

EXTENDED ESSAY

HISTORY

ADMIRAL BRISTOL AND THE TURCO-AMERICAN DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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## **ABSTRACT**

Rear Admiral Mark Lambert Bristol and his diplomatic and economic policies played an essential during the post World War I period in Turco-American relations. The region that the Admiral was assigned to was an area of uncertainty and international conflict. This study investigates the conditions of this specific stage and strives to identify Admiral Bristol's actions and decisions and their effect on the two countries' relations. The basic source used for this research is the Admiral's "War Diary".

## **INTRODUCTION**

When studying the early stages of Turco-American diplomatic relations, Rear Admiral Mark Lambert Bristol is accepted as prominent figure. But, what were the reasons behind the fact that a single person could do a pioneering and decisive mission in the the two countries' relations? How did this person's perception affect the post Great War Era? Answers to these particular questions will be considered and clarified in this essay.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The First World War can be defined as the "harbinger war" of the twentieth century. The outbreak of the first global war had many reasons behind it, such as the race of development and superiority between the leading nations of the world of that time and in fact, it was the ultimate expression of hostilities that has been growing among the nations of the world. The struggling powers of the war were determined before the war actually began. Each nation had already selected their allies and their respective enemies. Britain, France and Russia (and later Italy and towards the end of the war the US) formed the "Entente Powers". As a result of their global control over the world, the nations in their sphere of influence followed them into the war. The same happened on the other side, as the "Central Powers", formed mainly by Germany and Austria-Hungarian Empire, declared war on the "Entente", two more states would follow them: Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire. At the beginning of the war, the belligerent nations expected a quick and swift victory, however, this would not be the case. The war, negating all expectations, lasted for four years, and the "quick war" that had been anticipated at the beginning was soon turned into a war of attrition and worldwide casualties. The aftermath, similar to the beginning of the war brought about global political changes. The empires were dissolved, new nations emerged and as a result, further political turmoil increased throughout the earth. European nations' superiority over the world politics were reduced. The US, was in many ways, the true victor of the war. She had not only aided the Allies to win the war, but also had loans in European countries such as her own allies, Britain and France

(Keegan 14). The end of the war was in fact, the beginning of many other conflicts. The Ottoman Empire, or at least the area reigned formerly by the Ottoman Empire was a region of conflict and chaos by the end of the war.

The end of the First World War for the Ottoman Empire was marked by the Armistice of Mudros, signed on October 30, 1918. The agreement reached between the Ottomans and the Allies enabled the latter to virtually end the Ottoman administration's reign over its own country and gave the right to exercise power to the Allies. Furthermore, the Allies also had the right to occupy Ottoman territory as they saw fit. Consequently, the Ottoman territories would be divided amongst the Allies, the French and the British occupied the southeastern areas (The British mostly occupied Iraq, while the French gained the vilayet of Adana) and the Italians were given the territories in the South, such as Antalya. The victorious powers of the "Great War" also formed High Commissions in the capital of the Empire, Istanbul. (Buzanski 8) This is the point when the relatively "new" relations between the US and Turkey began.

## **AN AMERICAN DIPLOMAT IN THE EAST**

Rear Admiral Mark Lambert Bristol arrived at Istanbul on January 28, 1919, only a few months after the armistice was signed between Turkey and the Allies. Before discussing the relations between the United States and Turkey, it is important to clarify the relations between the two countries before the wartime period.

It is known that the US interest in Turkey dates back to the Treaty of Commerce and Friendship signed in 1830 (Buzanski 1). The treaty was signed during the reign of Mahmud II. This was a short time before the Empire's considerable innovations in the administration of the country. (known as the "Tanzimat") In addition, American missionary effort and philanthropic work has been active in the Near East for nearly a hundred years. Turkey and the US were on belligerent sides during a certain period of the First World War (Ottoman Empire entered the war on October 29, 1914, the US declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917). However, there has been no declarations of

war between the two states so, during the war the two states remained neutral to each other. The only diplomatic action was made by Turkey, when US entered the war along the side of the Allies, Turkey ended official diplomatic relations with the US on April 20, 1917. This action did not change the overall attitude of two states to each other.

Under these political circumstances when Bristol arrived at Istanbul, as a result of this neutral attitude he found that the native people were more friendly to Americans than the other powers present in the region at that time.

The Admiral's first assignment was "Senior United States Naval Officer Present, Turkey". (Buzanski 26) Bristol was given tasks regarding the relations between the Allies and the US. He had to provide relations with the High Commissioner present in Istanbul and about protecting the American interests.

Bristol's first aim was to extend his authority and power when he is given the above indicated task. The Admiral believed that his current rank would not be adequate to accomplish the tasks he was given. In other words, Bristol was not "fully empowered to represent his government". (Buzanski 28) Bristol then struggled to gain the power of the High Commissioner and eventually, it is seen that he succeeded. He was appointed as High Commissioner on August 12, 1919. (Buzanski 39) The rank "High Commissioner" provided Bristol the authority required for his ultimate diplomatic and commercial intentions. The tasks that he was given was still valid, Bristol was commissioned chiefly to protect and expand American interests in the Near East.

After being appointed as the High Commissioner, Bristol's tasks and aims can be divided into two main sections: these sections would be (a)political aims, (b)economic aims. Firstly, it should be stated that there were actually no clear distinctions between these aims. Bristol's main target would be to deal with the economy, but even though that he was not a politician, he frequently indicated that the political situation is harmful to his efforts regarding the American enterprises in the Near East. To achieve these tasks, the Admiral was aware of the fact that more control and higher authority in the area was essential. In order to do this, Bristol would constantly look for ways to gain

more authority. His successful attempt of being a High Commissioner could be regarded as the first step of this process. For instance, after being named with the title “High Commissioner”, Bristol would make a proposal to change State Department Officers’ titles to “Officers of the High Commission”. Approval of this proposal on August 12, 1919 gave the Admiral more control he had been seeking. (Buzanski 43-44)

### **BRISTOL’S POLICIES: PRINCIPLES AND ACTIONS**

Given his tasks, Bristol’s main target was to ensure that the American interests in the Near East were protected against any outer faction, and also expanded. To do this, Bristol applied the “Open Door” principle to almost all aspects to his work in the region. This principle was solely aimed to protect and promote American business interests. The application of this principle was, in the end, successfully done. According to Thomas A. Bryson, Bristol established a sixfold policy to carry out this principle:

The first task was to create an American good will in the Near East. The second task was to provide an area commercially favorable and suitable for the American enterprises. The third task of the Admiral regards the American relations with the Allies. The fourth was concerned about building an economic infrastructure. The fifth and sixth tasks were about education of both the native people and the American entrepreneurs. (Bryson 453)

To begin with, The Americans had an advantage over the Allies since, the US and Turkey never declared war on each other. Bristol’s aim was to enhance the good will in Turkey and keep the relations between the US and the majority of the people, Turks cordial. This would provide the needed support to the American businessmen working in the Near Eastern territories. (Buzanski 3-4,9)

Providing aid for any American citizen who can enhance and support the American business and economic investment in the Near East was the main target of Admiral Bristol. In fact, it can be clearly stated that this assignment was regarded the highest by the Admiral and the others are

minor compared to this particular one. Protection and promotion of American businesses in the Near East would not only safeguard the American interests in the region but also make a contribution to the economic income of the US. However, there were many setbacks and hurdles in the Admiral's way. Diplomacy and intelligence would be Bristol's main tools against these obstacles which had been voluntarily or involuntarily put in his way. (Buzanski 40)

Although the peace between the US and Turkey during the war created an American good will among the people of the region, some previously built American institutions were in fact harmful to the American interests that Bristol is trying to protect. Bristol indicates that the relief organizations hinder the efforts to preserve commercial interests of the United States. One particular example of these organizations is the Near East Relief, a prominent relief organization of the time. The one-sided propaganda made by the Near East Relief not only destroys the stability of the region but also increase the conflicts between races, as stated by Bristol (Bristol 24 June 1921):

*"I pointed out... that the activities of the Near East Relief was injuring the work of that Committee in the Near East... was endangering the lives of the people working in Turkey and finally was endangering American business..."*

*"All the propaganda used by the Near East Relief Committee in the United States for the raising of funds painted the Armenians as religious martyrs suffering persecutions, deportations and massacres at the hands of the Turks who were made to appear as having very atrocious qualities without any redeeming features."* (Bristol 14 Aug 1922)

Bristol claims that these relief actions does not help the minorities instead "turned the wrath of the Turks against Christians" (Bristol 14 Aug 1922). Bristol's intention is to end the atrocities committed by the different peoples of the Near East. Therefore, he advocates education and impartial treatment of all the people in the Near East. An area of conflict and continuous atrocities, would surely be against American interests. In addition, Bristol pointed out the fact that the effectiveness of American businesses in the Near East can only be assured by the unity and cooperation of the Americans present in the region. Thus, the missionaries, relief workers and



businessmen should be working harmonically, and they should not contradict each other (Bristol, 4 May 1922):

*“I suggested... that... all Americans should get together and come to an arrangement so that we could present a united front in developing all kinds of businesses in the Near East.”*

As seen above, by the time Bristol arrived at Istanbul, the Allies had already occupied many commercially important areas of the previous Ottoman Empire. The “Open Door” policy foresaw that the American business enterprises were to operate freely in the Near East and share the sources of commercial importance in the area. The oil-rich Mesopotamian region, for instance, has been an area of interest for Great Britain. Consequently, by the time Bristol gained the power and authorization needed to demand a share for the American businessmen a mandatory system had already been introduced to the areas occupied by the Allies. ( Bryson 459-460)

In spite of the first orders given to Bristol indicating that his aim should be to keep cordial relations between the United States and the Allies, Bristol’s way of thinking and organizing the events and areas of the Near East was almost always against the Allied intentions. While the Allies sought a mandatory, thus imperialistic administration for the former Ottoman Empire, and advocated that a system be divided into administrative and mandatory regions, Bristol would reject these plans. Bristol, on the contrary, proposed that the territorial integrity of the pre-war Ottoman state should be preserved, meaning that it should not be divided. In addition, this state should be given “proper conditions” . (Buzanski 103-105) These conditions included separation of church and state, religious freedom, universal education and self-determination. These “conditions” can be linked to the Admiral’s arguments mentioned above. The religious and racial conflicts resulted in atrocities, therefore if separation of church and state, combined with religious freedom, is brought to a state then the racial differences can be minimized. (Buzanski 104) Moreover, the power that should provide these conditions, according to Bristol, should not be the Turks themselves. (Bristol 18 July 1922) Bristol believes that the Americans have the power to create a stable state.

*"Then I had a discussion... that America was the only country that could do anything to solve this problem [minority and atrocity problems] in the Near East." ( Bristol 14 May 1922)*

Bristol's proposition offered as a solution to the problems in the Near East is a mandate of the US, however it is quite different than the divided Allied mandates of the empire.

*"I said that shortly after I got out here I formed the idea that the only true way to settle the Near East question and by all odds the best way, was for the United States to take a mandate over the whole of the Ottoman Empire." ( Bristol 14 Aug 1922)*

Inspecting all of Admiral Bristol's aims, one can reach the conclusion that Bristol's all policies can be summed up in his proposition for a mandate of the whole empire. The best protection and expansion of the American interests can be achieved through the complete American control over the Near East. Another entry in the Admiral's War Diary explains his further intentions:

*"...the quickest way and the best way to restore order in this country [the Ottoman Empire] was to send here a military force." (Bristol 18 July 1922)*

It is clearly seen that Bristol's intention was to gain complete control over the area by a mandatory system protected by a military force. In the same entry in his war diary, Bristol indicates that there are "two ways of dealing with Turks": "the first one would be to use force against him and the second way is the way of kindness, consideration and justice, therefore gaining confidence". (Bristol 18 Jul 1922) These statements can be linked to Bristol's proposal and his real actions. "Using force" would mean bringing the military force into the area, and the second way is the policy that the Admiral deployed in reality: The "Open Door" principle and impartiality. The reason why the first way has not been used was the turn of events as the years progressed. The nationalist administration constituted at Ankara, which would later become the capital of the Republic of Turkey, was successful in defeating the Greeks in the West and therefore, forced the Allies to sign a peace treaty in the nationalist favor.

Bristol was aware of the fact that the post-war Turkey was in a weak position, damaged economically and politically by the war. Impartial relief was therefore required to prepare a country

suitable to American business. Thus, Bristol employed forces and facilities he controlled to help the American businessmen. The Admiral's aim was to create a successful operation and he even used the ships under his command to provide transportation of the American businessmen. In addition, information had to be gathered in order to be utilized both by the Admiral and businessmen who were eager to be aware of the conditions in the Near East. Bristol formed an intelligence service along an economic infrastructure. Furthermore, communication was essential for business. Destroyers under Bristol's command had wireless equipment that provided communication for the travelling businessmen. (Buzanski 214-215)

Bristol's idea was to educate the people in the region in the American way of commerce and by this way, contribute to American interests. On the other hand, reluctance of American businessmen should be decreased by facilities formed to draw attention to the Near East. Bristol especially advocated the foundation of a branch of a banking institution as well as steamship and insurance companies. (Buzanski 239) The banks would provide the financial support to the other institutions and these other companies and agencies would aid the American businessmen. Bristol also indicated that these institutions should be formed only by Americans, which can be shown as a further proof to his idea of American control in the region. "Naval diplomacy" is a term that defines the Admiral's position and actions. Bristol used the naval forces under his command for the expansion of American enterprises.

The tool of diplomacy was also important to Bristol during his mission in Istanbul. Bristol used the American "neutrality" in the First World War to his advantage and by doing so was able to keep relations with each side. American High Commission had relations with the Allies and the Sultan. And, since the nationalist movement was not recognized by the US until the end of the war in Turkey (Turkish War of Independence), Bristol had informal relations with them as well. Diplomatic acts of Bristol could be attributed to his main target; the economic aims of the US in the Near East. Bristol is especially careful not to weaken his position therefore, he was aware that keeping good relations with each side during his duty in Turkey was essential.

*"...I had always been very careful not to do anything that would weaken my position and thus lessen the influence that I might have in the protection of American interests..."* (Bristol 12 July 1923)

#### BRISTOL AND THE TURKISH REPUBLIC: ANOTHER PHASE IN DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

After the foundation of the Turkish Republic in October 29, 1923, Bristol would continue his duty as a High Commissioner until 1927. The establishment of a new self-governed state was against Bristol's thoughts throughout his early career as a High Commissioner. However, it can also be stated that foundation of such a state is close to what Admiral Bristol strived to create in some way, by either using force or negotiation, suitable and favorable for the American business interests. The effects of Bristol's actions can be seen in post-war Turkey, the relations between the two states remained cordial. However, the main point of Bristol's efforts, the economic expansion of the US in the Near East which did not immediately arise as a main subject among the relations between the two countries. This was primarily due to the Turkish economic policy of etatism, which did not welcome foreign external investment. This does not mean that efforts of the Admiral was completely futile though. Beginning in the late 1940's the Turco-American political and economic relations gradually increased, and Turkey, consequently aided the US in the post-World War 2 era. (Bryson 466)

#### **CONCLUSION**

The overall evaluation of the above mentioned topics demonstrate that Bristol's mission in Turkey was actually a start of new diplomatic relations. Regarding this, Bristol's duty could be defined as a connecting era between the past Ottoman Empire and the future Republic of Turkey. Although the official US foreign policy was converted to isolationism after the end of the First World War, Bristol was still able to promote American interests in the Near Eastern region. This was the connecting link between the two states, which was aimed at the continuity of the relations and encouragement of business enterprises. The link also possessed diplomatic actions based on

neutrality, which was essential to maintain cordial relations between the two nations. Therefore, one can reach the conclusion that as the highest foreign official in both the last years of the Ottoman Empire and the earlier years of Republic of Turkey, Admiral Bristol's position and actions proved vital for the continuity of the Turco-American diplomatic and commercial relations.

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