

# ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS





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## Episode #295

### Eli Cohen | Mossad's Man In Damascus

### 6th Sep, 2022

[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:11] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge, and today we are going to be talking about Eli Cohen, the Israeli spy who [infiltrated](#)<sup>1</sup> the very highest levels of the Syrian military and government in what has been called the most [daring](#)<sup>2</sup> and effective intelligence-gathering operation in history.

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<sup>1</sup> secretly became part of them to get information

<sup>2</sup> brave, taking risks

[00:00:39] It's a tale of international [espionage](#)<sup>3</sup>, of [cunning](#)<sup>4</sup>, bravery, and of Middle Eastern rivalries.

[00:00:46] It's important, but it's also an amazing story, so I hope you'll enjoy it.

[00:00:53] OK then, Eli Cohen.

[00:00:57] On the 18th May, 1965, a crowd [gathered](#)<sup>5</sup> in Marjeh Square in Damascus, Syria.

[00:01:05] The outer [edges](#)<sup>6</sup> were lined with trees and official looking buildings, and in the middle was a green space from which a long column shot up into the sky.

[00:01:17] It was like any other square you might find in the city, but on this day there were armed men [patrolling](#)<sup>7</sup>, and military trucks coming and going.

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<sup>3</sup> the act of spying, the discovery of secret military or political information

<sup>4</sup> the use of cleverness and tricks to achieve a goal

<sup>5</sup> came together

<sup>6</sup> points, limits

<sup>7</sup> keeping watch over the area

[00:01:27] Whispers<sup>8</sup> and hushed<sup>9</sup> conversation echoed<sup>10</sup> around, and pedestrians passing by stopped, looked, and came closer to see what all the fuss<sup>11</sup> was about.

[00:01:40] They joined the crowd, jostling for position<sup>12</sup> to get a good look at what's going on.

[00:01:47] Peering<sup>13</sup> over into the middle of the square, they saw a wooden construction, and a man... hanging<sup>14</sup> there, dead.

[00:01:56] Over his body was a white sheet covered in Arabic script<sup>15</sup>, and his head was slumped<sup>16</sup>, the neck broken.

[00:02:05] The man was “Kamel Amin Thaabet”. He was a rich, well-known and politically connected Syrian socialite<sup>17</sup> and businessman.

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<sup>8</sup> low soft voices

<sup>9</sup> quiet and serious

<sup>10</sup> were repeated

<sup>11</sup> confusion, disturbance

<sup>12</sup> pushing each other

<sup>13</sup> looking with difficulty

<sup>14</sup> tied to some point above with a rope around his neck and without support from below

<sup>15</sup> handwriting

<sup>16</sup> fallen because of a broken neck

<sup>17</sup> well-known and important in the high class society

[00:02:16] Except his name wasn't "Kamel Amin Thaabet".

[00:02:21] His name was Eli Cohen.

[00:02:23] He was neither a [socialite](#) nor a businessman. He wasn't even Syrian.

[00:02:29] He was a spy for the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency.

[00:02:34] To find out how Cohen got to this point, we need to first go back in time to understand more about his life and what was going on in the Middle East at this point.

[00:02:46] Eli Cohen was born on in 1924, in Alexandria, in Egypt, to Syrian-Jewish parents from Aleppo who were [committed](#)<sup>18</sup> [Zionists](#)<sup>19</sup>.

[00:02:57] Cohen's background—as an Egyptian born, son of Jews from Syria who would later go on to work for Mossad—captures perfectly the complicated and [interconnected](#)<sup>20</sup> nature of Middle Eastern politics in the post-war years.

[00:03:13] As a very brief reminder of some of the main events here, at midnight on May the 14th, 1948, British control of the state of Palestine was due to [expire](#)<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> loyal, devoted

<sup>19</sup> people who believed in the development and protection of a Jewish nation in Israel

<sup>20</sup> having all of its parts linked or connected

<sup>21</sup> come to an end

[00:03:27] And it was unclear what would happen to the tiny territory that had been [plagued](#)<sup>22</sup> by civil war between Jews and Arabs.

[00:03:35] The United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine had proposed two states - one Jewish, one Arab - and the state of Israel was created.

[00:03:46] Within hours of Israel's creation, however, it was at war.

[00:03:50] On May 15th, just hours after Israel's Declaration of Independence, the armies of the surrounding countries of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Jordan invaded the territories that had, until the day before, been British.

[00:04:06] The invasion began the Arab-Israeli War and [set in motion](#)<sup>23</sup> decades of political and military [instability](#)<sup>24</sup> in the region, but by late 1948 Israel controlled territory beyond the borders originally [outlined](#)<sup>25</sup> in the U.N plan.

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<sup>22</sup> troubled, afflicted

<sup>23</sup> started, caused

<sup>24</sup> a situation of uncertainty and change

<sup>25</sup> defined, set

[00:04:23] Over half a million Palestinian refugees [fled](#)<sup>26</sup> to neighbouring countries, and Jews, facing increasing pressure and [intimidation](#)<sup>27</sup> in places like Egypt and Syria, were [expelled](#)<sup>28</sup> or tried to escape to Israel.

[00:04:39] By 1949 Israel found itself newly established, with expanded borders, but surrounded by [hostile](#)<sup>29</sup> neighbours.

[00:04:48] That was the political storm Eli Cohen would put himself right in the middle of: Egypt, Israel, and Syria will be the three key countries in Cohen's story.

[00:04:59] Oh, and Argentina too, but more on that later.

[00:05:03] The year after the creation of the state of Israel, Cohen's parents and three brothers moved from Egypt to Israel, but the young Eli Cohen stayed in Egypt to finish his engineering degree at Cairo Farouk University.

[00:05:20] While in Egypt he became involved in Jewish and [Zionist](#)<sup>30</sup> activities, helping other Jewish families escape to Israel and he became well-known to the Egyptian intelligence services.

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<sup>26</sup> left to escape from danger

<sup>27</sup> a situation of fear and danger

<sup>28</sup> made to leave

<sup>29</sup> not friendly

<sup>30</sup> related to people who believed in the development and protection of a Jewish nation in Israel

[00:05:33] He was [implicated](#)<sup>31</sup> in several spy operations in Egypt, but while other members of the Jewish-Egyptian [spy ring](#)<sup>32</sup> were [executed](#)<sup>33</sup> by the Egyptian authorities, Cohen managed to [get off the hook](#)<sup>34</sup>, the Egyptian authorities were never able to find [definitive](#)<sup>35</sup> [proof](#)<sup>36</sup> that Cohen was involved in anything more serious than [pro-Zionist](#)<sup>37</sup> campaigning.

[00:05:57] Anyway, unafraid of what had happened to some of his fellow [Zionists](#) in Egypt, in the summer of 1955 the 30-year-old Cohen went to Israel for a specialist spy training course.

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<sup>31</sup> involved

<sup>32</sup> a group of spies

<sup>33</sup> killed as a punishment

<sup>34</sup> go without being punished

<sup>35</sup> final, decisive

<sup>36</sup> information that showed that it was true

<sup>37</sup> showing support to the people who believed in the development and protection of a Jewish nation in Israel



[00:06:11] He returned briefly to Alexandria but in 1956, when Israel occupied the Sinai Peninsula as [tensions<sup>38</sup>](#) [flared<sup>39</sup>](#) during the Suez Crisis, Cohen was again [detained<sup>40</sup>](#) by the Egyptians and eventually [expelled](#) along with most of the Jewish community.

[00:06:30] He travelled to Israel via Naples, and upon his arrival [assumed<sup>41</sup>](#) that his pro-Israeli activity in Egypt, combined with his spy course experience and fluency in Arabic, French and English, would make him a perfect candidate for a job with the Israeli intelligence agency, the Mossad.

[00:06:50] He would be wrong, at least this time.

[00:06:53] After offering his services to the Mossad twice, he was rejected and placed on a reserve list as a translator and [logistics<sup>42</sup>](#) [clerk<sup>43</sup>](#) in the Israeli Air Force - an office job, essentially, and not exactly what Eli Cohen had in mind.

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<sup>38</sup> troubled or pressured political state

<sup>39</sup> became more intense or violent

<sup>40</sup> forced him to stay there

<sup>41</sup> thought it was true

<sup>42</sup> organisation, management

<sup>43</sup> someone who works in an office

[00:07:11] Some people have suggested that Cohen was [initially](#)<sup>44</sup> rejected from the Mossad because of an old psychological [evaluation](#)<sup>45</sup> they had done some years before.

[00:07:22] Cohen, the Mossad had said, had ‘a high IQ, great bravery, a [phenomenal](#)<sup>46</sup> memory, and the ability to keep a secret’, but also that he ‘did not always [evaluate](#)<sup>47</sup> danger correctly and was [liable](#)<sup>48</sup> to [assume](#)<sup>49</sup> risks beyond those which are necessary.’

[00:07:45] Remember this, as it will be important later on.

[00:07:49] Anyway, [frustrated](#)<sup>50</sup> at his [inability](#)<sup>51</sup> to join the Israeli intelligence, Cohen worked as an accountant in Tel Aviv for a couple of years.

[00:07:59] In 1959, he married an Iraqi-Jewish immigrant called Nadia, and the couple [settled](#)<sup>52</sup> into the coastal city of Bat Yam.

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<sup>44</sup> at the beginning

<sup>45</sup> judgement, analysis

<sup>46</sup> extremely good

<sup>47</sup> judge, calculate

<sup>48</sup> likely

<sup>49</sup> accept, take

<sup>50</sup> disappointed and annoyed

<sup>51</sup> not being able to

<sup>52</sup> stayed

[00:08:09] But Cohen was generally **fed-up**<sup>53</sup> with civilian life, he was bored of his office job, and he **yearned**<sup>54</sup> for action.

[00:08:18] His chance would come when **tensions flared** at the border with Syria, the homeland of Cohen's parents. The Mossad, the Israeli Secret Service, decided to take another look at him.

[00:08:32] The then Director-General of the Mossad, a man named Meir Amit, was looking for a special agent to **infiltrate**<sup>55</sup> the Syrian government, and came across Cohen's name while looking through a list of rejected candidates.

[00:08:48] Cohen's language skills were **appealing**<sup>56</sup>, and the fact he was born in an Arab country and said to have Arab **features**<sup>57</sup>, to be able to pass as an Arab, also helped.

[00:09:01] After being followed for a couple of weeks, Cohen was judged to be a **suitable**<sup>58</sup> candidate for training and he completed a proper six-month spy course at the Mossad training school.

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<sup>53</sup> had enough of it

<sup>54</sup> wished very strongly

<sup>55</sup> secretly become part of it to get information

<sup>56</sup> attractive, very interesting and useful

<sup>57</sup> characteristics

<sup>58</sup> fitting, appropriate

[00:09:13] He learned how to handle weapons and he developed all types of other important spy skills: map reading, [morse code](#)<sup>59</sup>, high-speed driving, [cryptography](#)<sup>60</sup>, and radio transmitting. All important skills, but the last one, radio transmitting, would be something that would later prove [pivotal](#)<sup>61</sup>, very important, in his [downfall](#)<sup>62</sup>.

[00:09:37] In order to make his [cover](#)<sup>63</sup> even more convincing, Cohen was taught the principles of Islam, how to pray and, most importantly, trained to speak with a Syrian accent and not his native Egyptian tongue.

[00:09:53] And of course, he was given a false identity as a wealthy Syrian businessman.

[00:10:00] Cohen's new name - his new identity - was Kamel Amin Thaabet, a rich Syrian [expatriate](#)<sup>64</sup>.

[00:10:08] An [expatriate](#), or expat, as they're often referred to, simply means someone who lives outside of their native country.

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<sup>59</sup> a code in which letters are represented by combinations of long and short light or sound signals

<sup>60</sup> the practice of writing or solving codes

<sup>61</sup> very important

<sup>62</sup> loss of status or power or ending

<sup>63</sup> false identity

<sup>64</sup> someone who didn't live in his own country

[00:10:16] To make his cover, his new identity, even more believable, in early 1961 the Mossad sent Cohen to establish himself as an expat Syrian businessman in Buenos Aires, in Argentina, where at the time there was a sizable and rich Syrian community.

[00:10:36] Under his new name, Cohen quickly [indulged himself](#)<sup>65</sup> in Buenos Aires' nightlife and made contacts in the Syrian community, including officials working at the Syrian Embassy.

[00:10:48] This group of diplomatic staff [allegedly](#)<sup>66</sup> included the Syrian military attaché at the time, Amin al-Hafez, who would later go on to be both Prime Minister and President of Syria, although al-Hafez [denied](#)<sup>67</sup> that he ever met Cohen in Argentina.

[00:11:04] What Cohen went on to do would be hugely [embarrassing](#)<sup>68</sup> for the entire Syrian political, military and intelligence [establishments](#)<sup>69</sup>, not only for al-Hafez.

[00:11:16] Anyway, Cohen made it obvious that he - or rather, Kamel Amin Thaabet - was very wealthy, and he threw [luxurious](#)<sup>70</sup> parties for the wealthy Syrian expat community in Buenos Aires.

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<sup>65</sup> allowed himself the pleasures of

<sup>66</sup> according to what is believed, supposedly

<sup>67</sup> said that it wasn't true

<sup>68</sup> causing shame or dishonour

<sup>69</sup> groups of people with power and influence

<sup>70</sup> very comfortable and expensive



[00:11:30] He also [engaged in](#)<sup>71</sup> political discussion and [gossip](#)<sup>72</sup>, and claimed publically to have [sympathies](#)<sup>73</sup> towards the Syrian Ba'ath Party, and lots of money to donate towards it.

[00:11:42] The Ba'ath Party would go on to [seize](#)<sup>74</sup> power in Syria in 1963, and the connections Cohen made with it during his time in Argentina would further [cement](#)<sup>75</sup> his cover story when he arrived in Damascus.

[00:11:57] When he arrived - or as he said 'returned' - to Syria in 1962, he rented an apartment in the [fashionable](#)<sup>76</sup> Damascus district of Abu Romana in a building opposite Syrian military headquarters.

[00:12:11] He [settled](#) into life in Syria, quickly restarting his social life and using the contacts he had made in Argentina to meet some of the most powerful and influential people in Syria's political and military [establishment](#)<sup>77</sup>.

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<sup>71</sup> was involved in

<sup>72</sup> casual conversation or reports about other people, typically involving details that are not confirmed as being true

<sup>73</sup> feelings of agreement and support

<sup>74</sup> take and hold

<sup>75</sup> secure

<sup>76</sup> in accordance with social fashions

<sup>77</sup> groups of people with power and influence

[00:12:26] Many of his friends from Buenos Aires offered to help him set up businesses, or to introduce him to famous Syrians and important figures from the government.

[00:12:37] He continued his [extravagant](#)<sup>78</sup> social life, and used his contacts to throw [boozy](#)<sup>79</sup> parties for high-ranking Syrian politicians and military officials.

[00:12:47] He [plied](#)<sup>80</sup> them with alcohol and carefully [probed](#)<sup>81</sup> for information, even lending money and advice to some of them.

[00:12:56] His cover, and [backstory](#)<sup>82</sup> in Argentina, had worked perfectly, and Cohen, or Kamel Amin Thaabet, as he was known to them, had firmly [established](#)<sup>83</sup> himself as a member of the Syrian social [elite](#)<sup>84</sup>.

[00:13:12] And he used it to great effect.

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<sup>78</sup> too expensive and impressive

<sup>79</sup> characterised by drinking large quantities of alcohol

<sup>80</sup> provided them (with alcohol) in a continuous way

<sup>81</sup> tried to discover

<sup>82</sup> the background that he had created for his character

<sup>83</sup> introduced, put in place

<sup>84</sup> the richest and most powerful group in society

[00:13:15] Believing that Cohen was a wealthy businessman with Ba'athist sympathies, Syrian officials talked openly with him about military plans and equipment, often with a drink in hand and women paid by Cohen [stroking](#)<sup>85</sup> their hair.

[00:13:31] The information the Syrians revealed so [casually](#)<sup>86</sup>, and quickly, to Cohen, was [shocking](#)<sup>87</sup> not only to the spy but even to the Mossad.

[00:13:41] Soon after his arrival in Damascus, he had already sent information to the Mossad about [bunkers](#)<sup>88</sup> where the Syrians stored Russian [artillery](#)<sup>89</sup>, [leaked](#)<sup>90</sup> a planned invasion of northern Israel, and informed the Mossad about two hundred [tanks](#)<sup>91</sup> just hours after they landed in Syria.

[00:14:01] Cohen warned the Israelis that the Syrians were planning to [reroute](#)<sup>92</sup> the Jordan River to [starve](#)<sup>93</sup> Israel of water, and even gave them enough information to destroy the equipment the Syrians were going to use to do it.

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<sup>85</sup> touching, caressing

<sup>86</sup> in a relaxed and informal way

<sup>87</sup> causing feelings of surprise or shock

<sup>88</sup> underground protected areas

<sup>89</sup> very large guns

<sup>90</sup> revealed, made known

<sup>91</sup> heavy protected fighting vehicles

<sup>92</sup> change its route or direction

<sup>93</sup> cause it not to have enough

[00:14:15] And when he wasn't [hosting](#)<sup>94</sup> parties for top military officials in his apartment, he was watching them from across the road.

[00:14:23] The [strategic](#)<sup>95</sup> location of his apartment allowed Cohen to report on what was happening at the military headquarters at all hours of the day.

[00:14:32] He reported on how many people were there at night, what time the lights went out, who came and went, when [motorcades](#)<sup>96</sup> came and left, and his [vantage point](#)<sup>97</sup>, his position right in front of the headquarters, gave him a good idea of when something was about to happen.

[00:14:49] When nothing was happening, he simply invited them over for parties and measured the [mood](#)<sup>98</sup> of Syria's political and military [elite](#) from their party [chat](#)<sup>99</sup>, from the conversation at the party.

[00:14:59] [Encouraging](#)<sup>100</sup> his guests to drink, Cohen remained [sober](#)<sup>101</sup>, but pretended to be drunk, took note of what they said and sent the important information back to his

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<sup>94</sup> arranging, giving

<sup>95</sup> being very useful and effective

<sup>96</sup> series of vehicles carrying very important people

<sup>97</sup> a position offering a good view

<sup>98</sup> the way they were feeling at that time

<sup>99</sup> conversation

<sup>100</sup> making them more likely to do it

<sup>101</sup> not drunk

Israeli [handlers](#)<sup>102</sup> via radio transmitter, coded letter, occasionally in person, whenever he returned to Israel, and even via letters with invisible [ink](#)<sup>103</sup> that went through Europe.

[00:15:26] When the Ba'ath Party [seized](#)<sup>104</sup> power in 1963 - led by Cohen's old friend from Argentina, Amin al-Hafez - Cohen's old friends became Syria's [ruling class](#)<sup>105</sup>.

[00:15:39] He was by then so [established](#) and trusted in Syrian high society that al-Hafez is even [rumoured](#)<sup>106</sup> to have considered appointing him Syrian Deputy Minister of Defence.

[00:15:51] Cohen was in.

[00:15:53] And the Syrians had no idea.

[00:15:56] He was even allowed to read [classified](#)<sup>107</sup> defence documents, advise government ministers, and was taken on tours of Syrian military bases and fortifications, all while sending the information back to Israel.

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<sup>102</sup> the people who directed or managed his activities

<sup>103</sup> coloured liquid used for writing

<sup>104</sup> took and held

<sup>105</sup> most powerful people

<sup>106</sup> believed, said without having proof

<sup>107</sup> officially secret



[00:16:11] Cohen's [cover story](#)<sup>108</sup> had worked beyond even the wildest dreams of the Mossad.

[00:16:17] Perhaps his most incredible piece of intelligence work, however, was when he collected information on the Syrian military defences at Golan Heights - a strategically important area on the Syrian-Israeli border and valuable water resource that had long been a point of [conflict](#)<sup>109</sup> between Israel and Syria.

[00:16:38] Since Israel's creation, Syrian forces had used the high, elevated position of Golan Heights to launch attacks on Israel's northern region of Galilee.

[00:16:50] Incredibly, it is [alleged](#)<sup>110</sup> that when Cohen was taken on a tour of the Golan Heights by Syrian military officials, he said he was sorry, he expressed [sympathy](#)<sup>111</sup> for the Syrian soldiers standing in the sun all day and suggested that trees be planted to create areas of [shade](#)<sup>112</sup>.

[00:17:10] A kind and generous idea, perhaps, some [shade](#) for the soldiers standing in the hot sun.

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<sup>108</sup> the character he had created to keep his real identity secret

<sup>109</sup> fighting

<sup>110</sup> believed, said without having proof

<sup>111</sup> understanding, pity

<sup>112</sup> cover, shelter from the sun

[00:17:16] But Cohen's primary concern wasn't the soldiers. He thought these trees might serve as excellent [markers](#)<sup>113</sup> for the Israeli army one day.

[00:17:26] And indeed, the Israel Defence Forces, or IDF, were then said to have used the trees as [targets](#)<sup>114</sup> during the Six-Day War, in 1967, when Israel captured Golan Heights in two days, and long after Cohen was dead.

[00:17:43] But despite all of Cohen's abilities as a spy, it would be [precisely](#)<sup>115</sup> his confidence and [recklessness](#)<sup>116</sup> that would prove his [downfall](#).

[00:17:53] If you remember from earlier, his Mossad [evaluation](#) was that he was considered [reckless](#)<sup>117</sup> and '[liable](#) to assume risks beyond those which are necessary'.

[00:18:04] Well, it turns out that this assessment was [spot on](#)<sup>118</sup>, the Mossad was right.

[00:18:10] In the autumn of 1964, Cohen made a trip back to Israel.

[00:18:15] It was a long stay - one that would prove to be his last - and his wife Nadia later said that he was worried about returning to Damascus.

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<sup>113</sup> objects used to show a position or place

<sup>114</sup> objects selected as the aim of the attack

<sup>115</sup> exactly

<sup>116</sup> the characteristic of acting without care or caution

<sup>117</sup> acting without care or caution

<sup>118</sup> completely correct

[00:18:25] Feeling the pressure of his operation, Cohen feared the Syrians were actively searching for the '[mole<sup>119</sup>](#)' - a term for someone who passes on sensitive information.

[00:18:35] Yet, he still agreed to go back to Syria, and promised his wife that this would be his last trip.

[00:18:42] I should say that there's some disagreement between the Mossad and the Cohen family about how exactly that happened, and whether or not Cohen actually wanted to go.

[00:18:53] Nadia, his wife, said that Cohen only returned to Syria after he was pressured by the Mossad; the Mossad said that they warned him to be especially careful and, [specifically<sup>120</sup>](#), not to send too many radio transmissions.

[00:19:09] And it's related to the last point that things start to go wrong for Eli Cohen.

[00:19:15] Under pressure from the Mossad or not, Cohen went back to Syria and continued to send radio transmissions.

[00:19:22] And he was doing it a lot. Too much, in fact.

[00:19:26] Cohen's fears that the Syrians knew about the [mole](#) were right.

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<sup>119</sup> person who was passing on sensitive information

<sup>120</sup> especially

[00:19:32] Syria's intelligence chief, Colonel Ahmad Suweidani, had made it his mission to find the [mole](#) and stop the [leak](#)<sup>121</sup> of sensitive information that was damaging the Syrian war effort and [embarrassing](#) its military leaders.

[00:19:46] He got help from the Soviets, and on January 24, 1965, the Syrians organised a period of radio silence and used Soviet tracking equipment to detect radio transmissions.

[00:19:59] Essentially, they stopped all radio transmissions, thinking that if they could find someone who was sending a transmission, this would probably be the [mole](#), the person who was sharing military secrets.

[00:20:13] They picked up a transmission, [triangulated](#)<sup>122</sup> the transmitter, and Syria's secret police got ready to [burst into](#)<sup>123</sup> the apartment where it seemed like the transmission was coming from.

[00:20:25] The apartment, of course, belonged to Kamel Amin Thaabet, or Eli Cohen.

[00:20:31] Syrian security officers kicked down, and found Cohen in the middle of sending a transmission.

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<sup>121</sup> the act of revealing or making known

<sup>122</sup> calculated his location using triangles

<sup>123</sup> enter suddenly and with force

[00:20:38] He was, as we say in English, ‘[caught red handed](#)<sup>124</sup>’, caught in the act.

[00:20:43] Cohen tried to [deny](#)<sup>125</sup> that he was a spy, but it quickly became clear that nothing could save him.

[00:20:50] When he was captured, the Syrian intelligence service forced Cohen to send fake transmissions to the Mossad, hoping they could recover the situation and use Cohen as a tool against Israel.

[00:21:03] Cohen, however, was not the kind of person to [turn on](#)<sup>126</sup> his country.

[00:21:08] The secret code he used in his communications with the Mossad told them that these were not normal transmissions and not to be trusted.

[00:21:18] The Mossad knew something was wrong, and tried to figure out ways to get Cohen out of Syria.

[00:21:25] Israel [appealed](#)<sup>127</sup> to the Pope and the U.N.

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<sup>124</sup> caught in the act

<sup>125</sup> say that it wasn't true

<sup>126</sup> turn against

<sup>127</sup> requested help from



[00:21:28] A plan was made to [kidnap](#)<sup>128</sup> famous or important Syrians as [bargaining chips](#)<sup>129</sup> for negotiation.

[00:21:36] Paying a [ransom](#)<sup>130</sup> to the Syrians via the French was suggested, and also that special Israeli forces be sent in to free him.

[00:21:46] Israel was even prepared to give the Syrians what intelligence they had on Syrian domestic politics, such as anti-Ba'athist [plots](#)<sup>131</sup> to [overthrow](#)<sup>132</sup> the government, in exchange for their top spy.

[00:21:59] But none of it mattered - the Syrians would not [negotiate](#)<sup>133</sup>.

[00:22:04] After being [tortured](#)<sup>134</sup> and [interrogated](#)<sup>135</sup> over many weeks, Cohen was put on trial in February of 1965, found [guilty](#)<sup>136</sup> of [espionage](#), and sentenced to death.

[00:22:17] On the 15 of May, Cohen wrote his last letter to his wife.

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<sup>128</sup> take away by force

<sup>129</sup> something that could be used to gain an advantage when trying to make the deal

<sup>130</sup> a large amount of money in exchange for him

<sup>131</sup> secret plans

<sup>132</sup> remove from power

<sup>133</sup> try to reach an agreement by discussion

<sup>134</sup> physically and extremely hurt in order to give information

<sup>135</sup> asked a lot of questions in order to give information

<sup>136</sup> responsible for the crime of

[00:22:22] In it, he said, “I am **begging**<sup>137</sup> you my dear Nadia not to spend your time in **weeping**<sup>138</sup> about something already passed. Concentrate on yourself, looking forward for a better future!”

[00:22:36] Three days later, on Tuesday the 18th of May, 1965, Eli Cohen was **hanged**<sup>139</sup> in Marjah Square.

[00:22:44] He had been **permitted**<sup>140</sup> to see a Rabbi in his last moments, but in death no such honour was **bestowed**<sup>141</sup> on him.

[00:22:52] His body was covered in a white sheet **outlining**<sup>142</sup> his crimes, left **hanging** for hours as a **spectacle**<sup>143</sup> for the crowd gathered in the square.

[00:23:02] After his execution, Syria refused to return Cohen’s body to Israel.

[00:23:07] They ignored requests from his wife and his family for the body, and the mystery about Cohen’s final resting place remains to this day.

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<sup>137</sup> asking in a powerful and intense way

<sup>138</sup> crying, mourning

<sup>139</sup> killed by being tied to some point above with a rope around his neck and without support from below

<sup>140</sup> allowed

<sup>141</sup> given to

<sup>142</sup> showing, displaying

<sup>143</sup> something impressive or important that could be seen or viewed

[00:23:17] In 2008 the Syrian government said that Cohen had been buried three times so that nobody would ever find the body, and to prevent the remains from being returned to Israel by the Mossad.

[00:23:31] The only piece of Eli Cohen that remains is his watch, which was reported in 2018 to have been found and returned to Israel, where it was presented to his family in a ceremony by the director of the Mossad.

[00:23:46] In terms of his legacy, Eli Cohen is remembered as Israel's most famous and successful spy.

[00:23:54] The information Cohen provided saved Israeli lives, weakened the Syrian war effort and [allegedly](#) even played a role in Israel's victory in the Six Day War.

[00:24:05] Cohen's was not only an extraordinary story, and piece of [espionage](#), but an incredible character transformation: from an Egyptian born Jew of [humble](#)<sup>144</sup> beginnings into a wealthy Arab businessman who [wined and dined](#)<sup>145</sup> Syrian high-society, all while working against them.

[00:24:24] In terms of his legacy, he has been remembered in biographies, films, a recent Netflix series called "The Spy", as well as countless documentaries.

[00:24:35] In Israel, streets and neighbourhoods are named after him, but perhaps the highest honour was reserved for a piece of land in the Golan Heights, the area Israel

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<sup>144</sup> of low social rank

<sup>145</sup> entertained them by offering wine and food

was able to capture in 1967 helped by Cohen's information and his [persuading](#)<sup>146</sup> the Syrian authorities to plant trees above the military bases to protect the soldiers from the hot sun.

[00:24:58] This piece of land used to be called "El Al", but it's now called Eliad, after the most famous spy in Israel, Eli Cohen.

[00:25:09] OK then, that's it for today's episode on Eli Cohen, the Israeli spy who [infiltrated](#) the [upper-echelons](#)<sup>147</sup> of Syria's military [establishment](#) and just perhaps [altered](#)<sup>148</sup> the course of Middle Eastern history.

[00:25:24] I hope it was an interesting one, and whether you knew a lot about Cohen before, or this was the first time you'd heard of him, well, I hope you learned something new.

[00:25:33] As always, I would love to know what you thought about this episode.

[00:25:37] Had you heard of Eli Cohen before?

[00:25:39] If you were alive, what do you remember of his capture and execution?

[00:25:44] Do you know of any other famous spies like Cohen?

[00:25:47] I would love to know, so let's get this discussion started.

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<sup>146</sup> making them more likely to do it

<sup>147</sup> high levels or ranks

<sup>148</sup> changed

[00:25:50] You can head right into our community forum, which is at  
community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:25:59] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo  
English.

[00:26:03] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

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## Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Infiltrated	secretly became part of them to get information
Daring	brave, taking risks
Espionage	the act of spying, the discovery of secret military or political information
Cunning	the use of cleverness and tricks to achieve a goal
Gathered	came together
Edges	points, limits
Patrolling	keeping watch over the area
Whispers	low soft voices
Hushed	quiet and serious
Echoed	were repeated
Fuss	confusion, disturbance
Jostling for position	pushing each other



<b>Peering</b>	looking with difficulty
<b>Hanging</b>	tied to some point above with a rope around his neck and without support from below
<b>Script</b>	handwriting
<b>Slumped</b>	fallen because of a broken neck
<b>Socialite</b>	well-known and important in the high class society
<b>Committed</b>	loyal, devoted
<b>Zionists</b>	people who believed in the development and protection of a Jewish nation in Israel
<b>Interconnected</b>	having all of its parts linked or connected
<b>Expire</b>	come to an end
<b>Plagued</b>	troubled, afflicted
<b>Set in motion</b>	started, caused
<b>Instability</b>	a situation of uncertainty and change
<b>Outlined</b>	defined, set
<b>Fled</b>	left to escape from danger

<b>Intimidation</b>	a situation of fear and danger
<b>Expelled</b>	made to leave
<b>Hostile</b>	not friendly
<b>Zionist</b>	related to people who believed in the development and protection of a Jewish nation in Israel
<b>Implicated</b>	involved
<b>Spy ring</b>	a group of spies
<b>Executed</b>	killed as a punishment
<b>Get off the hook</b>	go without being punished
<b>Definitive</b>	final, decisive
<b>Proof</b>	information that showed that it was true
<b>Pro-zionist</b>	showing support to the people who believed in the development and protection of a Jewish nation in Israel
<b>Tensions</b>	troubled or pressured political state
<b>Flared</b>	became more intense or violent
<b>Detained</b>	forced him to stay there

<b>Assumed</b>	thought it was true
<b>Logistics</b>	organisation, management
<b>Clerk</b>	someone who works in an office
<b>Initially</b>	at the beginning
<b>Evaluation</b>	judgement, analysis
<b>Phenomenal</b>	extremely good
<b>Evaluate</b>	judge, calculate
<b>Liabe</b>	likely
<b>Assume</b>	accept, take
<b>Frustrated</b>	disappointed and annoyed
<b>Inability</b>	not being able to
<b>Settled</b>	stayed
<b>Fed-up</b>	had enough of it
<b>Yearned</b>	wished very strongly
<b>Infiltrate</b>	secretly become part of it to get information

Appealing	attractive, very interesting and useful
Features	characteristics
Suitable	fitting, appropriate
Morse code	a code in which letters are represented by combinations of long and short light or sound signals
Cryptography	the practice of writing or solving codes
Pivotal	very important
Downfall	loss of status or power or ending
Cover	false identity
Expatriate	someone who didn't live in his own country
Indulged himself	allowed himself the pleasures of
Allegedly	according to what is believed, supposedly
Denied	said that it wasn't true
Embarrassing	causing shame or dishonour
Establishments	groups of people with power and influence
Luxurious	very comfortable and expensive

Engaged in	was involved in
Gossip	casual conversation or reports about other people, typically involving details that are not confirmed as being true
Sympathies	feelings of agreement and support
Seize	take and hold
Cement	secure
Fashionable	in accordance with social fashions
Establishment	groups of people with power and influence
Extravagant	too expensive and impressive
Boozy	characterised by drinking large quantities of alcohol
Plied	provided them (with alcohol) in a continuous way
Probed	tried to discover
Backstory	the background that he had created for his character
Established	introduced, put in place
Elite	the richest and most powerful group in society
Stroking	touching, caressing

<b>Casually</b>	in a relaxed and informal way
<b>Shocking</b>	causing feelings of surprise or shock
<b>Bunkers</b>	underground protected areas
<b>Artillery</b>	very large guns
<b>Leaked</b>	revealed, made known
<b>Tanks</b>	heavy protected fighting vehicles
<b>Reroute</b>	change its route or direction
<b>Starve</b>	cause it not to have enough
<b>Hosting</b>	arranging, giving
<b>Strategic</b>	being very useful and effective
<b>Motorcades</b>	series of vehicles carrying very important people
<b>Vantage point</b>	a position offering a good view
<b>Mood</b>	the way they were feeling at that time
<b>Chatter</b>	conversation
<b>Encouraging</b>	making them more likely to do it

<b>Sober</b>	not drunk
<b>Handlers</b>	the people who directed or managed his activities
<b>Ink</b>	coloured liquid used for writing
<b>Seized</b>	took and held
<b>Ruling class</b>	most powerful people
<b>Rumoured</b>	believed, said without having proof
<b>Classified</b>	officially secret
<b>Cover story</b>	the character he had created to keep his real identity secret
<b>Conflict</b>	fighting
<b>Alleged</b>	believed, said without having proof
<b>Sympathy</b>	understanding, pity
<b>Shade</b>	cover, shelter from the sun
<b>Markers</b>	objects used to show a position or place
<b>Targets</b>	objects selected as the aim of the attack
<b>Precisely</b>	exactly

<b>Recklessness</b>	the characteristic of acting without care or caution
<b>Reckless</b>	acting without care or caution
<b>Spot on</b>	completely correct
<b>Mole</b>	person who was passing on sensitive information
<b>Specifically</b>	especially
<b>Leak</b>	the act of revealing or making known
<b>Triangulated</b>	calculated his location using triangles
<b>Burst into</b>	enter suddenly and with force
<b>Caught red handed</b>	caught in the act
<b>Deny</b>	say that it wasn't true
<b>Turn on</b>	turn against
<b>Appealed</b>	requested help from
<b>Kidnap</b>	take away by force
<b>Bargaining chips</b>	something that could be used to gain an advantage when trying to make the deal
<b>Ransom</b>	a large amount of money in exchange for him



<b>Plots</b>	secret plans
<b>Overthrow</b>	remove from power
<b>Negotiate</b>	try to reach an agreement by discussion
<b>Tortured</b>	physically and extremely hurt in order to give information
<b>Interrogated</b>	asked a lot of questions in order to give information
<b>Guilty</b>	responsible for the crime of
<b>Begging</b>	asking in a powerful and intense way
<b>Weeping</b>	crying, mourning
<b>Hanged</b>	killed by being tied to some point above with a rope around his neck and without support from below
<b>Permitted</b>	allowed
<b>Bestowed</b>	given to
<b>Outlining</b>	showing, displaying
<b>Spectacle</b>	something impressive or important that could be seen or viewed
<b>Humble</b>	of low social rank
<b>Wined and dined</b>	entertained them by offering wine and food

**Persuading** making them more likely to do it

**Upper-echelons** high levels or ranks

**Altered** changed

*We'd love to get your feedback on this episode.*

*What did you like? What could we do better?*

*What did you struggle to understand?*

*Let us know in the forum [community.leonardoenglish.com](https://community.leonardoenglish.com)*