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To cite this article: Eyal Pascovich (2017): The Gatekeepers: film, television series, and book review, Journal of Intelligence History

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/16161262.2017.1404762

Published online: 22 Nov 2017.
BOOK AND FILM REVIEW

The Gatekeepers: film, television series, and book review


**Television series: The Gatekeepers, a five-episode Series** by Dror Moreh, co-produced by Dror Moreh Production and Israel Broadcasting Authority, Channel 1, Documentary Department; Hebrew speaking, English subtitles, each episode 60 min, 2014.


The seeds that would eventually lead to the birth of the extraordinary project of ‘The Gatekeepers’ began to germinate when Israeli film director Dror Moreh watched the 2003 American Oscar-winning documentary ‘The Fog of War.’ This film, directed and produced by Errol Morris, was based on his interviews with former US Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and left a huge impact on Moreh, as he recalled a few years later in the introduction to his book *The Gatekeepers* (p. 10):

> When I watched the movie for the first time, I was awed by the power of first-hand testimony, testimony coming from the secret chambers of American strategic decision making. I was amazed by the exposure of the ways in which decisions determining the fates of millions are made.

More or less at the same time, Moreh came across a newspaper interview with four former directors of Shin Bet, Israel’s internal security agency, in which they criticized Israel’s policy toward the Palestinians. While reading the interview, Moreh had an ambitious thought: Why not take these four ex-Shin Bet directors, or even all six living directors of this secret intelligence agency, and seat them in front of a camera, as Errol Morris did? Although Israel is known as a ‘kingdom of secrecy,’ zealously guarding its national security secrets, Moreh decided to give it a try. Much to his surprise, all six ex-directors picked up the gauntlet and agreed to sit in front of the camera, each one separately, open their hearts, and speak – at times critically – about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the war on terror, and the moral dilemmas they faced on a daily basis during their period of service. These dozens of in-depth interview hours, combined with archival footage and computer animation, were masterfully condensed by Moreh into a jolting 90-min documentary entitled *The Gatekeepers*. The film, a

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1. Alex Fishman and Sima Kadmon, “Four ex-Shin Bet Directors in a One-Time and Dramatic Meeting: ‘We are Seriously Concerned about the Fate of the State of Israel,’” Yediot Aharonot, November 14, 2013.
2. This expression was originally coined in the context of Israel’s policy of deliberate vagueness regarding its nuclear policy.
joint Israeli-French-Belgian production, was followed by a five-part television series and a book containing the full interviews with the six former Shin Bet directors.

The film comprises seven segments. The first, ‘No Strategy, Just Tactics,’ examines Shin Bet’s response to the rise of Palestinian terrorism following the 1967 Six-Day War and the beginning of Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian Territories. As the segment’s name hints, the Israeli government’s lack of coherent and clear-cut policy regarding the Palestinians, not only in the 1960 and 1970s but also today, is heavily criticized by the six ex-directors throughout the film. As observed by Yaakov Peri, who headed Shin Bet from 1988 to 1995:

“You see that void, that lack of initiative, that willingness to let things take their course without you stepping in and saying: ‘This is as far as it goes, in this direction or that.’”

The second segment, ‘Forget about Morality,’ focuses on the Bus 300 affair in 1984, when two Palestinian terrorists who hijacked a bus and were captured alive were executed by Shin Bet agents on the direct order of then-Shin Bet director Avraham Shalom. In order to evade the law, Shalom and his subordinates knowingly lied before the committees established to investigate the case. Shalom, who was forced to resign following the exposure of the whole scandal, refused to express full remorse for his deeds, as clearly illustrated by the following conversation with Moreh (30:24):

Moreh: Was it right to kill the terrorists on the 300 bus?
Shalom: Based on the results, no.
Moreh: Only because of the results?
Shalom: Only because of the results.
Moreh: So, if there was no reporter, it would be okay?
Shalom: If he had not come, no one would have known.
Moreh: What about the morality of it?
Shalom: With terrorism there are no morals. Find morals in terrorists first.

In spite of this, later in the film, Shalom heavily criticized Israel’s heavy airstrike in 2002 to kill the Hamas military commander Salah Shehade, an operation that claimed the lives of 15 others, including women and children. Shalom, who passed away in 2014, described this operation as an ‘overkill which stems from military stupidity,’ and claimed it was neither ethical nor efficient from a military point of view, as well as neither humane nor justified (1:21:57). The killing of Salah Shehade is the focus of the sixth segment of The Gatekeepers, ‘Collateral Damage,’ which examines the moral dilemmas that stem from Israel’s policy of the targeted killing of terrorists. Ami Ayalon, Shin Bet director from 1966 to 2000, uses the term ‘the banality of evil’ to criticize the Israeli transformation of targeted killing into a very frequent tool during the Al-Aqsa Intifada in the early 2000s, killing not only the terrorists themselves, but also their political and religious leaders (1:26:20):

When we deal, not with the one coming to kill us immediately, but with the person preaching, we are headed toward a place, which is forbidden by international law and

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3A biography of each one of the six Shin Bet directors can be found on the official website of The Gatekeepers, which also provides details about the filmmakers, the trailer, and press articles published after the film’s release: http://www.thegatekeepersfilm.com/.

4Unless otherwise specified, the English translations in this review are taken from the subtitles on the official version of the film.
basic justice poses huge question marks as to its ethics, but I am talking to you as head of the Shin Bet, it is ineffective.

The film also offers a glimpse into the shift Shin Bet made during the Oslo peace process between Israel and the Palestinians in the mid-1990s, when the former PLO terrorists became Israel’s peace partners (the third segment – ‘One Man’s Terrorist Is Another Man’s Freedom Fighter.’) Conversely, the fifth segment – ‘Victory Is to See You Suffer’ – describes the challenges Shin Bet faced when the peace process began to run aground in the late 1990s.

Carmi Gillon, Shin Bet director at the time of the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, is the tragic hero of the film’s forth segment, ‘Our Own Flesh and Blood.’ This segment describes the process that began with the illegal Jewish settlement in the Palestinian territories in the 1970, with the acquiescence of the Israeli governments; continued with the leniency shown by Israeli politicians and society toward the Jewish Underground that was caught by Shin Bet after committing terrorist acts against Palestinians and plotting to explode the Muslim holy places on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem; and ended with the right-wing incitement that eventually led to the murder of the prime minister, whose protection is one of Shin Bet’s highest priorities. In one of the film’s most exciting moments, Gillon confesses that during the days following the assassination, his wife tried to ‘keep him alive’ and warns of the possibility of another political assassination (1:02:28).

The last two ex-Shin Bet directors who were interviewed for The Gatekeepers are Avi Dichter (2000–2005) and Yuval Diskin (2005–2011). Diskin, who was criticized for agreeing to be interviewed for the film while still in office, provided one of its strongest moments when he accepted, almost without reservations, the following prophecy made by the late Israeli philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz shortly after the Six-Day War, quoted in the film by Moreh (1:30:30):

A state ruling over a hostile population of one million foreigners will necessarily become a Shin Bet state, with all that this implies for education, freedom of speech and thought and democracy. The corruption found in every colonial regime will affix itself to the State of Israel. The administration will have to suppress an Arab uprising on one hand and acquire Quislings, or Arab traitors, on the other.

Diskin’s astonishing acceptance of this view of Israel’s future, which he believes has now become its present, appears in the seventh and final segment of the film, ‘The Old Man at the End of the Corridor.’ The title of the segment was taken from the following anecdote by Ami Ayalon, which, in my opinion, is the most alarming statement in the entire film (1:27:33):

I was born near the Sea of Galilee... I had a wonderful childhood. I knew that there is a house in Jerusalem and on the second floor there is a long corridor. At the end of the corridor, there is a door and behind the door there is a wise man who makes decisions. He thinks. My parents called him the “Old Man.”5 Years later, after the Yom Kippur War, I went to Jerusalem, and I went to that same building. I was on the second floor and found no door at the end of the corridor and behind the missing door, no one was thinking for me.

The film ends with several more shaking statements, such as Carmi Gillon’s confession ‘We are making the lives of millions unbearable, into prolonged human suffering’ (1:34:21). Avraham Shalom provided the prophecy that the future is black and dark. He called the Israel Defense Forces a ‘brutal occupation force,’ and even compared the IDF to the German army during the Second World War, though he was careful to emphasize that he was not

5'The Old Man’ was the nickname of David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister.
referring to ‘the Germans’ behavior toward the Jews. That was exceptional, with its own particular characteristics. I mean how they acted to the Poles, the Belgians, the Dutch, the Czechs... To all of them...’ (1:34:56).

The Gatekeepers was released in 2012 and screened at festivals around the world, winning critical acclaim and several important awards.\(^6\) It was also nominated for Best Documentary Oscar in 2013. In Israel, however, reception was mixed, ranging from ‘one of the most intelligent, mature and self-disciplined documentaries that have been made here recently’\(^7\) to an unbalanced film that ignores ‘the hard realities that make the Shin Bet’s work so crucial and so heroic.’\(^8\) The official Israeli establishment was not inclined to adopt the film, and officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs pondered whether it would help or harm Israel’s public relations. On the one hand, the film strongly criticizes Israeli policy and accuses its leaders of ‘never missing an opportunity to miss an opportunity’\(^9\) to achieve peace with the Palestinians; on the other, the film is a badge of honor for Israeli democracy, which enables freedom of thought and speech. At the same time, it seems that inside Shin Bet, The Gatekeepers was not accepted favorably.\(^10\)

Today, more than 4 years after the film was released, it seems that The Gatekeepers has not led to any change in Israeli policy regarding the Palestinian question, although it did spark a bitter debate among the Israeli public and in the media. However, instead of focusing on the harsh criticism leveled by these very experienced national security experts, the debate concentrated mainly on the legitimacy of such criticism and the integrity of the critics themselves. For example, part of the debate surrounded the question whether it is appropriate for former Shin Bet directors to criticize the political echelon and its policy, especially after they refrained from raising similar criticisms during their period of service. This argument is rebutted by Ami Ayalon, who claims that Shin Bet directors must express any criticism they have on the political echelon, but should do so internally rather than publicly, as he himself was careful to do while serving under three Israeli prime ministers.\(^11\) By contrast, Yaakov Peri stated the following in The Gatekeepers (35:23):

> There were plenty of instances since 1967, when, in my opinion, we should have reached an agreement and got out [off the territories]... [However], it is not within my mandate to convince the prime minister to go to the Palestinians or not.

According to another accusation that was leveled against the former directors, their criticism against the political echelon allegedly stemmed from personal motives and particularly their political opinions. Indeed, Yaakov Peri admitted that after his retirement from service, during which he became familiar with the daily distress and suffering of the Palestinian population, he became ‘a bit of a leftist’ (1:33:53).

Similarly, Carmi Gillon stated that ‘we all [i.e. former Shin Bet directors] appear right-wing during our service and look left-wing to the public after we retire. But it comes from a very sober perspective. Not a political one.’\(^12\) Actually, the former directors who turned to politics after their retirement found themselves in different parties across the political spectrum.

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\(^6\)Winner: Best Documentary – Los Angeles Film Critics Association; Winner: Top 5 Documentaries – National Board of Review Awards; Official Selection – Venice Film Festival, New York Film Festival, Telluride Film Festival, and Toronto Film Festival.

\(^7\)Uri Klein, “Meeting the Gatekeepers on the Way to the Ballot Box,” Haaretz, December 31, 2012 (in Hebrew), http://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/cinema/movie-reviews/1.1896985.


\(^9\)This phrase was originally used by the late Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban in reference to the Palestinians.

\(^10\)Carmi Gillon, in discussion with the author of this review, 28 December 2014.

\(^11\)Ami Ayalon, in discussion with the author of this review, 8 February 2016.

\(^12\)Moreh, The Gatekeepers, 358.
None of them, including those who joined right-wing parties, ever claimed that his words in *The Gatekeepers* were taken out of context or retracted his criticism.

I have no doubt that the Shin Bet directors’ clear and sharp criticism stems from genuine anxiety for the future of the State of Israel. They all agree that Israel’s occupation of the Palestinians is neither moral nor effective. Without saying so explicitly, they all warn that the prospect of a two-state solution to the Palestinian conflict is diminishing daily, threatening Israel’s future as a Jewish democracy. The fact that all the Shin Bet directors who served from 1980 through 2011 have formed the same conclusion greatly amplifies its importance.

*The Gatekeepers* certainly does not make for easy viewing for Israelis and Israel’s supporters around the world. The film holds up a mirror to Israeli society, revealing a very disturbing reality which most of the public usually prefers to ignore. However, it is a must for every Israeli citizen and anyone who seeks to understand the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and appreciate the essence of Shin Bet’s war against terror and the moral dilemmas this involves.

Those with sufficient stamina will also greatly benefit from the 5-hour *Gatekeepers* television series, as well as the accompanying book, now also available to the English-speaking reader. Both present additional excerpts from the interviews with the former Shin Bet directors that were not included in the film, casting further light on the inherent tension between national security needs and the war on terror, on the one hand, and democratic values, on the other.

Indeed, anyone who is exposed to any of the three components of the extraordinary project of *The Gatekeepers* will recognize a fascinating and ironic paradox, whereby the six former directors of Shin Bet, whose main task is to combat terrorism, now appear to be loyal gatekeepers of Israeli democracy and its moral values.

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https://doi.org/10.1080/16161262.2017.1404762