

Our Man In Damascus

Following centuries of expulsion and persecution, the Holocaust proved to be the culminating devastation for the Jewish people. It became apparent that a Jewish state must be the “final solution” to this millenium of carnage. Jewish Zionists had fought for years to establish their own home and gain independence. An article by Matt Plen for My Jewish Learning brings up one of the many problems the Jews faced while searching for a home.

Following World War II, hundreds of thousands of Jewish displaced persons set their sights on *aliyah*, but the British government — in control of Palestine since 1917 and keen to maintain friendly relations with the Arab world — refused to admit them. As violence between Jews, Arabs, and the British mounted, Britain handed over the problem to the United Nations (Plen).

No one was willing to provide a refuge for the Jewish people. They had always wanted a place to call home, and after the horrible treatment they faced in the holocoast they needed a home more than ever. The journey to finding a home leads to even more conflicts. In November 1947, the Jewish people were finally given a home. The UN General Assembly voted to partition Palenstine into Jewish and Arab states. This caused instant conflict between the Arabs and Jews. Arabics vowed to “push the Jews into the sea”. Things only got worse from there after David Ben-Gurion officially declared Israel as an independent state. Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and contingents from Sadui Arabia all participate in an invasion of the new state on the eve of the declared independence. In 1949 the UN ordered a cease fire between the fighting

countries which ended the war upon its conclusion Israel had gained more territory than the UN partition had originally given them. The Jewish state extended into the West Bank and Egypt gained control of the Gaza Strip. The Palestinians and Jews created a fragile peace for awhile, but it didn't last long. Conflicts started back up only a year after the issued treaty of 1949.

Clashes and eruptions continued all the way up to 1967. In the 17 years between these 2 dates saw plenty of fighting and conflict. These conflicts included Israel attempting a plot to divert the Jordan river to the Negev Desert. Lebanese and Syrian attacks upon Israeli farmers in the Golan Heights were common, as were Jordanian bombings in Jerusalem. Planned attacks by Israel and upon Israel from surrounding countries abounded. Arab alliances were strengthened against Israel. Israel too had alliances with western countries such as Great Britain and the United States. This 20 years of contention culminated in the strategic Israeli victory in the 1967 war expanding Israel's borders and creating a buffer with her hostile neighbors.

The 1967 Six-Day War was one of the most impressive victories in modern warfare history. The planning that went into this short eventful war is second to none. After Israel intercepted messages between surrounding countries that started war plans they had against Israel, they sprung into action. Author James Rodgers comments on Israel's extensive plan and offers one of the many ways that the Israeli government showed genius in an article he wrote for *The Conversation*. "Israel's military success in the Six-Day War redrew the borders of the Middle East – and it also set a new standard for government spin in wartime. Alongside its preparations for war, Israel ran a masterful communications campaign designed to disguise its military one" (Rodgers). Israel used every resource it had to get prepared for this war. Nothing, however, will surpass their aerial attack. The whole operation was based upon if Israel could gain control of the

air. After the bombing of Egyptian air bases on the first day, Israel achieved this goal and just 5 days later came out on top of this short war. This event was a huge turning point in the history of the entire area. Israel was totally outmanned and outgunned, but they still came out on top with the least amount of casualties of all the other countries. They also almost doubled their land and gained control of the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights. However, none of this would have happened without the brave work of Eli Cohen. Eli Cohen's espionage efforts were the key to Israel's success in Syria during the 1967 Six-Day War. Cohen's unique skills led to the reception of vital information which allowed Israel's defense forces to successfully bomb Syrian fortifications and more. Cohen's sacrifice led to Israel's acquisition of the Golan Heights and it's greater international security.

The Birth of a Hero

_____ Eli Cohen was born in 1924 in Egypt. After Israel gained its independence, his whole family migrated to Israel. He however, stayed behind and did some work in Egypt for Israel. It was at this time that he was first introduced into the world of espionage. In an article written for the "Times", Alejandro De La Garza takes a deeper dive in Cohens early life. "Eliyahu (Eli) Cohen, an Egyptian Jew, was born in Alexandria in 1924. As a young adult, he worked within Egypt to secretly assist other Egyptian Jews in emigrating to Israel. Cohen later became part of an Israeli spy network in Egypt, which was uncovered and dismantled by Egyptian authorities in 1954"(De La Garza). Cohen's failed secret operation was later named the Lavon Affair. Reporter Gili Cohen, in his article "Israel Reveals Controversial 'Lavon Affair' Correspondence, 62 Years Later, further expanded on this operation.

Lavon Affair. Code-named Operation Susannah by IDF military intelligence, it involved a Jewish terror cell in Egypt that was sought to undermine Cairo's relations with the United States and Britain. The newly released documents show that the head of the IDF Intelligence Corps, Binyamin Gibli, made major but unsuccessful efforts to clear his name over the matter (Cohen).

The fall out of the Lavon Affair led to two Israelis being executed, and six others were sentenced to long prison sentences and were not released until 1968. Although he had a very small role in this operation, Cohen, and many others, were arrested but released a short time later. After this disastrous operation, in 1956 Cohen joined his family in Israel and started a life there. He instantly had a job in Israel's military. Yossi Melman further explains in an article for "The Jerusalem Post". "Being fluent in Arabic, French and Hebrew, he was hired as a translator for military intelligence. Yet he declined offers to be transferred to Unit 188"(Melman). His fluency in so many languages proved to be one of his greatest gifts in his short life.

In August of 1959 Eli Cohen married the love of his life, Nadia Cohen. They soon started a family and had 2 daughters, Sophie and Irit, and a son, Shai. Cohen was happy with the life he had built for himself, but he wanted more. His work bored him and he dreamed of joining the Mossad. The Mossad is the secret intelligence agency for Israel. He wanted to live the action packed life of a spy. He applied to join the Mossad, but was rejected because they found his style too reckless for an agency that requires one to be discreet. Offended, Cohen quit his job for the Israeli defense, and got a job as a filing clerk for an insurance company based in Tel Aviv. He worked there for about 2 years when he finally got what he had always wanted.

In 1960, the Mossad's head director Meir Amit was searching for an individual for a very special operation. Amit's vision was to infiltrate the Syrian government at the highest levels. None of the men he interviewed fit the bill for the job. Frustrated, he searched through the Mossad's old records. He happened to stumble upon Elli Cohen's file. Cohen's skill set seemed right for the job, so he had some of his men covertly follow Cohen for the next couple of weeks. Following their surveillance, they deemed Cohen the right man for the job. They approached Cohen and offered him the job. He was ecstatic for the opportunity and jumped right on board. He was instantly thrown into training for the next 6 months with a man named Yitzhak. He trained his photographic memory to the point where all he needed was a second to be able to describe an object perfectly. He also learned how to speak Arabic with a Syrian accent and how to operate a radio transmitter that could send messages from Damascus all the way to Jerusalem. Eli's wife Nadia was told nothing of the true operation. In his article about Cohen's life, Tamar Fox writes:

In 1960, Cohen was approached by the Mossad for a mission in Syria. Israeli intelligence was particularly excited about Cohen because of his Arab features and his knowledge of Arabic, English, and French. Cohen immediately began training and developing his cover. The first part of his mission would be spent in Buenos Aires establishing his identity as Kamal Amin Ta'abet, a Syrian émigré living in Argentina. In 1961, Nadia saw him off at the airport. She was told that her husband would be working for the Ministry of Defense (Fox).

With his training complete and his cover story ready, Cohen was sent to Argentina. He took on the identity of a wealthy businessman named Kamel Amin Taabth. He threw large parties full of

Syrian officials where they would get very drunk and participate in very adult activities. At these parties Cohen would gain information from them by pretending to be intoxicated and listening to the drunk Syrians speak openly about their work. De La Cruz has more to offer on Cohen's early years in the operation.

In South America, Cohen (or Thabet, as his Syrian associates would have known him) posed as a wealthy businessman. He succeeded in gaining the friendship of many influential members of Syria's community abroad before traveling to Damascus in early 1962 carrying their invaluable letters of introduction. There, he carried on a high-powered social life, holding parties at his home that were attended by high-ranking Syrian officials, whom he was able to subtly ply for information (De La Garza).

After Taabeth/Cohen built a strong relationship with Syrian officials, he moved into an apartment in Syria near a military base in 1962. Cohen kept up this secret life for almost 3 years, sending vital, life saving information back to Jerusalem. His persona got him friends in very high places in the Syrian government. Al-Hafiz, future Syrian president, treated Cohen, or Thabet as he'd known him as a close friend. He even considered Cohen for the position as Syria's Minister of Defense. Cohen used his small radio transmitter hidden in his apartment to send messages of what he discovered each day back to Israeli Moussad headquarters. Because his home was so close to a military base, his messages got mixed around with the messages being sent out from there removing any suspicion. One of the many plots foiled by Cohen's spy work was a plan to divert the Jordan River, Israel's main water source, away from Israel. Cohen used his photographic memory to pinpoint the sight, allowing the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) to bomb the equipment in the area before they could go through with the plot. Nothing compares

however, to the work he did during the Six-day War. In Melman's article he gave an example of the work Cohen did for Israel:

He was invited to military facilities, and he drove with army officers all along Syria's Golan Heights, looking down at the vulnerable farms and roadways of Israel below.

Cohen made a point, of course, of memorizing the location of all the Syrian bunkers and artillery pieces. He was able to describe troop deployments along the border in detail, and he focused on the tank traps that could prevent Israeli forces from climbing the heights if war were to break out. He also furnished a list of some of the Syrian pilots and accurate sketches of the weapons mounted on their warplanes (Melman).

All the information he provided was vital to Israel's victory along the northern borders during the Six Day War. However, nothing will compare to the genius plot Cohen had to destroy Syrian bunkers. Because Cohen was such a respected man in Syria, they trusted him enough to let him come out to where these bunkers were located. He heard the men complaining about how unbearable the heat was. Cohen was quick on his feet and thought of one of the simplest, yet smartest moves in military history. He offered the idea to plant eucalyptus trees outside of the bunkers to offer some shade and camouflage coverage for the men. Cohen relayed the following information to the IDF; beside each eucalyptus tree on the hillsides of the Golan Heights there was a hidden Syrian bunker. The IDF now had an easy solution to the Syrian defenses, just bomb the trees. Fox offers more on how vital this information was.

Overlooking Israel, the Golan Heights was a vital part of Syrian defense strategies, as it was nearly unsusceptible to Israeli attacks. Only top Syrian military staff were allowed to view the defenses that were set up, but Cohen succeeded in visiting every defense

position, brought by senior staff officers. Perhaps the most famous contribution Cohen made to Israeli strategic defense was his seemingly-innocent suggestion that planting trees around Syrian fortification would provide foliage cover and shade for troops. The Syrian army officer who heard this idea agreed, and acted on it. When Israel was taking the Golan Heights in 1967, the IDF was able to use these trees to pinpoint where the Syrian defense positions were”(Fox).

Cohen's Death

Sadly, the amount of information Cohen provided was ultimately his undoing. On his third and final visit to his home in Israel, Cohen could sense he was going to be caught soon and actually requested to be taken off of his assignment. His request was denied, but he was promised that this was the last time he'd be sent out, unfortunately it was. At this point the Syrian Government knew there was a mole amongst them and hatched a plan to catch whoever it was. The government had a mandatory day of radio silence. Unaware of the mandatory silence Cohen's messages were intercepted and traced back to him. Cohen was arrested, interrogated, and tortured. He wasn't given a fair trial yet was found guilty and sentenced to be hung. The only thing he was allowed to do was meet with a Rabi and write one final heartbreaking letter to his wife Nadia.

I am writing to you these last words, a few minutes before my end, and I would like to beg you to be in a good relationship forever. I request you dear Nadia to pardon me and take care of yourself and our children. Look after them poorly, bring them up and give them a complete education, don't deprive them or yourself of anything. Please be always in close communication with my dear parents. You can get remarried in order not to

deprive the children of a father. You have the full liberty to do so. I am begging you my dear Nadia not to spend your time weeping about something already passed. Concentrate on yourself, looking for a better future! I am sending my kisses to you and to the children: Sophie, Irit, and Shaoul, also to my family, especially my mother, my sister, Odette and her family, Maurice and his family, Ezra and his family, Sara and her family, Zion and his family, Alfred and his family and at the end to Bero. Don't forget your dear family; give them my best regards. Don't forget to pray for the soul of my late father and of mine. Receive all of you my last kisses and blessings.

Eli Cohen 15/5/1965 (Cohen).

On May 18th, 1965. Cohen was executed in a public square in Syria.

Impact

Since the “fantastic victory”, Israel has become an international powerhouse. The results of the conquest of the Six-Day War meant increased borders for Israel, and respect for the country’s military might. After this war, Israel proved they were not a country to be tested. The tactics used in the Six-Day War led to Israel's Air Force becoming one of the most esteemed in the world. As a result the increased territory and respect have given Israel peace and security to grow and flourish for the past 50 years. Israel is considered by many to be one of the most technologically advanced countries. Ranking as the 5th most inventive nation according to the Bloomberg Innovation Index. Additionally, Israel is ranked as the highest number of scientists per capita in the world. Without Cohen’s sacrifice, there is no way Israel would have won the war. Without the Six-Day War victory Israel would be in a very bad situation now. Sadly, Cohen’s efforts did not solve the on-going conflict between Israel and her surrounding neighbors.

However, peace has been achieved with Egypt and Jordan. There is still tension between Israel and Syria. However, this shouldn't distract from the fact that Israel has grown immensely since then.

Conclusion

In conclusion, even though Cohen was executed 2 years before the Six-Day War even officially happened, without his sacrifice and the information he provided, Israel would not have been successful in obtaining control of the Golan Heights. This control extended Israeli borders and provided safety from the constant shelling on their farmers in the Galilee area. He broke barriers for Israel, by allowing them to exist in peace and without constant fear for their lives. Cohen allowed them to progress. Eli Cohen was a hero, and even though his life's work didn't have the lasting effect he would have hoped for, he still should be revered for the patriotism he showed toward his country. Cohen was proud of the life he had lived, even though it meant making the ultimate sacrifice. Israel will forever respect and show gratitude for "Their Man In Damascus".

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Source

“A Brother's Story.” *Eli Cohen Official Web Site | A Brother's Story | Sponsored by Maurice Cohen and the American Friends of Eli Cohen Memorial, Inc.*,

web.archive.org/web/20110719050904/http://www.elicohen.org/resources/brothersstory/.

This is the writing of Maurice Cohen, brother of Eli Cohen. He tells the miraculous story of how the 2 brothers somehow ended up on the same mission without even knowing it. I will use this as a primary source to help show the effect of his operation and what he did during this operation. It is a great source.

“Translation of the Original Letter Before His Death.” *Eli Cohen Official Web Site | Letter Before Execution (English) | Sponsored by Maurice Cohen and the American Friends of Eli Cohen Memorial, Inc.*,

web.archive.org/web/20110719051126/http://www.elicohen.org/resources/last_words.php

These are the last words from the famed spy Eli Cohen. It is the final words to his loved Ones. This is a very good primary source that I will use a lot. This is the best source I have found.

Toi, et al. “Disturbing' Footage Emerges from Famed Israeli Spy's Execution in Syria.” *The Times of Israel*, 21 Sept. 2016,

www.timesofisrael.com/new-footage-from-famed-israeli-spys-execution-in-syria-emerges/

. This article is all about the fight to recover Eli Cohen's remains. Although Nadia Cohen

has pleaded for years to get the corpse of her husband, the Syrian government has refused, and now claims to have forgotten where the body is buried. I will use this article as a primary source because of the quotes from Nadia and the Syrian officials. It was very helpful.

Secondary Sources

Plen, Matt. "Israel's War of Independence." *My Jewish Learning*,

www.myjewishlearning.com/article/israels-war-of-independence/.

Matt Plen Chief Executive of Masorti Judaism in the UK. He has taught and trained teachers in the UK, U.S., and Israel. This article is about Israel's journey to independence, and the many wars they fought to get there. I will use this article to help build some historical background. It does a great job of really showing how difficult it was. This was a great article.

Fox, Tamar. "Eli Cohen." *My Jewish Learning*, www.myjewishlearning.com/article/eli-cohen/.

Tamar Fox is an associate editor for MyJewishLearning.com. She has an MFA in fiction writing from Vanderbilt University. This article takes a deep dive into the life of Eli Cohn. Starting from his birth in Egypt and ending with the fight to recover his body in Syria. This Article offered more on his achievements as a spy than any other, so that's what I will mainly use it for. This was a very useful article full of information.

Cohen, Gili, et al. "Israel Reveals Controversial 'Lavon Affair' Correspondence, 62 Years Later."

Haaretz.com, 10 Apr. 2018,

www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israel-reveals-controversial-lavon-affair-correspondence-62-

years-later-1.5401166.

Gili Cohen is a news reporter for the Israeli paper Haaretz. This article takes a deep dive into the Lavon Affair. It discusses the effects of them being caught, and the punishments received. I will use this article for historical background and more information on Eli Cohn. It included much more information than the other article on this, so I found it very useful.

Weiss, Leonard "The Lavon Affair: How a False-Flag Operation Led to War and the Israeli Bomb." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 29 June 2018, thebulletin.org/2013/07/the-lavon-affair-how-a-false-flag-operation-led-to-war-and-the-israeli-bomb/.

Leonard Wise is an acclaimed author. He has written many books on the Canada city of Toronto. This article covers the failed Israel spy mission in Egypt, the Lavon Affair. This article covered the first spy assignment that Eli was involved in, so I will mainly use this as historical background/ just talking about Eli's life. It's not the greatest source of information, but it will do for now.

Melman, Yossi. "Israel's Legendary Spy, Eli Cohen." *The Jerusalem Post* | *JPost.com*, 25 Sept. 2019, www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Israels-legendary-spy-602806.

Yossi Melman is a journalist and writer for the Jerusalem Post. The source discusses the very interesting, tragic life of Eli Cohen. It starts from the place of his birth and covers all the way up to his death. I found this useful mainly for the inclusion of his past career as a

spy. I had no idea he worked as a spy in Egypt. I found this article to be very useful and full of valuable information.

Garza, Alejandro de la. "The True Story Behind The Spy on Netflix." *Time*, Time, 5 Sept. 2019, time.com/5669302/the-spy-netflix-true-story/.

Alejandro de la Garza is a writer for the New York Times. This article breaks down the life of Eli Cohen, comparing it to life portrayed in the new Netflix series about the legendary spy. This article did not uncover something I didn't already know, but it still will just be very useful as a base to grow on. It was a very nice introduction into the topic.

Rodgers, James. "Israel's Victory in the Six-Day War Was a Model of Wartime Media Strategy." *The Conversation*, 11 Oct. 2019, theconversation.com/israels-victory-in-the-six-day-war-was-a-model-of-wartime-media-strategy-78054.

James Rodgers is the head reporter for "The Conversation" on Israeli news and history. This article takes a deep dive into how Israel used media as a strategy in preparation for the six-day war. I will mainly use this as an example of all that went into the victory for Israel in the six-day war. It was a very good article.