

latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-et-mn-gatekeepers-review20121126,0,2652404.story

# latimes.com

## Movie review: 'Gatekeepers' a potent profile of Shin Bet leaders

**Director Dror Moreh's documentary, featuring former heads of Israel's domestic counterterrorism agency, is more than simply eye-opening.**

By Kenneth Turan, Los Angeles Times Film Critic

8:30 PM PST, November 25, 2012

"We all have our moments," says Yuval Diskin, calm, thoughtful, disturbed. "Maybe you're shaving and you think, 'I make a decision and x number of people are killed.' The power to take lives in an instant, there's something unnatural about it."

advertisement

The "we" in that compelling statement refers to a very small group of individuals, the men who, like Diskin, have been the heads of Shin Bet, Israel's shadowy, super-secret domestic counterterrorism agency, the men profiled in "The Gatekeepers," a documentary potent enough to alter how you see the world.

Playing for a one-week Oscar qualifying run prior to a 2013 general release, "The Gatekeepers" is a coup for Israeli director Dror Moreh, who did what sounds impossible: He convinced all six living former heads of Shin Bet, the men who ran the agency from 1980 through 2011, to speak publicly for the first time about their work combating violence from both Palestinians and Israelis.

### [PHOTOS: Celebrity portraits by The Times](#)

To call the blisteringly candid results eye-opening is not even to scratch the surface.

Riveting from beginning to end, "The Gatekeepers" works in a pair of complementary ways: as a portrait of half a dozen compelling individuals, no two alike, and as a chronological history of the state of Israel from the end of the Six-Day War in 1967 to the present. It's the autobiography of a country, if you will, told by ultimate insiders.

The noteworthy thing about the six is that, though they couldn't be more different — and, in fact, take the occasional sharp jab at each other — they are alike in a number of intriguing ways.

As befits their occupation, these speakers — Avraham Shalom, Yaakov Peri, Carmi Gillon, Ami Avalon, Avi Dichter and Diskin — are somber, serious and highly intelligent. They're impressive commanders who lack neither the confidence nor the nerve to do whatever the situation demands. Yet these men also demonstrate how soul-destroying it can be for moral individuals and societies to cope with situations that almost mandate

behavior that may seem amoral or even immoral. Far from being soulless and uncaring, these complete pragmatists agonize over the right and wrong of what they've done even if they feel there was no choice.

Interestingly enough, these six men also share a belief that a Palestinian state should have been a priority, linked to a kind of disdain for Israeli politicians for not doing more to make it happen.

### [THE ENVELOPE: Coverage of the awards season](#)

"You knock on doors in the middle of the night, these moments end up etched deep inside you," says Peri. "When you retire, you become a bit of a leftist."

Israel's dilemma began in the aftermath of the Six-Day War, when 1 million Palestinians came under military rule overnight. (Another superb Israeli doc, Ra'anan Alexandrowicz's "The Law in These Parts," explores this phenomenon.)

"When the Arabs surrendered, we had no enemy," recalls Shalom, adding bitingly that when terrorism began, "it was lucky for us: We had work."

Always a controversial figure, even among fellow Shin Bet leaders, Shalom was brought down by 1984's Bus 300 incident. Two Palestinians hijacked the bus from Tel Aviv to Ashkelon. They were captured, interrogated, and then, in an action that caused a huge furor, summarily executed. "We killed them with their hands tied," says Avalon, still furious.

Shalom talks reluctantly about this incident and clearly feels betrayed by the political establishment. But on one point he is immovable: "With terrorists there are no morals," he says. "In the war against terror, forget about morality."

Not all terrorists, the gatekeepers take pains to point out, are Palestinian. In 1984, Shin Bet arrested militants, members of the Gush Emunim West Bank settlers group, who came to be known as the Jewish Underground. These men were caught red-handed placing bombs on Palestinian buses in Jerusalem that would have killed hundreds and had plans to destroy the Dome of the Rock, an act that would have sparked worldwide, violent repercussions. But because of their political connections to the heart of the Israeli establishment, the perpetrators, much to the gatekeepers' disgust, served minimal prison terms.

### [PHOTOS: Hollywood backlot moments](#)

Though the spontaneous eruption of 1987's Palestinian Intifada caught the Shin Bet by surprise, it only emphasized the feeling, as Peri puts it, that "we should have reached an agreement and got out."

The only prime minister credited by the Shin Bet leaders with sincerely believing in a Palestinian state was Yitzhak Rabin, who signed the historic Oslo Accords with Yasser Arafat in 1993 that led directly to perhaps the film's most disturbing section, its examination of the murder of Rabin by an Orthodox Jewish assassin.

"The Gatekeepers" uses expertly selected newsreel footage throughout its length to counterpoint its interviews, and this is especially effective in putting on screen the horrific ways settler activists fomented hatred against Rabin. The interviews with Carmi Gillon, who was the head of Shin Bet during this time, are especially wrenching.

"He changed history big time," Gillon says of the assassin. "Until today. It gets worse."

The final section of "The Gatekeepers," entitled "Collateral Damage," deals with James Bond-type Shin Bet

missions against Palestinian terrorists and how public revulsion against the killing of innocent bystanders led to Solomonic decisions about the power of a given bomb that have to be heard to be believed.

If "The Gatekeepers" leaves a lasting impression, it is how disillusioned these committed men are about their country's current situation. Diskin, for instance, unequivocally endorses professor Yeshayahu Leibowitz's celebrated prediction that the Palestinian occupation would turn all of Israel into an authoritarian "Shin Bet state."

Even Shalom, who speaks witheringly about the uselessness of morality early in the film, ends with an even more unsettling thought about the Palestinian occupation. "It's a very negative trait we acquired," he says, speaking slowly to allow the words to sink in. "We became cruel."

-----

'The Gatekeepers'

No MPAA rating.

**Running time:** 1 hour, 37 minutes

**Playing:** At Norwalk 8, Norwalk

[kenneth.turan@latimes.com](mailto:kenneth.turan@latimes.com)

## PHOTOS AND MORE



**VIDEO: What to see during Thanksgiving weekend**



**The Envelope: Awards Insider**



**PHOTOS: NC-17 movies: Ratings explained**

Copyright © 2012, [Los Angeles Times](http://www.latimes.com)