Geopolitics of Film: Valley of the Wolves-Iraq and Its Reception in Turkey and Beyond

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This article investigates Valley of the Wolves—Iraq as a cinematic text produced and widely consumed in domestic and international cinema markets. By placing a non-Western movie in the analysis of film studies, the authors claim to situate the film in a three-part analysis that has received less attention from other disciplines. First, the film can be situated as a cinematic challenge to the American media representation of the Iraq War and to the Bush administration’s “war on terror” discourse in so-called unstable regions. In addition, Valley of the Wolves—Iraq attempts to negotiate and contest the meaning and the depiction of the war discourse in Iraq brought to bear by American popular, practical, and formal geopoliticians by reproducing the cinematic space and retelling stories of the war from the “other” vantage point. Second, the film in its own right can be located as a cultural product that attempts to consolidate the geopolitical imaginations of Turkey in the Middle East and the world. Third, this study aims to formalize audience interpretation of such political entertainment using empirical techniques. In this context, the critical question is how and to what extent this film plays a representational role within Turkish society and how it affects audiences’ geopolitical perceptions.

Key words: geopolitics of film, audience response, Turkey, Iraq War, Valley of the Wolves—Iraq

Introduction

In the years following the invasion of Iraq in 2003, discontent with U.S.-led coalition forces increased around the world, and particularly in the Middle East. Despite the support of the Turkish ruling AK Party (Adalet ve
Kalkinma Partisi, or Justice and Development Party) for a possible U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Turkish Grand National Assembly, whose majority is controlled by the AKP, surprisingly rejected a U.S. plan to use Turkish territory for military manoeuvres against Saddam Hussein’s forces in the spring of 2003. This unexpected rejection of the United States’ request was interpreted as evidence of the unpopularity of U.S. policies toward the Middle East and Third World countries, policies that are often considered unilateral and bullying (Smith 2009). On 4 July of the same year, an incident commonly known in Turkey as the “Hooding Event” occurred in northern Iraq, in which 11 members of the Turkish special forces were detained by American ground troops in a humiliating manner. This event was an affront to Turkey; it seriously damaged U.S.–Turkey relations and, predictably, increased Turkish anger toward the United States and its war in Iraq. According to the PEW Research Center’s 2003 public opinion survey, America’s negative image among Turkish people had already reached a historic high of 82%. In the same survey, when asked what was wrong with America’s foreign policy, 52% of Turkish respondents said that the problem was President George W. Bush. Not surprisingly, the proportion of people who supported the U.S. fight against terrorism was a mere 22% (Kohut 2003).

Following years of war, incidents such as uncontrolled civil violence and escalation of ethnic conflict among Iraqis fed negative attitudes toward the United States and its reconstruction efforts in Iraq. These feelings and incidents set the stage for the moment when the Pana Film team was inspired to transform war moments into a profitable “cinema-politics” and began making the controversial Turkish movie Valley of the Wolves—Iraq (Kurtlar Vadisi—Irak).

The development of the film was opportune, in the sense that its storyline of the film included certain images reflecting a prevailing discontent among Turkish audiences about the Iraq War and U.S. conduct of that war. In Valley of the Wolves—Iraq, Polat Alemdar, a former Turkish secret agent, assigns himself the devout duty to search, find, and punish those responsible for the “Hooding Event” and for the death of the Turkish lieutenant who committed suicide because he had failed to ensure the security and dignity of his 11 men. After his secret arrival in northern Iraq, Alemdar witnesses the American army personnel’s sadistic and individualized battles with Iraqi civilians and the groundlessness of American aggression in Iraq. From the moment he discovers the U.S. soldiers’ violations of the rules of engagement, his Rambo-esque moral obligations begin.

This paper investigates Valley of the Wolves—Iraq as a cinematic text produced and widely consumed in domestic and international cinema markets. With its large budget, unprecedented in the history of Turkish cinema, and its controversial subject matter, representational focus, and main characters, the film quickly captured the attention of millions. The explanation of the film’s success resides in its opposition to U.S. geopolitical imaginations in the Middle East, which created alternative geopolitics in the region and captured the attention of millions through the modern Turkish cinema. By placing a non-Western movie in the analysis of film studies, this paper aims to situate the film in a three-part analysis that has received less attention from other disciplines. First, the film can be situated as a cinematic challenge to the American media representation of the Iraq War and to the Bush administration’s “war on terror” discourse in so-called unstable regions (Dodds 2008); in addition, it attempts to negotiate and contest the meaning and depiction of the Iraq War discourse produced by American popular, practical, and formal geopoliticians by reproducing the cinematic space and retelling stories of the war from the vantage point of the “other.” Second, the film can be located as a cultural product in its own right that attempts to
consolidate the geopolitical imagination of Turkey in the Middle East and in the world (Dittmer 2010; Yanik 2009). As both Lerna Yanik and Jason Dittmer argue, *Valley of the Wolves—Iraq* is “anti-geopolitical” as well as geopolitical in its own contextual standing. Third, this paper aims to formalize audience interpretation of such political entertainment using empirical techniques; in this context, the critical question is how and to what extent this film plays a representational role within Turkish society, and how it affects audiences’ geopolitical perceptions. To accomplish this, we designed a survey comprising 27 close-ended questions, which were then posed to 309 participants. Respondents came from across the socio-economic spectrum in the five districts of Istanbul, Turkey. To enhance our survey’s representativeness, we chose survey sites reflecting the general characteristics of the population. We then focused on selecting a random sample of respondents that included the various social strata and geographic origins found in Istanbul’s population. The data collected shed light on the dynamics of geopolitical imagination among Turkish audiences.

**Geopolitics of Entertainment and Contextual Necessity in the Understanding of Audienceship**

Scholars of political geography and international relations have expanded their study of geopolitics from the practical geopolitical activities of states to the geopolitical impacts of popular culture (Dittmer 2010; Dodds 2006; Sharp 1996). The key question for these scholars is how popular cultural texts represent, produce, and reproduce events, places, and people in constructing personal and collective identities (Said 1997; Anaz 2010). Similarly, many scholars have given careful attention to how practical geopolitics use popular media productions to set geopolitical agendas such as the “war on terror” or the “war on drugs,” as well as the importance of the media in shaping our understands and interactions with the world (Lukes 2005; Klaebn 2002); but there remain two important lacunae in the literature.

The first is that few scholars have engaged in audience-reception studies of the geopolitics embedded in popular culture, despite recent calls to consider audiences’ roles and their reactions to the text, the process of consumption, and the creation of meaning (Sharp 1993; Dodds 2006; Toal 2007; Dalby 2008; Dittmer 2008). The other gap in the literature is that few scholars focus on geopolitical texts produced outside the United States and Europe. This is where our interest in studying the *Valley of the Wolves—Iraq* comes from, as an example of a text produced outside the U.S. culture area. In this respect, this particular text enables an analysis of Turkish engagement with dominant war discourses and with the Ameri-Kingdom’s presence in Iraq.

From this departure point, *Valley of the Wolves—Iraq* is positioned within the alternative geographies of image making and representation of war in Iraq, because “the question of the representation of place is also necessarily a question of ideology” (Rose 1994, 46). We argue that the film challenges the circulating images and daily discourse produced by the Western (and particularly American) mass media about the Iraq War. Despite several Hollywood films critiquing the justifications of American actions in the Middle East, most portrayals of Arab people and their geography in the U.S. media and cinema have not been positive (Shaheen 2003; Wilkins 2009; Kellner 2010). Jack Shaheen (2001), in his book *Reel Bad Arabs*, examines 900 Hollywood films and concludes that the majority show Arab people as dehumanized, terroristic, different looking, and threatening. Abu Sadat Nurullah (2010) finds this negative image of Arabs and Muslims is intensified in the American TV series *24*, which depicts Muslims as framed in the Bush administration’s war discourse, ready to launch missile attacks on America. Nurullah concludes that Arabs and Muslims
portrayed on 24 continue to fit the common stereotype of Middle Easterners as dangerous and villainous others (1024). In another quantitative study, Shahzad Ali and Khalid (2008) investigate U.S. mass media representations of 12 Muslim countries in Newsweek and Time magazines from 1991 to 2001. Their findings on (pre-war) Iraq reveal an interesting point: they conclude that there was no positive coverage of Iraq in either magazine during this period and classify the stories as 10% negative and 90% neutral. In our understanding, filmic depictions of the Middle East, and particularly Iraq (e.g., True Lies, Executive Decision, The Siege) are no different from news-media portrayals of the same people and region. The 2005 film American Soldiers, for example, depicts Iraqi cities as chaotic, dangerous, and unpredictable through the conversation of U.S. soldiers. These Iraqi neighbourhoods are not similar to neighbourhoods in the United States, nor are the people similar to Americans; but they all look the same—constantly dangerous and threatening. Indeed, this depiction of Iraq and Iraqis is very similar to general historical trend of portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in the American news and media world. Lines of dialogue in movies such as 1937’s The Sheik Steps Out (“they [the Arabs] all look alike to me”), 1968’s Commando (“all Arabs look alike to me”), and 1986’s Hostage (“I can’t tell one [Arab] from another. Wrapped in those bed sheets they all look the same to me”) indicate that the image of the Arab in film has not changed across either time or space (qtd. in Shaheen 2003, 172). The Valley of the Wolves—Iraq thus aims to present an alternative view of the war and of American heroism in the contested warscape of Iraq.

In addition, the very same film consolidates Turkey’s geopolitical aspirations as a regional actor in the Middle East. The film not only dramatizes Iraq’s incapability of unification, and its vulnerability to a descent into further cycles of war, but also attempts to channel Turkish people’s attention to Turkey’s regional geopolitical interests and the geopolitical necessity for active involvement in the affairs of northern Iraq.

As Power and Crampton note, films “provide ‘a language and imaginary’ as well as reference points and ways of en-framing popular understandings of the radically changing geopolitical world” (2007, 1; see also Dodds 2006). Valley of the Wolves—Iraq undoubtedly creates an alternative cinematic language for audiences to better understand the dynamics of continuing war in Iraq and the elements of out-of-the-ordinary geopolitical representations/imaginations of Turkey, the Middle East, and America (Yanik 2009, 154). Not surprisingly, in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Washington officials spent significant amounts of time and effort with Hollywood filmmakers to restore an American image around the world and to build morale among Americans by mobilizing Hollywood cultural products (Dittmer and Dodds 2008). Films such as Behind Enemy Lines (2003) and Black Hawk Down (2001) have been clearly identified as moralistic back-up units and cinematic justifications for U.S. foreign interventions (Dodds 2006; Power and Crampton 2007; Davies and Wells 2002). Importantly, the geopolitics of cinema not only deploys its framed and coded, discursive and subtle, prevailing influences over audiences but also knits a delicate web of interconnections between events and geopolitical codes of the state, between ideological apparatuses and state’s geopolitical practices, between interventional engagements by the state and justifications of its actions (Carter and McCormack 2006; Williams 2002). In the same sense, Gerard Toal argues that geopolitics is about the re/arrangement of global political actors on a world stage where grand actors play out geopolitical dramas. Thus, popular productions, particularly films, “represent a unique way of arranging these dramas and actorship”: Hollywood films supplement spatialized (specialized) and visualized stage settings for construction of America’s geopolitical codes and identities.
Films, in other words, "provide a way of solving (geo) political uncertainty ... and making clear the lines of division between 'us' and 'them'" (Power and Crampton 2007, 6). Therefore, exploration of films’ representational practices and their role in enacting geopolitics, enforcing collective identities, and providing a handy (sign) language for audiences becomes crucial.

Given this vital particularity of films’ close relationality to geopolitical representations and varied audiences receptions, as Klaus Dodds (2006) argues, there is a need to theorize this relationship. Dodds states that those who are interested in popular geopolitics “need to better understand how audiences read films with a variety of ‘dispositions’ and emotional investments” (2006, 118). But audiences’ interpretations are not univocal or necessarily straightforward. Janet Staiger (2005) highlights the fact that viewers bring their own meaning-making mechanisms to films; in other words, there are no homogeneous viewers who will bring a range of similar meanings to films. Indeed, the compositions of audiences differ very much in terms of their dispositional characters (Purcell et al. 2009). Audience engagement with visual and other forms of texts is significantly penetrating and active. Dittmer argues that reading any text is not merely an activity that takes place in isolation but, rather, “a social act in which textual meaning is disciplined and structured by social forces” (2008, 283). As he maps out the social locations of readers of the Left Behind series, he notes that textual meaning is not handed down from authors to readers in a pure unaltered state, but rather meanings are alternatively opened up and closed down by macro-and micro-scale structuring influences, including (but not limited to) nationality, gender, ethnicity, political orientation, other texts being consumed in temporal proximity (current events) and degree of social connection (others aware of this act of reading). (2008, 284)

Similarly, scholars of mass communication and media argue that text-interpreting agents show selective predispositions to particular information while omitting other available information (Steiner 1962; Sears and Freedman 1967; Lawrence 2005; Stroud 2007; Whiteman 2004). Ivan Steiner, for instance, notes that people tend to see and hear communications that are favourable and congenial to their predispositions. The term “predispositions” here includes “sex role, educational status, interest and involvement, ethnic status, political attitude, aesthetic position, and any way of characterizing people that matters to them” (Sears and Freedman 1967, 196). Thus people’s political beliefs, cultural positions, and geographic locations are significant in predicting what sorts of information they will seek to engage with. In other words, viewers’ predispositions motivate them to engage with certain films while avoiding other films that may challenge their existing beliefs. This inclination to select information that reinforces existing belief has been evaluated empirically by many scholars of political communication to predict people’s political attitudes toward information exposure (e.g., Sears and Freedman 1967; Lazarsfeld et al. 1948; Turner 1991; Stroud 2007). For instance, Natalie Stroud investigated the influence of political predispositions on the decision to view (or not view) Michael Moore’s 2004 film Fahrenheit 9/11. She concludes that those who watched the film had more negative attitudes toward George W. Bush than those who merely intended to watch it. Stroud’s study of Fahrenheit 9/11 shows that political dispositions play a large role in motivating people to view certain films; people seek out like-minded media to reinforce their political and atavistic attitudes (Stroud 2007, 429).

This and other experimental audience-composition studies suggest that it is possible to understand who views or seeks out what sort of messages and information, and for what reasons. What remains unexplored, however, is how much and to what extent a
viewer absorbs and operationalizes the message that he or she is exposed to. This paper maps out meaning-making attitudes of Turkish audiences after viewing the film Valley of the Wolves—Iraq. Though our empirical investigation offers limited explanations as to what degree viewers are influenced by the film, it explores explanations of Turkish audiences’ dispositional characters and their geographical imaginations regarding political events around them.

Valley of the Wolves—Iraq and the (Re)construction of Turkey’s Geopolitical Role in the Middle East

The film Valley of the Wolves—Iraq was launched by Pana Film Company producers in 2006, following the popular TV series of the same name, Valley of the Wolves (Kurtlar Vadisi). Pana Film’s success began with this 97-episode series, whose broadcast began in January 2003. The series is still in production, under different names (e.g., Valley of the Wolves—Ambush) and on different national TV channels. The TV series Kurtlar Vadisi had already familiarized Turkish audiences with the concepts such as the value of honour, duty, and love of country before the film Valley of the Wolves—Iraq debuted (Yanik 2009, 158). Like the film, the series dealt with domestic and international conspiracy theories and heroic sacrifice, ornamented with nationalism and traditionalism, and saturated with righteous mafiasim (Demir 2007; Yanik 2009; Iık 2006). The team behind the series exploited opportunities to link onscreen storylines to day-to-day matters of Turkish life and topics that garnered Turks’ attention, such as fighting against the dark organizations of the “deep state” and the external enemies of Turkey (Gültekin 2006).

Inspired by the series’ popularity and “hit” status, Pana Film went on to produce one of the most expensive Turkish film productions ever made. The film had a US$10.2 million budget and grossed approximately US$29 million from the domestic and foreign box office (primarily in Syria, Germany, Belgium, The Netherlands, France, the United Arab Emirates, Hungary, Finland, Japan, Greece, Argentina, and Brazil; IMDb 2006). It was translated into many languages and attracted millions of online and offline fans in Turkey and abroad, particularly among young male populations.

The movie’s plot focuses on a series of events that allegedly really took place in Afghanistan and Iraq between 2001 and 2006. According to the producers, the film is “based on true stories” of incidents such as the “Hooding Event” of 4 July 2003, Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse, American soldiers’ random shootings during a Muslim wedding and into a shipping container carrying civilian prisoners in Afghanistan, and a Jewish doctor’s harvesting organs for international buyers in the United States, Israel, and Britain (Sanli 2006).

The film has been strongly criticized by many politicians and media commentators for its demonic portrayal of U.S. military personnel and for representing the Jewish doctor as harvesting organs from civilian prisoners. Shortly after Valley of the Wolves—Iraq debuted in international markets, Germany’s largest cinema chain, CinemaxX, pulled the film from its theatres in response to criticism from European politicians. Although Pana Film had cut some of the more controversial scenes to better suit European and American viewers’ tastes, the film’s propagandist and anti-American nature did not escape viewers’ criticism. The film was criticized as a jingoistic action movie aimed at reviving a discourse of nationalism that has long been ignored or disregarded by formal national political organizations in Turkey. In Yanık’s words, the film became the “venue for expressing and reflecting alienated Turks’ anger while replenishing the tarnished national ego” (2009, 159).

In the international community, concerns focused on the film’s potential to distance Turkey from the Western world and, in particular, to trigger harmful actions against U.S.
personnel overseas and U.S. reconstruction efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. For example, MSNBC host Joe Scarborough (2006) addressed these specific concerns about the film; he also heavily criticized the American actors’ participation in such an anti-American production. Not only political and media elites but cinema-goers, too, were upset about the film’s depiction of the United States. Just after the film became a hit, thousands of comments were posted on Internet sites around the world. One viewer shares his opinion as follows:

Yes, *Valley of the Wolves—Iraq* is as anti-American as it is rumored to be, and yes, it is anti-Semitic as well ... And it is equally anti-Christian, though this aspect is rarely mentioned. But mostly it’s just a cinematic dud, a ridiculous Turkish propaganda film that has little to interest anyone who isn’t a nationalistic Turkish teenager with too much testosterone. (Zombietime 2006)

According to the counterargument, however, the film actually helped people discharge and deflate their static discontent in a safely channelled way; that is, the film opened a safety valve to release the pressure caused by American policies in the Middle East. The film’s producers ably escorted audiences toward a cinematic revenge, restoring national honour and heroism without causing harmful outcomes.

Scriptwriter Bahadir Ozdener defends his film by claiming that majority of the storyline is inspired by factual events:

Our film is a sort of political action. Maybe 60 or 70 percent of what happens on screen is factually true. Turkey and America are allies, but Turkey wants to say something to its friend. We want to say the bitter truth. We want to say that this is wrong. (Rainsford 2006)

Apparently the producers intended to situate the film within the contemporary geopolitical conditions of post-9/11 moment. The goal was not only to rescue Turkishness but also to animate the reality of war on the screen, stressing the exigency of Turkey’s strategic role in the current geopolitical chess game for its regional interests.

From that perspective, *Valley of the Wolves—Iraq* successfully managed to set the stage for the audiences to understand the reel/real drama of war and geopolitical events occurring around Turkey every day. The film effectively satisfied Turkish audiences when the super-Turk (Polat Alemdar), with his men, defeated American chaos (brought by the U.S. commander of the 173rd Airborne, Colonel William C. Mayville, played by Billy Zane as Sam William Marshall) and brought (re)order to former Ottoman Baghdad once again. In fulfilling this mission, the film became the topic of conversation for everyone from politicians to taxi drivers. For instance, former Turkish parliamentary speaker Bulent Arinc described it as “absolutely magnificent” and “an extraordinary film that will go into history” (Letsch 2006).

We have demonstrated that the film and its storylines resonated with the Turkish public, reflecting Turkish attitudes toward U.S. actions in Iraq and perhaps even Turkey’s own role *vis-à-vis* neighbouring states. However, this evidence is not enough to fully explain the consumption of this text, or what motivated the viewing of the film and how it was understood in comparison to what the producers wished to accomplish. Questions similar to these drove us to design an investigative survey to understand the dynamics of audience dispositions for *Valley of the Wolves—Iraq*; this phase of the study is discussed further in the next section.

**Methodology**

**Selecting Survey Sites**

The audience research is built on a survey conducted in five districts of Istanbul: Mecidiyeköy (Sisli), Kadıköy, Üsküdar, Fatih, and Eminönü (see Figure 1).
These sites were chosen for several reasons. First, they represent a cross-section of cultural, historical, and political backgrounds. Second, they are important arenas as sites of daily business transactions and routes for many sectors of the Turkish population, and thus offer a diverse pool of potential respondents for polling on the street. Lastly, these sites provide economic and cultural opportunities for internal migrants flowing from the eastern part of Turkey, and thus could diversify our population further (Keskin 2007). These central urban hubs function as sites of absorption and as a life-preserver for new immigrants, the unskilled population, and seasonal vendors. As a result of this dynamic population influx, in some of our survey sites the daytime population climbs to a high of 2 million people from a night-time low of as few as 32 000 (IBB 2008). Thanks to these daily population movements and the cosmopolitanism of these cyclical flows, these sites represent an adequate cross-section of the Turkish population in general, and were thus judged suitable for our survey. It should be noted that Istanbul comprises approximately 23% of Turkey’s total population and that the sites selected serve as business, tourism, and transportation hubs accounting for large fractions of Istanbul’s daytime population (IBB 2008).

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

As shown in Table 1, 68.5% of respondents indicated that they had seen the film. Of these, 62.6% were aged 35 or younger. This result did not surprise us, because, as many media commentators argue, this type of chauvinistic action movie is predominantly consumed by younger, less educated populations (Demir 2007). Our results endorse this argument (see Tables 2 and 3); however, it should be noted that the distribution of Turkey’s general population is skewed toward the relatively young and uneducated: 26.3% of the population is under 15, and of the 56 million aged 15 and above, only 10.379 million have completed high school, according to 2010 census data (18.5 million have completed primary school, and 8 million graduated from middle school; TurkStat 2010).
Political Characteristics of Turkey’s Population

Because of the nature of Turkey’s diverse political characteristics, respondents’ answers to the question of what constitutes their world view (see Table 4) need to be carefully examined and evaluated in Turkey’s unique geo-cultural context (Gokmen et al. 2008). For example, some individuals interviewed confidently claimed to be “a religious person” but not an “Islamist.” Similarly, several respondents chose to give multiple answers to the question of “what is your world view.” According to these respondents, one can easily define oneself both as “nationalist/conservative” and as “democrat” at the same time. We believe that these multiple self-definitions do not discredit the overall quality or relevance of the survey, because when coding respondents’ answers to this question we (a) counted only the first choice of world-view identification (people self-identified a category rather than selecting from a list of options); (b) translated their “world view” responses into the American context to highlight similar positions on a political spectrum across the two states; and (c) acknowledged that some people will feel only comfortable when they can identify multiple world views.

**TABLE 1**
Responses to the question “Have you seen the film Valley of the Wolves—Iraq?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>68.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>31.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never heard of the film</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Necati Anaz, fieldwork, 2008

**TABLE 2**
Gender distribution of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>56.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>43.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Necati Anaz, fieldwork, 2008

**TABLE 3**
Respondents’ levels of education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>42.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College/university</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Necati Anaz, fieldwork, 2008

**TABLE 4**
Distribution of respondents’ political views*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kemalist**</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>26.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rightist</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalist</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious***</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamist</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-Democrat</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Answer</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>321</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Necati Anaz, fieldwork, 2008

* Most people identify their world view by reference to political parties that they have associations with.

** “Kemalism” here refers broadly to the sets of ideas and objectives of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, founding father of modern Turkey. His six principles (Republicanism, Secularism, Nationalism, Populism, Revolutionism, and Statism) are associated with the Kemalist thinking and philosophy of the current opposition party, the Republican People’s Party. Kemalism has been and continues to be the dominant ideology of the Turkish state and its branches, especially the military, the judiciary, and higher education.

*** In the Turkish context, “religious” is more likely to refer to someone who submits to the will of his or her faith, while “Islamist” mostly refers to a person who associates him- or herself with Islam’s political aspects and/or with an Islamic political party.
The survey had four main parts, totalling more than 25 closed-ended questions. The first part explored respondents’ demographic traits (e.g., age, education, gender). The second part asked what respondents thought of the Iraq War and U.S.–Turkey bilateral relations, regardless of their acquaintance with the film *Valley of the Wolves—Iraq*. The third part investigated respondents’ sources of news and their particular interests in cinema. The fourth part attempted to understand how and to what extent *Valley of the Wolves—Iraq* influenced people’s perceptions and understandings of the Iraq War and of U.S.–Turkey relations in general.

Survey respondents were selected by means of random phone calls and visits to homes and businesses and by interviewing people, again approached at random, in the streets of five districts of Istanbul, as described above. In all, 309 people participated in the survey, 200 of whom indicated that they had seen the film.

### Results

Everyday consumption of cultural cinematic images has been commonly acknowledged to have a significant influence on viewers, shaping their perceptions of space, place, and social interactions (Aitken and Zonn 1994; Cresswell and Dixon 2002; Morley 2006). In particular, films provide possible alternative orders to people’s everyday chaotic realities. Furthermore, films are argued to naturalize nationalist ideologies and gradually form and maintain nations’ “imagined communities” (Peckham 2007). For instance, Sumita Chakravarty investigated how early popular Indian films made after India’s struggle for independence reinforced the idea of the Indian nation and thus helped to create one (Chakravarty 1993).

The film we examine here reveals similar results. Our study investigated how Turkish people understand the nature of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and Turkey’s role in Middle Eastern affairs. In general, the study demonstrates that there are relationships between the way in which people see the world and themselves within it and the way in which they interpret cinematic narratives witnessed in their everyday lives.

One of the most important results of this audience-research study is that the film appears to have played a very minor role in shaping opinions of American military actions in Iraq. Turkish audiences already possessed codified opinions about what was happening in Iraq: 61.9 % of respondents to the question, “After watching the film *Valley of the Wolves—Iraq*, has your perception of the Iraq War changed?” said “No.” Indeed, a BBC reporter’s on-the-spot interview with one moviegoer in Istanbul illustrated that the film’s audiences have already predetermined their point of view on the Iraq War: “I’m back to see it for the second time already … It is anti-American, but we already know what they’ve done in Iraq. That’s the reality. Now we can see it on screen” (Rainsford 2006).

In order to distinguish what opinions Turkish audiences held about the war in general before seeing the film from their opinions on the war after seeing the film, we posed several questions about the Iraq War and American military operations in the region before mentioning *Valley of the Wolves—Iraq*. Respondents were asked to rank what they considered the problems of the Middle East according to their importance (see Table 5; problems were identified by the

### Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Problem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Problem related to U.S. foreign policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Problem related to Israeli foreign policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Problem related to the economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Problem related to security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Problem related to religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Problem related to ethnicity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Necati Anaz, fieldwork, 2008
researchers prior to the interview). Respondents ranked issues related to U.S. foreign policy as the number one problem in the Middle East; Israel’s regional policies as the second most important problem in the region, and economic issues in third place. Problems related to ethnicity placed sixth in the survey. This result shows that in the eyes of the Turkish people, the foreign and regional policies of the United States and Israel in the Middle East are singled out as the main cause of problems in the region.

Respondents were then asked how they would rank the United States’ reasons for invading Iraq (see Table 6). “Natural resources” was overwhelmingly chosen as the top reason for the U.S. invasion of Iraq; in second place came “U.S. imperialism,” followed by “war against Islam” in third place and “war against terrorism” in fourth place. “Spreading democracy” and “justified aggression” were insignificant in the rankings.

However, 51.2 % of respondents described Turkey and the United States as strategic partners, while only 15.2 % said that the two countries are enemies. Since the negative image of the United States in Turkey became prevalent with the George W. Bush administration’s policies after the 9/11, we asked whether respondents believed in Obama’s promises of change with respect to current conditions in Iraq: 44.9 % believed that the current situation in Iraq would stay the same, while 50.5 % thought the Obama administration would make positive changes with respect to the war in Iraq.

The second part of our survey focused on the question of whether the film reflects reality, and, if so, to what degree Turkish audiences relate the film’s version of reality to events that have allegedly taken place during the Iraq War. A total of 86 % of respondents stated that the film reflected true events of the Iraq War. Not surprisingly, the “Hooding Event” scene involving 11 Turkish soldiers was rated as representing true events by the highest number of respondents, followed by the shooting of the shipping container full of men and the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse. The assault on the wedding party and the Jewish doctor’s organ-trading racket received few votes as depictions of real events.

When asked whether the film *Valley of the Wolves—Iraq* had become the voice of the Turkish people, 57 % of respondents agreed. A closer analysis revealed that people who associated themselves with the Kemalist world view were more likely to show serious concern about the “Hooding Event” than respondents with more politically identified world views. Democrats and Islamists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>War against Islam</th>
<th>Fighting against terrorism</th>
<th>Justified aggression</th>
<th>U.S. Imperialism</th>
<th>Natural resources</th>
<th>Spreading democracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kemalist</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalist</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialist</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamist</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No world view identified</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The Arab World Geographer/Le Géographe du monde arabe* Vol 13, no 1 (2010)
followed Kemalists in identifying this as the most effective scene in the film. For Turkish audiences, evidently, the sensationalist aspects of the “Hooding Event” overcame all other events, and this emotional reaction did not visibly differ among gender, economic, or educational categories.

To read these responses accurately, one can say that in the eyes of respondents, the “Hooding Event” seriously degraded Turkish identity and was seen as a collective insult to the Turkish nation. In the movie, it was understoodly a crucial duty for the former Turkish secret agent to address attacks on the Turkish nation by means of revenge and to rescue the honour of the nation for the people of Turkey. In our analysis, we always kept in mind the incessant media coverage of the “Hooding Event” and of subsequent developments. Turkish elites’ nationalist reactions played a significant role in increasing both nationalist feeling in Turkey and antipathy toward the American presence in Iraq. In the eyes of Turkish audiences, this event resembled no other event in history committed by the Turkish military (at least officially). Hooding and handcuffing Turkish soldiers in Turkey’s own backyard inflamed unforgettable anger in every sector of Turkish society.

Turks, according to the teaching of Turkish history, have lost many battles, but they had never before been humiliated by a country with which the Turkish military (or, for that matter, secularist Kemalists) has long been aligned. Press coverage and public reaction provide evidence that the “Hooding Event” was not considered comparable to other acts the United States is alleged to have committed in Iraq. Turks might have forgiven those incidents in time, but the “Hooding Event” hit far closer to home. In addition, American forces’ cooperation with Kurdish security forces in an operation aimed at capturing Turkish forces in the city of Sulaimaniya was not justified in the minds of Turkish people. The question of how a Turkish ally could side with Kurdish forces against Turkey has not faded away in elite or public thinking, and this became the primary focal point of the film’s storyline.

Discussion

The findings of our audience-research study suggest that the effects of Valley of the Wolves—Iraq on respondents’ views of the Iraq War and of the efforts of the U.S.-led coalition in the region are limited. The results indicate that Turkish audiences held strong predetermined opinions about the American presence in Iraq prior to watching the film. The majority of respondents (including those who did not see the film) believed that the American presence in Iraq stems from (a) the presence of natural resources, (b) U.S. imperialism, and (c) a war against Islam; 61.9% of those who watched the film indicated that it had not changed their views on American efforts in Iraq or on why the United States invaded Iraq. Of the 38.1% who watched the film and indicated that it did change their opinion, 87.1% reported that their opinion changed for the worse. Discontent with the American presence in Iraq showed no credible differences among the demographics and ideological groups represented in the sample.

A closer assessment of the survey results tells us that Turkish audiences are capable of drawing distinguishable lines as to where opposition to American efforts ends and anti-Americanism begins. Respondents clearly ranked U.S. foreign-policy issues as the number-one problem for the Middle East, yet 79.2% agreed that, at some level, Turkey–U.S. relations are in good condition and, in fact, described the relationship along a continuum ranging from “strategic partners” to “allies” or “friends” (see Table 7).

Another critical assessment tells us that respondents indisputably put Turkish identity and national pride first when ranking the most disturbing true events depicted in the film. Not surprisingly, the collective humiliation of the “Hooding Event” was the most upsetting of all. Despite the heavy criticism of the film as anti-Semitic, Turkish audiences disagreed,
placing Gary Busey’s organ-harvesting Jewish doctor at the bottom of their list of effective scenes. For our respondents, Turkish soldiers’ honour comes before anything else, and thus, even if it is only a cinematic act of avenging wrongs, Polat Alemdar’s fight for justice and national dignity is welcomed across multiple segments of the population.

Conclusion

This audience-research study highlights the fact that Valley of the Wolves—Iraq has dual geopolitical impacts. First, the film establishes an alternative voice against the Western-oriented (mainly American) hegemonic popular representation of the Middle East, as “it reverses the usual political order of things” (Dodds 2008, 1623). It contests the common description of war and peace in the region, bringing untold and unseen stories of the everyday realities of the Iraqi people to millions of viewers. The war becomes ugly and bloody again as viewers witness it in theatres; human suffering, the total destruction of war, and the West’s cruelty become as close as the cinema screen. One viewer shared his outrage in these words: “If I see an American when I get out of here I feel like taking a hood and putting it over their head” (Rainsford 2006). It can be inferred that the film created a geographic proximity and political justification to express animosity toward the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. In this respect, this facet of the film is recognized as “anti-geopolitics,” brought forth from outside the Western cultural area.

The other part of the dual nature of the film forms an “alternative geopolitics” within which Turkey plays important geopolitical roles as the regional power and the protester of injustice. In the eyes of the film’s Turkish producers, Iraq and the surrounding region are too important for Turkey and the Turkish people to ignore. Thus the film constructs an informal geopolitical language for Turks to visualize Turkey’s own geopolitical alternatives and responsibilities in the region. Turkey is a dominant power and must act accordingly, in the eyes of the producers and of many of the film’s consumers.

This empirical study should also be located as a contribution to audience-research studies within geography and communication. One of our main goals was to see how Turkish people read these geopolitical storylines and how their interpretations could be analyzed. To undertake that task, we developed more than 25 close-ended survey questions to ask ordinary residents of Istanbul in locations where every aspect of Turkish life is believed to be harboured and brought to the surface. We focused mainly on respondents’ understanding of the Iraq War prior to seeing the film and the film’s possible effects on viewers by comparing respondents who had seen the film to those who had not. Our conclusion was that people hardly received these geopolitical narratives as a surprise or an out-of-the-blue phenomenon; the majority of opinions centred around the notion that the film reflected only the known realities of the war, rather than bringing new information to audiences. For many, the film spoke for the silent majority of those with concerns about the prosecution of the Iraq War; it aimed to send a message to global audiences that people in the region are well equipped to understand what goes on in Iraq and are aware of the war’s very ugly consequences.

We should also be aware that there is another reason for the existence of this action-adventure genre movie. In the political-

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**TABLE 7**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Valid %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategic partners</td>
<td>51.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allies</td>
<td>18.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enemies</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-way and self-interest-oriented friendship</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey is a U.S. subcontractor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Necati Anaz, fieldwork, 2008
economic discourse of the cinema world, the movie aimed to dominate the Turkish cinema markets and make money. Given the relative youth of the majority of cinema-goers in Turkey, firms such as Pana Film take every opportunity to exploit nationalist sensations and dramas for profit. When this facet of action films is analyzed, *Valley of the Wolves—Iraq* can be seen as another profit-driven entertainment product whose audience is understood as a commodity. This simplified analysis does not detract from the paper’s main points as laid out above; however, this materialist interpretation of the film remains another important component to be investigated in ascertaining the linkages between the Turkish state and the cinema firms that help to reproduce the state and the nation.

Like other audience-response studies, our study is subject to limitations and drawbacks in documenting and analyzing aspects of audience response. Detailed and broader investigative studies must be used to gain a better understanding of audience interpretations and conceptualizations of the meaning-making process. One arena for improving scholars’ understanding of audiences can be found through social-networking technologies and subsequent network analysis. Dodds’s (2006) work on the Internet Movie Database started exploration in this vein; social network analysis technologies (Hansen et al. 2010) in combination with textual analysis of comments and postings may give scholars of geopolitics and communication access to both the discursive power of text and insights into the social power of those engaging in the discourse to propagate particular views of film, space, and geopolitics.

**Acknowledgements**

We would like to acknowledge the immensely helpful comments and valuable insights of the anonymous reviewers. Necati Anaz would also like to thank to Ghazi-Walid Falah, Arif Keçeli, Matthew Ryan McNair, and GENAR’s president, Mustafa en, and its associates for their kind support and encouragement. Any remaining shortcomings are the authors’ own.

**Notes**

1. This paper is the extended version of a presentation submitted to the AAG’s annual conference in Las Vegas, Nevada, in 2009.
2. We are here comparing *Valley of the Wolves—Iraq* to the budgets and performance of other successful Turkish film productions, such as the 2004 fantasy-comedy *G.O.R.A.* (US$5 million budget, US$23 million in ticket sales, 4 million viewers) and the 2001 comedy-drama *Vizontele* (US$2.5 million budget, 3.3 million viewers).
3. The actual interviewing was carried out in 2008 by employees of a nationwide survey company, GENAR, located in Istanbul.
4. For the purposes of this study, we defined as “true” events that received news coverage worldwide, such as the “Hooding Event.”

**References**


