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Request Type: Copy

BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Call Number:

Author: Williams, Brian Glyn
Title: Insight Turkey : quarterly research and information journal with focus on Turkey.
ISSN: 1302-177X
Edition: any
Imprint: Istanbul : Center for Intercultural Dialogue and Cooperation, 1999 9999
Article: "Valley of the Wolves, Iraq.' Turkey's Popular Culture..."
Date: Jan-Mar 2006
Verified: WorldCat Type: Serial, Internet Resource

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Valley of the Wolves, Iraq: Turkey's Popular Culture Reacts to the Unsettling Presence of the U.S. in Iraq in Film and Novels

Brian Glyn Williams*

Pop culture in the surrounding regions, however, offers unique insights into the popular perceptions of American activities in Iraq, and none more so than in Turkey, a nation seemingly obsessed with the American presence next-door. Turkey, a Western-leaning secular country that is both a member of NATO and an applicant for membership in the European Union, has a vibrant and expressive pop culture that at first glance seems to emulate all things American. Thankfully, stereotypes of American GIs and Americans in general among the Westernized Turks have not, however, led to any violent anti-Americanism in Turkey. For the average Turk, America is thus a focus of conflicting feelings of admiration and a growing sense of distrust.

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As recent history demonstrates full scale military invasions of sovereign nations, even rogue states like Saddam Hussein's Iraq, have unintended ripple effects on the peoples living in the surrounding regions. But the true impact of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq on the average person in the street in Syria, Iran or Turkey is hard to gauge.

Pop culture in the surrounding regions, however, offers unique insights into the popular perceptions of American activities in Iraq, and none more so than in Turkey, a nation seemingly obsessed with the American presence next-door. Turkey, a Western-leaning secular country that is both a member of NATO and an applicant for membership in the European Union, has a vibrant and expressive pop culture that at first glance seems to emulate all things American.

Kral Television, Turkey's answer to MTV, for example is full of Turkish rap music and metal rock that, while amusing to American purists, is taken seriously by hordes of Turkish teenagers who avidly digest it. And one can hardly miss the impact of American culture on Turkish clothing. Turks young and old don baggy surfing shorts, polo shirts, the latest converse sneakers, baseball caps, and compete with Puff Daddy in crafting their own rap fashions.

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But the Turks’ fascination with things American does not necessarily translate into popular support for the invasion of Iraq which most Turks see as separate from the war on al-Qaeda. This is best demonstrated in a recent *Turk Cola* television ad which features an African American GI in the desert stopping to take a drink from what looks to be a Turkish Coca-Cola bottle. As the refreshing drink pours down his parched throat the American soldier suddenly wakes up, as if from a trance, and turns to throw off his helmet and return home. In the background the advertisement has

the words of Turkey’s beloved founder, Kemal Atatürk, which state “*Yurtta Sulh, Cihanda Sulh*” (Peace at Home, Peace Abroad). The implications are obvious, Americans need to ‘chill out’ and go back home.

For another example of the popular distrust of the Americans who have invaded their region, one has but to peruse the selection offered in Turkish book stores. One of the hottest items on the shelves is the best seller *Metal Fırtına* (*Metal Storm*), an implausible Tom Clanceyesque novel which graphically describes a future U.S. invasion of Turkey.¹ And this wildly popular work has spawned a virtual genre of imitators which take as their premise the U.S. invasion of Turkey in search of alternative sources of fuel.

But these rather enjoyable ‘what if’ books offering futuristic scenarios are not as disturbing as the slew of more ‘serious’ scholarly works which purport to offer insight into the ‘inevitable’ American invasion of Turkey. A theme which emerges from such works is that Americans are far too discerning a people to have bought into the implausible hype about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction.

One self-proclaimed American expert, Hakan Türk, appears to have cornered the market on explaining America’s deeper rationale for invading Iraq. In such books as *The American Empire*, *The Turkish-American War*, and *The Countries on America’s Hit List* Hakan Türk claims that the U.S.’s long-term secret agenda is actually to dismantle the pre-existing states in the region, including Turkey, in order create a homeland for the region’s twenty million Kurds.² It will be the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of Mandates and the state of Israel all over again, only this time the Kurds will be the beneficiaries of Western occupation. While these works offer no

plausible motive for why the U.S. would seek to deconstruct Turkey, a trusted NATO ally, and build a Kurdistan, they take it as an article of faith that America intends to do so in the near future.

What is disturbing is how widely believed this and other counter-intuitive myths associated with America’s ‘real’ reasons for invading Iraq have become in this land that is ironically enough full of *Amerikan özentileri* (‘American wannabes’).



Valley of the Wolves – Iraq

Many Turks, including those who are open admirers of the U.S., seemed to have overlooked America's difficulties in controlling even a small portion of Iraq, the Sunni Triangle, and bought into the hype about a future "Operation Turkish Freedom."

Seen in this context, it was perhaps inevitable that Turkey's growing movie industry got into the act by producing a blockbuster movie designed to play upon Turks' fearful fascination with America. The current hit movie *Valley of the Wolves-Iraq*, which opened on February 3, is Turkey's most expensive movie production to date.³ It is based upon the real story of a Turkish special force unit's capture by U.S. troops in Iraq in July 2003. The Turkish unit of eleven soldiers were caught arming local Turkmen in northern Iraq and mistaken for Iraqi insurgents. In the process they were unceremoniously hooded, hand-cuffed and shipped back to Turkey by the American military.

The whole incident offended Turks who take great pride in their military and played on their brewing distrust of American intentions in the region. Based upon a wildly popular television series *Kurtlar Vadisi* (Valley of the Wolves), the movie version is premised on the adventures of a fictional Turkish special force commander, Polat Alemdar, who returns to Iraq to avenge this humiliation of his men by the Americans.

The main villain in *Valley of the Wolves Iraq*, an American commander named Sam William Marshall, played by Billy Zane, resembles the stereotypical American imperialists found in *Metal Storm* and other examples of anti-American literature in Turkey. Marshall is a sadist who sends his victims to the notorious U.S. prison of Abu Ghraib and has no compunction about gunning down innocent Iraqis attending a wedding. Such searing images will no doubt impact the ways in which millions of Turks view America and represent a public relations fiasco for the U.S. in its battle for the hearts and minds of the Muslim world.

Thankfully, stereotypes of American GIs and Americans in general among the Westernized Turks have not, however, led to any violent anti-Americanism in Turkey. Secularized Turks still line up in droves to eat in McDonalds in Istanbul, many send their children to school to learn American English, most still listen to American music and watch American movies, and the vast majority of Turks support the U.S. war against the al-Qaeda terrorists who also struck their country in November 2003.⁴ For the average Turk, America is thus a focus of conflicting feelings of admiration and a growing sense of distrust.

One person from Istanbul whom I interviewed summed up his countrymen's mixed feelings about Americans when he admitted "Of course we Turks admire you Americans, but we are also paranoid about you just like you are about Muslims. But there is one big difference between us and you.... We won't be coming to your neighborhood anytime soon in search of Kurdish weapons of mass destruction!"

“ Stereotypes of American GIs and Americans in general among the Westernized Turks have not, however, led to any violent anti-Americanism in Turkey ”

Endnotes:

1. For Turkey's best-selling book about the U.S. invasion of Turkey *Metal Storm* (Metal Fırtına) see the following sites:
 - a. <http://dukkandharma.com.tr/V1/Pg/BookDetail/Number/18479>
 - b. To order see: <http://kitap.antoloji.com/kitap.asp?kitap=37560>
or <http://www.ideefixe.com/Kitap/tanim.asp?sid=S3DFVURGSF6F220LFBDJ>
 - d. See also website devoted to author and *Metal Fırtına 2* found at: <http://www.xasiork.net/medya/>
2. Books by Hakan Türk: found at: <http://kitap.antoloji.com/kisi.asp?CAS=39357>
Amerika'nın Hedefindeki Ülkeler. (The Countries on America's Hit List) Istanbul, 2004.
Amerikan İmparatorluğu. (The American Empire) Istanbul, 2003.
Türk Amerikan Savaşı. (The Turkish American War) Akademi TV Yayıncılık; Siyasi Tarih, 2005.
3. For websites discussing the movie *Kurtlar Vadisi Irak* (Valley of the Wolves Iraq) and the surrounding furor see about Americans being depicted as blood-thirsty killers see: "In Turkish Movie Americans Kill Innocents" AOL News at:
<http://aolsvc.news.aol.com/movies/article.adp?id=20060202084309990001>
"Turkish Movie Depicts Americans as Savages" CNN.com
http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/europe/02/02/turkish.movie.ap/?section=cnn_latest
See also Turkish websites such as the *Valley of the Wolves-Iraq* fan-club site at:
<http://www.kurtlarvadisi.de/index.php>
4. See Brian Glyn Williams. "El Kaide Turka: Tracing an al-Qaeda Splinter Cell." *Terrorism Monitor*. Volume 2 Issue 22 (November 18, 2004). found at: brianglynwilliams.com (under Publications)