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'Most Israelis Are Not Listening'

By JODI RUDOREN

JERUSALEM — The Oscar-nominated documentary “[The Gatekeepers](#)” braids the recollections and reflections of six former chiefs of the Shin Bet, Israel’s internal security service, into a disturbing narrative of their country’s occupation of the [Palestinian](#) territories since 1967. In the United States the confessions of these tough terrorist hunters have startled and provoked audiences, fueling the criticism among Jewish liberals of the right-leaning Israeli government’s expansion of settlements in the West Bank.

But one of the subjects of the film, Ami Ayalon — who followed his Shin Bet tenure with several years in Parliament — worries that the film will have less impact where it is most important, because “most Israelis who saw it are Israelis who are convinced.”

“Most Israelis are not listening,” Mr. Ayalon, who ran the Shin Bet from 1996 to 2000, said in an interview. “When it is too tough, the easiest way to deal with it is to close our eyes and to close our ears.”

The big question is whether the 97-minute, \$1.5 million “Gatekeepers” will change that. It has [already captured the attention of the world](#): at least 10 American film critics, including two from The New York Times, put it in their best-of-2012 lists, and Israel’s Foreign Ministry gets inquiries almost daily from its embassies about how to handle the reaction in countries where “[The Gatekeepers](#)” will soon be screened. (After an Oscar-qualifying run last year the movie opens in New York and Los Angeles on Friday.)

Here in Israel the film has received positive reviews and praise by newspaper columnists since its festival premiere last summer and opening on Jan. 1 but has not exactly started a revolution. The issues it raises were not, for example, a [factor in the elections](#) on Tuesday. By last Sunday about 22,000 people here had seen the film — a lot for an Israeli documentary but still a tiny fraction of the population of nearly eight million.

The message of “The Gatekeepers,” formed from the collective wisdom of the six living former Shin Bet leaders, is this: The occupation is immoral and, perhaps more important, ineffective. Israel should withdraw from the West Bank as it did from the [Gaza Strip in 2005](#). And the prospect of a two-state solution to the Palestinian conflict diminishes, threatening the future of Israel as a Jewish democracy.

(The film also confronts internal Jewish terrorism, including [the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin](#) in 1995 and a plot to blow up the Temple Mount in the 1980s.)



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While public opinion polls show most Israeli Jews still support the creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, increasing numbers have lost faith that it could happen in their lifetimes.

“The question is whether those people who believe there is no one to talk with, nothing to talk about, and we are condemned to go on fighting and killing for the next 10 generations — and they are supported and empowered by our political community — whether they will be open to see the different view,” Mr. Ayalon said. “Probably it is too difficult.”

[Dror Moreh](#), the 51-year-old director of the film, said over coffee recently that its power is not so much the message as the messengers. He got the idea for “The Gatekeepers” while working on a 2008 documentary about former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, whose chief of staff described a [2003 article in an Israeli newspaper](#) that quoted Shin Bet leaders as critical in persuading Mr. Sharon, once called the father of the settlements, to evacuate those in the Gaza Strip. “[The Fog of War](#),” Errol Morris’s 2003 documentary about the lessons that Robert S. McNamara, the former United States defense secretary, learned during Vietnam, was also a source of inspiration.

One or two dissenters from the security establishment can be dismissed as having gone soft or having an ax to grind, Mr. Moreh said, but not all six former chiefs of the Shin Bet since 1980. They talk with a mix of pride and shame about brutal interrogations and deadly operations, with one referring to a particular assassination as “very clean and elegant.” They are not your typical peaceniks. (Though the film’s opening title card says the men had never been interviewed before, that is not technically true. Four of them broke their agency’s code of silence for the 2003 article, and the others have spoken out since.)

“They know better than anybody else,” Mr. Moreh said of his subjects. “They have been there, they have done the work.” He added, “Any Israeli who is not corrupted ideologically, who when he looks in the mirror he doesn’t say the mirror is crooked, will have to listen eventually to what they are saying.”

What are they saying? “In the war against terror forget about morality.” That’s Avraham Shalom, who resigned in disgrace in 1986 after ordering the [killing of two Palestinians who had hijacked a bus](#). “You can’t make peace using military means,” says Avi Dichter, who ran the agency from 2000 to 2005 and is now home front minister.

Mr. Ayalon: “You ask yourself less and less where to stop.”

Mr. Shalom again: “There was no strategy, just tactics.”

Yaakov Peri, who was elected to Parliament last week as a member of the new centrist There Is a Future party: “When you leave the Shin Bet, you become a bit of a leftist.”

Mr. Moreh said that as a child in the tough Jerusalem neighborhood Kiryat Yovel he “used to run from school to a cinema that showed three movies in one sitting.”

He devoured westerns, science fiction, and monster movies, he recalled, “just to forget about everything and go into this charm of being in the cinema and allow myself to be sucked into a completely new reality, a completely new world of whatever I wanted to see.”

Yet when he became a filmmaker he turned his lens on the reality around him. “Look, I live in Israel,” he said. “To do movies like ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark’ and, let’s say, ‘The Hobbit,’ is something that you do out of pleasure. The troubles going on in Israel oblige you to create films that seem more, I would say, important.”

Besides the Sharon documentary he also directed a 2003 documentary about an Israeli journalist in the Iraq war. He is turning “The Gatekeepers” into a five-part series for Israeli television and a book.

“The Gatekeepers” is actually one of two Israeli films about the occupation to be nominated for the best documentary Oscar this year. The other, “[Five Broken Cameras](#),” is a \$250,000, intimate movie mostly of video shot by a Palestinian who spent years at weekly protests of Israel’s separation barrier encroaching on his West Bank village. Mr. Moreh’s, in contrast, is slick and makes rare documentary use of computer-generated imagery.

As the Shin Bet directors describe operations, viewers often see a bank of monitors seemingly tracking the movement of suspected terrorists via drone cameras; they were created for the film. Ditto with the supposed Shin Bet file cabinets, dossiers and maps of collaborator locations. The video of the bus hijacking was invented digitally from a handful of still photographs shot by journalists that night.

“I won’t tell you when it is real and when it is recreated,” Mr. Moreh said. “When you see the film nobody can tell.”

The Israeli press has mostly praised the film. Uri Klein, film critic of the liberal daily Haaretz, called it “one of the most intelligent, mature and self-disciplined documentaries that have been made here recently.” Ariel Rubinstein, a professor of economics at Tel Aviv University and a longtime activist in the peace movement, described it in [an essay in the newspaper Yediot Aharonot](#) as “the dream document of those who wish to convince by the power of words just how devastating the occupation is.”

But Aluf Benn, the editor of Haaretz, [wrote in a recent column](#) that the film is “convenient for the Shin Bet,” painting its chiefs as victims of the political leadership and going light on their own bending of the law. Palestinians, Mr. Benn complained, “are depicted in the film as stereotypes: an Arab and a donkey in black and white, youths throwing stones, a screaming mob running behind an ambulance.”

Ofra Ben Yaacov, an official in the Foreign Ministry's culture division, said she considered the movie a must-see for Israeli ambassadors and their aides abroad, despite its devastating criticism of government policy, if only so that they can engage critics.

"Of course it's a little problematic if you're talking from the point of hasbarah," Ms. Ben Yaacov said, using a Hebrew term for propaganda. "If we are trying to export our art in all different fields, the question is whether it will be better to take only things that are good to Israel, that don't ask any questions, that don't raise any dilemmas. From my point of view the answer is not — you have to be open and not be a censor."

A spokesman for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the prime minister had not seen "The Gatekeepers" and had no plans to. Mr. Moreh, whose dream "is to go to the White House and show the film to Obama," said Mr. Netanyahu had also not sent a message of congratulations about the Oscar nomination.

And if he wins?

"I'm not expecting him to call me," Mr. Moreh said. "I would ask him to go and see the film and to think over what is said in the film from the people who are most responsible for the security of the state of Israel."