

# Six Powerful Voices

## DEEP INSIDE ISRAEL'S SHIN BET



BY MARK DANNER

*The first duty of Shin Bet, Israel's feared internal intelligence service, is to be invisible. Its very motto, "Magen VeLo Yera'e," brands this shadowy organization as the "Defender that shall not be seen." So it is more than a bit startling to find a documentary film built around interviews with Shin Bet's surviving directors—not one but all six: Ami Ayalon, Avi Dichter, Yuval Diskin, Carmi Gillon, Yaakov Peri and Avraham Shalom. Persuading these feared professional spooks to sit for on-camera interviews was unprecedented; extracting the details they tell, not only about their shadow war with Palestinian terrorists but their bitter conflicts with Israeli politicians, was historic—and, as the story unfolds, increasingly shocking. I sat down with Dror Moreh, director of The Gatekeepers, to ask him how he did it.*

**MARK DANNER:** Why Shin Bet? What was it that drew you to do a film

about this organization?

**DROR MOREH:** Shin Bet is the intelligence organization that has dealt with the Palestinians from day one. Their operatives are on the ground. They are always there. They specialize in understanding Palestinian society. If I want to hear about the Israel-Palestinian conflict from a professional's point of view, I want to hear about it from them.

**DANNER:** They have absolute credibility.

**MOREH:** *Absolute!* These are (the people) no one can argue with. You cannot dispense with their words. If there is anyone who is expert on the Israeli-Palestinian situation, it is them. No one can contradict them. And at the end—and this is the most important part—they told me, "We have erred."

**DANNER:** When it comes to Israeli politicians, the Shin Bet directors show an increasingly critical, indeed almost embittered attitude.

**MOREH:** What you see here in Israel are politicians who manipulate everything for their own survival in the political arena. They are shortsighted. They don't care about the future or are too stupid to look forward. Our main criticism in the film is that we Israelis could have done better. The biggest blame for that lies with the politicians.

**DANNER:** One of the most moving passages is the death of Yitzhak Rabin, who had signed the Oslo peace agreement and then was assassinated by a rightwing religious Israeli. Carmi Gillon, then head of Shin Bet, says, "Not only did the assassination succeed, it succeeded big-time and succeeded until the present day." What does he mean?

**MOREH:** He means Israel's agenda is now subjected to the settlers. The extreme rightwing rabbis and settlers are controlling almost everything in Israel. Settlements are growing each day. Even though the current prime minister [Benjamin Netanyahu] says he believes in a

two-state solution, he's building settlements all the time and enlarging the settlements in Judah and Samaria. ... Rabin was the light at the end of the tunnel for some kind of reconciliation with the Palestinians. Today, there is a dark hole.

**DANNER:** Getting an extended interview with any single former director of the Shin Bet is an achievement, and very unusual. Gathering all six of them together—particularly a feared legend like Shalom—is a *tour de force*. How did you do it?

**MOREH:** Let me compliment you! You understand Israeli history. Avraham Shalom is a legendary figure in Israel and never ever gave an interview.

I adore *The Fog of War* by Errol Morris. I think it's one of the most important films that has ever been done. It showed that men in power could speak about their time in office and offer insights about what they did.

In the beginning, I thought about five directors. I didn't think Yuval Diskin, who was still in office, would take part. I tried to

understand who would be the best one to approach them through. I chose Ami Ayalon. It took me quite some time to reach him and when I did, I told him that I wanted to speak about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict through interviews. I asked him to please give me the phone numbers of the heads of Shin Bet. He admired the idea and said, "If you can get them, that's great."

It took a long time—each one interviewed me extensively. I went to each one of them a few times, and they understood what I wanted to do. I told them that the interviews would be extensive, at least ten hours with each of them.

**DANNER:** These guys are extremely charismatic—not just well spoken, but extraordinarily powerful on camera. Shalom is a wily, brilliant fellow, particularly when he's talking about the Bus 300 incident (in which he was accused of ordering the execution of two captured Palestinian terrorists). You and Shalom have a kind of duel, as you push him to give you a straight answer—and he in turn dares you to challenge his decision. It's a remarkable moment.

**MOREH:** There were a lot of moments like that. Believe me, Mark, the editing process was painful. As you can imagine, there are amazing, amazing stories that had to be left out of the final cut because of time constraints. That debate with Shalom was much more aggressive than the shortened version you saw. I asked him about the concept of illegal order (a legal obligation for Israeli soldiers to act morally), which is very, very strong in the Israeli army. He basically said, I cannot answer this type of question from you because you are hindering the state of Israel by asking these questions.

It wasn't easy for him to speak about Bus 300 incident. But I said, "You have to speak. You have to speak." It took some time, but in the end he agreed.

**DANNER:** I think he comes out well—by challenging the questions in such a way that he in essence puts the burden of responsibility of decision-making, and thus of moral inquiry, back on the viewer.

**MOREH:** I worked very hard to show the person behind the persona. At one stage I had personal stories from each one in childhood. Shalom was a young child in Vienna—he was in the balcony when Hitler invaded Vienna. He saw Hitler giving his speech in Vienna. He was treated horribly as a young Jew. All his friends turned against him. He was beaten almost every day at school, and at the last minute, he managed to run away from Vienna and reach Israel on the day

the Second World War erupted. When he says we Israelis treat Palestinians like the Germans treated the occupying countries in Europe, people know he experienced that firsthand.

**DANNER:** That's a particularly shocking moment in the film. He also describes the controversy of overusing violent shaking as a technique during interrogation of prisoners. Shalom's answer: If you stop using this technique, instead of stopping 90 percent of terrorist attacks, we'd stop 70 percent.

**MOREH:** There were a lot of suicide bombers in Israel. The use of that "shaking" technique—what they call moderate physical pressure—had to be discussed by the attorney general. He tells a true story about a terrorist they couldn't do that to do, they couldn't interrogate him in this technique. There was a suicide attack and the bus was bombed, and people died. Only then did they interrogate him with this technique and they got the info they needed.

The main issue is that this organization [Shin Bet] has so much power. Any organization that has that much power needs someone above it to limit this power. The limiting of power by the judicial system or by the politicians is sometimes not enough. Shin Bet is an organization that wants to achieve results and will do whatever is needed to reach those results. You need to have very strong people who control it, to see that everything is done according to the law.

**DANNER:** You make the point that politicians want binary choices: either do it or don't do it. Secondly, that sometimes it's much harder not to act than it is to act. It's an interesting reflection on power and on the weakness of politicians. If you as a politician say, "Go ahead and attack," you're essentially covering yourself.

**MOREH:** Most of the Shin Bet directors told us that politicians don't want to know the details of their operations. One thing politicians are good at is covering their asses. They don't want to be liable, especially the politicians now in Israel—they don't want to be liable for anything. They don't want to know. The big example is Bus 300, where basically the prime minister (Yitzhak Shamir) gave permission to Avraham Shalom to kill [the Palestinian prisoners]. It was a permission that he executed a few times before that and a few times after that.

I had a very nice conversation with (Shalom) a few days ago after the screening. He said to me, "I liked your film but you didn't put enough blame on

the politicians."

"Why do you think that?"

"They gave me the permission" to kill the prisoners.

"Avraham, it's in the movie that they gave you the permission."

"No, it's not enough. People have to understand that *they* were the ones responsible."

I don't think he's right. He should've implemented better judgment on the ground. But the fact is that three prime ministers—Shimon Peres, Yitzhak Rabin and Yitzhak Shamir—manipulated the judicial system in Israel in order to pardon him. ... That draws a very clear notion that they were involved, that they knew what was happening and they were afraid that if (Shalom's case) were to go to court, they would be blamed as well.

**DANNER:** If one were to describe *The Gatekeepers* as a film "based on six interviews," one would think it was a "talking head" documentary. But in fact it is filled with vivid footage.

**MOREH:** From the beginning, I knew I would have stories without any shred of visuals, so I knew we would need to work very hard to visualize the stories in a way that had never been done before. That's why the budget was so high. We needed to create a whole world that does not exist, but is based on real documents and real footage from the ground.

**DANNER:** You and I are speaking in the wake of the film's premiere at the Jerusalem Film Festival. What was the reaction? What were you expecting?

**MOREH:** I was terrified in the premiere, because it was the first time the heads (of Shin Bet) had seen the movie. There were four of them on the first day, and the other two on the second day. Shalom is very old and almost cannot walk. I was sweating and trying to see the movie from their point of view.

But the responses were amazing from them and from the crowd. People cried, people were shocked, people came to me afterwards and hugged me without words. ... Two settlers from the West Bank said to me, "This is the first time we have watched something that, when we will go home, we will think very carefully about."

**DANNER:** You make it clear in the film that the Shin Bet directors spent their professional lives dealing in tactics and expecting a strategy to come from the politicians who were their bosses. And in their view that strategy never came, which is why Israel has reached the political dead end it has. Your film has given all of these men the chance to speak out and say this forthrightly, and to set out what they believe that strategy should have been, and should be.

**MOREH:** Each time in our history that we managed to overcome the obstacles of terror, we give the politicians "free time" in which they can decide where they want to take the country. But the politicians didn't manage to create a bet-



Director Dror Moreh

ter reality. The only one that tried to do so—Yitzhak Rabin—was assassinated. Today, there is quiet in the West Bank. It's flourishing. There are no terror attacks. It is the best time to say, "This is where I want to take [Israel]." But there is nothing happening. ... And if you don't do anything, as Avraham Shalom says at the end, the future is bleak. **FW**

*Mark Danner has written about foreign affairs and American politics for The New Yorker, The New York Review of Books, The New York Times Magazine and other publications. Honors include a National Magazine Award, three Overseas Press Awards, an Emmy and a MacArthur Fellowship. His latest book is Stripping Bare the Body: Politics Violence War. His new book, Torture and the Forever War, is forthcoming this fall.*

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**THE GATEKEEPERS**  
*Israel, 2012, 90m*  
**Director:** Dror Moreh