

# Israel Military Intelligence: Stealing a Soviet MiG

From 1952-63, Isser Harel directed both the Shin Bet (the Israeli internal security service) and the [Mossad](#) (for foreign operations). In early 1963, he was replaced by a newcomer, Meir Amit. At first Amit was not accepted by Mossad operatives loyal to Harel, but after a shaky start, marked by some lack of cooperation and trust, he asserted his leadership over the organization. Even those who had fiercely opposed his entry as the new head of the Mossad in place of Harel grew to respect, admire, and like him. Meir Amit turned out to be a great operations chief. Under him and Military Intelligence (Aman) chief Aharon Yariv in the 1960's, Israeli intelligence turned out some of its most amazing successes. One of these successes had a decisive impact on the outcome of the Six Day War in June 1967 - the stealing of a Soviet MiG-21.

Soon after assuming leadership of the Mossad on March 25, 1963, Meir Amit consulted a great number of military men in order to spell out Mossad objectives, and ask what they felt would be the Mossad's most valuable contribution to Israeli security. General Mordecai (Motti) Hod, commander of the [Israeli Air Force](#) in 1963, (and for the following few years), told him to bring a Soviet-made MiG-21 to [Israel](#).

It is difficult to determine if Motti Hod really believed such a feat could be pulled off. [Ezer Weizmann](#), who took over command of the Israeli Air force from Hod, told Amit the same thing shortly before the [Six-Day War](#). If it could be done, the Israelis would then have access to the secrets of the most advanced fighter planes the Arab states possessed at the time - and according to the Russians, the most advanced strike aircraft in the world.

The Russians began introducing the MiG-21 into the Middle East in 1961. By 1963, when Amit took over the Mossad, it was an essential part of the Egyptian, Syrian and Iraqi Air Forces arsenals. The Russians introduced the aircraft under maximum secrecy and security. The Russians "had made it a condition of supplying the aircraft that they should be responsible for security, crew training and maintenance." Few in the West knew much about the MiG-21 - but feared its capabilities.

The Russians, of course, were aware of the risks they were taking by stationing MiG's outside of their own borders in the service of foreign armies. Security was thus extremely tight - and the Russians were often responsible for it. This in turn bred resentment among certain elements of the their Arab beneficiaries, who were sometimes angered by the greater authority the Russians exerted at their own Syrian, Egyptian or Iraqi air bases than they did themselves. Still, appointment to an MiG-21 squadron "was the highest honor that could be granted to a pilot. These were not the kind of men who could be bribed or would talk loosely in public. As a result, neither Mossad nor Military Intelligence had made any progress at all." They had tried a few times before. Through the services of an Egyptian-born Armenian by the name of Jean Thomas, the Israelis had tried to pay an

Egyptian Air Force pilot 1 million dollars to defect to Israel with his MiG-21 in the early 1960's. The pilot refused, Jean Thomas and a number of accomplices were caught, and Thomas and two of his accomplices were hanged in December 1962.

Another attempt to convince two Iraqi pilots to defect to Israel didn't work either. But the third attempt did.

"The Israeli military command had always placed a premium on complete familiarity with every weapon their enemies might use against them in combat. One of the first to emphasize this was General Dan Tolkowsky, the commander who built up the Air Force in the early fifties. He said again and again that 'It is a basic principle of warfare that to know the weapons the enemy has is already to beat him.'" Tolkowsky constantly pressed for this kind of information. So, as we saw, would his successors [Mordecai Hod](#) and [Ezer Weizmann](#) as commanders of the [Israeli Air Force](#).

The Israeli efforts to accumulate information on potential enemy plans and equipment is of course vital for her national defense. But it has, and undoubtedly continues to be, vital for barter with the United States as well. In Israel, the United States has an ally who has often provided Intelligence far more in-depth than their own, especially about soviet penetration of the Middle East in the 1960's and 1970's. In return, the Americans have often been willing to provide Israel with the latest military equipment which under other circumstances they might not have been willing to provide.

It is true that as early as the [1956 Suez War](#), the Israelis found an abandoned Russian plane abandoned by its Egyptian pilot, as the Egyptians hastily fled before the rapidly advancing Israeli Army.

This was a major coup. But its effects soon wore off as the Russians introduced the more advanced, and unknown, MiG-21 into the Syrian, Egyptian and Iraqi Air Forces.

Israeli Intelligence went through its options; "bribery, intercepting a plane at its unloading point in an Arab country, planting an agent at an airbase..." But the Mossad came to the conclusion that it would be best to try and persuade an Arab pilot to defect to Israel.

In the event, the Israelis got a free tip-off from an unexpected source without initiating a thing; an Iraqi Jew by the name of Joseph indicated that if Israel wanted an MiG-21, he could probably arrange it. This was a strange development. Most [Iraqi Jews](#) had been flown to Israel in a massive airlift in the early 1950's. Perhaps 1000 or even less remained of a community which prior to the early 1950's numbered well over 100,000 Jews.

Joseph had grown up as a poor Jew and had been indentured to an Iraqi Maronite Christian family at the age of ten. Although he never attended school or learned to read and write, he, like the biblical Joseph, rose to prominence in this non-Jewish family's household. No decision was taken without him being consulted. He was present at all family meetings, and his was often the last word on any family decision. He had risen to be a central figure in the family's affairs whom they all looked up to, admired, respected, and loved.

When he was almost 60, however, during a quarrel with the real head of the household, Joseph was told that without the family he would have had nothing. Although the

Christian Maronite soon apologized, Joseph didn't forget it. He decided then and there to explore his "otherness" - his Jewish identity. This was something he had hardly given thought to before. He began to learn about Judaism and Israel. Although he maintained his loyalty to his adopted family, he also felt equally loyal to his newfound concern for Israel. Late in 1964 he contacted Israeli officials in Tehran (until 1979 Israel had a good relationship with Persian, non-Arab Iran) and Europe. He had something important to tell them.

Israel, as a Jewish state in the Middle East, has always cultivated non-Arab nations on the periphery of the Middle Eastern world - such as the Turks and until 1979, Iran. Israel also actively cultivated minorities within Arab-Moslem nations. Israel has made discreet intelligence contacts over the years with the Druze sect (primarily in Syria and Lebanon), the Kurds in Iraq and elsewhere and the Maronite Christians and other Christian sects throughout the Middle East. In the early 1980's Israel tried to form a full-fledged alliance with the large but minority Christian Maronites in Lebanon.

In early 1964 Israel soon had contact - through Joseph - with a Maronite Christian pilot in the Iraqi Air Force. The family felt disaffected with their lot. The father felt frustrated by the increasing pressures the Iraqi government was imposing on him and other Maronite Christians. Some of his friends had even been imprisoned and he was finding it difficult to manage his business. He mentioned to Joseph that he would like to leave the country.

After Joseph first contacted the Israelis, there were many in Israel who preferred to drop the issue as unrealistic. But not Meir Amit. Even when Joseph began demanding more money and many in Israel pegged him as a con-man, Amit pursued it. He had an ally in Yitzhak Rabin, Chief of Staff of the Israeli Armed Forces on the eve (and during) the Six Day War. They contacted a top agent in Baghdad, an American woman, and either on Israeli orders or on her own initiative (sources conflict) she decided to draw out Munir Redfa - a Christian Iraqi air force pilot and a member of Joseph's adopted family.

The American woman was a Mossad agent (it is not clear if she was Jewish) who was not only lively and intelligent but beautiful as well. She mixed in easily in high social circles wherever she went. According to one source, she initiated the contact with Munir Redfa at a party, where the two immediately hit it off. He told her he was a patriotic Iraqi, but he "found himself in violent disagreement with the current war being waged by his government against the minority Kurdish tribesmen in northern Iraq." In the 1960's as in the 1990's, the Kurds tried to maintain their independence in the Arab (and Turkish) world that did not wish to give it to them. As a minority Christian, Munir Redfa was greatly troubled by the fact that he, as a deputy commander of a MiG-21 squadron, was one of those who was asked to lead bombing missions against the almost defenseless Kurds. According to Dennis Eisenberg, Uri Dan, and Eli Landau, Redfa "even confessed a 'sneaking admiration' for the Israelis, who were 'so few against so many Moslems.'" There were other things bothering him as well. He had been passed over as commander of his squadron, he was stationed far from his home in Baghdad, and "was allowed to fly only with small fuel tanks, because he was a Christian." The American woman listened. She continued to see him and their intimacy, despite his marriage and several children, grew.

She exploited the connection to suggest a holiday in Europe in July 1966. He agreed. After a few days there, she "suggested that Munir fly to Israel with her. She had friends there

who might be of service to him." She pulled out a brand new passport and tickets.

He then knew that this had to have been planned from the start, and she hadn't been attracted to him for who he was. But he also knew that she was making an offer that could be of great benefit to him. Not only would he be through with the bombing missions he so disagreed with - the Israelis would be paying him 1 million dollars. It was as attractive as it was dangerous.

Munir wanted to see that not only his wife and children would be taken safely out of Iraq, but his parents and the rest of his extended family as well. Joseph would see to that. Joseph was concerned that of each family member knew that they were going to leave, it was inevitable, due to human nature, that someone would mention the fact to the wrong person, and the whole plan would go awry. Therefore many of the family members were never even told they were going to leave Iraq. As for Munir Redfa himself, not only did the Israelis agree to pay him very well and grant full protection to his family, but they told him that they would provide him "with Israeli citizenship, a home, and a job for life."

Munir Redfa's mind was made up. Mordecai Hod, the commander of the Israeli Air Force, met him and went over the escape plan with him. He would fly a zig-zag route to Israel to avoid Iraqi and Jordanian radar. IAF commander Hod told him: "You know how dangerous this is going to be. The flight is 900 kilometers. If your own colleagues guess what you're up to they may send planes to blow you out of the skies. If they don't succeed, the Jordanians may try. Your only hope is to remain calm and follow this route. They do not know it, we do." Hod continued; "If you lose your nerve you are a dead man. Once you have left your ordinary flight path there is no turning back." Redfa seemed aware of this and responded simply; "I will bring you the plane."

For the remainder of his stay in Israel Munir Redfa and his Israeli handlers went over his planned escape again and again. "He was amazed to see that they knew almost as much about the goings-on at his airbase as he did. They knew the names of all the personnel, both Russian and Iraqi, and the layout of the entire base. They knew minutely the routine of training flights: long flights on certain days, short on others."

He would have to pick a day when he would be permitted to go on a long-range flight.

Redfa and the American woman went back to Europe and from there to Iraq. Soon members of Redfa's family began leaving the country; one as a tourist, another for medical treatment...

Munir Redfa set his date for August 16, 1966. The Israeli Air Force would be expecting him on one of a number of given days in August. He carried on his business as usual as best he could with co-workers he would never see again. He asked the ground crew to fill his tanks to capacity, something the Russian advisors generally had to sign for. But the Iraqis disliked the Russian advisors, who seemed to hold them in contempt. This worked to Redfa's benefit. As a star pilot, they were too happy to obey his orders, rather than those of the Russians.

He took off. After heading out towards Baghdad, he veered off in the direction of Israel. The ground crew radar picked up a blip on the screen heading west and they frantically radioed him to turn around. He didn't. They warned him they would shoot him down.

He turned the radio off.

Hundreds of miles away Israeli radar picked up the blip on the screen. They sent up a squad of IAF Mirages to escort him. He went through his prearranged signals and they flew alongside him to a base deep in the Negev Desert.

That day, "Mossad agents hired two large vans and picked up the remaining members of the pilot's family, who had left Baghdad ostensibly to have a picnic. They were driven to the Iranian border and guided across by anti-Iraqi Kurdish guerrillas. Safely in Iran, a helicopter collected them and flew them to an airfield, from where an airplane took them to Israel."

Newspapers all over the world carried the sensational story of an Iraqi pilot who had defected with his MiG-21 to Israel. "Like all news stories, it stayed in the papers a few days (with constantly shrinking headlines) and was soon forgotten by most people...Among those who did not forget were military leaders of the United States, France, Britain and other powers. They pressed the Israelis for a glimpse of the aircraft, the first to fall into the hands of a nation friendly to their interests..."

The Russians were furious. Their air power secrets were seriously compromised. They threatened the Israelis ferociously and demanded the plane back.

The Israelis, of course, did not return the plane. They did not, however, turn it over to the United States for the time being in order to temper Russian rage.

Moreover, it diminished the KGB's - and of course the Iraqis' - prestige. Redfa was not an unbalanced cadet, as they may have preferred to believe, but "one of the country's best pilots, and he had been very thoroughly screened by Soviet and Iraqi security before rising to his position as an elite air force pilot - even if he did, as a Christian, face certain drawbacks.

The Israelis did not divulge their part in Munir Redfa's defection for quite some time. It took years for the Russians to put together how the theft of the MiG had been arranged. They assumed from the start that the Mossad was behind it. In this they were correct.

A few months later the IAF did loan the MiG to the United States for testing. It was an essential and very important part of American strategic capabilities. They US Air Force used the MiG in simulated dogfights with the intention of gaining as much insight into the Soviet plane's capability that they could.

For the Israelis the benefit of possession of the plane was even more immediate. In an April 7, 1967 dogfight with the Syrians, the IAF shot down six Syrian MiG's to no Israeli planes. In the June 1967 War, the Israeli Air Force commanded overwhelming air superiority over the Syrian and Egyptian MiG's. Not a little had to do with the fact that an MiG had been flown to Israel less than a year earlier with the connivance of Israeli Intelligence.

Munir Redfa came to Israel with his family and was given a new job and a new life. The American woman saw him perhaps once more after he arrived, but she was committed to her work in the Mossad, which was where her ultimate loyalty lay.

The Iraqi Jew Joseph did not come to Israel, preferring to remain a Zionist from afar in his native Iraq. Presumably, he lived satisfied with what he had done both for the family he loved and the country on which he bestowed his new-found concern and affections.

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**Sources:**

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