



## **Full Length Research Article**

### **THE ISRAELI MASTER-SPY ELI COHEN AS A FREEMASON**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Although the literature does not provide much information on the membership of Eli Cohen in, the Order of Freemasons, it is clear from the findings in the article that his membership in the Order and Learning his principles constituted an important factor in his life.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Israel and Syria were enemies following Syria's commitment to destroy Israel after the establishment of Israel in 1948, as a part of the effort of the Arab world to eliminate the State of Israel and its Jewish residents. In the 1950s, as a part of the effort of the Intelligence Directorate of the Israeli Military (Hebrew: Aman) and the Secret Intelligence Service of Israel (Hebrew: Mossad) to obtain intelligence on Syria, a spy by the name of Eli Cohen was sent to Syria. In the framework of his role, he succeeded in connecting to government officials in Syria and obtaining valuable intelligence information for Israel, until he was captured and executed by the Syrian government in 1965. Extensive literature has been written about Eli Cohen and his actions as a spy, but literature on his membership in the Freemason Order in Egypt has not been written.

#### **Biography**

Eli Cohen was born in the city of Alexandria in 1924 to a pious Jewish family with strong Zionist ideology.

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His father was born in the city of Aleppo in Syria and moved to Egypt in 1915. Eli Cohen studied in the HaRambam Jewish high school in the city and then was accepted to engineering studies at the University of Alexandria. In 1944 he joined the Zionist movement, and in 1954 his first contact with the Israeli Intelligence began, when he rented in his name an apartment in Egypt that was used by the group of HaEsekHaBish (meaning in Hebrew 'the Unfortunate Affair' or the 'Bad Business' and known in English as the Lavon Affair) (a group of Israeli intelligence operatives exposed in Egypt). In 1957 he immigrated to Israel and resided in the city of Bat-Yam. In 1957 Cohen was drafted by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) and placed in the Intelligence Corps, where he served as an intelligence analyst in the counterespionage department. After his military service, he attempted to be accepted into the Mossad but was rejected for an unclear reason. To earn his living, Cohen worked in the accounting department in HaMashbirHaMerkazi. In 1959 he married Nadia Michael, the sister of the renowned Israeli author Sami Michael<sup>1</sup>.

#### **Career as a Spy**

In the end, Cohen was recruited to the Mossad after the head of the Mossad, Meir Amit, searched for an agent who could infiltrate the Syrian government.

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<sup>1</sup>Javits, Jacob (9 July 1971). "Superspy in an unholy war". *Life* 71 (2) 30 August 2011

Amit encountered Cohen's name when he reviewed the list of candidates who had been rejected by the Mossad in the past, after none of the active Mossad agents was found to be suitable for this role. Cohen was subjected to about two weeks of covert surveillance by the Mossad, and after he was found to be suitable, he received a message from the Mossad that it had been decided to recruit him to the organization. He underwent a training course of six months, and in the evaluation at the end of the course it was written that he had all the attributes required for the designated role. Cohen began his activity in 1961. In that year, he was sent to Argentina, as a part of the attempt to build for him a cover of a Syrian businessman named Kamel Amin Thaabet, who supposedly had stayed in Syria a number of years in the past, emigrated to Argentina, and was now interested in returning to his Syrian homeland. As a part of the construction of the cover story, Cohen became involved in the Syrian community of Argentina and became friends with a number of prominent people linked with the Syrian government<sup>2</sup>. In contrast to what is customarily thought, Cohen was operated at the beginning of his intelligence activity by Unit 188 of the Intelligence Corps of the IDF. Only in the continuation was he transferred to the activity of the Mossad. The tactics of Cohen were similar to those used by the Mossad operative Wolfgang Lotz (Ben-Arie) in Egypt. This method included the construction of relationships with politicians, government officials, and high ranking Syrian military officers. One of the ways that Cohen adopted was to employ escorts when hosting in his home. Cohen's apartment in Damascus was known as a 'safehouse' where businessmen and senior government officials would go to have assignations with women, when these women were escorts, secretaries from the Ministry of Defense, airline hostesses, and singers.

Frequently these meetings also included conspicuous consumption of alcohol and free talk about the government and the defense and security system in Syria, including future action plans of the Syrian military to attack Israel. Eli Cohen, who would for the most part pretend to be inebriated during these meetings, listened closely to what was said. In addition, Cohen extended financial loans to government officials and used this fact to ask advice of them, supposedly to facilitate his businesses outside of Syria. The officials were happy to provide advice, since they did not suspect Cohen and they saw him as one of them. In the continuation, it was even claimed that he had formed a close friendship with the Minister of Defense of Syria, Amin al-Hafiz and that it even had been considered to appoint him to the position of Deputy Minister of Defense. Hafiz and his secretary denied this claim for years afterwards (for obvious reasons). The quality of intelligence that Cohen provided to Israel was no less than amazing. In a period of four years Cohen conveyed to Israel, via broadcasts and encrypted letters, strategy information on the policy of the Syrian government and military pertaining to Israel, including the Syrian defense plans of the Golan Heights against an Israeli attack. One of Cohen's prominent achievements was a trip he himself went on in the Golan Heights, as the sole civilian participant, accompanied by the Syrian Minister of Defense and senior Syrian military officers.

In the framework of this visit, Cohen gave the Israeli intelligence detailed information on the locations of the Syrian fortifications in the Golan Heights. One of the famous stories from this visit was Cohen's recommendation to the command of the Syrian military in Damascus to plant eucalyptus trees, a rare sight in the Golan, above the Syrian military positions so as to protect the soldiers against the sun and against identification by the Israeli air force. This action helped the intelligence corps of the IDF to discover the location of the Syrian military positions on the Golan Heights<sup>3</sup>.

### Capture and Execution

One of the items of the information that Cohen passed to Israel was a Syrian plan to use agents in Israel to sabotage the *movilha'artzi* (the national waterline, the pipeline that leads water to the Negev desert). The failure of the operation and the destruction of the means of sabotage intended for the national waterline caused the Syrians to suspect that there was an intelligent agent among them conveying information to Israel. In the effort to discover the spy, innovative Soviet equipment to track radio signals was brought to Syria, with the goal to identify the position of the agent's wireless transmitter. The main suspicion arose when Cohen's transmitter caused interference with the transmission in the region of the Syrian general staff in Damascus, after the routine frequency was changed.

In January 1965 it was decided to have wireless silence in all the communication systems of the Syrian military for 24 hours so as to receive the broadcast. Eli Cohen, who did not know of this silence, continued to broadcast information to his handlers in Israel for a lengthy period of time every morning. In the end, using triangulation of direction identification instrumentation, the building and then the apartment from which the broadcast came was identified. (For this purpose, the Syrians disconnected the electricity alternately in every floor. Cohen's transmission in this period was fed by a home electrical system.) When the Syrian security forces broke into the apartment and caught him with the transmitter, he did not put up any resistance. At first the Syrians did not suspect that he was an Israeli agent. They thought that, like the case of Wolfgang Lotz, he was a Syrian businessman who had betrayed Syria for money. However, in the investigation Eli Cohen admitted that he was a Jew and an Israeli who was acting on behalf of the Mossad.

After Cohen was arrested, the Mossad put forth tremendous efforts to save his life. The Syrians were even offered (through the mediation of the French) information about the revolt that was expected to be held against the existing government, with all the operational details. However, the Syrian government refused the deal, fearing to be depicted in the eyes of the people as 'soft and cowardly', and Cohen was executed by hanging in the center of the city of Damascus, in front of the masses and the media. (It should be noted that not a long time afterwards the revolution did indeed occur, and the Syrian Baath party came into power and has ruled Syria until today.)

<sup>2</sup>Katz, Yossi (2010). *A voice called: stories of Jewish heroism*. Jerusalem, [Israel]: Gefen Publishing. pp. 111

<sup>3</sup>Javits, Jacob (9 July 1971). "Superspy in an unholy war". *Life* 71 (2) 30 August 2011

It was said by witnesses of the event (including the Druse who live today in the Golan Heights) that before the hanging Eli Cohen objected to the fact that the sign to be attached to his chest would say 'traitor to his country'. Throughout the entire investigation, he insisted on the truth: he served his homeland (Israel) and Syria is not 'his homeland'. This version was eventually accepted by the Syrians as well but did not save Eli Cohen from execution<sup>4</sup>.

### Membership in the Freemason Order

The Freemason Order is a large international secret fraternal organization. According to its own definition, this is a 'beautiful system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols'. The three main principles are freedom, fraternity among brothers and people, and equality. Since the organization defined itself as based on a moral perception, all members are expected to have moral behavior, and emphasis is placed on charity. The members of the organization, who are mostly men, see themselves as brothers in worldwide fraternity. Freemasonry is based on the principles of brotherly love, relief, and truth. In France the leaders of the French Revolution adopted the slogan of the Freemasons as: Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité (liberty, equality, fraternity).

The ideological source of Freemasonry symbolism came from the fraternity of the Freemason Order in the Middle Ages and other orders in this period. In those times the professional guilds tended to keep professional abilities that express their occupation secret through codes and secret symbols. They would meet in meeting places called lodges. During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries people who were not professional masons entered the mason guild. They were intellectuals and nobles of the period. These people transformed the instruments of the masons into instruments that express a rich world of philosophical ideas that help every moral person built his character in the best possible way. In 1717 in England the Freemason Order was officially established, when four lodges were united into one grand lodge, which united under its authority all the lodges in the country. The main activity of the Freemason was for about three hundred years, internal, in the fraternity. The perception was and still is that the enrichment of the brothers with values and the slow improvement that will improve their moral and human level will lead to a ripple effect that would improve society as a whole.<sup>5</sup> Eli Cohen was a member of the Freemason Order in his city of birth, Alexandria, Egypt. There the lodge in which he was a member was Egalité (French for equality). The brother who recommended him to the lodge was a British businessman who lived in Alexandria, James Halifax, who at the time managed a shipping company established by his father. Thus, for instance, in the article of the British researcher Wesley Britton "The Eli Cohen Files: The Roots of Spies" it is written that:

"James Halifax, a British citizen living in Alexandria, told that he brought Eli Cohen into the Freemason Order called Egalité in the 1950s".<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Kahana, Ephraim (2006). *Historical dictionary of Israeli intelligence*. Lanham, Md, Scarecrow Press

<sup>5</sup>Stevenson, David (1988). *The Origins of Freemasonry*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 38-44

<sup>6</sup>Britton, Wesley, 2009, *The Eli Cohen Files Part I: The Roots of Spies*, SpyWise Publications, pp.11

Further evidence is the description that Eli Cohen's biological brother, Avraham Cohen, gave to the Maariv newspaper in Israel on one of Eli Cohen's vacations in Israel from his espionage assignment.

"However, Avraham was especially curious about the small mezuzah (decorative case containing parchment with specific verses from the Bible) he brought with him. Once he opened it and discovered material of the Freemasons. When he lifted his head, he saw Eli above him: 'Do you like my mezuzah?' He asked with a smile."<sup>7</sup>

However, it became clear that in addition to the regular activity of the Freemasons, Eli Cohen and James Halifax acted together in the Freemason lodge to clandestinely transfer military weaponry to the IDF. According to testimonies, Cohen and Halifax recruited money through brothers in the Egalité lodge in Alexandria to purchase large amounts of arms that remained from the battles of World War II. Later they used the resources at the disposal of shipping company managed by Halifax's father to smuggle the arms to Israel. Evidence was given by Eli Cohen's biological brother, Avraham Cohen, in a lecture at the Dahan Center.

"Eli's membership in the Freemason Order was not just for appearance's sake; he recruited money there. In his biography he noted a person named James Halifax as his recommender ... and then I heard from him that they would recruit money together from El Alamein fields, the battle zone between Montgomery and Rommel in World War II. There were fields of armament thrown there and the Bedouin would trade in it and would fill boxes. And the father of this James Halifax was the manager of a shipping company named Hellenic Mediterranean Line and they transferred in boxes the weaponry and arms to Israel even before Eli immigrated to Israel."<sup>8</sup>

Another mention can be found in the book of Wesley Britton:

"Halifax's father, a Freemason himself, owned a Greek shipping company that conveyed merchandise between the ports of Alexandria, Beirut, and Haifa. It was told that Cohen and Halifax used the company to smuggle weaponry to the State of Israel from North Africa. In addition, it was told that Eli Cohen used his membership in the Freemasons to recruit money from the members of the lodge to purchase weapons from the Bedouin who stole the weapons from the British."<sup>9</sup>

In the continuation, it became clear that the capture of Eli Cohen in Damascus as an Israeli spy and his exposure as a member of the Freemasons in Egypt in 1965 constituted a basis for the Egyptian government under Gamal Nasser to close down the activity of the Freemasons in Egypt a year before in 1964. Wesley Britton writes in his book about Eli Cohen that:

<sup>7</sup>Maariv Newspaper, Interview with Avraham Cohen, "Following Eli Cohen: The Stories that Were Not Told about Our Man in Damascus", May 11, 2015. <http://m.maariv.co.il/HomePage/FrontPage/Article.aspx?id=476527>

<sup>8</sup> Cohen, Avraham, 2015, Dahan Center – 50 Years to the Hanging of Eli Cohen, 1:36:12-1:37:35. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOKQWj2oRhE>

<sup>9</sup>Britton, Wesley, 2009, *The Eli Cohen Files Part I: The Roots of Spies*, SpyWise Publications, pp.11

“In 1965 I discovered that the fact that Eli Cohen was a member of the Freemasons in Egypt constituted justification for the raid to close the halls of the Freemasons in Egypt a year before.”<sup>10</sup>

Description of the closure of the Freemason Temple in Alexandria and justification of the action by the exposure of Eli Cohen’s membership appeared in the Al-Ahram newspaper on November 19, 2011.

“On April 4, 1964 the Freemason Temple on Toussoun Street in Alexandria was closed by the directive of the Ministry for Issues of Welfare, under the argument that the Freemasons ‘promote an agenda that is not commensurate with the goals of nonprofit institutions’. A year later additional proof came to the country about this agenda, when the fact that the Israeli spy caught in Damascus that year, Eli Cohen, was a member of one of the lodges of the Freemasons in Alexandria.”<sup>11</sup>

Another mention of the justification of the cessation of Freemason activity in Egypt can be found in *The Masonic Travelermagazine*, in an article of an author named Kent Henderson titled “The Craft in the Muslim Countries”.

“After the Suez Canal Crisis in 1956 the first president of Egypt, Gamal Nasser, expelled most of the foreign citizens from Egypt, and they included many Freemasons. Consequently, lodges lost members, and those who remained, without a doubt, were very cautious in light of the new regime. In 1964, after a great scandal that included the Israeli master spy Eli Cohen, who belonged according to certain reports to a lodge in Egypt, the government in Egypt completely forbade all activity of the Freemasons in the land of Egypt.”<sup>12 13</sup>

In this context, to obtain an explanation about the hostility towards the Freemasons in Egypt it is possible to read the article written by the renowned Egyptian author Samir Raafat titled “The Freemasons in Egypt”.

“At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Freemason Order in Egypt included 54 lodges in Umm al-Dunya. Then, between the years 1940-1957 we find 18 Freemason halls registered in Cairo, 33 in Alexandria, 10 in Port Said, 2 in Mansoura, 2 in Ismailia, and 1 in Faiyum, Mahallah Al Kubra, and Minya. From a historical perspective, the attitude of the Freemason to Jews was important.

Jews saw Freemasonry as a way to achieve equality and were the standard-bearers for the distribution of membership in the lodges. However, because of the fact that many of the symbols and rituals of the Freemasons were related to Jewish mysticism, every time there was a financial crisis in the Muslim countries accusations arose against the Christian-Jewish alliance as the main cause. Immediately after King Farouk was deposed, Freemasonry was linked to pro-Zionist opinions. According to the conservatives, the similarity between the temple of the Freemasons and the BneiBrith Order (a Jewish order established according to the model of Freemasonry) was an argument in support of this opinion. After the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the opponents of the Freemasons in Egypt acted openly against the Freemasons, arguing that the Freemasons are subversive, dangerous, and aspire to undermine Arab nationalism and patriotism.”<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion, although the literature does not provide much information on the membership of Eli Cohen in, the Order of Freemasons, it is clear from the findings in the article that his membership in the Order and Learning his principles constituted an important factor in his life. The next studies needs to learn more about the activities of Eli Cohen in the Order of Freemasons and explore how learning the principles of the Order influenced his decisions making in his unique life.

<sup>10</sup>Britton ,Wesley, 2009, The Eli Cohen Files Part I: The Roots of Spies, SpyWise Publications, pp.11

<sup>11</sup>Al-Ahram Newspaper, November 19, 2011. <http://www.masress.com/en/ahramweekly/28154>

<sup>12</sup>Galtier, G. *MaconnerieEgyptienne, Rose Croix and Neo-Chevalerie*. Ed. Do. Rocher, 1989. p 36

<sup>13</sup>Henderson, Kent, "The Craft in Islamic Countries: An Analytical Review", *The Masonic Traveler*, 2014.

<sup>14</sup>Raafat, Samir. "Freemasonry in Egypt." *Insight Magazine*, March 1, 1999. Retrieved, Aug. 27, 2007.