

## **'Valley of the Wolves': Nationalism, Conflict and The Other in a Turkish Film**

By: Kameel Ahmady

This paper looks at the film *Valley of the Wolves*, a project allegedly funded by the Turkish government and the state army after the arrest of some Turkish intelligence services in Northern Iraq by the US army. On its release, the film has caused a lot of controversy not only within the Middle East countries which it portrays, but also in communities as far a field as London. The film is also abounding in an underlying symbolism and cultural meanings which allow us to examine the role of cinema in shaping identity and the way consumption of popular culture plays a role in this. Many believe the film was trying to restore honour and pride for Turkey, and is based on true story where a small group of Turkish intelligence army going to Iraq in order take their revenge against American and Kurdish authorities they saw as degrading them. Therefore, this paper also explores how cinema can become a language of politics which can be used to draw support within the general population and as an external pressure in international relations between countries. In the light of recent political developments in Middle East, and the role of mass media, with the world public taking an interest within this, such cultural and political elements are extremely important within even popular cinema. As the region is now reported with almost daily information about war, insurgency and constant clashes between east and west over supposed religious and cultural values, the meaning and perceptions of nationalism in this new era of Middle East history will undoubtedly change alongside such new developments. I also want to demonstrate that Turkey is currently in a unique position with respect to its relations with the western powers and observations on its human rights record, thus making mass media and its popular consumption all the more relevant as a means of expressing nationalist sentiments.



The first scenes of *Valley of the Wolves Iraq*, the most expensive Turkish movie ever made, starts from a location described to be the Kurdistan town of Suleimanaie, where eleven undercover Turkish spies were arrested by US forces in 2003. On July 4 of that year in the Ashti district of Suleimanaie in Southern Kurdistan (Iraqi Kurdistan), American forces raided a compound of the pro-Ankara Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF) and arrested eleven Turkish undercover intelligence officers who were arming the ITF and plotting to assassinate the Kurdish mayor of Kirkuk. The eleven Turkish spies were hooded and handcuffed and transferred to the Abu Ghareb prison.

If we accept the allegations of involvement from the Turkish state and armed forces as promoting the production of propaganda in such films as *Valley of the Wolves*, the movie seems to be a reaction to the Suleimanaie event. The directors and producers of the Turkish movie seem to be expressing a widely held Turkish view about the difficulty in dealing with the fact that Americans do not want the presence of Turkish

intelligence officers in Kurdistan, taking into account that the Kurdistan regional government is officially in charge of the region. Themes of honour and its loss seem to be ever-present in the film. For example, one of the Turkish intelligence officers commits suicide to save his honour. His farewell letter reaches Polat Alemdar, an elite Turkish intelligence officer who travels to Kurdistan with a small group of men to retaliate for the “humiliation”.

The film has been understandably controversial, not least within Kurdish groups and media outlets and was banned in Canada on claims of its racist content. I was asked to write review about the film for a Kurdish language film magazine, and making my way to a north London cinema, a crowd of people opposite the cinema and the presence of some TV cameras attracted my attention.

As Anderson’s study of nationalism and mass media has shown, popular culture for a mass audience was effective as a nationalist strategy partly because it promoted mass consumption by audiences ‘and simultaneously mobilized them for politico-religious purposes’ (Anderson, 1999:40). In the same way, today’s audiences, consuming more technologised visual rather than print media, can take part in this without any direct feelings of it being a political experience. At the same time, my observations during screenings of this film in London among diverse audiences shows that it also sparks extreme views and strong sentiments not only at a nationalist level, but in terms of more personal, even emotional responses.

As Salih says:

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Movies, like advertising, are essentially social texts. Advertising does not just sell a product; it also promotes a style of living and a way of better living. Movies, likewise, do not just tell a story; they also play an important Role in shaping a national identity (Salih, <http://www.kurdistanobserver.com/>, accessed 3/03/06)

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Depending who the audience is and how films and cinema generally are viewed and consumed in that given society, it will become a tool that government and interest groups can use as one of their important means of propaganda. They can do so through a process of promotion and demotion, or what Robert Scholes calls in *The Protocols of Reading* “cultural reinforcement,” that is, reassuring the viewers that the values and beliefs they hold are superior to those held by others.

This form of reinforcing ethnocentric values is of course nothing new, but it is interesting to examine how film and visual representations can reinforce these ideologies in a way that state institutions never could, because film and popular culture are much more accessible to the common man. Despite this however, state interests may still be reflected in such popular manifestations.

As to the issue of the Kurdish involvement, this complicates matters even more, where the neighbouring countries to Iraq are concerned that the presence of some Kurds in the international spectrum may harm the stability of their relations with or management of Kurdish inhabitants in their lands, which itself has been far from calm. Now as Middle East has become an increasingly narrow focus of the foreign media, it seems the era of oppression by reliance on arms has been put on hold. I

believe that while violent conflicts do exist, some powers are using media instead as a way to silence dissent and support consensus around nationalist ideologies. It has been long since media been used and installed by governments, for example the Kurdish populations in Turkey, despite being nationals of that country, do not have the freedom of broadcasting in their mother tongue, since it is seen to violate the nationalist ideals of the Turkish state. Therefore, the involvement of the Kurds in Iraq within the incident that gave rise to *Valley of the Wolves* no doubt plays a part in its extreme approach to events.

With respect to international relations, Turkey's policy on Iraq has been changing constantly as to how to deal with the rapid political changes in areas of Iraq which are of special concern to Turkey to the extent that the country still does not have a set policy for example in relation with Kurds of Iraq in the north. Due to the shifting post war political and strategic balances in northern Iraq (Kurdistan), Ankara has reportedly decided to revise its policy on Iraq. Accordingly, instead of confining its policy mainly to Ankara's security concerns in northern Iraq, Turkey is to assume a wider perspective taking in a broader picture of the country's situation. Presumably, this will also include less official approaches to such things as popular attitudes and ideas within the general public, as well as generating media projects, films and television which can reflect the concerns of the Turkish state.

Moreover, Ankara is planning to relax its so-called 'red lines' regarding Kurdish parties in the region and adopt a more flexible position aimed at alleviating Iraqi Kurdish concerns that 'Turkey could intervene in northern Iraq at any moment'. However, Ankara has no intention of wavering from its steadfast opposition to any independent Kurdish state being formed in the region and has repeatedly accused the Kurdish regional government of ignoring the rights of minority Turkmen in oil rich Kirkuk. Iraq's constitution creates a fully self-governing Kurdistan and includes a procedure to resolve the status of Kirkuk. Turkey has tried to accept that it is the sovereign right of Iraq to organize itself as the peoples of Iraq choose. But as Turkish nationalism is alive and has a powerful impact inside the government and in particular in the army, we must recognize that Ankara has only a few alternatives. There is no military option. A Turkish intervention in northern Iraq would be much more difficult than its domestic 15-year war fought against the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), and would lead to international condemnation and possible sanctions. The timing would be poor, particularly since the accession talks with the EU are so keenly pursued by Ankara.

An intervention in Iraq would also endanger Turkey's chances of joining the European Union. Given such a situation, and the current Turkish policy on Iraq, Turkish media and cinema have been increasingly supported by the army and government in order to represent Turkish interests, and especially with respect to Iraq. With the eyes of the world now on Turkey's attitudes towards human rights, stability in the Middle East and its own minority populations, military force is an increasingly risky option, even with respect to control over its own Kurdish insurgency with the PKK. Thus it seems not far-fetched that they are redirecting their oppressive tactics, and especially extreme nationalist discourse, through such media as film, television and other forms of popular culture. My main argument is that the physical exertion of force in previous eras of Turkish state nationalism is being replaced by a more acceptable and sanitised propaganda war. This is in evidence through such films as *Valley of the*

*Wolves*, and in a general environment of proliferating media production, including three newly established satellite TV channels set up by Turkey in recent months to air programming in Turkish and English for Iraqi Turkmen in order to strengthen their political position and the leverage that they provide to the state in negotiating rights in Iraqi Kurdistan, namely Kirkuk.

As a means of transposing conflict into new expressions, cinema can perhaps at first glance seem to have transcended the interests of particularistic national rhetoric, bringing the issues visually represented to a broader audience. This situation can be deceptive, because even translational phenomena of visual culture and mass media are still, as Shryock (2000) rightly shows, based on the regulations, ideals and conditions of the nation-states from which they originate.

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As a site of cultural reproduction, the nation-state no longer seems big enough; its peculiar resources – industries, workforces, currencies, identities, ideologies – are constantly spilling across its boundaries. This is certainly true of “popular culture”, the vast network of information, narratives, and artistic performances conveyed by television, VCR, CD, cassette tape, film and print technologies (Shryock, 2000:33)

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He therefore reminds us that so-called ‘translational media’ hides many social, political and material realities based within nation-state systems, a reality which those who viewed the film from here in London and whom I interviewed for this paper seemed to understand perhaps better.

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At the north London cinema where the film was screened, a small but vocal group of Kurdish activists were distributing flyers to those who were queuing to see the movie and trying to persuade others not to pay to see the movie, as they claimed it will provide funds to the Turkish army “to kill innocent people in Kurdistan. Giving an interview to one of the assembled TV crews, a young protester expressed his harsh view as to how the film is Turkish government propaganda and is designed to destroy the image of the Kurds and in fact to insult them. A young man who was leading the protest told me that

there is no Turkish movie that doesn't portray and show the flag of Turkey and picture of Ata Turk, you can't see a movie that talks about or even illustrates any sign of existing other cultures besides Turkish, what this movie does is exactly this and more, it insults its Kurdish population as well as Iraqi Kurds, showing them like puppets of the foreign powers.

For movies, as for advertising, there is also the question of timing, or the historical moment: both tend to respond to key political or social developments in the life of a culture. Movies, thus, become a big player in the way today's humans think about themselves and their world and how we sometimes are encouraged to take a stand on issues or events on the basis of movies or documentaries we saw. On an individual level even, such cases may be expressed in terms of the way people will form their ideas about a particular issue or event, often references being made to a film as a way of explaining ideas.

For all these reasons, and also because movies can be quite good at packaging complicated events as simple stories, movies can play a major role in shaping and policing the national culture, especially when they operate with an easily identifiable ideological focus (Salih, <http://www.kurdistanobserver.com/>, accessed 3/03/06).

The aim of such movies is to turn a lie into a fact, or a stereotype into a piece of coveted wisdom, or racism into a love for one's homeland. To that end, the viewer is bombarded with images, close-ups, and narrative bits and ends at an alarming rate, movies of this kind also try to present sacred images of nationalist strength and how actions can be justified to preserve and protect national honour and pride. Certainly *Valley of the Wolves* fits such a description, with its focus not only on reclaiming the honour and national pride in Turkish security forces, but also in its many depictions of cultural 'others', including Americans, Kurds, Christians, and Jews, all of whom are vilified to the point of overtly racist representations.

Of course, much of this project of reclaiming lost pride and dignity of an imagined nation is about, as Anderson (1999) has shown, imagining certain aspects of the nation's or the people's history while forgetting others. In the case of Turkey since the republic founded by Kemal Ataturk, this has sometimes contributed to a tension between a desire to acknowledge and celebrate the history and identity of the Turks, and an equal wish, according to Kemalist doctrine, to align Turkish culture, if not history, with European influences. This is true not only at the level of state declarations and official discourse, but in the more prosaic aspects of daily life and popular consumption including film and forms of material culture. Stokes says that:

Turkish modernity has, since 1923, been framed by the state's nation-building project, which, like others, has struggled to reconcile national with global imperatives. The production of a distinctly national social and cultural reality, rational, secular, functional, gendered, and ethicized, has throughout been uneasily aware of its Other, rendered in Turkey in pathologized terms as Oriental, "Islamic", irrational, and transgressive (Stokes, 2000:225)

Of course a film like *Valley of the Wolves*, not to mention the enthusiasm it has generated within Turkish audiences both in Turkey and Europe, contradicts this rational and functional view wholeheartedly. By depicting cultural others, including Jews and Americans, with such gusto as vicious and blood-thirsty, the Turkish filmmakers are contributing to a nationalist project which is anything but rational, and indeed transgresses many boundaries of its own, as is evident from the controversy it has created not only for Kurdish audiences offended by its portrayals, but even within liberal Turkish circles. European Parliamentary MP Cem Ozdemir, a German Turk, gives a complex diatribe against the content of the film and the harmful effects it may well have on the Turkish state in a recent column for popular German weekly *Der Spiegel*. From his point of view:

The main theme of the movie is revenge (and maybe even the reason for the movie itself). The film follows a Turkish intelligence agent as he seeks to avenge the officers and restore their honour. This wouldn't be so bad if the film didn't portray the opponents of Turks and Muslims so brutally -- the bad guys in this black and white world are the Americans, the Kurds, the

Christians and the Jews. Giving a specific ethno-religious or national background to the antagonists in a movie is nothing new and allows filmmakers to pander to clichés and racist sentiment...but it doesn't make it easier for me to tolerate "Valley of the Wolves". (*Der Spiegel* 22 February, 2006 <http://service.spiegel.de/cache/international/0,1518,401565,00.html>, accessed 18/03/26)

Despite the high attendance rates that Ozdemir describes taking place in German cinemas where the film screened, a low turn-out in the hall gave plenty of choice for where to sit in the north London cinema where I viewed the film. This was in marked contrast to the display of protests and hype of the news cameras outside the cinema itself. This viewing proved to be an interesting exercise in participant observation in its own right. In front of me on the day I saw the film were a family who seemed to be Kurdish from Turkey. Throughout the screening they were constantly making remarks as to how the film is racist, and chose to ignore all aspects of Kurdish life and language by its portrayal of Kurdistan. They had clearly come to the film prepared to be annoyed. The Head of the family was frequently looking upset, making statements about the film being 'an insult', complaining that all locals in the film were wearing long, Arabic dress and the street signs and the images of the towns being either Arabic or Turkmen. The younger members of the family, on the other hand, were crying during a scene where a young Turkmen girl is knifed down by the US army general, and the main Turkish actor comforts her in her last moments by saying he will always stay in love with her.

At the end of the movie, its impact on the viewers evidently differed according to the positionality, as a small group of Turkish youth provocatively chanted 'long live Turkey' while another group of angry looking Kurdish men and women were clearly upset about the film. In an interview afterwards, they told me they found the film very politically motivated, and suggested it was designed to mislead the non Kurds/Turks outside the region by showing how the US army is treating Muslim Arabs in Iraq. One Kurdish woman said it is so easy for most people to believe the account of this movie if they don't know Turkish media, and how Turkish films are 'manipulative and nationalistic'. According to her, this film tried to take advantage of what is happening in Iraq, and manipulate the Arab and Muslims across the world. She said how strange it was from her point of view that the supposedly 'secular' Turkish cinema has become popular as a form of 'Muslim' cinema in order to attract Muslim viewers. Leaving the cinema this group were telling each other how wrong they felt about having 'paid to be insulted'. Three young English men and a woman were discussing the recent American Gulf War movie *Jarhead* while they were leaving the cinema, and said that while *Jarhead* and what they had just seen were both war movies, at the same time it was very interesting to see how each portrayed the war the way they want it to be. *Jarhead* was about the Gulf War and group of soldiers at war showing the human side of the people and their lives back home. 'But what we just saw was very political, trying to show everyone as the bad guys apart from defenceless Arabs and loyal Turkish soldiers'.

Shafik (1998) shows us how efforts have been made within Arab films to develop a cinematic tradition which is responsive to the imperatives of globalisation, but cautions that like Turkey as described by Stokes above, "...it has not always been successful in erasing binary antagonisms such as past and present, tradition and

modernity, East and West” (1998:210). Of course, the same can clearly be said of American (and probably all) cinema that portrays cross-cultural encounters, particularly in times of conflict, in an “us/them” format. Such expressions in the Turkish *Valley of the Wolves* were clearly designed to send such a message to viewers, portraying the Turks as heroic victims of the villainous Americans and Kurds, and the Arabs as their dehumanised victims.

At a time when the spotlight is on Turkey for its treatment of difference and human rights, films such as this send a clear message of intolerance, and as Mr. Ozdemir points out, can hardly promote the interests of the Turkish state in joining the EU and westernising. At the same time, such ‘unofficial’ methods of putting forth an extreme nationalist agenda can be more successful as they are easy for the mass audience to digest on the one hand, and cannot in fact be directly linked with the state, despite the rumours. In any case, the Turkish army has always been a somewhat renegade section of political process in Turkey, and cannot always be seen as aligned with Ankara’s official policies and statements. Whatever the situation, we must remember that the power of a film can precisely lie at times in its distance from official discourses, despite the propaganda elements it involves.

Makers of a film have no power, once it is released, over the act of viewing, and my own experience of the film even in one small cinema in north London proved the diversity of views which such an experience can generate. These different acts of viewing by different people, is no doubt influenced by their past experiences, so that they add their own stereotypes and prejudices (whether of race or politics) to those being presented by the film makers. In the post-modern world where people have connections to experience and memory that reach across borders, there are also many unpredictable factors shaping our cultural consumption of popular culture such as films.

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