April 3, 2009.

A6. E-mail forwarded to this author from Avraham Cohen, Jan. 9, 2009.

A7. E-mails to author and Esben Sylvest, July 1 and 3, 2009.

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