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Beware of the Wolves!

The Turkish versus the European Reception of *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* (2006)

By Kevin Smets, Dilek Kaya Mutlu and Roel Vande Winkel

Keywords: Turkey, Turkish cinema, Middle East, reception, distribution, geopolitics, media franchise

Introduction

Serdar Akar's action film *Kurtlar Vadisi: Irak/ Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* was released in Turkey in January 2006. Riding the waves of Turkish nationalism and capitalizing on widespread frustrations over Turkey's geopolitical situation, the film became one of the most-watched local films ever. Soon afterwards, the film was released in European theatres. Although targeted at viewers of Turkish origin, the film

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caught the attention of others too. This marked the beginning of a polemic reception and a wide public and political denouncement of the film's anti-American and anti-Semitic character. This article first looks into the political and cultural background of *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq*, then summarizes its main storylines. Then, based on a close reading of a wide variety of press statements, newspapers and articles, we discuss the Turkish and European reception of the film.¹ This way, we intend to put the cultural phenomenon of *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* into a more comprehensive perspective. We argue that this is necessary to understand the wider controversy surrounding the *Valley of the Wolves* media franchise, which continues to trigger public debate, as yet another film, addressing the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (*Kurtlar Vadisi: Filistin/Valley of the Wolves: Palestine*) was released earlier this year.

Cultural and political context

On 1 March 2003, the Turkish parliament rejected a resolution authorizing the Bush administration to use Turkish territory as a base for its planned invasion of Iraq. Denying American forces the ability to open a northern front from Turkey complicated 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' (which started on 20 March) and heralded the beginning of a crisis period in American–Turkish relations. Some months later, on 4 July 2003, an incident took place in the northern, Kurdish region of Iraq, now (since the 2005 ratification of the new Iraqi constitution) the federal entity of Iraqi Kurdistan. In that region, soldiers from the US Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade arrested plain-clothes members of the Turkish Special Forces. Pictures of the arrested men, their hands cuffed and heads hooded, were taken and published. This incident, the so-called 'Hood Event', became an important national affair in Turkey. The Hood Event was seen as an 'insult' (Yavuz 2006: 215–23) to the Turkish Army and the Turkish nation, and an American act of 'revenge' for Turkey's unwillingness to support the invasion of Iraq (Özkök 2003; Yılmaz 2003). Turkish political, diplomatic and military officials never received the American 'apologies' they held themselves entitled to (Özdağ 2003). They also found little support in



A German DVD copy of *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* uses the famous phrase 'The first casualty of War is Truth' for a tagline. The large red sticker 'not under 18' clearly uses the controversy surrounding the film's theatrical release as a commercial asset.

the international community, which remained silent altogether. This indicates that the event was only considered a minor incident by third parties, some of which probably questioned the legitimacy of Turkish Special Forces in that region. A joint American–Turkish commission was set up to investigate the arrests but the results of that investigation were never made public (Yetkin 2007). The Hood Event was not the first crisis in the history of American–Turkish relations, but it is to date registered in the Turkish national memory as the most 'humiliating' event between the two NATO allies (Şanlı 2006).

The Pana Film production *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq*, the content of which is discussed in more detail below, starts with a dramatized re-enactment of the Hood Event. In the film, one of the



arrested Turkish officers commits suicide out of shame, but leaves behind a farewell letter, urging Turkish intelligence agent Polat Alem-dar (Necati Şaşmaz) to avenge the Hood Event. Turkish audiences were familiar with the Polat character from a 97-episode Turkish mafia series, also entitled *Kurtlar Vadisi* ('Valley of the Wolves'), which had gained phenomenal popularity in Turkey. In the first series of the television show, Polat infiltrated the fictive Council of the Wolves, a powerful Turkish mafia organization controlled and directed by the United States and Israel. The series concluded with Polat meeting the American mafia leader (Andy Garcia) and his wife (Sharon Stone) and bringing the Council of the Wolves to an end. The television series was one of the most watched and debated series ever in Turkey. Its popularity can be explained in part by (1) its concrete references to and depictions of political and social issues in Turkey, including the issues of 'the deep state' (an undisclosed conspiring group of high-placed leaders that are believed to rule the country undemocratically) and state-mafia

relations; and (2) its response to anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiments. In fact, the series was so popular that, when one of its main characters, Çakır (Oktay Kaynarca), a 'good' mafia man fighting on the side of the weak, died, obituaries were published in newspapers and religious ceremonies were held in some towns. The series was, however, also criticized for promoting over-nationalism, violence and a mafia lifestyle among the youth (Altaylı 2006; Ateş 2006; Bora 2007). The series began in January 2003 on Show TV, one of the major Turkish TV channels. The fourth and last season concluded in December 2005 on Channel D, owned by Turkey's largest media conglomerate, the Doğan Group, which was also one of the major sources of financial support behind the film.

Raci Şaşmaz and Bahadır Özdenler, who had also written the screenplay of the TV series, began working on the screenplay of *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* months before the conclusion of the TV series. News about the film appeared in the Turkish press early in September 2005 and a trailer of the film was already on air before the conclusion of the TV series. The film became a news event especially owing to the rumour that several Hollywood actors, such as Sean Penn, Tim Robbins and Harvey Keitel had read the screenplay and seriously considered (or even agreed) to play in it (Akbaş 2005). Later, Özdenler claimed that a dozen of international stars, including Al Pacino, Robert De Niro and Jean Paul Belmondo had been contacted, but were unavailable because of conflicting agendas (Milliyet 2005). The most expensive Turkish production to date, with a cost of \$10 million, the film was shown to the press on 7 October 2005, nearly four months before its official premiere. This allowed for rumours and commotion to circulate way in advance of the public release.

Filming controversy: main storylines and references

The film starts with the above-mentioned reconstruction of the Hood Event, which is followed by the suicide of an ashamed 'victim'. Honouring that man's last wish, Polat Alem-dar, accompanied by two assistants, travels to northern Iraq, determined to get his hands on Sam Marshal (Billy Zane), the American

responsible for the Hood Event. Polat does not intend to kill Marshal, he just wants to humiliate him (back) by having him hooded and photographed by the press. Thus it could be argued that the film attempted to do what Turkish officials could not: to avenge the Hood Event and to restore the damaged Turkish national pride. However, the film's ideological function extends far beyond this simple 'utopic function'.² Indeed, the Hood Event serves only as a pretext for a more complicated narrative, which produces a set of statements on a range of issues from the American presence and policy in northern Iraq to alleged US war atrocities, the Kurdish question, Islam and terrorism.

Marshal, coordinating American operations in northern Iraq without being a proper military officer (a likely reference to American private military companies operating in Iraq, such as Blackwater USA), refuses to comply with Polat's demands. This 'forces' Polat to go after Marshal and to punish him and his helpers even harder. Punishment is due, indeed, for Polat is soon confronted with a number of atrocities that Marshal and the Americans under his command, eagerly helped by unreliable Kurdish Iraqis, commit against Arab Iraqis. The film eventually ends with a shootout, in which Marshal is shot.

In between the reconstruction of the Hood Event and the execution of Sam Marshal, the storyline meanders in different directions, bringing various characters and incidents into the story. Stylistically, the film is heavily influenced by American action films, although the result – in spite of the film's considerable budget – has no visual grandeur and is never really impressive. Nevertheless, the film itself is very anti-American, or at least highly critical of American activities in Iraq. To some extent reproducing Hollywood's often simplistic cultural characterizations of Arab people (Shaheen 2001), the script is incredibly crude and culturally biased. In one scene Marshal, who is portrayed as a convinced Christian (on some sort of crusade), assists his Jewish doctor-friend (Gary Busey) in harvesting organs of Iraqi prisoners, to ship them to the United States and to Israel. The crude characterization of Americans, Israelis and (Iraqi) Kurds stands in glaring contrast to more nuanced Turkish and Iraqi characters. For instance, one storyline features an Iraqi sheik,



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who repeatedly states that ‘true’ Islam does not allow or justify acts of revenge such as suicide bombings or the beheading of an American journalist. The latter may be a reference to the beheading of American journalist Daniel Pearl, in Pakistan in February 2002. Indeed, besides the Hood Event, references to other well-known incidents are repeatedly woven into the story. Scenes taking place in the prison of Abu Ghraib reconstruct the infamous pictures of naked prisoners forced to pile on top of each other, threatened by a lookalike of reservist Lynndie England. Furthermore, the film’s American raid of an Iraqi wedding party brings to mind the 2004 Mukaradeeb wedding massacre, where 42 civilians reportedly died during American attacks.³ These central scenes highlight the film’s complex claim to the proper course of events and the references to actual and alleged incidents have only reinforced controversy.

Releasing the wolf: reception in Turkey

On 31 January 2006, *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* opened with a spectacular premiere in Istanbul, where guests were welcomed by men in American military uniforms carrying heavy machine guns. The entrance of the theatre was decorated with a portrait of Saddam Hussein and with American Hummer jeeps used in the film (*Sabah* 2006b; *Zaman* 2006f; *Milliyet* 2006c). Among the guests were numerous celebrities, including Emine Erdoğan, the wife of the prime minister and Bülent Arınç, the then president of the Turkish parliament. Emine Erdoğan reportedly liked the film very much and was ‘proud’ of the film-makers. Bülent Arınç described the film as ‘an extraordinary film that would go down in history’ and added that the scenario was very realistic (both quoted in *Sabah* 2006b: 4 February). The then Minister of State Kürşad Tüzmen, who also attended the premiere, compared the film to Hollywood productions and argued that it was ‘a source of pride’ for Turkish cinema. Asked about the film’s possible effects on US–Turkish relations, Tüzmen stated that the film was ‘a work of art’ and that ‘it should not be approached politically’ (quoted in *Sabah* 2006a). Although he did not attend the premiere, Vice Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah Gül, currently president of the republic,

would state a few days later that the film would not affect US–Turkish relations because there had been many European and American films of the same kind and the film ‘meant nothing in comparison to certain Hollywood films’ (*Zaman* 2006d; *Milliyet* 2006c). It was also reported, but not confirmed, that the prime minister himself had seen and enjoyed the film in a private screening (*Vatan* 2006a).

Distributed in Turkey by KenDa Film, *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* opened nationally on 3 February 2006 on 479 screens. Advance tickets had already been sold weeks before and long queues were formed in front of the theatres. Despite several prohibition demands by the children’s welfare services, the film continued to be screened without an age limit and even broke all Turkish box-office records: 1.1 million admissions at the end of the first three days and 4.5 million admissions in total (*Zaman* 2006e). Still, *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* was not liked by everyone. Several Turkish film critics were dissatisfied with the ‘poor scenario’, ‘poor characterization’ and ‘poor narrative structure’ (Tuba Akyol 2006; Gülseven 2006; Hazar 2006; Taşçıyan 2006). Moreover, the film was criticized for being built upon crude dichotomies between ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’ (i.e. ‘good Turks and Arabs’ vs. ‘bad Americans and bad Kurds’, ‘bad Christian fundamentalism’ vs. ‘good Islamic tolerance’) (Atik 2006; Taşçıyan 2006). The film was also described as an ‘exploitation film’ that attempted to benefit from the popularity of the TV series (Vardan 2006) or as an ‘*alaturka*’ Hollywood imitation (Taşçıyan 2006). However, the film was appreciated by some journalists, especially by those from the Islamist press, who thought it was ‘as good as Hollywood films’ in terms of the action scenes (Dumanlı 2006; Emir 2006; Ünal 2006). Affirmative or negative, many people compared Polat to Rambo. For example, Can Dündar (2006), a well-known Turkish journalist, columnist and documentarian, argued that Polat was using ‘the tricks he had learned from Rambo and Hollywood’ against the United States. In other words, he was ‘shooting America with its own guns’. The idea of the film battling its enemy with a powerful western tool was echoed in a more recent analysis of the film by Lerna Yanık (2009) as well. The popularity of the film with the Turkish public was seen as an outcome of the high popularity of the TV

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series it was based on as well as of the rising anti-Americanism in Turkey due to the American invasion of Iraq and its media coverage (Vardan 2006; Yalsızuçanlar 2006).

Besides, many public figures and politicians, from old ambassadors to sociologists, communication scholars to opinion columnists and critics agreed that the film provided a feeling of revenge in response to the Hood Event (Erdoğan 2006; Sağlam 2006). The film was framed as an attempt to avenge the Hood Event and restore the damaged Turkish national pride in many opinion pieces too (Emir 2006; Mengi 2006; Gülseven 2006; Semercioğlu 2006; Altaylı 2006; Atik 2006; Dünder 2006 and İdiz 2006 among others). Some writers reacted to this aim negatively by describing it as a 'fantasy' providing feelings of a 'fake victory' and 'temporary satisfaction' to Turkey who 'lacks the courage and power to face the USA' in real life (Atik 2006); as 'opium' for relieving Turkey's feeling of 'oppression' and 'defeat' by the United States (Dünder 2006). This echoed concerns that had been expressed even before the film came out. In early January 2006, Fahrettin Telliöğlü, an Islamist known for his 2005 'freedom to turban' march and his protests against the American invasion of Iraq, had already asked for the prohibition of the film on the grounds that it had the purpose of breaking down Turkish people's 'hatred' against the United States by seeming to avenge the Hood Event (Zaman 2006g). Consequently, although this may come as a surprise, the strongest condemnations of the film came from some nationalist circles who read the film through the lens of some conspiracy theories, as appears from Çetinkaya's essay (2006) on the nationalist complaints about the TV series and the film. *Yeniçağ*, a nationalist newspaper, argued that the film was meant to restrain the rising anti-Americanism in Turkish society by satisfying people's anti-American feelings and by providing a 'fake' sense of revenge. Thus, the newspaper claimed, the film was part of a 'psychological operation' led jointly by the United States and the Doğan Group, which was aimed at decreasing anti-Americanism in Turkey before an (expected) American operation against Iran (Yeniçağ 2006). Another nationalist newspaper, *Ortadoğu*, also suggested that the United States might have been involved in the film's making. *Ortadoğu*'s columnist, Yalçın Güzelhan

(2006), claimed that the film's main function was neither to avenge the Hood Event nor to restrain anti-Americanism in Turkey. Instead, he argued, the film was to help the American occupation forces by spreading the idea that suicide bombers committed an unacceptable sin. This referred to the sheik character, who argues against suicide bombings and against the decapitation of American hostages on moral and religious grounds. Güzelhan was also the only columnist to offer a symptomatic reading of the representation of Islam in the film. Several columnists and opinion writers, especially those from the Islamist newspaper *Zaman*, praised the film's representation of Islam, especially the sheikh character (Ghassan Massoud) by arguing that he represented 'the true face of Islam'. It was also pointed out that the film showed 'the true, peaceful face of *tarikats* (Sufi orders)', which have been 'demonized' in Turkey since the establishment of the republic in the 1920s (Dumanlı 2006; Kamış 2006; Ünal 2006). However, the responses to the sheikh character and the power attributed to him were not that positive in some Leftist and liberal newspapers; some were also irritated with the 'abundance' of religious images.

All in all, the film was mostly read as a 'nationalist' or 'chauvinist' work exploiting the rising anti-American feelings in Turkish society (Aslan 2006; Aytekin 2006). Indeed, the anti-American discourse of the film became a major debate in the Turkish press. İsmet Berkan (2006), a columnist and the editor-in-chief of the liberal newspaper *Radikal* compared *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* to a World War II film where Nazi soldiers and the oppressed Jews were replaced with American soldiers and Iraqi Arabs and Turkmen respectively. Berkan also contended that the film did not simply fuel American enmity; it also told us 'why we must hate America'. Remarking that *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* fitted the anti-American feelings in Turkish society, Can Dünder (2006) from *Milliyet*, another liberal newspaper, claimed that the film, most importantly, heralded the Turkish Right's break from the United States. He argued that the Polat character represented the Rightist figures and organizations in Turkey who had been supported by the United States within the framework of its anti-communist struggle. There was also the claim that the anti-Americanism in the

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film was not without grounds. It was argued that the film was based on realities that everybody had been able to follow from the media (i.e. the torturing of Iraqi prisoners, bombing of mosques, the murdering of Iraqi civilians) (Emir 2006; Babaoğlu 2006; Tuba Akyol 2006; Doğan 2006; Korkmaz 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). This especially became a topic in the Islamist newspaper *Zaman*. For example, Sadık Yalsızuçanlar (2006) argued that even if the events in the film might not be real, the events in northern Iraq since the 2006 American invasion were so 'cruel' that 'dozens of *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* would not be able to tell' of them. In this respect, the United States was invited to 'look in the mirror' rather than blaming the film (Korkmaz 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). Although different opinion writers admitted that the film involved a harsh critique of the United States, they rejected the idea that it would offend the United States or increase anti-Americanism in the world. Their main supportive argument was that such criticisms were already being made by American film-makers (e.g. Michael Moore) or Hollywood itself (Hazar 2006; Dumanlı 2006; Ünal 2006, Korkmaz 2006d).

The Leftist newspaper *Evrensel* framed the film not only as being anti-American but also as being anti-Kurdish. Pointing at the depiction of Kurds as collaborators with the United States, some opinion writers argued that the film was inciting anti-Kurdish feelings (Polat 2006; Sarpdere 2006; Aytekin 2006). *Evrensel* also quoted people from Diyarbakır, a south-eastern city with a large Kurdish population, being happy with the anti-Americanism but angry about the depiction of Kurds as 'collaborators and servants to the USA' and as being 'responsible for the cruelty in Iraq' (*Evrensel* 2006b). However, this issue was not debated in other newspapers. The anti-Israel and anti-Semitic statements were in general hardly referred to in the Turkish media, which tended to focus on the anti-Americanism of the film. This clearly indicates that the film was received in a highly politicized climate framed by a geopolitical context. The geopolitical representations reversed by *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq*, Yanık (2009) argues, reprocess popular discourses on political issues.

The gigantic success that *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* enjoyed in Turkey was also noticed abroad, for instance in the United States. A report submitted to the US Ministry of Foreign Affairs by

its Turkish embassy suggested anxiety about the 'very strong anti-Americanism' in the film as well as about the supportive and praising attitude of Turkish officials (*Milliyet* 2006a). Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was even questioned about the success of this film in the American Congress (Yanık 2009). The American Jewish Committee (AJC) also expressed its concerns (*Radikal* 2006). However, since the film was not shown in American theatres – except for low-profile screenings of a censored version at some local festivals (Anon. 2006) – the controversy died quickly. In European countries where the film was commercially released, however, the production caught much more attention.

Afraid of the wolves? Distribution and reception in Europe

Several European countries count among their populations considerable Turkish communities that keep in touch with developments in Turkey, through various channels: personal relations, satellite television, the Internet, etc. In several of these countries, this has created a small market for Turkish films. An important role in that process is played by the film distribution company Maxximum, which since 2001 has distributed more than 30 Turkish films in several European countries. Maxximum, which secured the European distribution rights to *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* is located in Germany, home to the world's largest migrant Turkish community. It was therefore only logical that the festive European premiere, in the presence of lead actor Necati Şaşmaz, was organized in Germany. On 8 February 2006, nearly 3000 people attended the premiere evening at the huge Cinedom theatre in Cologne, where 10 of the 14 screens had been reserved for the occasion (*Milliyet* 2006d). The film was enthusiastically received by most attendees, but some, interviewed by a German journalist of Turkish origin, were also critical of its nationalist messages (Ulusoy 2006). The day after the premiere, the film officially opened in Germany (65 theatres) and in the Netherlands (12 theatres). At the end of that first day, the film had obtained 30,000 admissions in Germany and another 6200 in the Netherlands. In the next

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week, Maxximum also had the film released in Austria (10 February), Belgium, Switzerland, Denmark and Great Britain (all 16 February) (*Vatan* 2006b). The film was also distributed in France (1 March) by TooCool. With the European screenings, the film's total admissions rose to €4.7 million, placing it at fifth place in the 2006 European film chart.

Turkish films programmed in local theatres are usually not reviewed or mentioned by the local press. With *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq*, things were different. The film immediately caught the attention of journalists, but also of politicians. Again, Germany played a central role. The leader of the conservative Christian Social Union (CSU) and premier of Bavaria, Edmund Stoiber, called upon movie-theatre operators to cancel screenings of the film in Germany on the grounds that it was 'anti-western' and a 'hate film' (Çiğdem Akyol 2006) encouraging the clash of civilizations rather than integration, especially the integration of Turkish immigrants into German society. In an interview with the influential tabloid *Bild am Sonntag*, Stoiber contended: 'This irresponsible film does not encourage integration but sows hate and mistrust against the West. I urge the cinema owners in Germany to pull this racist and anti-western hate film immediately' (*Deutsche Welle* 2006). Stoiber added that Turkey, as a European Union candidate, 'should take a clear stand' on the film. Similarly, Markus Söder, the secretary-general of the CSU, said: 'This film is not acceptable in any way. We must call on Turkish political leaders to distance themselves from it. If this doesn't happen, it will mean that the film is being well received by them. And such people cannot be accepted into the European Union' (*Agence France Presse* 2006).

The possible accession of Turkey into the European Union has led to fierce debates in recent European politics for a number of cultural, economic and religious motives. Later, Stoiber expressed that he was against the Turkish entry to the European Union. Pointing to *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq*, he argued: 'If this is the reality in Turkey, Turkey is not suitable for the EU just for this reason' (*Evrensel* 2006a). Among other reactions to the film, Heribert Rech, the minister of interior affairs of the Baden-Württemberg state, claimed: 'This film incites hostility against the USA and the Jews, distances cultures from each other, and, before everything

else, radicalizes the Turkish youth' (*Evrensel* 2006c), whereas Green Party leader Reinhard Bütikofer called upon theatres to stop showing the film (*Spiegel Online* 2006). Another call on theatres not to screen the film was made by the German Central Council of Jews. The vice-president of the council, Charlotte Knobloch, told the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* that the film 'stoked anti-Semitic sentiment' (*Deutsche Welle* 2006). As a result of the heated controversy and pressure from conservative politicians and the Jewish community in Germany, on 23 February the Cinemaxx group, the country's largest movie-theatre chain, removed *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* from exhibition. Cinemaxx spokesman Arne Schmidt explained that 'the controversy surrounding this film has really heated up. We didn't want to add oil to the fire so we decided to pull the film' (Roxborough 2006a).

Stoiber's attempt to get the film banned garnered criticisms in Germany and Europe as well as Turkey. Faruk Şen, the head of the German-based Centre for Turkish Studies (TAM), told *Turkish Daily News*:

I have difficulty in understanding reactions in Germany to *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq*. Many American Rambo films have been shown in Germany. They were much worse and bloodier than the Turkish movie, but they were never discussed that much [...] It is a shame to start to debate whether the country that produced the movie can join the EU. This contradicts freedom of expression, freedom of the press and the German constitution because moviegoers will decide whether a movie is good or bad. The state should not intervene. (*Turkish Daily News* 2006).

That Stoiber's demand came in the aftermath of the controversy caused by the Prophet Muhammad caricatures published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* (later reprinted elsewhere as well) for the sake of freedom of expression, created further debate. Anıl Şahin, the head of Maxximum, told the *Rheinische Post*: 'When a cartoonist insults two billion Muslims it is considered freedom of opinion, but when an action film takes on the Americans it is considered demagoguery. Something is wrong' (*Daily Telegraph* 2006b). This statement was repeated and defended during an interview we conducted

with the manager of Maxximum (Istanbul, 10 September 2009). Sabahat Emir (2006) from the liberal *Sabah* newspaper criticized the prohibitive attitude of Germany adding that it was 'exemplary of the western hypocrisy which defends the freedom of expression when it suits its own interests'. Similarly, while Claudia Roth, the chairwoman of the German Green Party, criticized the film for using 'racist, anti-Semitic, anti-American prejudices', and the Turkish government for 'explicitly encouraging' people to watch the film, she described German conservative politicians' attempt to have the film banned as a 'double standard' because they had defended freedom of opinion against the reactions of the Muslim world during the 'caricature controversy' (Milliyet 2006g). The film was also discussed in the European Parliament. A German deputy, Silvana Koch-Mehrin, argued that 'those people who want a ban on the film just like Stoiber are acting like regimes in Arab countries that attack freedom of expression' (Turkish Daily News 2006).

Different German media, in their turn, reported in threatening manners about the Turkish film. Several German opinion makers analysed the film's controversy as a result of 'clashing cultures' (Die Tageszeitung 2006a) or a 'strife of cultures' (Butterwegge 2007), referring to Samuel Huntington's illustrious *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996). Correspondingly, others saw in the film a threatening pan-Islamic 'Muslimisches Wir' (Die Tageszeitung 2006c), a Muslim 'us', and an 'us against them' (Die Zeit 2006a) as opposed to the western culture shock experienced when confronted with it (Die Tageszeitung 2006b). Yet others focused on the political menaces that *Valley of the Wolves* disclosed; the film's nationalist stances are linked to a nostalgic turn towards the grandeur of the Ottoman past (Die Zeit 2006b) or the longing for a greater Turkish empire (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 2006). This latter idea has been echoed in recent research on Turkish cinema as being one of the new trends in modern Turkish film production (Arslan 2009; Suner 2010).

Originally the Voluntary Self-Regulation Committee of the German Movie Industry (FSK) rated *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* 'not under 18'. Maxximum Film appealed against this decision which resulted in a 'not under 16' rating (Evensel 2006c). However, Armin Laschet,

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the minister of integration in North-Rhine Westphalia, who criticized the film for 'inciting hatred and discriminating between religions', demanded an age restriction for the film on the grounds that it 'gave the impression that Christians and Jews launched a crusade against Muslims' and that this might affect the youth negatively (Evensel 2006c; Zaman 2006b). The application of Laschet to the FSK resulted in another 'not under 18' rating, valid from 13 March 2006 (Zaman 2006a). The decision was welcomed by German media minister Eberhard Sinner who considered it an 'important ruling

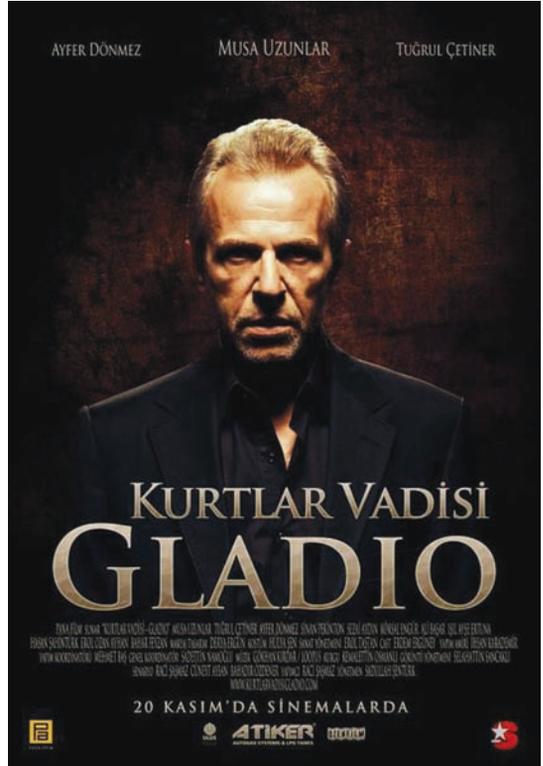
'We spent our entire life watching films in which Middle Asian people are treated as potential criminals. Islam is always equated with terrorism. Why are you obsessed only with the issue of Jews and Tel Aviv? There are good and bad persons in every society.'



in favour of peaceful coexistence between cultures in Germany' (Roxborough 2006b).

The controversy in Germany became so significant that the film-makers and Maximum organized a press conference with film-makers Raci Şaşmaz and Bahadır Özdener. The meeting was aired live on several TV channels. Şaşmaz and Özdener claimed that they were neither anti-American nor anti-Semitic and that they were not discriminating among races. They stressed that what should be discussed was the 'brutality' in Iraq and the situation of the 'innocent people victimized by the occupation forces'. Referring to the accusations of anti-Semitism, Şaşmaz answered: 'We spent our entire life watching films in which Middle Asian people are treated as potential criminals. Islam is always equated with terrorism. Why are you obsessed only with the issue of Jews and Tel Aviv? There are good and bad persons in every society' (Milliyet 2006f).

Compared to Germany, the British, French and Belgian releases of the film were far less controversial in political and journalistic circles. In Britain, for instance, the press primarily focused on the film's problematic reception in Germany, as part of international (cultural) news (Sunday Telegraph 2006). Similarly, *The Times* (2006) discussed the film in the context of Turkey's international relations. In Belgium, a short polemic started in a newspaper, but quickly evaporated (Vande Winkel and Van Bauwel 2006). There, the caricaturist nature of the film was weighed against the ignorance concerning the far more common anti-Arabism in western cinema. In France, the film was described as 'anti-American' and 'over-nationalistic' in *Le Monde* and in *Le Figaro* (Milliyet 2006e, 2006h). The distributor TooCool Production encountered several problems during the film's French release. Ali İnan, the head of the company, explained that they had prepared 80 copies for 60 cities in France but met the resistance of the movie-theatre chains 'partially due to the controversy that the film caused in Germany'. This situation was interpreted by the Turkish press as 'hidden' or 'sly censorship' (Zaman 2006c; Ortadoğu 2006). After special permission was granted at the beginning of March, the film was released on 12 screens in 7 cities in France with a 'not under 16' rating (Basutçu 2006). Contrary to the



interpretations in the Turkish press, Claude Rainaudi (2006) complained in an online opinion article that the film was only a minor topic in the public debate, (deliberately) ignored by most media.

The European press reactions that we have collected and discussed were characterized by two main contrasting discourses; one of panic and amazement about the film's content and political stances on the one hand, and a discourse that was relativistic towards these matters on the other hand. The majority of the articles dealing with *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* announced the film and reported on its release in an alarming way. In a few exemplary reports from European mainstream media the film was criticized for its inclination to intensify the disparities between the Middle East and the West. Quoting Turks who had seen the film, the *Daily Telegraph* (2006a) commented that the film 'looks likely to deepen the growing anti-American sentiment'. *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* was attacked as anti-American and anti-Semitic and it was argued that the messages of the film were legitimized by the positive attitude

of the Turkish authorities during the premiere. Moreover, it was pointed out that the film was not an 'underground production' or 'just another action film' but the most expensive Turkish film ever made. The film was taken as a sign of the declining popular opinion of the United States. It could be argued that *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* not only became a news event in the western press but also caused some kind of panic: newspapers referred to audiences cheering the film in the movie theatres and shouting 'Allah-u-Akbar (Allah is the greatest)' (*Daily Telegraph* 2006a; *Sunday Telegraph* 2006) and they quoted Turkish audiences of the film, which suggested that the film's anti-American message was indeed very effective on them. In a similar vein, the Dutch journal *Trouw* (2006) headed that Turkish youngsters wanted to resemble the anti-American hero of *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq*, alluding to the instant anti-American and radicalizing effect of the film. Correspondingly, another Dutch newspaper (*NRC Handelsblad* 2006) headlined spectacularly, but upsettingly, 'German Turks cheer at every American soldier killed in the film hit *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq*'.

Yet, a parallel discourse characterized the European media as well. A less polemic and less alarming manner of reporting on the film was found in essays and reviews that put the film's release into a broader perspective. In France, Mireille Beaulieu (2006) tempered the controversy over *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* by stating that the western criticism was based on a 'first reading' (i.e. a short-sighted interpretation) of the film. From the perspective of the Turks, she continued this stance; the film might just as well be about justice. In Belgium, the previously mentioned essays by Vande Winkel and Van Bauwel (2006, 2007) were a counter-voice against the panic discourse, just as the well-known politician of Turkish descent, Selahattin Koçak (2006), soothed the situation by stating that 'it is just a film', which moreover should not be put at the same level as the classical Turkish films. As it appears, some of the more relativistic writings on *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* came from countries in which the film caused less political controversy. Looking at the overall European press coverage and political reactions following the film's release, the instant discourse was one of concern over the anti-western content and the possible implications



on the Turkish people in Turkey and Europe. The few voices that put this into perspective emphasized the innocence and freedom of entertainment products and called for an equal treatment of western and non-western films as both are often guilty of one-sided and preoccupied cultural representations.

When wolves wander: Turkey's controversial media franchise

In Turkish film studies, the *Valley of the Wolves* phenomenon has been discussed in terms of its exemplarity regarding the stylistic and industrial changes in new Turkish cinema (Arslan 2009: 85). Also regarding content, *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* and the linked products are characteristic of a range of popular film productions that deal with terror, the 'deep state' theme and the link between politics and all types of mafia. As journalist Emrah Güler (2010) describes it, 'Turkish cinema has found the holy grail of box-office success: exploiting nationalist sensitivities'. True to this trend, several more films similar to *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* will be produced in the years to come.



Valley of the Wolves has grown into one of the most successful franchises in the history of Middle Eastern media.

Ever since the popular television series was made into a film, *Valley of the Wolves* has grown into one of the most successful franchises in the history of Middle Eastern media. In 2007, a new season of the series began under the title *Kurtlar Vadisi: Terör/Valley of the Wolves: Terror*. The new series would focus on the phenomenon of terror in Turkey and depict Kurdish separatist violence, namely the terrorist activities of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey, and their background. However, the series was banned by the Radio Television High Council (RTUK) after the first episode on the grounds that it could incite sectarian violence. A new and 'softer' version of the series, *Kurtlar Vadisi: Pusu/Valley of the Wolves: Ambush*, which deals with some major unresolved assassinations in Turkey, has been on air on Show TV since April 2007. The series continues to break rating records. Furthermore, a computer game and two more films have been based on the TV series. The film *Kurtlar Vadisi: Gladio*

Valley of the Wolves: Gladio (Sadullah Şentürk, 2009) deals with a former intelligence agent taking on the secret organization Gladio, which is partially based on the secret anti-communist



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network in post-World War II Europe sponsored by NATO and the CIA. The film is in particular inspired by renewed investigations into the Ergenekon issue in Turkey (Güler 2010). Just as its predecessor, the film was released in several European countries (on 18 November 2009 in Belgium and on 19 November in the Netherlands and Germany). Although its box-office success was less outspoken in comparison with its 2006 forerunner, *Valley of the Wolves: Gladio* is counted among one of the most successful Turkish films in recent years.

Early this year, after the writing of this article, came the long-time anticipated *Kurtlar Vadisi: Filistin/Valley of the Wolves: Palestine* (Zübeyr Şaşmaz, 2011). Months before its release, the film was already controversial because it is set amidst the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Gaza Strip (Hürriyet 2010). Earlier, the content of the *Valley of the Wolves* television series already caused tensions between Israel and Turkey (Flower and Medding 2010), but this time the film was said to dig into controversial political issues even deeper. Thus, reviewers and politicians prepared for another heated discussion. In the sphere of the recent crisis in Turkish-Israeli relations following the 31 May 2010 Gaza flotilla raid, a commercial entertainment product such as *Valley of the Wolves: Palestine* seems to position itself right in the middle of geopolitical debates. We have presented the different discourses and the range of press and political receptions of its predecessor *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq*. In Turkey as well as in Europe, particularly in Germany, the film and its geopolitical claims created a controversy previously unseen in Turkish and Middle Eastern cinema. As new creations in the *Valley of the Wolves* franchise are announced, it is essential to be aware of the different discursive positions as well as the geopolitical processes behind them. By exploring these positions in the Turkish and European press, we hope to contribute to a serene discussion of the latest as well as future products in Turkey's controversial media franchise.

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Endnotes

1 For articles published in Turkey, all translations are by the authors.

2 For a discussion of the ideological and topic functions of mass media texts, see Jameson (1979).

3 The incident is, however, denied by the US military, see McCarthy (2004).