

Geopolitics of film: Surveying audience reception of a Turkish film, *Valley of the Wolves: Palestine*

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Abstract:

This paper focuses exclusively on *Valley of the Wolves: Palestine* – a political action film – to better understand Turkish audiences’ interpretations of Turkish geopolitics, Turkey’s role in the Middle East and Israel-Palestine relations in particular. Along these lines, this paper investigates Turkish audiences’ interpretations of such political-entertainment text by including online inquiries: a survey and analysis of the film comments. Results of the study suggest that respondents’ interpretations of the film vary with some commonalities.

Keywords: Geopolitics of film, *Valley of the Wolves: Palestine*, audience reception, geopolitical imaginations

Introduction

As many scholars from various disciplines note, films form an everyday image-based language that can provide better ways of framing a radically-changing geopolitical world and handy maps through which peoples imagine/position themselves in an uncertain geopolitical world (Power & Crampton, 2007; Stroud, 2007; Toal, 2007; Dittmer, 2010). Even the most complicated and problematic issues of socio-political life can be expressed smoothly through cinematic narrations and artistic forms. Under the circumstances, films’ indisputable ability to present events and social subjects in a compelling, and even propagandist, manner charms politicians and world states. Power and Crampton argue that films “reflect in various ways on common themes of national identity, gender and the construction of masculinity and ethnicity through film and seek to explore the importance of borders, boundaries to cinematic narratives” (Power and Crampton 2005, p. 2). Inspired by the work of political geographers and various reception studies of different disciplines, this essay investigates audience reception of a film from geographical point of views, embedded

within the post-structural school of thought and recent popular cultural studies. The essay also aims to investigate Turkish audiences' geopolitical imaginations toward Turkey-Israel relations and the Palestine question which exclusively shapes geopolitics of the Middle East and the possible peace process throughout the region.

Turkey's relationship with Israel has been in a critical phase since Turkish Prime Minister R. Tayyip Erdogan's scolding of Israel's President Shimon Peres at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in 2009. This showdown negatively impacted relations between the two countries, and the tenor of deception diplomatic exchanges worsened afterward. They reached a nadir when in the wake of the 2010 flotilla effort to deliver materials to Palestinian Territories in violation of an Israeli blockade of the territories. The Netanyahu government refused to comply with the Turkish government's demand for an apology, compensations to families of the deceased and removal of the blockade following the attacks and killing nine Turkish activists sailing to breach the Gaza blockade (negotiations on these matters have begun as of 2013). However, the ill-managed and mutual escalation of the crisis became more public and international when film makers took part in this crisis and ventured to become a virtual observer, interpreter, and driver of geopolitical events in the Middle East. *Valley of the Wolves: Palestine (VWP)* is a prime example of this. Thus, this paper focuses exclusively on *Valley of the Wolves: Palestine* – a political action film – to better understand Turkish audiences' interpretations of Turkish geopolitics, Turkey's role in the Middle East and Israel-Palestine relations in particular. Along these lines, this study investigates Turkish audiences' interpretations of such political-entertainment text by including online inquiries: a survey and analysis of comments of the film. Results suggest that respondents' interpretations of the film vary with some commonalities.

In investigating a political-action Turkish film, *VWP*, and its reception in Turkey, special attention will be paid to the role of interpretative and active (Yeatman, 2011) Turkish audiences in the making of their geopolitical meaning through a cinematic signification with the film. An argument made throughout this study is that, when using film, geographers' academic investigations are often limited to First World cinema or international products that are welcomed in the English speaking world. These efforts rarely engage Third World productions that provide alternative geopolitical visions to western (US and the West Europe) geopolitics. Rarely are Third World audiences and their meaning-making processes given serious consideration, particularly the Turkish audiences. For these reasons, the *VWP* is chosen as the case study, given the film's stature internationally and its unique challenge to dominant geopolitical discourses.

Valley of the Wolves: Palestine

The political-action film *VWP* was released in Turkey and abroad by Pana Film Company in January, 2011.¹ Following the popular television series and cinema films which all carried similar names, *Valley of the Wolves (Kurtlar Vadisi)* (2003-2005), *Valley of the Wolves: Ambush* (2007-Present), the political-action films *Valley of the Wolves-Iraq* (2006), *Valley of*

the Wolves: Gladio (2009) and now *Valley of the Wolves: Palestine* (2011) becomes part of a collection of James Bond type cinema serials.

The television series (*Valley of the Wolves*) and the films familiarized audiences with many values such as honor, duty, bravery, and love of country before any other concepts or messages (Yanik, 2009). These cultural products similarly dealt with and engaged in domestic and international conspiracy theories and heroic sacrifice, heavily ornamented with nationalism, traditionalism and justified killing (Işık, 2006; Demir, 2007; Anaz & Purcell, 2010). The producers of the *Valley of the Wolves* set their storylines in the day-to-day subjects of Turkish life such as fighting against the dark organization of the ‘deep state’, corrupt financial entities and external enemies’ designs on Turkey and the region (Gültekin, 2006).

When AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had acrid conversation with Israeli President Shimon Peres at the World Economic Forum in Davos, 2009 the idea of making another film similar to *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* was reconsidered. Right after the ‘height of humiliation’ occurred during a diplomatic meeting between Turkish ambassador, Ahmet Oguz Celikkol and Israel’s Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon in Jerusalem in January 2010 (BBC, 2010), *VWP* took shape. The subsequent attack by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) on the Mavi Marmara Gaza Flotilla in May 2010 (which resulted in nine deaths and the wounding of fifty Turkish citizens in international waters) gave the needed momentum for this political-action film to be realized. The plot of *VWP*, as with the previous film (*Valley of the Wolves: Iraq*), follows well-trained Turkish agents led by the protagonist Polat Alemdar on a quest for revenge against the cruel Israeli general Moshe Ben Eliezer who was the prime planner and the executor of the Mavi Marmara raid. The film begins with the IDF’s operation on the Turkish ship the Mavi Marmara which sails to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza and transport its humanitarian load to Palestinians. From the beginning and throughout the film, many shootings and killings occur during the Israeli soldiers’ raids of Palestinian neighborhoods or when Polat and his men engage with Israeli soldiers. The film does not refrain for a moment from depicting IDF soldiers as ultimate killing machines of innocent Palestinian civilians the whole time.

Because of the film’s anti-Israeli portrayal, it was banned in Germany and heavily criticized for premiering on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, January 27. After Pana Film appealed to the German court, the ban on the film was removed, but it was restricted to audiences 18 years old and older. Other European countries such as Netherlands, France and United Kingdom posed similar restrictions on the film by ruling that 16 and older could only view the film.

Understanding the audience

The question of ‘what constitutes an audience’ has occupied many scholars’ intellectual curiosity (Gillespie, 2005; Hay, Wartella, & Grossberg, 1996; Morley, 1980; Ang, 1991; Yeatman, 2011). The argument of whether there is a self-selecting, naturally formed audience is a matter of scholarly questioning and continuing debate in academia. However,

in many writings, it is said that audience(s) is/are somehow structured, made, imagined and niched by media institutions (or scholars for that matter) (Gillespie 2005). This way of explaining audience is open to critique as modern information and communication technologies open up new gates into the subject of 'audience' and necessitate new ways of investigating, contextualizing, and interpreting audiences. An individual as a subject of audience can play multiple roles and be the source of information production on one side, and the subject of consumption and an active agent of information distribution on the other side which highlights the complex modes agency and active participation of producer-consumption nature of reception (Harrison, 2013; Kääpä & Wenbo, 2011). As reception theory highlights, individuals actively shape the meaning of a given text and audiences do not passively receive meanings; they negotiate, reject or fully accept messages as they are processed through their socio-cultural conditions (Hall, 1980; Plunkey, 2010).

This is to say that media is neither static as it is believed to be, nor the audience a fixed or passive receiver of messages. This demonstrates how problematic it is to conceptualize audience in the postmodern world. The idea of audience is also changing in response to new information and communication technologies (Jancovich, Faire, & Stubbings, 2003). Given the changes, how to investigate audience is a matter of understanding the contemporary conditions of audienceship (Massumi, 2002; Yeatman, 2011) and, parallel to that, utilizing new qualitative and quantitative techniques.²

Thus in order to better understand how the Turkish film *VWP* cinematizes Turkish geopolitics and how Turkish audiences engage in the meaning-making process, I am compelled to include different ways of analyzing the discourse of audience reception through surveying their responses asking closed-ended questions and analyzing comments of online-fan communities formed by the film viewers on Sinemalar.com.

However, no closed-ended questionnaire or analyzing online film comments can adequately formulate ways of understanding audience receptions completely. This paper acknowledges that more detailed qualitative techniques are needed to investigate meaning-making process. Therefore this paper is limited on bringing new conceptualization to the audience studies; rather, this paper highlights that it is a geopolitical perspective on Turkish audiences' use of a political-action film to shed some light on their understanding of Turkey's relations with Israel and its geopolitics in the Middle East. In other words, what this political-action film means and does for Turkish audiences. To answer this question, one should participate in some sort of audience investigation practices. Without giving some kind of voice to the film audiences, understanding of Turkish people's use of popular culture as their reference point for understanding Turkey's current geopolitical visions in the Middle East would be limited.

Method

Grasping broad aspects of the conditions of audience responses is limited and a challenging task. It surely requires a comprehensive research design and a careful application of the research plan on the ground. This study on Turkish audiences' meaning-making of a

political-action film which is an attempt to cinematize Turkey's redesigning of the geopolitics of the Middle East should clearly necessitate the use of different aspects of audience investigation methods. As a consequence of this need, this study utilized trilogy of understanding a visual text which includes engaging with the production site, the text itself and the conditions of the consumption site (audience) (Gillian, 2012). Therefore, an interview with the scriptwriter of the film (production site), an analysis of the text (VWP) and the multiple techniques of understanding the conditions of the Turkish audiences (consumption site which included extensive focus group interviews in different cities in Turkey and with different sections of Turkish society, online survey and analyzing online fan-comments) are formed as the primary data collection of this paper. However, for the sake of manageability of the findings and organization of the paper, only online inquiries are included in this paper. And findings are more of descriptive analysis than critically engaged ones.

As mentioned above, two ways of data collection included in this study: a survey which was conducted in the form of an 'online self-completion questionnaire via the web-based survey company, SurveyMonkey three months after the film came to theaters and an analysis of the film-comments through Sinemalar.com. The survey link was distributed through internet film-fan sites, Facebook film-fan groups and my Facebook contacts in a snowball method. When participants clicked on the survey link, they were directed to go to three sections of the survey where 29 questions were designed to collect data a) about the participants' demographics and socio-political positions, b) about their engagement with popular culture (cinema, TV, Internet, etc.), c) about respondents' knowledge on Turkey's geopolitical condition, and d) to identify to what extent the film shaped their geopolitical imaginations, and how people evaluated the film *VWP*.

For the second part of data collection, I included online comments of the film to better understand the practiced audiencing and users' negotiated meaning-making independent of the influence of structured surveying. How people interpreted the film, what meanings online-commenters made through discussions of the film's messages (perhaps for others to appreciate) and what micro-politics they practiced on the virtual space became an important motivations for this study.

Survey Results

The survey was completed by Turkish speaking audiences from 38 provinces of Turkey and 15 countries around the world. 359 respondents started the survey but only 333 of them completed all 29 questions. 226 people indicated that they did not see the film and 115 reported that they had seen the film. Among those 115 viewers, 80 percent were men and 20 percent were women. Also 72 percent of the viewers identified themselves as single and 26 percent were married while more than 88 percent of the viewers were younger than 35. 75 percent of those who viewed the film identified themselves standing on the 'right' side of the political spectrum.

Audiences’ responses: the nature of Israel-Palestine issues

Public opinions have been a vital source and force in structuring national and international affairs. Turkey’s relations with Israel have always been moderate until the Mavi Marmara raid by Israel Special Forces in 2010. The current Turkish governments’ international (and national) policies also played important roles in shaping the relations between Turkey and Israel (Tür, 2009; Inbar, 2010). Turkey, a rising economy, political actor, and cultural influencer in the Middle East, felt compelled to support the Palestinian cause at the expense of its relationship with Israel. Israel’s military actions against Gaza Strip and its continuing expansion of settlements in the West Bank created a huge public outcry in Turkey against Israel, which ultimately gave the momentum for the AKP government to revise its policies against Israel. This policy shift against Israel became a turning point in Turkey-Israel relations as well as public opinion toward. The Mavi Marmara incident which resulted in killing of nine Turkish activists by Israel in international waters brought Turkey-Israel relations to a historical low. This was the political atmosphere within which a political-action movie, *VWP*, came out to cinematize the Palestinian cause and several months later of the film’s release this study was conducted. Thus, it should be acknowledged that the results may reflect some level of temporal discontentment against Israel within the Turkish society.

The survey results of public opinions about the Israel-Palestine issues and Turkey-Israel relations showed that people’s understandings of the matter reflected current opinions shared nation-wide regardless of whether people saw the film or not. Because questions that highlighted these issues were asked to every respondent who participated in the survey. In doing this, I aimed to get a sense of whether the film *VWP* made a significant impact on shaping people’s opinions toward the Israel-Palestine conflict, and Turkey-Israel relations (see **Table 1**).

As **Table 1** indicates, 62.8 percent of respondents define the relationship between Turkey and Israel as one that is based on shared interests. People believe that there are common geopolitical interests that bring the two states together. As seen in the same table, very few people think that Turkey-Israel relations can be described as friends or allies.

Table 1: In general, which of the following terms best describes Turkey-Israel relations?

	n	%	Skipped
Allies	21	6.2	
Friends	19	5.6	
Shared interests	213	62.8	
Enemies	59	17.4	
Other	27	8.0	
Total	339		20

Moreover, the total number of people who think that the two states are enemies is higher than the number of people who think the two states are friends and allies combined. In the 'other'³ option, people demonstrated that their opinion on the relationship between Turkey and Israel is not limited to the given choices in the survey. For instance, some of the respondents' answers included these statements:

They are two competitive countries that cannot tolerate each other but they are bound by their geography and politics.

Israel is the boss and Turkey is her tool.

To me they are enemies but according to the Turkish government, they are partners.

From Israel's point of view, Turkey is an enemy country but from Turkey's perspective the relationship is a partnership.

These statements show that participants' opinions on classifying the relations between the two states are diverse and their interpretations of the status quo are multiple.

When asked what the source of the conflict between Israel and Palestine was, respondents clearly indicated that the state of Israel is the leading problem-making actor in this conflict. There are also significant numbers of people who think that the Western world is also responsible for this conflict. In the 'other' categorization, Zionism is thought to be the leading problem for the conflict. Even so, referencing the Torah's 'Promised Land' idea,

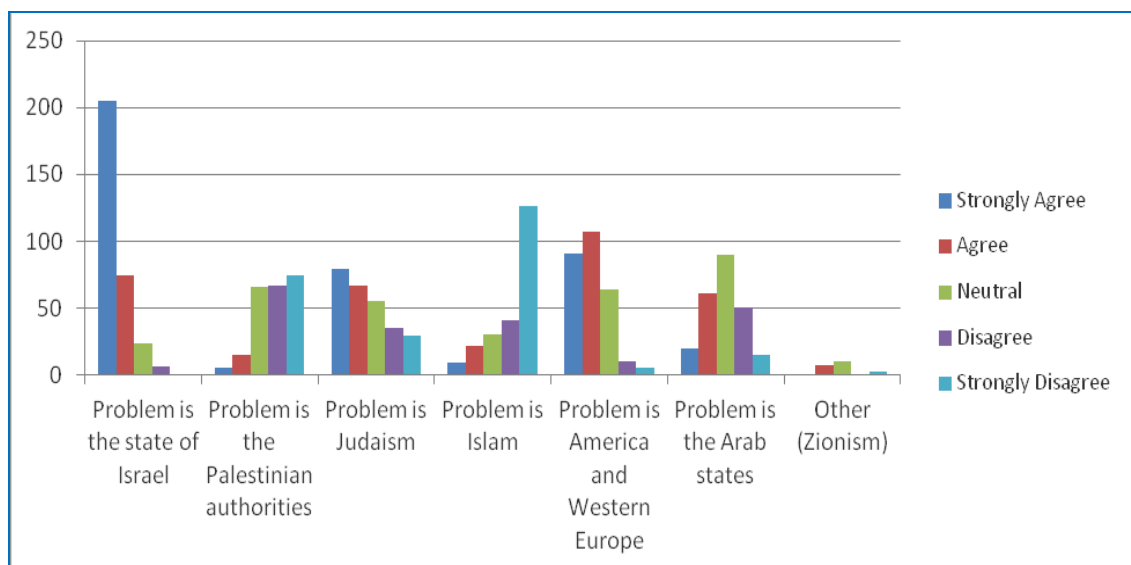


Figure 1: The nature of the problem regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict

quite a large number of people indicated that the Torah and its teachings are the source of this territorial conflict. Other respondents blamed capitalism and globalization for widening the gap between the poor/weak and the rich/powerful. Several respondents, on the other hand, see the root of the problem in terms of historical accounts claiming that the region is prone to the all kinds of conflicts because of Arab nationalism in the 20th century and the consequent Arab resistance against the Ottoman Caliph during which some Arab tribes coupled with sympathy for the British occupation. Some respondents said that “the root of the problem is the British who gave the Palestinian land to Israelis and the Palestinians who betrayed Ottomans at the first place”. Another respondent wrote this as the root of the problem: “If there was a Rashid [noble leader] Caliph, Palestine would not be as it is today”. These are some of the important details of audience responses wherein there can be found important clues on cultural and geopolitical codes of developments in the Middle East. This is to say that respondents do not just consume the text; they also bring their own meaning-making that takes reference from their own cultural and historical conditions, understandings of the current political events and socio-political backgrounds.

To the question of which way Turkey should direct its support, significant numbers of people indicated that Turkey should be on the Palestinian side. Also large numbers of people think that Turkey should stay neutral or follow the United Nations. To follow up this question, I

Table 2: How should Turkey become involved in Israel-Palestine conflict?

	n	%	Skipped
Turkey should support only the Palestinian side	185	54.9	
Turkey should support only the Israeli side	1	0.3	
Turkey should follow only the United Nations	42	12.5	
Turkey should follow only the European Union	8	2.4	
Turkey should stay neutral	101	30.0	
Total	337		22

Asked ‘if you think Turkey should become involved in the Palestine-Israel conflict, and why do you think Turkey should become involved itself in Israel-Palestine conflict’. I asked them to rank their answers from the most important reason to the least important reason. The result revealed that important numbers of people perceive the Palestine cause as a case of human rights (see **Figure 2**).

73 percent of respondents agreed that if Turkey takes part in this conflict, it should support Palestine cause because it involves human drama and human rights. Those who think that Turkey should be a regional player in the region also support Turkey’s intervention in the conflict. People who support this idea are too numerous to ignore. 52.8 percent of people indicated that this is a ‘somewhat important’ reason for Turkey to become involved in Palestine-Israel issues. A sizeable number of respondents also think that

Turkey should be involved in this conflict because Palestine (mainly referring to Jerusalem) is a holy land for Muslims, and because Palestine is part of the former Ottoman territory.

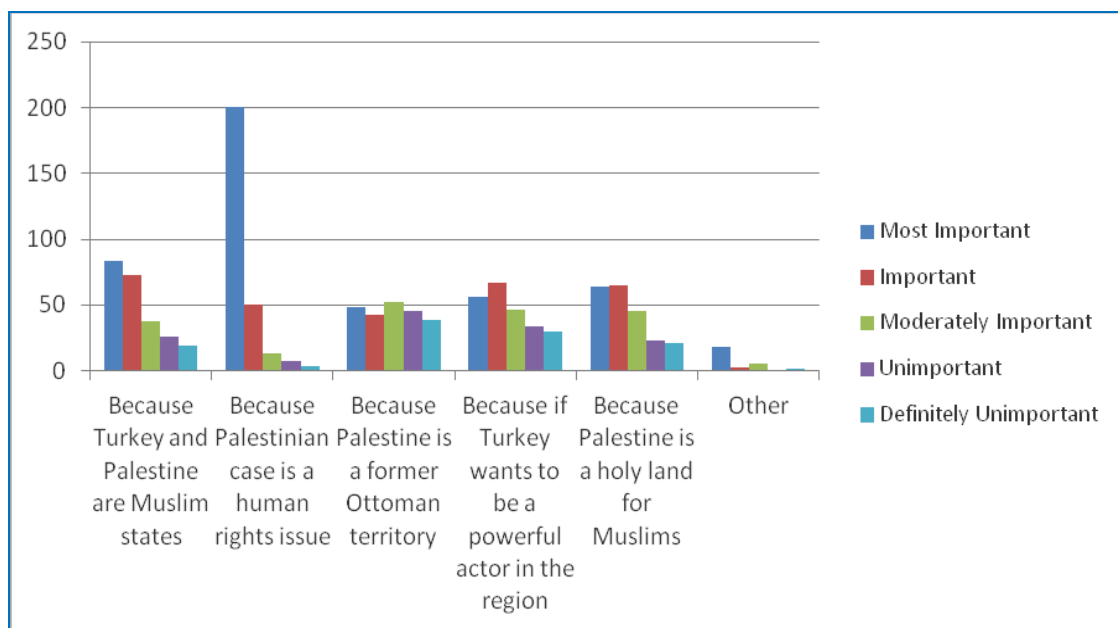


Figure 2: Why should Turkey be involved in the Israel-Palestine conflict?

This question also included the ‘other’ category. In there, respondents’ answers varied. Some insisted that Turkey should stay out of the Israel-Palestine conflict, as some indicated that what has been happening in Palestine is a crime against humanity. One respondent wrote: “If there is a human crisis there [Palestine], this should be the problem of all humanity that has rationality, conscience and self-respect. I am saying this without taking anybody’s side – religion or race. If Palestinians had done the same thing to Israelis, I would have reacted the same way. To me, humanity is essential here”. As this quote demonstrates, participants’ take on the Palestinian conflict resemble to the United Nations’ resolution on the issue that highlights the two state solutions. It can also be inferred from this response that respondents negotiate geopolitical meanings created by different political actors about

Table 3: A fair solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict cannot be established in the absence of Turkey. Do you agree?

	N	%	Skipped
Definitely agree	101	29.4	
Somewhat agree	88	25.6	
I am not sure	43	12.5	
Disagree	81	23.5	
Definitely disagree	31	9.0	
Total	344		15

Palestine-Israel issues. They also question and negotiate options that I provided for them as possible answers. They find that my options are limited and therefore they need further explanations and make further arguments to express their opinions. When I asked: ‘A fair solution to Israel-Palestine conflict cannot be accomplished in the absence of Turkey. Do you agree?’ More than half of the respondents agreed with the statement. However, people who disagreed with the idea of Turkey’s involvement made up a large majority of respondents (see **Table 3**). This indicates that large numbers of people are still uncomfortable with Turkey’s intervening in the conflict for different reasons.

Table 4: Which state or international organization can be a mediator to solve the Israel-Palestine Problem?

	n	%	Skipped
The United Nations	40	11.7	
The European Union	6	1.8	
The United States	16	4.7	
Turkey	122	35.7	
The Arab states	4	1.2	
Russia	1	0.3	
China	0	0	
Israeli and Palestinian authorities only	54	15.8	
Israel and Palestine problem cannot be solved	99	28.9	
Total	342		17

As shown in **Table 4**, 28.9 percent of respondents disagree with the idea that the Israel-Palestine conflict has clear-cut solutions. At the same time, 15.8 percent indicated that Israelis and Palestinians are the only authorities who can solve their own problems.

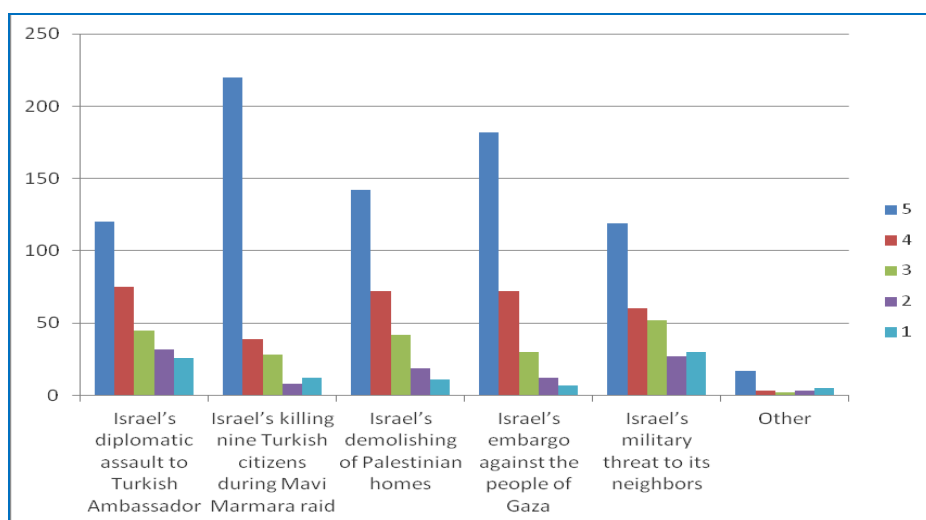


Figure 3: Effective events (5 is the most effective and 1 is the least)

Before moving to the film-effect-section of the survey, I wanted to know where people would situate Turkey on a cultural map. This question is a bit distinct thus it should be understood differently than asking where people currently see Turkey on a political map. The answer to such a question might relate to Turkey’s aspirations for joining the European Union or the West. But what I am asking here is that where people think Turkey belongs to which is related to assessing Turkey’s history and geography all together.

Table 5: In terms of cultural closeness, where do you think Turkey belongs to?

	N	%	Skipped
Europe	21	6.2	
Middle East	86	25.4	
Caucasus and Central Asia	47	13.9	
Eurasia (Europe & Asia)	162	47.9	
Other	22	6.5	
Total	338		21

As **Table 5** shows, 47 percent of the respondents located Turkey in between Europe and Asia. This correlates with Turkey’s official rhetoric saying that Turkey is a ‘bridge country’ between Europe and Asia, between the East and the West. Those who only see Turkey as a European country seem to be insignificant in numbers. In the ‘other’ option, however, people renegotiate Turkey’s cultural closeness in their own words. Some respondents indicate that Turkey “has its unique characteristics,” while some define Turkey as a ‘hybrid country,’ synthesizing all, which is not so different than to say Turkey is a bridge or Eurasian country. Some others reposition Turkey as being a country of Europe and the Middle East. These results demonstrate that Turkey’s imagined geography is ‘in between’ places and cultures, meaning that Turkey, with its material and mental borders, is a cross-road country in between Europe, the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Knowing where Turkey is located may help us better understand respondents’ opinions on Turkey’s geopolitical role in the Middle East.

Film effects

Questions on this part of the survey were directed to those who indicated that they had seen the film. Those who did not see the film were excluded from completing this part of the questionnaire. By doing this, I wanted to find out what possible roles the film played in and affecting people’s interpretations of Israel, Turkey-Israel relations, and Israel-Palestine relations. Additionally, I wanted to find out what people make of a political-action film which was produced during a time when Turkey-Israel relations reached their nadir. Initial results indicated that the film did not affect people’s perception toward Israel. Turkish audiences already had ideas about Israel-Palestine relations and Israel’s Palestine policies. To put it differently, people thought that the film was just repeating the known and familiar.

Table 6 clearly demonstrates that the film did not greatly affect audience opinion. 80 percent of the respondents indicated that their negative view of Israel stayed the same. In other words, Turkish audiences had negative preconceptions about Israel and Israel’s actions against Palestinians. Seeing a film about Palestine did not affect their views on the matter.

Table 6: After watching the film *Valley of the Wolves: Palestine*, has your perception toward Israel changed?

	N	%	Skipped
After watching the film, my opinions toward Israel has changed negatively	12	11.4	
After watching the film, my opinions toward Israel has changed positively	2	1.9	
After watching the film, my negative opinions toward Israel has stayed the same	84	80.0	
After watching the film, my positive opinions toward Israel has stayed the same	0	0	
I have no idea	7	6.7	
Total	105		254

Even though measuring changes in audiences’ opinions on Israel-Palestine conflict and Israel-Turkey relations via a single question is hard, I should note that a similar conclusion has come out when I conducted focus group interviews and semi-structured conversations with viewers of the film, VWP, in a study that has not been published yet. Thus I am confident to say that the film-audiences had pre-shaped opinions on the matter before they saw the film by looking at the result of the Table 6.

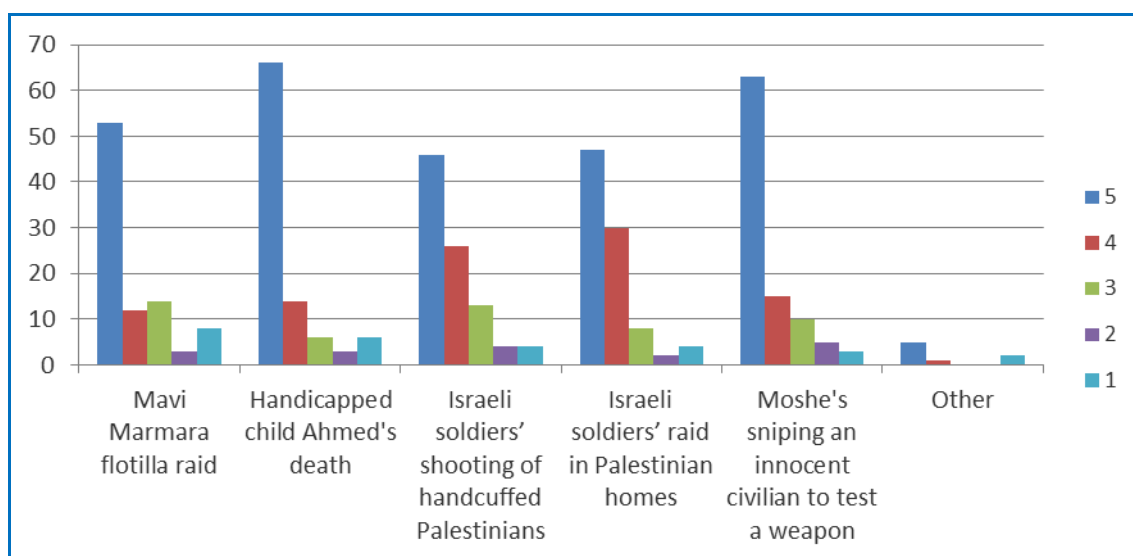


Figure 4: Please rate the following scenes in terms of affecting your opinions about Israel.

Figure 4 shows which film scenes were conceived effective by the respondents. These scenes were picked with no particular order in mind. But these filmic events were repeatedly pushed to the fore during my pilot studies as eye-catching scenes. I highlighted five of them for the survey and provided the ‘other’ option if the respondents had different ideas about film scenes that they think are more effective. As **Figure 4** shows, the scene in which the handicapped boy, Ahmed, is crushed under the debris of his home in front of his grandmother’s eye captures the attention of the participants the most. Since this question was rated as being the most effective scene (corresponds to the number 5) to the least effective scene (corresponds to the number 1), Moshe’s testing of a special bullet on a Palestinian civilian is the second most disturbing scene according to respondents. The other scenes seem to be fitting with the film’s genre of its own such as killing, shooting, and exploding. On the other hand, some important discussions were raised when the respondents were asked to put their own evaluations in the ‘other’ option. For instance, several respondents indicated that certain lines of dialogue were very effective such as, when the protagonist, Polat Alemdar, said: “I did not come to Israel, I came to Palestine”. But some other respondents were very skeptical about the film’s effectiveness altogether, saying: “this film had nothing to do with Israel or Palestine. If there was, then, I missed it”. Another viewer argued that “film is a film. It did not affect my views”. However, when I asked if this film became the voice of Turkish people more than 60 percent said that the film reflected Turkish people’s views (see Table 7). Only, 23.8 percent of the respondents disagreed with the statement saying the film did not become the voice of Turkish people.

Table 7: In your opinion, do you think that the film *Valley of the Wolves- Palestine* became the voice for Turkish peoples?

	n	%	Skipped
Definitely agree	23	21.9	
Somewhat agree	44	41.9	
Neutral	13	12.4	
Disagree	18	17.1	
Definitely disagree	7	6.7	
Total	105		254

Table 8: Do you believe that the film mirrors the current government’s Middle East policies?

	n	%	Skipped
Definitely agree	13	12.4	
Somewhat agree	30	28.6	
Neutral	31	29.5	
Disagree	25	23.8	
Definitely disagree	6	5.7	
Total	105		254

Table 8 shows possible connections between the film’s messages and the current AKP government’s Middle East policies. By looking at the table, people’s opinion about whether this film reflected the current AKP government’s policies in the Middle East is unclear. The respondents’ choice seems to concentrate in the middle of the diagram. 29.5 percent indicated that they are not so sure about the film-government relationship. However, after combining the results of ‘definitely agree’ and ‘somewhat agree’, 41 percent of respondents indicate that the film somehow reflects the current government’s Middle East policies.

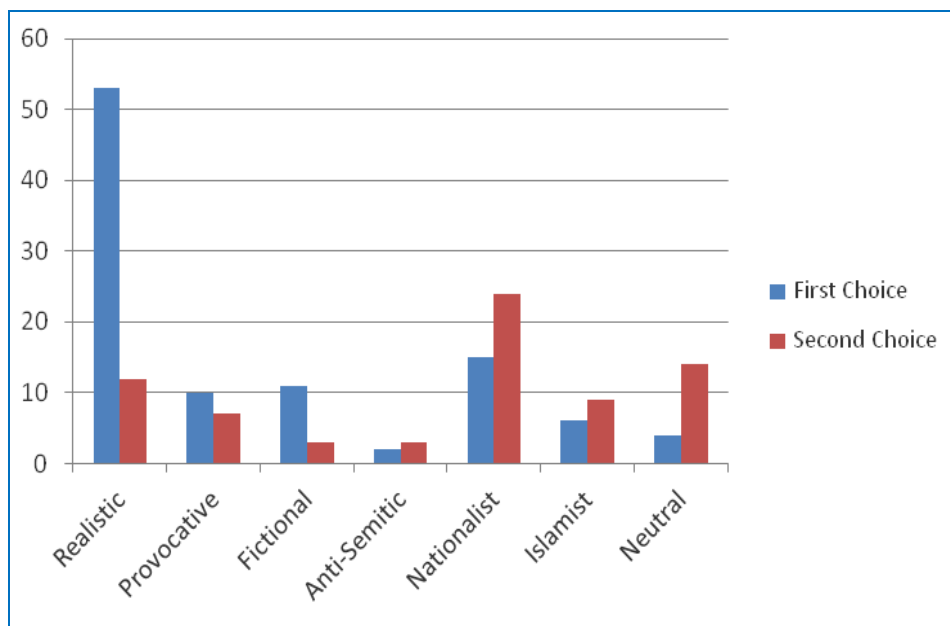


Figure 5: Overall, how do you describe the film?

At the end, when I asked respondents to categorize the film in terms of its cinematic position, a large number of people indicated that the film features some realistic presentations as well as nationalist and provocative ones. The question of what counts as realist representations depends on how people define the term ‘realistic’ within the politics of cinema and cinema culture in Turkey. However, in the follow-up studies of this online inquiry such as focus group and face-to-face interviews (unpublished) indicated that respondents called the film realistic because of its cinematizing of Palestinian drama that Turkish people believe really took place.

Results of the data reveal that peoples’ opinion about Turkey’s geopolitical role in the Middle East is complex and multifaceted, and the effects of the film in shaping the audiences’ opinions are insignificant. But the respondents’ pre-existing negative perceptions about Israel are firm. Significant numbers of people think that Turkey should be involved in Middle East politics but, on the other hand, they maintain their skepticism and pessimism about Turkey’s capability to resolve the conflict between Israel and Palestine. However, taking into account the fact that 75 percent of people imagine Turkey in the east of Europe, public opinions about Turkey’s involvement in the Israel-Palestine issues as an active

mediator can be foreseen, and, expected to be more radical in the future. As seen in the results and detailed audience opinions in the 'other' sections, respondents are relatively well informed about Turkey's international affairs (SETA, 2011), and active in their reading about the geopolitics that surrounds Turkey. In this sense, it can be said that decoding filmic messages and making geopolitics from below constitute an important part of spatialized politics of audienceship.

As mentioned earlier, a clear majority of the audience demonstrated that they had pre-conceived notions about Israel and its policies toward Palestinians before they had seen the film. It should be remembered that this survey is designed to investigate if the film *VWP* influenced respondents' perceptions about the Israel-Palestine conflict. In this sense, I argue that the film's ability to change people's opinion about the conflict remained limited. For example, the survey results suggest that 58.5 percent of those who did not see the film identified Israel as the prime problem of the conflict. Additionally, 67.8 percent of respondents who did not see the film indicated that Israel's Mavi Marmara raid influenced their opinions about Israel negatively while the same notion reached to 79.2 percent among those who indicated they saw the film. But, it is important to highlight that those who did not see the film did not automatically identify Israel as the hostile state to Turkey. Viewers' opinions about Turkey-Israel relations remained moderately positive. 65 percent of them identified Turkey-Israel relations as 'interest-based relations'. In this respect, it can be argued that the film did not affect people's opinions regarding Turkey-Israel relations, but the film did serve as a conduit to have their voice be heard. Meanwhile, many people agreed with the idea that the film presented dramatic events that supposedly really took place. To complement these findings and to better understand the factors that affect audiences' interpretations of a text and their meaning-making behaviors, online audience comments are also investigated in the following section.

Online audience comments: Engaging Valley of the Wolves: Palestine

In the second part of the paper, an online film readership (I call them 'users' in this paper) is brought to the fore-front to shed some light on online audiences' engagement with *VWP* while adding their critical reading of a text within their network(ing) context. To do this, Sinemalar.com -a widely referenced movie website in Turkish- is counted as the source of audience comments. In this membership-only website, users freely leave their comments and respond to the comments of others. Commenters are not forced to use their actual identity or provide an actual picture of theirs to become a member. Two things immediately surface on this website to make their comments important for this study. First, comments are anonymous; there is no authorship associated with the comments because no real names are used which ultimately encourages people to speak freely with each other. Second, viewers on this internet site take films seriously and assess them critically for others to see be it producers or other users. Users in this site assess films critically by discussing scenes, actors/actresses, and scenarios in addition to rating the films between 1 and 10⁴ as 10 indicates the most liked.

Because of these two important characteristics of the site, Sinemalar.com makes boundaries between producers and consumers transparent, fluent and active. Through these applications, online audiences enjoy being both the author and the consumer (Wiatrowski, 2011). By critiquing the text and others' comments about the text and being critiqued by others for their comments and showing their likes and dislikes, users actively engage with the text. Thus, constant dialogues between users continue and they push hard to influence others to see the film or warn others to keep their mind awake as they watch it.

The examined comments are taken out of a total of 2025 comments, which were posted before and after the film was released. From reading through several hundred of these comments, I included the arguments that can mainly be categorized in two opposing groups: arguments that are in favor of the film and arguments that are unfavorable about the film although these arguments by no means are an attempt to reduce users' engagements with the film in a simplistic form. Users' interpretations of the film are much more complex, unfixed and therefore should be analyzed within a broader context.

Valley of the Wolves: Palestine – A monument to bravery

One of the immediate categorizations that can be drawn from reading online comments left for the *VWP* is that some users appreciate the film for being bold and showing aggressive attitude toward Israel. This group perceives Israel to be a hostile state toward the entire Muslim world and Palestinians in particular. Users in this group show their solidarity with the film makers and read the film as one geopolitical text that challenges dominant perceptions that are put forward by the western entertainment sector. One user shares the following comment after outlining several problems with the film:

... After all, there is one thing about this film that made me be happy about the Turkish cinema, and that is that this film brought different perspectives on understanding of the 'East' and the 'West'. For years, Asian people have been portrayed as hostile and belligerent by Hollywood and European cinema. In the history of Turkish cinema, this film reverses this perception by repeating catchwords between the lines over and over again without fearing from anything. Just because of this reason, I recommend everyone see this film (posted by TheManiac on 9/10/11).

Another user wants to draw other users' attention to cultural imperialism to which the user connects the film industry as being a crucial part of it. Thus, he/she attempts to inform and warn others to be aware of this cultural imperialism trap. This user's favoring for the film derives from a strategic point of departure, one that underlines an informed readership. After giving a paragraph-long definition of what cultural imperialism is in his/her point of view and explaining how indigenous cultures disappear while American culture dominates all, he/she adds:

... Why I am sharing this with you is just to say that one of the most important vehicles of cultural imperialism is cinema today. Look at films. In them, white is always good and saves everyone's life. Was not the white who saved Japan in the film, *Last Samurai*? Because of this, whenever we watch films, we always have to have this consciousness [cultural imperialism trap] in our mind, first and foremost. And when we make films, we have to calculate this factor as well. In other words, the best strategy should be to hunt your opponents with their own weapon. Keeping this piece of information in your mind I say, watch this film immediately (posted by Edipdemircan on 10/10/11).

"To hunt opponents with their own weapon" phrase is believed to be one of the important tactics of war practiced and advised by the prophet Muhammad. This user by referring to the prophet's war tactic as in the case of conservative cinema tradition which will be explained later sees cinema as a weapon of influence rather than a piece of entertainment of the modern life. This is no different than states are seeing cinema as the source of power of behavior to influence hearts and minds of other nations. For this very reason, in many academic writings highlighting the geopolitics of cinema either within international relations and area studies or political communication studies put more emphasis on nations' power of ability to obtain outcomes they want. In Nye's conceptualization, it is the 'soft power' that is needed to exercise in order to influence other nations. He explains soft power as a "countries ability to influence events through persuasion and attraction, rather than military or financial coercion" (Nye, 2004, p. 6). Turkey as an emerging power in the Middle East and a geopolitical actor in the periphery of the international system by all means seeks to influence former Ottoman nations and geographies in the form of economic and cultural exchanges (Aras, 2009). Thus, understanding the vitality of popular culture as a 'soft power' is essential in terms of interpreting Turkish audiences' responses. Moreover, situating the film, *VWP*, within the map of Turkish audiences' responses, the importance of mobilizing this power for the benefits of Turkey and Turkish geopolitics in the Middle East as well as in different regions is a crucial task.

One user uses a different analogy to support the idea of why this film should be watched by everyone. The user wants other users to pay attention to one Turkish newspaper that brings out a critical session held in the European Parliament about *VWP*. He/she underlines the importance of the film by referencing the news in the newspaper. To the user, the logic goes like this: if the film becomes a topic of a European parliamentary, then it must contain something important so that it is worth watching. He/she notes:

The European Parliamentary, Stefan Fule, gives resolution of a question about the danger that what *Valley of the Wolves: Palestine* can cause in Europe. Fule wants the EU to discuss the matter of whether the film should be allowed in European countries or not. The impression I got from this

development is that there must be something important about this film that they [Europeans] don't like to see or are afraid of. Otherwise, Europeans would not be panicking like that (posted by Veronicasue on 8/10/11).

There are other users who congratulate Pana Film for even thinking about producing films such as this -very anti-Israel and bold in criticizing Israel. These users think that Israel is the most influential state in the world with strong ties around the world. Users believe that in reality it is almost impossible to confront with Israel and its power networks. Thus some users praise the Pana Film as being the only group that is bold enough to stand against Israeli power. For that reason, they welcome the film's anti-Israel representations and congratulate the Pana film for its cinematic confrontation with Israel. For example, one user declares:

I congratulate the team of production just because of their extreme courage for making such a film without worrying about Israel's economic, military and political power and without fearing from supporters and collaborators of Israel around the world (posted by hitm11 on 6/5/11).

In the same framework, another user blames Turkish diplomats and government officials for failing to follow the path of the Ottoman Empire and its mission. For the user, this film, even though it has many cinematographic flaws, succeeds to glorify Turkey's name at the global scale. The user also congratulates the film for being the first anti-Zionist film in Turkey. He/she notes:

... Even though the film is terrible in many aspects, it still should be watched just because of its ideological stance and for cinematizing the story of an oppressed people. I don't think any other film company could have even dared to produce a film like *Valley of the Wolves: Palestine* (posted by blade44 on 9/10/11).

Valley of the Wolves: Palestine: An exploiter and a heart hijacker

The opposing point of view stresses that the film is a sensational and unrealistic junk. When viewers criticize the film, they explain why they dislike this film in long paragraphs at the same time question its authenticity. Users instantly recognize the film's deliberate attempt to exploit emotions intensified immediately after the Mavi Marmara incident. In the following discussions, users highlight how the filmmakers abuse public sensitivity and how this sensitivity can be turned into profit. Noticeably, users in this discussion forum seem to be well informed about the Pana Film products and political economy that operates within the film industry. One user notes:

Polat and his men finished America in Iraq [referencing the film *Valley of the Wolves-Iraq* (2006)] and now they are heading to Israel to finish them without any casualties on their side. They go to Israel to avenge the Mavi Marmara attack so to speak. At first, they act like they are there to protect the oppressed but suddenly you see the art of killing. Number of Israelis and of course many Palestinians are killed. What do they think? To kill several Israeli, they cause the death of hundreds of Palestinians. Palestinians die like pears falling down from a tree. Is this how they protect the oppressed? Is this what the cinema is all about? And look at their dress. They dress suit and so called Palestinian scarf around their shoulder. Is this how much you [Pana film] know about Palestinians? No one in that region wears that kind of scarf if you want to know the fact. That scarf is Turkish made for Kurds in Turkey. This film is nothing more than stroking Turkish sensitivity and nationalism. The Palestinian cause should never be exploited like this (posted by mtiske on 10/30/11).

Viewers who criticize the film note that the film inadequately addresses the point, which should be to vocalize the Palestinian cause worldwide. They argue that the film contains no subject, no story and no point of view from the beginning to the end. One user says:

This was the most absurd, ridiculous, dumb, aimless and subjectless [pointless] film I have ever seen (posted by XlasisMatthew on 9/30/11).

Users not only criticize the film and the film makers, but also critique the critics. They accuse other commentators for thinking ideologically or viewing the film through a nationalistic lenses rather than rationally. In the comments, it was noticeable that users did not just write their thoughts randomly and then faded away. They seemed reading each other's comments and responding to them seriously. In other words, users were not only the simple consumers of the text but were also active authors. They affect others and are affected by others in these ongoing anonymous exchanges they make. They are not passive readers; they actively contribute to the meaning making of the text even when their participation in affecting the original text is limited. The users seemed to be well aware the power of such online discussion forms to influence other users' opinions. One user shares his/her thoughts:

I read many comments. Except few of them, they were all written with nationalist and chauvinist mindset. The excuse is the film's ideological stand point and its position to reflect the reality. What a nonsense excuse. What is stopping you from filming Palestinian realities? Do it. To me, what is described as the Palestinian problem in this film is not even the tip of the iceberg [the film did not even touch the real problem in Palestine]. But,

making a film about reality has nothing to do with making a watchable film. I criticize films from artistic and cinematic qualities. If the film lacks quality, who cares about if the film mirrors the reality. You just cannot kill a team of army with your four men. Is this how you reflect the reality (posted by Hijyenik on 09/27/11)?

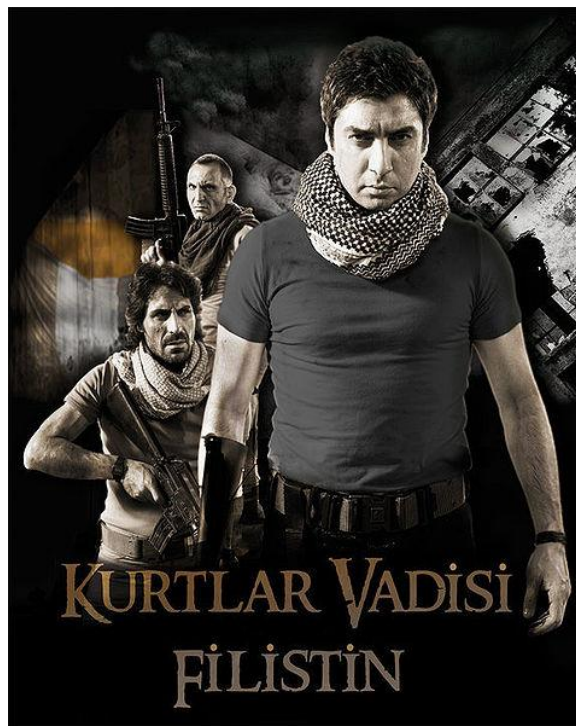


Figure 6: A movie poster showing Polat and his men.

Source: Yerlifilmizle.blogspot.com

In some other comments, users show impressive knowledge of Turkish contemporary cinema. It seems like they extensively read related news about films before they go to theaters. Even, their comments can be qualified as professional-like (meaning, one is trained to critique an art work) reviews and their readings of current Turkish cinema trend seems to be an instructive one. These users situate the film *VWP* in the conservative cinema tradition in which Islamic and nationalist world view is promoted.

In this tradition, film makers believe that a conservative cinema should function as an important visual-language to formulate an 'imagined political community' while creating new ways of thinking about the past and the present (Anderson, 1991). This recent growing interest in conservative film production, in many cases, is understood to have connections with so called the light-Islamist party, Justice and Development Party, AKP. A commonly held belief is that the ruling party, AKP, supported conservative cinema-art sector because they both shared the same cause (Uguz, 2010). For instance, Uguz claims that the director of *New York'ta Beş Minare* (*Five Minarets in New York*, 2010), a Mahsun Kirmızıgül film, enforces AKP-oriented international and national policies, and Fetullah Gulen tendentious

world view. Several comments connect this tradition and the film to the currently increasing political Islam and the Fetullah Gulen movement.⁵ It is only recently that cinema's socio-political effects have been rediscovered by conservative cinema producers and they have begun to include Islamic and traditional topics in their films (Güven, 2008). This new interest for making films about conservative and nationalist themes grew exponentially especially when Islamic and/or conservative business firms increased their market share in the Turkish economy and began investing in the art sector as they used to invest in religious structures and activities. These wealthy business people backed art forms that would highlight traditional values, enforce cultural unity and advocate for national togetherness as seen in the TV series *Kurtlar Vadisi (Valley of the Wolves, 2003)*, *New York'ta Beş Minare (Five Minarets in New York, 2010)*, *Hür Adam (Free Man, 2010)*, and *Fetih 1453 (Conquest 1453, 2012)*.

For example, the producer and the director of *Free Man*, Mehmet Tanrisever (he is known to have close relations with the Fetullah Gulen Movement), is also a businessman and the owner of the Feza Film company which produced other conservative cinema films such as *Minyeli Abdullah I and II*. Tanrisever's return to cinema as a producer and director after 20 years of absence was because of his belief in cinema's role in educating people. Tanrisever stated this to a newspaper reporter about his recent film *Free Man*: "conservative business people now have money but they are hardly motivated to invest in art. I believe that cinema is the best tool to educate people... if I knew my film attracts no audience, I would still make this film" (Tokay, 2011, p. 5). His remarks on the film's significance for a production displays similarities to what the scriptwriter of *Valley of the Wolves: Palestine*, Cüneyt Aysan, said about his film. Aysan in an interview with me (not published) said that "even if one person sees the film, it means a success for us. Quantity is not an important matter here; what is important is how successful we are able to present an alternative version of the story objectively even if we cannot change the perceptions completely". This demonstrates that conservative cinema producers have different agendas other than producing just art and entertainment. However, how the audiences receive the film's intended messages is not a linear or passive manner as the paper highlights throughout this study. Here is another commentary contrasting the intended message and finding this film 'outrageous'. He/she says:

What kind of mind can write such a scenario? Why are people dying? What is the reason for? And why are Palestinians dying all the time? Why are they dying for Polat and his men? ...here we see the summit of the conservative cinema. Here are the fruits of congregationalism in the country and the film industry. Why is there this much desire to comfort nationalist sensations in this latest Turkish film sector? Even exaggeration has to have logical limits (posted by Tiensanli on 9/19/11).

As illustrated in the comment above, users are very critical of the film not because of its agenda but mainly because of its unrealistic fictionalization of the scenario. They point out that neither art nor aesthetic should be sacrificed in the name of publicizing human tragedy in Palestine. The two are not mutually exclusive. They also note that the message of the film itself cannot qualify the film as watchable unlike other opinions which highlight that although the film is dramatized; it still addresses the heart of the geopolitical issue.

Conclusion

In this paper, descriptive results of the survey showed that the Turkish people's negative opinions about Israel are generally the same among those who watched the film *VWP* and those who did not. Indeed, it seemed to be that this negative image toward Israel among Turkish people has much more to do with an already-damaged Turkey-Israel relationship stemming from the 2008 Gaza (Israel's offensive bombing of Gaza) and the following events than the effects of the film. Participants in this survey repeatedly and overwhelmingly expressed that their negative opinions toward Israel stayed the same. However, this does not mean that Turkish people's readings of the film are identical. Truly, their reaction to the film and interpretations of Turkey-Israel, Israel-Palestine, and Turkey-Palestine relations differed in many ways. Again, perception of Israel among Turkish people did not significantly differ between those who saw the film and those who did not see it. This outcome supports the idea that Turkish people had pre-conceived notions toward Israel, its policies toward Palestine and its geopolitical position in the Middle East.

From analyzing viewers' comments in the second part of the paper, mainly two opposite views of the film emerge. On one side, some viewers see this film as a popular geopolitical text that defies the power of Zionism and as a text that restores and remake the Palestinian nationhood and territoriality. In this framework, users appreciate the story (the story of Palestine) *VWP* communicates more than how the story is told (filmic quality). Users dismiss their artistic and cinematic criticism just because of the film's boldness to tell such a story of human drama in Palestine and the Zionist oppression of Palestine. In this sense, the users believe that the film indubitably serves the purpose.

On the other hand, users decry the film for being extremely political and unrealistic with no decent story attached to it. They challenge the film producers for being chauvinistic and extreme in fictionalizing the Palestinian story. Users find no reason for being cinematic extreme in the geography of the film where no place is safe for Palestinians. They indicate that whatever the message might be, a film should never disconnect itself from the filmic reality even if the expectations of extreme actions from a political-action subgenre are high. Moreover, some of the users point out that a film should never be a vehicle for a certain political agenda if it wants to stay in the limits of cinematic taste.

However, what seems to be in common in both sides' comments about the film is that both sides share their discomfort about Israel's actions against Palestinians. Users acknowledge the film's necessity to publicize the human drama that continues to take place in Palestine and greatly value indispensability of bringing it to the attention of international

movie audiences. However, as mentioned, what separates each view from one another is that the lack of film quality and the dissatisfaction with the fictional characteristics of the film versus the importance of the story. In other words, the core of the online discussion comments centers around the arguments in which one side emphasizes the importance of the message while other is critical of the quality and factuality of (re)presenting the story. To put it differently, the online discussion comments mainly tackle with the question of whether the authenticity and cinema art should be sacrificed in the name of sending political messages. In this sense, the audiences' comments show some contradictions as well as some overlapping.

As mentioned earlier, a key data source for this research was gathered through online-film-comments, coordinated through an online discussion forum, *sinemalar.com*. User readings within this online discussion forum can be categorized in two ways: those who embraced the film as a monument of bravery against the power of Zionism and as those who rejected the film in terms of its butchering the artistic side of the film-making at the expense of conveying political messages. It should be noted that the latter group did not discard the film messages completely but rejected the film-makers' mindset for not respecting cinema as a form of art. After closely surveying of comments on this online discussion forum, it should be also noted that the film viewers (users of the online form) possessed valid knowledge of the *Valley of the Wolves* phenomenon which has dominated the Turkish cinema culture for years. Their film readings and analysis of the film's conjectural roles in Turkish society were significant. Another important point that can be drawn from users' discussion is that some users were uncomfortable the way the filmmakers portrayed Palestinians in the film. They were agitated by the fact that the film treats Palestinians as the 'other' while prioritizing Turkish bravery and heroism. In other words, the film implicitly (if not explicitly) engages in orientalizing Palestine, identifying the Palestinian case as the new (Turkish) white man's burden. In this respect, I can say that users did not easily adopt the film's goal (to visualize the Palestinian struggle) as a noble action, as the producers intended. In this sense, users' comments in this forum were exclusively enriching for this study not only because their comments were well articulated, but also because these comments were a part of audience interpretations that were made without any fabricated environment or any interference from the researcher.

This study also makes a point that people do not consume films passively. Their engagement with any cinematic text is negotiated (supporting Hall's encoding/decoding study) and embedded within the current socio-political conditions (Hall, 1980; Morley, 1980). Therefore to better understand people's meaning-making process, one needs to understand different socio-political and cultural conditions within which a text is produced, consumed and reproduced. Perhaps, utilizing multiple audience reception methods along with an extensive investigation on the site of the text and production of the text would give us a better picture about audience reception and meaning-making process.

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Acknowledgements:

The author would like to thank Martin Barker and two other reviewers for their helpful comments for improving this paper. Any remaining shortcomings are the author's own.

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Notes:

¹ Other countries: USA, England, Italy, Iran, France, Germany, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, China, Denmark, Armenia, South Korea, Croatia, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Japan, Canada, Cyprus (Greek), Cyprus (Turkish), Hungary, Macedonia, Norway, Portugal, Russia, Serbia, Ukraine, Greece (Source: imdb.com).

² This study also included focus group discussions and two interviews with one of the scriptwriters and activists of the Mavi Marmara Flotilla.

³ In some questions, 'other' is given as an option where respondents would answer the question in their own words instead of choosing given limited options.

⁴ Valley of the Wolves-Palestine's overall score is 7.6 out of 10 rated by sinemalar.com viewers. This is slightly higher than those of Valley of the Wolves-Iraq and Gladio which both received 7.4 out of 10

⁵ Often referred to as 'The Gulen Movement' or 'The Fetullah Gulen Community', it is a social (Islamic) movement that originates in Turkey. The movement has millions of supporters in Turkey and hundreds of schools and cultural centers, many publication houses, and television stations in Turkey and all around the world. The leader of the community, Fetullah Gulen (Hodja Effendi), currently resides in the Poconos of Pennsylvania, USA.