

Review - The Gatekeepers

Written by Oren Barak

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OREN BARAK, MAY 31 2015

The Gatekeepers

Director: Dror Moreh

Year of Release: 2012

The Gatekeepers, the acclaimed documentary by Israeli filmmaker Dror Moreh, provides its viewers with a rare glimpse into the workings of Israel's security agencies, which, since 1967, have put their best efforts into quashing the Palestinian resistance to Israel's continued occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. At the crux of the film are interviews conducted with "the Gatekeepers", six former directors of the Israel Security Agency, which is widely known by its acronym *Shin Bet* (or *Shabak*). Together with Israel's military, the *Shin Bet* has been the major security agency involved in the Occupied Territories throughout this period. In addition to the interviews, which cover different aspects and dilemmas of the activities of the *Shin Bet*, the film makes use of documentary footage and computer-generated imagery to present key episodes in the history of Israel and the *Shin Bet*, complementing the officials' narratives.

The main argument that emerges from the film is that the valuable time that Israel had gained thanks to the Gatekeepers' efforts was squandered by the "Landlords," that is, by Israel's political leaders, who did not find a satisfactory solution to the problem of the Territories, and allowed it to fester and haunt Israeli society. In view of the continued impasse in the relations between Israelis and Palestinians, and given the weakness of the Israeli Left after the failure of the Oslo Process and the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000, it is clear why this argument, put forth by prominent security experts, has fallen on open ears. Indeed, since *The Gatekeepers* came out in 2012, some of its protagonists have openly criticized the Israeli government led by Benjamin Netanyahu. One of them, Carmi Gillon, even claimed, in a protest held outside the prime minister's residence in Jerusalem in November 2014, that "The State of Israel is led by a group of pyromaniacs and headed by an egomaniac towards [its] final destruction."

A more critical examination of the claims made by these former *Shin Bet* directors, however, raises several questions that need to be considered. First, the notion that the *Shin Bet* is separate from Israel's political system and subordinate to it and, therefore, that those who serve in this agency can "talk politics" only after their retirement, is far from being true. Indeed, the Gatekeepers themselves indicate how close they were to Israel's political leaders, and how the latter, in turn, were intensely involved in their agency's affairs. This became evident in two major scandals that shook Israel and the *Shin Bet* during the 1980s, both presented in the documentary. The first one was the Bus 300 Affair, which was an attempt to cover up the killing of two Palestinian armed activists who had kidnapped an Israeli bus, were caught, and were handed over to the *Shin Bet*. The second was the *Shin Bet*'s uncovering of a secret but politically well-connected Jewish organization that launched armed attacks against Palestinian civilians and planned to destroy the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. The fact that three former directors of the *Shin Bet* (Avi Dichter, Ami Ayalon and Yaakov Peri), as well as other former officials in the agency, have joined politics not long after their retirement, also speaks to this intimate relationship.

The second problematic assumption of *The Gatekeepers* is that the *Shin Bet* was and remains a professional, that is, a non-political agency, whose sole purpose is to deal with threats to Israel's national security, especially with terrorism, espionage, and the release of state secrets. However, what is striking in the film is that each of the six

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former directors of the *Shin Bet* indicates how he found himself facing a challenge that was very similar, if not identical, to the one confronted by his predecessor. This suggests that, in fact, the role of the *Shin Bet* in the Occupied Territories since 1967 was, and remains, very political, indeed. The wealth of information collected by the *Shin Bet* on the Palestinians in the Territories; the numerous collaborators that it managed to recruit; the clandestine operations that it carried out against Palestinian armed activists – all these helped secure Israel's continued rule over these areas.

And finally, what emerges from *The Gatekeepers* is that the Territories, where the *Shin Bet* has been mostly active, are not a part of Israel but are merely a “deposit” held, and according these ex-officials mismanaged, by its political leaders. But in fact, the *Shin Bet* was never able to create a real buffer, or “gate,” between Israel and the Territories, and, if anything, its actions have only further immersed Israel there. The blurring of the boundaries between Israel and the Occupied Territories worked, of course, in both ways: the more *Shin Bet's* actions deepened Israel's occupation of the Territories, which in time acquired permanent characteristics, the more the Palestinian armed factions sought to defy this state of affairs by carrying out armed attacks inside Israel.

The *Shin Bet*, as it emerges from *The Gatekeepers*, is thus an actor whose main purpose since 1967 has been to solidify Israel's occupation of the Territories, and not to create the conditions for the Israeli state's eventual withdrawal from them. In view of this role, one is left to wonder how six directors of a major security agency that, among other things, is responsible for seeing the “big picture,” could not grasp the meaning of the role which was assigned to them and which they, willingly, took upon themselves. Of course, it is also possible that the Gatekeepers were conscious of this role but chose to keep quiet rather than rock the boat.

In sum, although *The Gatekeepers* raises important issues, and one can be respectful of its six protagonists, who, like former US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in *The Fog of War* (which inspired Moreh's film), have decided to break their silence, one must not overlook their individual and collective responsibility for the reality that they helped create and which they now criticize.

About the author:

Oren Barak teaches at the Department of International Relations and the Department of Political Science at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel, and is currently an Israel Institute fellow at the Government Department of Cornell University. He is the author (with Gabriel Sheffer) of *Israel's Security Networks: A Theoretical and Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).