

War Games Without Frontiers

A new, sometimes heartbreaking documentary about the cyclical struggle for peace in the Middle East

June 7, 2021 Michael Giltz



Oscar-nominated filmmaker Dror Moreh's newest documentary examines the struggle for peace in the Middle East from the perspective of U.S. negotiators.

Who started it? That's the question at the heart of any report on violence between Israel and the Palestinians. Go back a few days and you might spotlight Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu, wagging the dog so he doesn't have to go to jail quite yet. Go back a few more days and Hamas is lobbing missiles at Israel.

Go back a little bit further and Israeli soldiers swoop into disputed holy sites to hustle out Palestinian worshippers on a sacred holiday. Imagine troops storming St. Peter's to clear out Catholics on Easter for comparison. Go back five years and you get one answer; 50 years and you get another. Eighty years? Five hundred years? A few thousand? Oy.

THE HUMAN FACTOR ★★★(3/5 stars)

Directed by: Dror Moreh

Running time: 108 min

For another angle, don't ask the Israelis and don't ask the Palestinians. Ask the Americans. During the past 50 years, a core group of U.S. negotiators appear again and again at the public summits, backroom negotiations and one-on-ones that constitute the peace process. It almost doesn't matter which U.S. President or Secretary of State you're talking about. For these negotiators, their life's work is cutting the Gordian knot of a two-state solution. And they've got something to say.

The Human Factor is the third documentary film by director Dror Moreh centering on Israeli politics. The first profiled Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. I might call him the "controversial" Ariel Sharon, but that applies to literally any Israeli Prime Minister. If they're not controversial to the progressives, they're sure to be controversial to the far right. And they're all controversial to the Palestinians.

Moreh's second and best film is The Gatekeepers. In it, the current and former heads of Shin Bet, the country's internal security service, speak bluntly about the challenges facing the nation. It's been said the Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity. But in a nuanced and powerful way, they make clear much the same can be said about Israel's leaders.

Now with his third film on this topic, we hear from the Americans. If you've never followed the back and forth of Israel's entanglement with the Palestinians, The Human Factor may prove a revelation. If you have, it presents familiar ups and downs, from the Camp David Accords in 1978 to the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by Israeli far rightists in 1995 to Bibi's tantalizing Nixon-in-China opportunities from a fresh perspective. It observes history from about ten feet to the right, the men seen in photos of historic meetings but not at the center of those photos.

Those men — always men — offer modest insights and a few fresh anecdotes. One describes meeting alone with the Palestinians. When that meant Yasser Arafat it also meant a meal; nothing was accomplished without first breaking bread. The negotiator stands in a room looking around. A table is set for a nosh while most of the men lounge on a couch watching The Golden Girls. These are the terrorists some Israelis fear and hate?

He laughs, but just as often the negotiators cry or gnash their teeth. The particulars almost don't matter. A breakthrough almost happened, or a breakthrough did happen and then it fell apart; stability reigned until it didn't.

The film might depress the hell out of you, for stubbornness and stupidity abound. Almost 50 years after Jimmy Carter's breakthrough, the headlines of tit-for-tat violence are numbingly familiar. If you believe most Israelis and Palestinians simply want to get on with their lives, Moreh's documentary will break your heart.

And yet. The archival footage that resonates appear a few times, always after a major breakthrough. Again and again we see Jews and Palestinians take to the streets in joy, laughing and waving their respective flags, thrilled at the possibility of peace.

And after all, it's only been 50 years. Think of the progress. Think of the Oslo Accords and the peace with Egypt and the recent cynical deals with other Arab nations.

When animosity can be measured in millennia, a stumbling peace process over the last five decades is almost promising. The human factor is still at play, Rabin and Arafat develop a rapport! Bibi sees a political advantage in striving for genuine peace! Yes, he later sees a political advantage in torpedoing that peace, but still! Again and again, the two sides come so close yet fall short, thanks to a killer's bullet or a badly timed election loss or a power struggle in Iran or perhaps a poor night's sleep.

In a way, the film shows how they came so close and makes you cry. You might also realize how often they've come so close, and hold your breath for just a little longer.

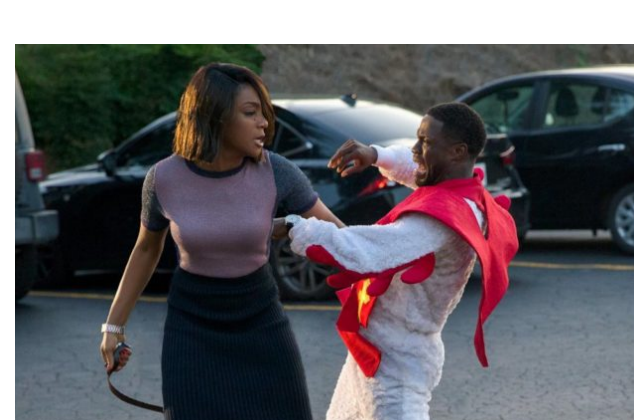
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Michael Giltz

Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He co-hosts the long-running podcast Showbiz Sandbox.

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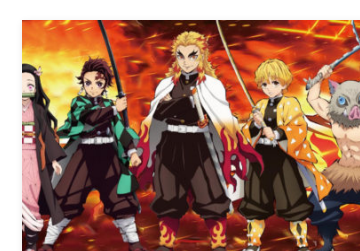
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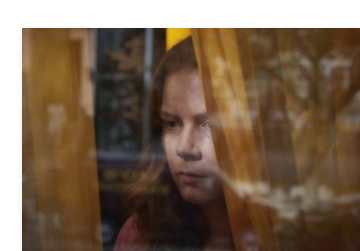
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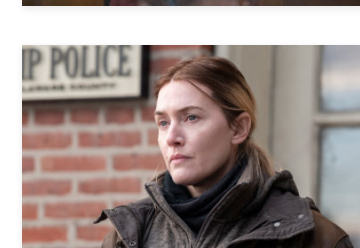
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