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## “The Gatekeepers”

Posted by *David Denby*



At this point, just about any honest film about Israel will be touched by tragedy. “The Gatekeepers,” a documentary history of the country told from the point of view of its internal security chiefs, is both honest and saddening. The movie will be playing in New York only through Sunday—the end of a qualifying run for the Academy Awards—but it will reopen on February 1st. (After this brief note, I hope to return to it then.) “The Gatekeepers” was made by the Israeli filmmaker Dror Moreh, with French backing, and it is obviously intended, among other things, as a challenge to the Netanyahu regime. The movie is built around interviews with six men who pretty much consecutively ran the Shin Bet, Israel’s internal-security intelligence operation, from 1980 to 2011 (there’s a two-year gap, when the agency was headed by someone who is not featured in the film). Moreh includes such remarkable figures as the fierce and bullying Avraham Shalom, now elderly, with an old man’s acid clarity and humor, and Yuval Diskin, who was the Shin Bet chief from 2005 until 2011, and has recently become an outspoken opponent of Netanyahu’s policies. These insiders reported directly to the Prime Ministers they served. They are all hyper-patriots who would do anything to save Israeli lives and to preserve the Jewish state. And they are convinced that Israel is on the wrong track—that the future is “dark,” as Shalom puts it; that Israel is turning into a colonial power policing a rapidly increasing population of Arabs within its borders.

The shocker is how outspoken they all are—at least by American standards. (The movie is yet another proof that discussion of Israel’s behavior is much freer in Israel than it is here.) They are all learned, sober guys, with emotions passing between triumph and regret in startling alternations. They candidly discuss anti-terrorist operations (their main brief) and such methods as torture and targeted assassinations of Hamas leaders. They evince a withering contempt for the native extremists—Israel’s right-wing bomb-throwers—who wanted to blow up the Dome of the Rock, the holiest of Islamic sites, in Jerusalem, an act that would have started a war conducted by all the world’s Muslims against Israel. They are ruthless, pragmatic, calculating, and yet, at times, astonished by their

ability to pinpoint a missile or bomb attack against a single house or individual. They exercise power and—in retrospect, at least—question it at the same time. They are constantly weighing consequences against benefits, murder against morality. “With terrorism, there are no morals,” Shalom says, meaning that any measures are legitimate, but, at the end of the film, he expresses serious doubts about what Israel is doing. They are masters of “tactics,” but they know that “strategy”—the *point* of all these brilliant counterterrorism operations—may have eluded them, and has certainly eluded Israel’s leaders. But more on this remarkable film in February.

*Read David Remnick’s recent Letter from Tel Aviv about the dissenting voices of Israeli security chiefs.*

**Keywords**

- Israel

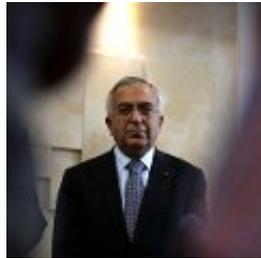
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