

Review of the film 'The Gatekeepers' (April 2013).

(Posted on the Yachad website)

By the time 'The Gatekeepers' (Dror Moreh, 2012) reaches London it will already have been seen in Israel, for months, and in the US, where its Director was nominated for the best documentary feature at the Oscars. It has also of course created much fuss. That means that a reviewer has to stand on the shoulders, or in the shadow, of many reviews which have preceded it. The reviews have mostly just expressed their astonishment at the frankness of former heads of Israel's intelligence and security apparatus who, with [Meir Dagan](#), the recently retired head of Mossad, have become the psychological leaders of Israel's opposition.

The film consists of material from lengthy interviews with six former heads of Shin Bet, Israel's internal security apparatus mainly charged with preventing terrorist attacks. That in itself is remarkable in a country where security is exceeded only by falafel in the hierarchy of obsessions. More remarkable still is the extent to which the interviews give solace to what is broadly called 'the left' in Israel – 'left' denoting a vast range of attitudes which are more or less in favour of the 'two-state solution' and peace negotiations with Palestinian representatives. (Even George W. Bush would count.) One after another the interviewees say that their experience as heads of what they readily admit is a ruthless and cold-blooded organization leads them to believe that 'it cannot go on like this', that 'one must speak to everyone' and – in two cases at least – that the Occupation and the settlement movement are eroding, or have already irreversibly damaged, Israel's democratic ethos. Ami Ayalon (head of Shin Bet 1996-2000), not only wore the most 'lived-in', the craggiest and most pained long-suffering expression – he also was the most biting, while right at the end Yuval Diskin said he agreed with Israel's modern Jeremiah, [Yeshayahu Leibowitz](#), who wrote already in 1968 of the 'curse of dominating another people' which would turn Israel into a police state, "with all that this implies for education, freedom of speech and thought, and democracy'. Leibowitz is also known for having used the terrible N-word to describe where Israel was heading (and I do not mean 'nuclear').

It has been remarked, hopefully, that the film is good for Israel because it shows that the country permits open debate – more open in fact than takes place in the USA on the subject of Israel. Some of the things said by these men would be regarded as totally unacceptable on the floor of the US Congress, for example, leading to ostracism, boycott and – heaven forbid! - a black mark from AIPAC, not to speak of our own Zionist Federation. Israel's Minister of Culture, Limor Livnat, stayed away from the events surrounding the Oscar which featured the film and its Director, and said that although she is against censorship she would like Israeli filmmakers to practice self-censorship. Bibi Netanyahu said he has no intention of seeing the film, though surely that just means that for him once was enough.

The question for conspiracy theorists is why the Israeli authorities allowed it to be made and shown. There is no question that the Israeli government censor would have been able to censor or even prohibit it, or that these men would not have participated in it without some sort of green light – but although it contains many uncomfortable opinions, it does not reveal any sensitive information. Maybe a bright spark thought indeed that the film would do Israel's reputation good and encouraged it – and the many [sponsors](#) do include the 'Yehoshua Rabinovich Foundation's Cinema Project' which is 'independently funded and supported by the Cultural Administration at the Israeli Ministry of Culture and Sport, and the Israeli Council for Cinema'. I think that if that bright spark exists, she was right, but I also hope that it is more than a public relations stunt.

One question which the film wants the rest of us to ask, of course, is why don't the politicians stop kicking the (dynamite-filled) can down the road and stop their country's slow but sure transformation into a state of which all Jews, indeed all people, should be ashamed (labels and epithets suppressed)? Another is how can these people speak in cold blood of their own part in torture and at the same time say that negotiation and peace are absolutely essential - and I do not doubt their sincerity. How can they present themselves as absolutely rational individuals who have ordered killings and assassinations, but also as individuals with a conscience (the word 'ethical' pops up a lot) whose

job just happens to be the prevention of terrorism or rather, the interruption or disruption of real or suspected terrorist plots? Their complaint, indeed their evident anger, is a reaction to the politicians who leave them carrying this other can (or, better, poisoned chalice). The poison is in the pseudo-technical language used to describe counter-terrorism, as if it was a surgical activity and of course as if targeting individuals is a replacement for politics. At one point Ami Ayalon quotes Clausewitz, the early 19th century theorist of war whom every strategic guru has to quote, saying that 'Clausewitz, who was very intelligent, though he was not Jewish – or at least no one has yet claimed him as Jewish - said that war ends up by creating a new political reality' – but it is still a political reality, not a desert, or a sea or a bubble or a theatre. But this war is going nowhere politically.

The palpable resentment of these cerebral killers is understandable. So long as they can keep the terrorists at bay the political class does not have to lay out, let alone make, any choices about the country's relationship with Arabs, with Palestinians, with Europe, and of course, perhaps above all, with itself. The longstanding jargon refers sloppily to 'difficult and painful choices and sacrifices' but rarely spells them out. Which is not surprising because the lightly pronounced phrase 'dismantle the settlements' could mean, at the extreme, expelling 350,000 people from their homes. Why? Because the settler movement has been allowed, again in the words of one of these men, to dictate the politics of the country, irrespective of the party in power. Carmi Gillon (1994-96) recalls the plot to blow up the Dome of the Rock – a plot which was more advanced and had better prospects of achieving its goal than most would like to think: the culprits were imprisoned, but later released after an overwhelming Knesset vote. (A friend reminds me that this was in the context of the release of a large number of Palestinians in one of those prisoner exchanges which happen from time to time.) Had it succeeded, every Muslim country in the world from Morocco to Indonesia would have gone to war against Israel.

The interface, or grey area, between bureaucracy and politics is a recurrent theme. You may not recall an attack on a house in Gaza which almost killed the entire Hamas leadership. Well, the then head of Shin Bet Avi Dichter tells that he had gone to Sharon and said that they would be meeting in a two-storey house: with a ten-ton bomb he could

kill them all – and this was an absolutely exceptional opportunity because they always avoided being together in the same place. But a ten-ton bomb risked causing a lot of collateral damage while a five ton bomb would only succeed in the objective if they met on the upper floor. After much haggling Sharon said ‘OK – a five ton bomb’: but the meeting was on the lower floor and they all ran out of the house very fast when it was hit – it was said even Sheikh Yassin was seen running. But the underlying question, which Dichter does not mention explicitly, surely is: would the assassination of the entire Hamas leadership have improved Israel’s long-term security – let alone the chances of peace?

One terrible incident was the case of Bus 300. This bus was hi-jacked in 1990 and the hi-jackers were photographed being taken away in handcuffs. Shortly afterwards they were killed. According to [The Gatekeepers website](#) Avi Shalom, who had been part of the team who kidnapped Eichmann in 1960, authorized the killing and received the ex post backing of then Prime Minister Yitzchak Shamir and of Shimon Peres. The interview itself did not seem so clear on that point, but it was a shocking event which eventually led to Shalom’s resignation.

Again and again we return to the core message: the undoubted efficacy of Shin Bet in executing its narrowly defined task has enabled the settler movement to gain ascendancy over political decision-making, while the political class, out of fear or shame, do not say what they really think – if indeed they know what they think. Only those who take a delight in provoking everyone else, and the whole of Europe as well, say what they think. The bureaucracy is left to do the dirty work, thus bolstering the settler movement and the anti-peace camp by default. And this is their resentment: that in the end they are playing a political role within the country, whether they like it or not.

But Dan Ephron, in his review in the [Daily Beast](#) alluded to another, sobering, view, that ‘the film is somehow the parting shot of an old secular elite in Israel, which is steadily being supplanted by another group, this one more religious and less prone to compromise. (The current Shin Bet head is religious.)’

So, although fans of Yachad might want to take heart from the film, they might also ask themselves if it could not have been called

'Yesterday's Men'.