

When Israel's Mossad Stole A Iraqi Mig-21: The Story Of Munir Redfa

By Unknown Author

This happened in 1966. Another Israeli conflict with the Arabs was imminent. What worried the Israelis was that the Arabs had received the new Mig 21 fighter from Russia. Not even the US knew anything about the new threat in the sky. Israel had to lay its hands on a Mig 21. This is the story of Munir Redfa, an Iraqi Christian fighter pilot, who was enticed by the Mossad to fly his Mig 21 to Israel.



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Redfa in 1966 and in 1998 before his death

WHO WAS MUNIR REDFA?

Munir Redfa (1934–1998) was an Iraqi fighter pilot, of Syriac origin, who defected to Israel in 1966 by flying a MiG-21 of the Iraqi Air Force. In what is considered as one of the Mossad's most successful operations, Redfa's

entire extended family was smuggled safely out of Iraq to Israel. The MiG-21 fighter was evaluated by the Israeli Air Force and was later loaned to the United States for testing and intelligence analysis. Knowledge obtained from analysis of the aircraft was instrumental to the successes achieved by the Israeli Air Force in its future encounters with Arab MiG-21s. Redfa's defection was the subject of the movie *Steal the Sky*.

Redfa was born Munir Habib Jamil Rufa in 1934 to an Syriac family belonging to the Syriac Orthodox Church from Mosul. He was the second of nine children. Like many other Syriac, his family fled to Iraq as part of the Christian migration from southeast Turkey northwestern mountains.

At the time of Redfa's defection, a press conference was held during which he indicated that he had suffered from religious and ethnic discrimination in Iraq and that he did not feel that it was his home, and requested asylum in the United States. Although he was reunited with his family in Israel, he did not re-emigrate to the US, contrary to his declaration, and he received Israeli citizenship. He and his family shortly thereafter moved to another western country. Shortly after Redfa's defection, Iraqi Christians were not allowed to join the air force per orders from Iraq's then-president. This order was still true until the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Redfa died in 1998 of a heart attack.



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The Mig 21 that Redfa flew into Israel

THE inside story of a daring mission to steal a Russian MiG21 jet fighter from Iraq has emerged in Israel as the country prepares to mark its stunning victory in the six-day war 40 years ago this week.

The secrets of the plane, which was flown to Israel by its decorated Iraqi pilot Munir Redfa, laid the foundation for a triumph by Israeli pilots during the 1967 war, in which the MiGs flown by the Egyptian, Syrian and Iraqi air forces were crippled. Last week Zeev Liron, the pilot who persuaded the Iraqi to defect, recalled how the whole mission had nearly unravelled when Redfa's wife, who had been told nothing, threw a fit in Paris on hearing the news that she was going to live in Israel. In 1966 Redfa was a 32-year-old pilot in the Iraqi air force. He was frustrated that his Christian background was blocking prospects of promotion and outraged that he had been ordered to attack Iraqi Kurds. He was beginning to doubt whether he had any future in Iraq. Joseph Shamash, one of Israel's top agents in Baghdad, befriended Redfa and his wife Betty and persuaded them to join him on a Greek island holiday during which they were introduced to Liron. They knew him only as Josh. "Josh can help you to leave Iraq," Shamash whispered to Redfa.

"When Munir heard what we wanted – to fly his MiG from Iraq to Israel – he almost fainted," said Liron. "My MiG? To Israel? Are you guys out of your minds?" He pointed out that his tanks carried insufficient fuel to reach Israel and that he would be shot down as soon as he tried to head for the border. Speaking as a fellow pilot, Liron pulled out a map and showed Redfa that his plan could work. "Finally Munir was convinced," Liron said, "but by the morning he'd got cold feet." Urgent action was required. Mossad consulted Yitzhak Rabin, the army's chief of staff and future prime minister, who ordered: "Bring him to Israel. Show him where he'll land and let him fly in one of our jets." Redfa was given an Israeli passport in the name of Moshe Miz-rahi and touched down with Liron in Tel Aviv, where he was taken to the airfield where he would land the MiG. Before he left Israel, Redfa asked Liron not to tell his wife anything about the plan. "I'll prepare the ground," he promised. But he did not – and it almost derailed the operation. Back in Baghdad, Redfa was assigned to a long-haul flight and he convinced his ground staff to add an extra fuel tank to his MiG. Meanwhile, the Israelis arranged for Redfa's entire family to leave Iraq for their summer holiday. The last to leave were Betty and their two children, aged three and five, who flew to Paris. When Liron met her there in a Mossad safe house and told her they were about to fly to Israel, she had hysterics. "Forget it!" she screamed. "Israel? Are you mad? And who are you anyway? I'm going straight to the Iraqi embassy." "Only then did I realise Munir hadn't said her a word to her about going to Israel," said Liron.

Eventually he calmed Betty down, persuaded her not to expose the plot to

the authorities, gave her an Israeli passport and got her onto a flight to Tel Aviv. Several hours after they landed, Redfa and his MiG21, escorted by an Israeli Mirage, landed at the airbase. With Redfa's help, the Israelis immediately began to unlock the secrets of the Russian plane. Their pilots tested it to its limits. They fought mock dogfights with their Mirages and learnt the tactics needed to beat it. After the 1967 war, Redfa and his family left Israel. Betty had told her husband that living with the enemy was out of the question. Mossad arranged for them to adopt new identities – as the proprietors of a petrol station in the West. The MiG was lent to the US, which tested it in the Nevada desert, and it helped develop a new generation of American fighters. In return, for the first time, the US began to supply Israel with modern jets. Redfa died of a heart attack in 1998.

[Times](#)

REDFA AND THE BEAUTIFUL AGENT

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. The 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.**