

FILM REVIEW

## **Propaganda: ‘Wire Mesh are Edge Decoration of States’**

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### **Propaganda**

1999

Directed and written by Sinan Çetin

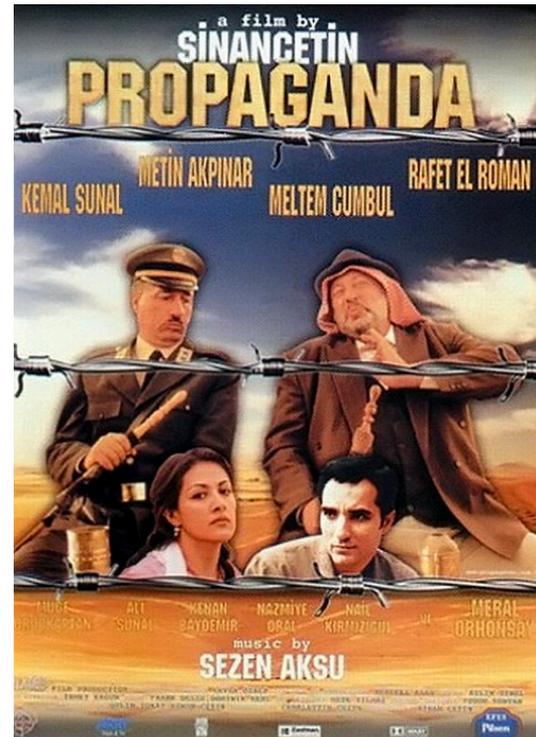
Runtime: 1 hour and 50 minutes

Original language: Turkish

More information at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0216986/>

Borders as a research area have been the subject of many academic studies. Borders have also been an important source of inspiration for films. *Propaganda* (1999), one such film, was inspired by the border construction process that took place in the Hislihisar village of Kilis in 1948 on the Turkish-Syrian border in 1948. In fact, the Turkey-Syria border was more permeable in those years. People living on the border, which cut through the town, could cross easily, and social and economic relations continued in their normal course. However, problems such as the sharing of water resources, terrorism, and smuggling, which started between the two states in the 1950s, reached the point where wire mesh was installed on the border and mines were laid. The last move of this process was the kilometers-long border wall that Turkey built to defend against security threats and irregular migration (Aras 2020; Oztig 2019).

The 1999 Turkish film *Propaganda*, directed by Sinan Çetin, deals with the wire-mesh stage of this border construction process in a tragicomic way. The fact that Çetin's hometown is the Bahçesaray district of Van, on the Turkey-Iran border, may be an impetus for making the film. Çetin says that he directed the film because states see borders as a tool of propaganda. Explaining that



examples of this were encountered during the Cold War years, Çetin emphasized that although many states later gave up the propaganda of those years, Turkey continued to use its borders as a propaganda tool (Çetin 1999).

Focusing on real events that took place in Turkey in 1948, *Propaganda* is about the process of building wire-mesh fencing on the Turkish-Syrian border during the Cold War. The film tragicomically reflects the experiences of the local Customs Enforcement Director Mehdi, his

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best friend Rahim, and their two families, during the demarcating of the border with wire meshes. With the order from the state administration, measurements are made along the borderline and wire mesh is installed. In addition, a symbolic wooden border gate that could be opened and closed by hand was built. In his statement to the villagers at the opening of the Customs Enforcement Directorate, Mehdi defines the wire mesh as the “edge decoration” of states, emphasizing the beauty and necessity of wire mesh. In the same scene, there are articles on the importance, usefulness, and necessity of borders on posters hung in the village. Unable to foresee that the border will separate families, languages, cultures, and lovers, Mehdi is confident that his duty is to ensure the integrity of the state and protect the sacred borders.

The villagers, who lived without a border for years, oppose the fence, because it divides the village in two. Rahim, Mehdi’s best friend and also the village doctor, is among those on the other side of the fence. Moreover, Rahim’s wife is the village teacher, and Rahim’s daughter is Mehdi’s son’s lover. Some of the villagers are suddenly surprised when they are asked to present passports in order to cross, which they thought was only necessary for foreigners. The astonishment of the villagers and the limits on daily life is depicted in many scenes in a tragicomic way. For example, the crossing of a teacher, an old man, and a shepherd who use the same road every day are now controlled by soldiers demanding passports. The imprisonment of one of the sheep after crossing the border without permission becomes a tragicomic example of the state’s security practices against the now illegal border crossing. Mehdi is determined not to cross the border without a passport, out of respect for state authority, and applies this determination even in situations that are not logical. Even when his wife and children cross to the other side of the border, Mehdi still does not abandon his obedience to the state rules. Moreover, Mehdi’s son, who stayed with him, wants to cross the border without permission when he realizes that he cannot be with the girl he loves. Mehdi realizes he is about to lose his family due to his duty as a director. He comes to a breaking point when he injures his son in the arm with a gun as he crossed the border without permission to prevent him from leaving.

While all this is going on, Rahim is sure that there is no longer a life to live on the other side of the border. He decides to emigrate with his family. Changing his mind after shooting his son, Mehdi decides to take off his director’s uniform and crosses the border to meet Rahim. Both get into a truck with their family and start moving. At this point, the film

reveals its stance against the use of borders by states as a propaganda tool with the final scene. The truck changes its route and moves towards the border and breaks through the wooden gate that was created earlier.

*Propaganda* is not the only film that focuses on the border, while tragically dramatizing the use of the border as a propaganda tool. *Hudutların Kanunu (The Law of the Border)*, directed by Lutfi O. Akad in 1966, was shot in another border province, Şanlıurfa, and focused on the relationship between the state’s military personnel at the border and smugglers. In many ways, *The Law of the Border* is the fulcrum on which much of modern Turkish cinema turns (Ebiri 2017). *Hükümet Kadın (Government Woman)* directed by Sermiyan Midyat and produced in 2013, is about the same border as propaganda. It takes place in a village of Mardin, another province on the border, and reflects issues such as smuggling and border crossing in a tragicomic way.

There are two points that distinguish *Propaganda* from other films. First, the construction process of the Turkey–Syria border is quite problematic as state policies ignore the sociology of the region, people’s lifestyles, and cultural similarities which the film was able to convey. The second is related to the fact that the wire-mesh border fences, which the film focuses on, are being used as a widespread policy tool by states today, just as they were introduced as “edge decoration of states” 70 years ago. Today, states “decorate” their borders with wire mesh and walls, especially against migration, almost as if they are competing with each other.

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