

The Gatekeepers

The “Gatekeepers” here are the six retired directors of the Israel’s secret service agency, Shin Bet, (from the organization’s Hebrew initials) talking openly about their work in protecting the Jewish state over the past 45 years. Shin Bet’s duties are safeguarding Israel’s state security, exposing terrorism and providing intelligence for counter-terrorism operations in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (this service is distinct from Mossad, the foreign intelligence service).

For his incisive new documentary, director Dror Moreh got all of these directors to sit down and talk to his camera, discussing their agency’s work since the 1967 Six-Day War. Moreh, an Israeli cinematographer for most of his career, here directs his second feature film, which was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Feature-length Documentary

Mingled amongst the sit-down interviews with the six is a recent mini-history of Israel told through surveillance footage, newsreel and TV news coverage, and re-enactments. This material presents a rough chronology of Shin Bet’s achievements and failures. The interviews begin with the aftermath of the 1967 war and the euphoria of that time. It was not to last, of course, and the decades-long struggle over Palestine and terrorism leads the Shin Bet leaders to discuss the lost opportunities of their service, the occasional mistakes in their fight against terror, and their frustration with Israeli authorities who ignored their advice. Also, the interviewees talk of the genuine moral dilemmas they came to face, such as the continuing price of the occupation of the territories, and some of the risks they felt had to be taken to protect the homeland.

The group of six are a somber, earnest lot, as stalwart as you expect spy chiefs to be, yet they reveal, too, the manner of veterans of dirty work who look, in their later years, to reconcile with their erstwhile foes (*the film is in Hebrew, with English subtitles*).

The revelations for Westerners in this film are several, but I will note two. First, this is the first time that these men have publicly spoken about their super-secret lifework. It is an achievement for director Moreh to have got **any** of the recent Shin Bet chiefs to talk, much less the last six bosses of the agency. Second, the evident frankness they display and, even more telling, the fact that, to a man, they found some of the policies of the various Israeli governments they have served as inflexible or short-sighted.

True, these men are now out of office and can speak more freely, but their consistent views are still revelatory, inasmuch as they basically favor a two-state solution, decry the expansion of settlements, and express an openness to Palestinian views which recent Israeli governments have had difficulty expressing. As one man says, after his long exposure to Palestinian terrorism, “you begin to understand, and then to sympathize.” For men who helped the Israeli government to gird for war, they are most convincing advocates for peace.

(*The film is rated PG-13 and runs 97 minutes.*)

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