

# Telluride Review

5:00 PM PDT 8/31/2012 by Todd McCarthy

## Director Dror Moreh's documentary tells the story of Israel's Shin Bet security agency with an inside perspective.

You can scarcely believe what you're hearing and seeing at first: Six former heads of the Shin Bet, Israel's historically secretive internal intelligence agency, telling stories out of school about secret operations, the cultivation of informers, interrogation techniques, targeted assassinations, successes and failures and the dangers posed by the Israeli far-right. The most senior of them, who believes that the future is “bleak,” ends by lamenting that the nation's army is now “a brutal occupation force that is similar to the Germans in World War II.” In other words, this is one hot, provocative, revelatory and astonishing documentary, one sure to provoke enthralled interest and controversy wherever it is shown worldwide. After initial festival exposure at Telluride, Toronto and New York, Sony Classics will release the film in the United States next year.

Given that the agency's motto is “The Unseen Shield” and that its only publicly known member at any given moment is its director, of whom there have 13 over the course of Israel's history, one immediate question is: How is it that all these men jointly decided to spill the beans about so much concerning the organization's operations and methods? A likely answer is that they are alarmed about where things are headed. It's probably no coincidence that four of them — **Ami Ayalon, Avraham Shalom, Yaakov Peri**and **Carmi Gillon** — jointly gave an interview in 2003 warning of “catastrophe” unless a two-state solution to the Palestinian issue was implemented, as the inevitable alternative would be a form of apartheid. They're no happier today.

Cinematographer-turned-director **Dror Moreh** leaves such sentiments for the very end, as he uses the frank and informed views of his seen-it-all participants to assemble a riveting history of a singular organization. Criticized for borderline torture techniques at times and blamed for not preventing the assassination of Prime Minister**Yitzhak Rabin**in 1995, the Shin Bet, ideological issues aside, seems overall to have done an impressive job, especially given that it serves a democracy, of obtaining information and thwarting what is estimated as 90 per cent of attempted terrorist attacks under circumstances as challenging as any in the world.

A key early passage puts the viewer in the position of spymaster. As overhead black-and-white surveillance coverage shows a vehicle allegedly containing terrorists making its way through urban streets, pertinent questions are posed before a decision to attack is made: Do we know who's on board and how many there are? How much time do we have? Will there by any collateral damage? Then a silent explosion is witnessed. A button has been pushed. People are dead. Someone played God.

The historical panorama begins in the aftermath of the Six Day War in 1967, when one million Palestinians came under Israeli control in the West Bank, Gaza and the old city of Jerusalem. Israel quickly took a census, which enabled it to determine who and where everyone was, laying the basis for an excellent list of potential informers. Shin Bet agents were sent in to live among the Palestinians, learned Arabic so well they could tell when code or other evasions were being used and developed a staggering network of agents and prisoners with information.

Mostly black-and-white newsreel footage provides vivid images of Palestinian towns and settlements at the time, of Israeli soldiers rounding up detainees and of the forbidding former Turkish prison in Jerusalem where allegedly “moderate” forms of physical duress kept the intelligence flowing. Even tough old bird Shalom, who headed the agency from 1980-86, adamantly favored a two-state solution from early on, although he was done in when, under his watch, two terrorists were killed by Israeli agents in the wake of a bus hijacking.

Such incidents occasion debates about the legality and morality of killing, both to prevent and punish terrorism and, in a political sense, whether the Shin Bet operated on its own or at the direction of the prime minister. Through it all, the former agency chiefs, who also include**Yuval Diskin** and **Avi Dichter,** evince a profound awareness of these issues but, more than that, an enlightened pragmatism that, in such a job, must no doubt be applied everyday.

The Shin Bet began showing its weaknesses with the First Infitada in the late 1980s, which caught it unawares, the beginnings of bus bombings and other atrocities, the emergence of the more extreme Hamas and Islamic Jihad movements, which were much tougher to infiltrate than Fatah, and most of all with Rabin's murder, which revealed the threat posed by the Israeli far-right. One fascinating passage describes how the Shin Bet managed to catch right-wingers who were about to blow up 250 Arabs and Palestinians in buses in Jerusalem as well as to bomb the Dome of the Rock, an act which, one says, would have brought all of Islam down upon Israel.

The agency emerged from all this turmoil by shifting its priorities from field operations to hi-tech expertise, which has paid great dividends in fighting terrorism. An amazing interlude describes the 1996 assassination via cell phone of the Shin Bet's number one most wanted at the time, Palestinian bomb maker Yahya Ayyash, while another describes how in 2003 it missed, out of government timidity, nailing about a dozen top terrorists in a single action.

Still, for all the exploits and moments of success, the prevailing tone at the end is one of near-despair over the future of Israel on the part of knowledgeable patriots who have spent their lives manning the ramparts. The climactic comments of all six participants lament weak-willed leadership, an Israel that's become a “police state,” and a point at which “We've become...cruel.”

Ayalon, who also served as command-in-chief of the navy and member of the Knesset and comes off as the most intellectually exacting of all the participants, sums it up this way: “The tragedy of Israel's public security debate is that we don't realize that we face a frustrating situation, in which we win every battle, but we lose the war.”