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MOVIE REVIEW

Six Israeli Spymasters on a Shadowy Past and a Dark Future

By A. O. SCOTT

“The Gatekeepers,” a new documentary by the Israeli director [Dror Moreh](#), consists of interviews with six men, all of them retired, most of them bald, one of them a grandfatherly type, well into his 80s, in suspenders and a plaid shirt. They reminisce about past triumphs and frustrations, but Mr. Moreh’s amazing, upsetting film, which opens Monday for a weeklong awards-qualifying run in advance of a wider release next year, is the opposite of nostalgic. It is hard to imagine a movie about the Middle East that could be more timely, more painfully urgent, more challenging to conventional wisdom on all sides of the conflict.

The six men are all surviving former heads of [Shin Bet](#), the Israeli security agency (also known as Shabak) whose activities and membership are closely held state secrets. Legally established in 1949 under the government of David Ben-Gurion, the organization initially focused on internal matters in a fledgling country beset by ideological divisions. Since the 1967 war, however, the biggest part of Shin Bet’s mandate has involved counterterrorism and intelligence gathering in the West Bank and Gaza.

“The Gatekeepers” is in part a history of post-’67 Israel, in which familiar events are revisited from an unusual and fascinating perspective. The leaders of Shin Bet, who answer directly to the prime minister, are not part of the country’s military command structure. Nor, because of the clandestine nature of the agency, are they visibly part of the Israeli political establishment, though they sometimes function as public scapegoats when politicians make mistakes. What is most astonishing about the interviews Mr. Moreh has recorded is how candid and critical these six spymasters are, inflecting their stories with pointed, sometimes devastating assessments of the failings of successive governments.

“I think, after retiring from this job, you become a bit of a leftist,” says Yaakov Peri, who ran Shin Bet from 1988 to 1994, during the first Intifada and the negotiations that led to the Oslo peace accords. But while it is true that Mr. Peri and his colleagues generally favor the curtailment of Jewish settlements on the West Bank and a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they are hardly doves or bleeding hearts. And their shared professional ethos of ruthless, unsentimental pragmatism is precisely what gives such force to their worries about the current state of Israeli politics.

With neither undue pride nor excessive remorse, Mr. Moreh’s interlocutors talk about the

“targeted assassination” of Hamas militants, about “moderate physical pressure” applied (sometimes fatally) to [Palestinian](#) prisoners and about the other tactics that are part of the arsenal of occupation. They also confront some significant lapses, including the killing of two suspects in a 1984 bus hijacking that led to the resignation of Shin Bet director Avraham Shalom and threatened to bring down the government of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir. Later Shin Bet failed to anticipate the outbreak of the first Intifada and was unable to prevent the assassination of [Yitzhak Rabin](#) by a right-wing Jewish extremist in 1995.

Mr. Shalom, born in Vienna in 1928 and a veteran of the 1948 War of Independence, comes across as a wise and gentle old man, though he is recalled by others as a bully and monster. He is at once a steadfast defender of Shin Bet’s tactics and an eloquent critic of a political leadership, which was unable, as Labor and Likud traded power and the country lurched from crisis to crisis, to summon the strategic vision or the moral courage necessary to bring about a lasting solution to its problems. “The future is very dark,” he concludes, lamenting the cruelty and intransigence that he sees as the legacies of more than four decades of occupation.

He is not alone in his pessimism, which is perhaps the dominant mood of Mr. Moreh’s film. The director, somewhat in the manner of [Errol Morris](#), is an unseen and mostly unheard inquisitor, occasionally shouting a question from outside the frame or prodding his subjects when they seem coy or confused, and allowing a series of vivid portraits to emerge. The audience is absorbing a collective history but also coming to know a collection of complicated, thoughtful human beings, who are willing to share not only their war stories, but also their doubts, qualms and conflicted emotions.

Mr. Moreh intercuts the interviews with archival footage of public events and evocative recreations of more shadowy doings. The resulting film is inevitably partial — it relies entirely on those six voices, without the usual documentary chorus of opposing views or disinterested experts — but also eminently, even thrillingly fair-minded. It is guaranteed to trouble any one, left, right, center or head in the sand, with confidence or certainly in his or her own opinions. If you need reassurance or grounds for optimism about the Middle East, you will not find it here. What you will find is rare, welcome and almost unbearable clarity.

“The Gatekeepers” is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). Acts of violence described in calm tones of voice.

The Gatekeepers

Opens on Monday in Manhattan.

Written and directed by Dror Moreh; director of photography, Avner Shahaf; edited by Oron Adar; music by Ab Ovo and Jérôme Chassagnard – Régis Baillet; production design by Doron Koren; produced by Mr. Moreh, Estelle Fialon and Philippa Kowarsky; released by Sony Pictures Classics. At the Lincoln Plaza Cinema, Broadway at 62nd Street. Running time: 1 hour 37 minutes.

