

Valley of the Wolves as Representative of Turkish Popular Attitudes toward Iraq

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Abstract

In 2006, the Turkish film, Valley of the Wolves (Kurtlar Vadisi-Irak) (Serdar Akar, 2006), was released to audiences in Turkey and Europe. Costing \$10 million, it was the most costly production in the history of Turkish cinema, breaking all box office records in the country. A fantastical account of a Turkish victory over a fictional US invasion of the country, Valley of the Wolves has been interpreted as a reaction to the ‘Sack Incident’ (‘çuval olayı’) of July 2003, in which eleven Turkish soldiers were hooded and arrested in northern Iraq shortly after the United States invasion. The film’s title hence refers to a dark and dangerous place where howling and vicious ‘wolves’—namely Americans and Kurds—are gathered.

This paper argues that Valley of the Wolves confirms a reemergence of 1960s Turkish industry (Yeşilçam) films which emphasized the historical conflict between Western and Islamic values. It discusses the extent to which Valley of the Wolves reflects popular Turkish attitudes toward the US war on Iraq, and it analyzes the film’s projection of Turkish humiliation, anger, and frustration following the Sack Incident. The paper also addresses how Valley of the Wolves engages US–Turkish relations and Turkish concerns over current Iraq-related politics, especially the US–Kurdish alliance, the establishment of an independent Kurdistan, Turkmen and the issue of Kirkuk, US violations of international law in Iraq, and the conflict between Islam and Christianity.¹

Introduction

Yeşilçam (literally, ‘Green Pine’), the historical Turkish film industry, underwent significant growth following the Second World War, when it began producing scores of films annually. By the 1960s, Turkey had become the world’s sixth largest cinematic producer—but this ‘golden era’ would not last, as political crisis and the introduction of television and video led to Yeşilçam’s decline (Dönmez-Colin 2007, 51). Susan Hayward argues that 1960s Turkish cinema saw the emergence of two national film movements, the first of which was preoccupied with the perceived conflict between ‘Western values and Islamic traditional values’, especially through depiction of Turkish traditions, a recurrent theme that would reemerge during the 1990s, and the second of which was concerned with ‘Islamic ideology’ (436-7), an issue that would reemerge during the 2000s, in films such as *A Man’s Fear of God (Takva)* (2006) by Özer Kiziltan, *Times and*

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Winds (Beş Vakit) (2006) by Reha Erdem, *Destiny (Kader)* (2006) by Zeki Demirkubuz, and *Adam's Trains (Adem'in Trenleri)* (2007) by Baris Pirhasan (Deniz and Akkaya, *Sundays Zaman*).

After 1980, Turkish cinema experienced exceptional decline. Audiences came to prefer Hollywood to Turkish films, as the latter was increasingly devoid of popular appeal. In 1986, the Turkish Ministry of Culture, sensing the danger of such decline, intervened to support Turkish cinema in various, often novel ways (Hayward, 436). Turkish directors were compelled to adapt to market imperatives through utilization and dependence upon new Western technologies. This enabled them to produce hybrid genre films (usually of the action–suspense variety) as well as to tackle sensitive themes of public concern, including unofficial government practices, migration, and the Kurdish question. Ironically, such themes were addressed more openly than ever, as freedom of expression had come to be encouraged in conjunction with Turkish efforts to rapproche European Union standards (Ayliffe et al., 1055).

More recently, a *post*-Yeşilçam cinema has emerged, in which high-budget commercial successes have been produced. These include *Vizontele* (2001) by Yılmaz Erdoğan and Ömer Faruk Sorak, starring Yılmaz Erdoğan, *G.O.R.A.* (2007) by Ömer Faruk Sorak, starring Cem Yılmaz, *Vizontele Tuuba* (the sequel to *Vizontele*) (2004) by Yılmaz Erdoğan, and *Valley of the Wolves* (Serdar Akar, 2006). This blockbuster aspect notwithstanding, the ‘trends’ characteristic of post-Yeşilçam cinema since the 1980s (Dönmez-Colin 2006, 119) have largely been associated with particular directors—what Erdoğan and Göktürk refer to as *auteurism* (536)—thus rendering the new development imprecise and disunified.

Of the big-budget films, *Valley of the Wolves* is noteworthy for its focus on the continuing conflict between Islam and the West, its projection of desire for understanding between those ostensible adversaries, and for a nationally unified Turkish government that can embrace all religious and ethnic groups within the country. Hence, its thematic roots are locatable to 1960s Yeşilçam, which emphasized the importance of a strong government capable of protecting its citizens, both inside and outside geographical borders, in a way that would safeguard the dignity of all Turks. In the wake of the film’s success, *The Masked Five in Iraq* (2007) was released. It portrays a gang of Turks who

dupe United States officers stationed in Iraq in order to secure Iraqi oil resources, thus capitalizing upon the range of patriotic feeling evoked by *Valley of the Wolves*. A third film in this veritable sub-genre, yet more nostalgic in tone, is *The Last Ottoman* (2007), which concerns the heroism of an Ottoman soldier during the latter part of the First World War (Butler, *Turkish Daily News*).

Background to *Valley of the Wolves*

In 2004, a novel entitled *Metal Storm* (*Metal Firtina*) was published in Turkey. Co-authored by science-fiction writer, Orkun Ucar, and journalist, Burak Turna, *Metal Storm* was especially popular among Turkish military, Foreign Ministry, and Cabinet personnel. Its story is set in (a future) 2007, as US forces invade Turkey from neighboring Iraq and destroy the country in ways that recall the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Following the fictional, 2007 invasion, the US attempts to divide Turkey among its historical adversaries, Greece and Armenia, and establish a Kurdish state. Finally, a Kurdish-Turkish hero, Gokan, comes to the rescue and saves Turkey by attacking the US with a nuclear weapon (Widmer, 2005; Schleifer, 2005). Over 50,000 copies of *Metal Storm* have been sold.

Metal Storm was published one year after the ‘Sack Incident’ (*‘çuval olayı’*) of 4 July 2003, in which approximately 100 US soldiers, led by Colonel William Mayville of the 173rd Airborne, 4th Infantry Division, raided the headquarters of the Turkish Special forces in Sulymaniah city and arrested eleven Turkish soldiers.² The arrested soldiers were hooded, interrogated, and released after sixty hours, whereupon US General David Petraeus, responsible at the time for US forces in northern Iraq, was nicknamed *‘çuvalcı pasha’*—‘Hood General’. The US tried to justify these arrests by claiming it was trying to prevent Turkish forces from assassinating the Kurdish governor of Kirkuk, Abd-al-Rahman Mustafa. Turkish observers believe, however, that the incident was orchestrated after the the Turkish Parliament rejected on 1 March 2003 a US request to use Turkish territory as a launching pad for its invasion of Iraq. Diplomatic relations between the US and Turkey suffered extensively in the wake of these events.

² Turkish forces have only a few military bases, located mainly in the Dohuk governorate. For more information, see Gareth Jenkins, ‘Unwelcome Guests: The Turkish Military Bases in Northern Iraq’, *Terrorism Monitor* 6, no. 6 (24 March 2008).

When *Valley of the Wolves* was released three years later, these events were still fresh in the minds of the Turkish populace—and the US presence in Iraq had escalated. Adapted from a Turkish television series of the same name that had already enjoyed three highly successful seasons,³ the film version grossed more than \$27.9 million, primarily in Turkey but also in Europe, especially countries heavily populated by Turkish immigrants and guest-workers. Following the film's release, an ensuing increase in anti-American sentiment prompted the US Army to issue warnings to its personnel not to frequent theaters at which the film was playing (*Stars and Stripes*, 7 February 2006).

Valley of the Wolves likely produced such responses, and subsequently accrued a sense of public importance, because of its obvious political relevance to actual events which had taken place in post-invasion Iraq, namely the Abu Ghraib scandal, the torture and humiliation of Iraqi detainees, the May 2004 massacre of Iraqis celebrating at a wedding near Rutba city, the execution of detainees held captive in a truck container,⁴ and countless additional acts of everyday humiliation. Scriptwriter Bahadır Özdener said of the film that its aim was to speak 'out against the war, the occupation, and the human rights violations' (Associated Press, 4 March 2006):

Our film is a sort of political action. Maybe 60 or 70 percent of what happens onscreen 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 (Letsch, 2006).⁵

Valley of the Wolves was well-received not only by popular audiences but by Turkish politicians, who have traditionally remained detached from such matters for diplomatic reasons. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan reportedly screened the film privately (İdiz, 2006). At its public premier, which he attended with Erdoğan's wife, Parliament Speaker Bülent Arınç declared *Valley of the Wolves* a 'great film that will go

³ For details, see the film's official website: www.valleyofthewolvesiraq.com.

⁴ This incident occurred when Iraqi security forces intentionally left several detainees inside a truck container, which led to their deaths from overheating and suffocation. *The Road to Guantanamo* (2006) by Michael Winterbottom and Mat Whitecross depicts the same incident as it happened originally in Afghanistan.

⁵ Beginning in late 2006, US filmmakers began directing films concerning human rights violations in Iraq, including *The Situation* (2006) by Philip Haas, *Redacted* (2007) by Brian De Palma, *In the Valley of Elah* (2007) by Paul Haggis, and *Battle for Haditha* (2007) by Nick Broomfield, all of which draw from actual events.

down in history'. When asked whether he thought the film corresponded to real-life events in Iraq, Arınç replied, 'Yes, exactly', it was 'realistic' (*Turkish Daily News*, 6 February 2006; *Hürriyet*, 16 February 2006). Erdoğan's wife, referring to the film's heroic Turks, chimed in that she was 'proud of them all'. When the film received harsh criticism from the US, Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül retorted that it was 'nothing when compared to certain films made recently in America', and added, 'Cooperation between our countries is in everybody's interest. Such films can be made as long as they do not include insult and disrespect'.

Turkish Popular Views

Criticism of *Valley of the Wolves* has interpreted the film as 'virtual revenge' for the Sack Incident (*Turkish Daily News*, 6 January 2007). Semih İdiz, for instance, referred to the film as 'sublimated vengeance' for an event that has 'left a deep mark among Turks...for which they will die if necessary' (2006). Another Turkish writer, Elif Şafak, saw the film along similar lines, as a reflection of vying masculinisms: 'To give tit-for-tat is the nuts and bolts of the politics of masculinity. If you put a hood on my head, I put a hood on your head' (2006).

According to a survey conducted in Turkey just prior to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, 88 percent of Turks opposed any kind of military confrontation with Iraq, and approximately two out of three believed Turkey should not interfere in any military action (*Turkish Daily News*, 10 January 2003). A later survey, conducted in June 2006, revealed that '88 percent of the respondents held unfavorable views of the United States, mainly because of the Iraq war. When asked whether they believe that the war on Iraq made the world a safer place, more than 90 percent of the respondent said "no"' (Pew Global Attitudes Project, June 2006). These results attest to deep-seated anger felt by many Turks toward the US in recent years.

The Messages of *Valley of the Wolves*

A prevailing theme in *Valley of the Wolves* is that the US invasion and occupation of Iraq is rooted in a historical struggle between Islam and Judeo-Christianity. In 1976, Turkey did recognize the Charter of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and during that

same year, it hosted the Islamic Foreign Ministers Conference (Liel, 56). Many Turks would subsequently oppose the 1991 Gulf War because, accordingly, the ordinary Turkish ‘man in the street identified himself with his Muslim brothers’ (Ibrahim, 285). Although the various Muslim countries profess divergent interests, foreign policies, and orientations towards secularism, Turkey and the Arab states are nonetheless strongly connected by civilizational Islam (Liel, 54). Erdoğan’s Muslim-based Justice and Development Party (AKP), which won the 2007 Turkish elections, exemplifies the persistent power and influence of Islam in that country. Indeed, Turkey remains committed to Islam despite calls to join the European Union that would require it to abandon its Islamic roots. Many Turks continue to understand the US war on Iraq as an attack on Islam—a view shared by several Muslim countries.

The opening scenes of *Valley of the Wolves* depicts the presence of Jewish Israelis in Erbil, northern Iraq. Contrasting official Kurdish reports, Israelis are shown residing in the city’s Grand Harlton Hotel, their presence viewed by local Muslims as a religious violation.⁶ Similarly, an American doctor who removes organs from Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib is characterized as Jewish in order to underscore his villainy. The kidneys of his victims are sent to London, New York, and Tel Aviv—a fictional elaboration meant to heighten his treachery and generalize it to all US operations in the region.⁷

The film likewise stresses discord between Muslims and Christians, by emphasizing the religious motives of a CIA agent, Marshal Sam, who proclaims, ‘I am a peacekeeper assigned by God’, and who believes he is ‘God’s child’. Sam is characterized as a devout Christian whose main objective in coming to Iraq was to purify his soul and change peoples’ minds. In fact, Sam’s Christian devotion is typical of the US president portrayed in *Metal Storm*: he brags of being exceptional (‘God’s chosen people’), and, with Zion on his mind, he promises, ‘I’ll die in these lands. My blood will flow in these lands...until we return here and until the promised land becomes ours’. For Sam, the Judeo-Christian ‘Promised Land’ shall be reached via Iraq, where ‘peace shall overwhelm’. The conflict’s religious dimension is further emphasized near film’s end, as

⁶ For further evidence of Israeli involvement in Kurdistan, see *Yedioth Aharanoth*, 1 December 2005.

⁷ Some errors in the film include the depiction of the Arab wedding party as an Indian one, especially with respect to the women’s costumes, and the presence in post-2003 Erbil city of Saddam Hussein posters and storefronts bearing signs in Arabic—none of which have been visible there since the 1991 Gulf War.

shots of Muslim Sufi prayer are juxtaposed with those of Sam's Christian prayer. US forces are shown desecrating Muslim holy sites, bombing mosque minarets during the call to prayer—recalling an actual event that occurred in Fallujah in 2004.⁸ Finally, Iraqi detainees in Abu Ghraib are portrayed praying and crying simultaneously, highlighting the severity of their humiliation and torture in US hands. As one US soldier begins undressing the Iraqi prisoners, he shouts, 'You'll burn here for eternity, you sons of bitches!'

Notwithstanding these elements, director Serdar Akar, who received a Special Prize for the film at the Cannes Film Festival, claimed that *Valley of the Wolves* was intended to 'promote a dialogue between religions' (Letsch, 2006). Akar may have been referring to one of the film's central Turkman characters, a Sufi sheikh named Abdul Rahman Khalis Karkuki, who is widely respected across the various political factions. Indeed even a Kurdish commander in the film, who resembles KDP (**Kurdistan Democratic Party**) leader, Masu'd Barazani, objects to Sam's plan to arrest the sheikh, stating that he 'saved us from the tyranny of Saddam' and has direct 'lineage to the prophet'. In fact, the sheikh stands for reason, representing a genuine Islamic voice by his persisting attempts to find logical solutions to the problem of religious fundamentalism that emerged in Iraq after the invasion. When a female character, Layla, prepares to blow herself up near a US military installation in retaliation for the killing of her husband, Sheikh Abdul Rahman convinces her to remain steadfast instead: 'Patience does not mean humiliation; patience is a struggle'. The sheikh reasons with Layla, reminding her that true Muslims are never like the followers of Hassan Bin Sabah because they are neither suicide bombers nor murders: 'Every suicide operation increases our weakness and disunity. Our enemy wants these operations to increase, and he has probably organized some of them'. Whereas the sheikh seems fatalistic, his advice is tempered by the claim that there 'is no hope of being rescued unless we follow God's path to liberation'. During another incident, Sheikh Abdul Rahman saves a Western journalist from beheading by an Al-Qaeda-like organization, then presents him with the option of killing his captors, in order to show that Islam preaches neither murder nor injustice. In

⁸ In April 2004, approximately 150 US air strikes were carried out in Fallujah, and 75-100 buildings and two mosque compounds were badly damaged or destroyed (Hoffman, 90-7).

short, *Valley of the Wolves*' characterization of this Sufi sheikh offers a counter-image to Western media stereotypes of Muslim scholars, as it distinguishes between the genuine Islam he practices and the non-Islamic quality of those who would kill or display disrespect toward other human beings.

On the other hand, *Valley of the Wolves* concerns itself with the tense relationship between Turks and Kurds, presenting Kurds as 'enemy' collaborators. Such projections echo popular Turkish sentiment against Kurds. In a Turkish public opinion poll conducted in 2005, 91% of Turks objected to George W. Bush's Middle East policy, and a majority stated that the main obstacle to consolidating relations between the two countries was US inaction towards members of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)' (*Turkish Daily News*, 6 February 2006). Article 14 of the 1982 Turkish Constitution prohibits any kind of separatist activity; hence, the PKK has been labeled a terrorist organization accused of aiming to destabilize the unity and security of the Turkish state. It is important to note here that between 1984 and 1995, more than 13,000 Turkish soldiers were killed in armed struggle against the PKK, not to mention Turkish financial losses estimated at eight billion dollars per year (Al-Kaylani, 59). In turn, Iraqi Kurds have been viewed as enemy collaborators ever since they gave logistical assistance to the PKK. Turkish fear of the Kurdish independence movement has increased since 1991. In 2002, Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit stated directly that there is a 'de facto Kurdish state in northern Iraq [and] we cannot allow this to go any further' ('Turkey Warns of Lengthy Iraq War', 2002). In a meeting between Hussein Qifriq Aughlu, a high-ranking Turkish army officer, and Paul Wolfowitz, Assistant US Secretary Of Defence, prior to the 2003 invasion, Aughlu confirmed that Turkey 'shall interfere directly in the region in case a Kurdish state with Kirkuk as its capitol [is] established' (Ahmad, 2002). Confirming his Turkmen lineage, the Turkish commander also stressed that the living conditions of Turkmen in Iraq were of concern to Turkey. In other words, the Iraqi Kurdish efforts to establish an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq was and remains a threat to Turkey, which would hope to control oil-rich Kirkuk as well as the fate of Iraqi Turkmen and, evoking Turkey's longstanding ambitions, to annex Mosul

and Kirkuk.⁹ Turkey fears above all that the establishment of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq would fuel Kurdish ambitions in Turkey and neighboring countries toward helping create a more expansive state, which Turkey believes would destabilize the region and its own economic growth.

In *Valley of the Wolves*, Kurds are portrayed as villains who conspire to kill Turkmen and Arabs, and who willingly aid the US. The film opens as three undercover Turkish agents head toward Erbil to avenge the death of their friend. When stopped at a Kurdish pashmerga checkpoint, one of the agents provokes the Kurds by telling them, 'In Iraq, there are oppressed people...I work in human trafficking. I was told that human life here is cheap.' A fight ensues in which all the Kurds are killed. Kurds are likewise portrayed as US pawns. For example, Sam eventually reveals his strategy of divide and conquer, by which he has pitted Arabs, Turkmen, and Kurds against one another in order to serve US interests. When he is threatened in the hotel, furthermore, he uses Kurdish children as human shields and forces them to sing pro-American songs. In these instances, Kurds are represented as easily manipulated, blindly following the American way of life only to satisfy their masters.

It should be noted that the film also includes a Turkish Kurd, suggesting the existence of Kurds in Turkey who are loyal to the state rather than to the Kurdish independence movement. Near film's end, a Turkish officer just attacked by the US decries, 'All of this is because of the Kurds', to which his Kurdish comrade replies, 'But I am a Kurd, too!', and the officer responds, 'You're different, Abdul Hay'. In effect, *Valley of the Wolves* echoes popular Turkish sentiment against Kurds, displacing Turkish anger over regional conflict and instability onto them.

By the same token, *Valley of the Wolves* emphasizes the strong bond between Turks and Iraqi Turkmen. One of the film's Iraqi characters, an aid in Erbil, is a Turkman who dies while attempting to rescue his fellow Turks. Before dying, he expresses his nationalist feelings: 'Turkey is proud of you'. The Turkmen leader, Hasan, is represented as a nationalist opposed to Kurdish influence in the region. When Kurdish pashmerga force Arab and Turkmen families to leave Erbil as well as some villages near Mosul and

⁹ The famous Turkish proverb reads, 'Ana gibi yâr, Bağdat gibi diyar olmaz' ('To a man there is no friend like a brother, and no land like Iraq').

Kirkuk, Hasan stands firmly against the move. Regarding the US, he says, ‘They have divided the region by giving the mountains to the Kurds, the desert to the Arabs...and oil for them, whereas Turkmen in Erbil have nowhere to go’. Sam executes Hasan for allowing his fellow Turks refuge in his house. Once again, the sacrifice shows Turkmen willing to die for Turkey as opposed to tyranny. The film’s explicit focus on Turkmen also affirms a purported need for Turkey to protect its ‘subjects’ abroad.

In addition to depicting the Turkish–Kurdish conflict, *Valley of the Wolves* depicts the politically fraught relationship between Turkey and the US, through its construction of a conflict between Sam and Polat Almedar, the film’s Turkish hero. According to a Turkish poll conducted in 2005, 70 percent of Turks interviewed linked Americans with the word ‘violent’, 68 percent with ‘greedy’, 57 percent with ‘immoral’, and 53 percent with ‘rude’ (Pew Global Attitudes, 2005). In line with these findings, which indicate just how negatively Americans have been perceived in Turkey since the US invasion of Iraq (Güney, 483), *Valley of the Wolves* frequently contrasts benevolent actions of Turks with evil deeds of US soldiers. Polat is about to attack the hotel in Erbil, for example, but decides not to upon learning that Sam is using Kurdish children as human shields. A political discussion ensues between Sam and Polat, in which Sam speaks disparagingly of Turkey: ‘We sent you the elastic for your goddam panties...Why don’t you produce anything?...The United States has been paying for you the last 50 years...You begged us for more money...You begged us to save you from the Communists! How did you forget?’ In this way, Sam justifies US aid to the Kurds in terms of disapproval of Turkey, in turn heightening the dramatic tension between the two characters—and the international conflict they allegorize. By contrast, Turkish characters are always portrayed as humane and merciful. When the American doctor at Abu Ghraib receives corpses rather than live prisoners, he comments, ‘How many times have I told you that these are living people, not animals?’, to which a US soldier replies, ‘I have no regret for animals, sir!’

In the end, Sam dies after being stabbed by Polat with Layla’s Arab dagger, an act that symbolizes the unity of the two peoples—Turks and Arabs—as they rid themselves of the Americans. Poetic justice is achieved: the three Turks miraculously return home

victorious, with Polat and his comrades as indefatigable heroes. Tellingly, Polat's image in posters for the film resemble Lawrence of Arabia. Ironically, however, the film's implied final message is that Turks will not be humiliated, as Iraqis have been, thus reinforcing the Turkish prejudice—extending back through the Ottoman Empire—of ethnic 'difference' and 'superiority' to Arabs.¹⁰

In conclusion, *Valley of the Wolves* stands as a vehicle by which to project Turkish popular concerns and aspirations, displacing the conflict between Turkey and the US onto the Kurds, and presenting the US war on Iraq as primarily a religious conflict. The film

¹⁰ See Benson (47); Alawy (84); Antonius (185-91); and Aydin (22). As Asis Ali Bey, an Egyptian major in the Ottoman General Staff, proclaimed when he met General Jamal Pasha, Commander of the Fourth Army in Sinai, Palestine and Syria, to complain about Turkish treatment of Arabs:

What have you Turks done for us Arabs except try to exterminate us insult and despise us that you should now expect friendly treatment on our part? Are you forgetting that in Constantinople when you want to call a dog you shout 'Arab, Arab, Arab!' When you want to say that anything is obscure and incomprehensible, you say 'It's like the hair of an Arab'. One of your pet phrases is, 'A fig for the splendors of Damascus, if only we needn't see another Arabian face!' Are not the lines of your poet, 'On the evening I left Damascus, I said, "Blessed be this holy night",' one of your favorite expressions? (Pasha, 61)

This attitude is shared by many Persians on similar grounds. These ethno-chauvinist sentiments are echoed in some American films that depict Iranians, including *House of Sand and Fog* (2003), in which Ben Kingsley states, 'I'm not an Arab', when refusing to perform a humiliating action, and *Crash* (2005), in which a Persian character insists that he is Iranian, not Arab, after his store is ransacked and burglarized.

thus encapsulates the beliefs of the Turkish majority whose dignity had been injured during the Sack Incident, in turn supplying a modicum of redress to lost Turkish pride and self-esteem, through images of national superheroes defying and overcoming the ‘wolves’ in their own hideouts.

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