Hakan Özoğlu, *The Decline of the Ottoman Empire and the Rise of the Turkish Republic: Observations of an American Diplomat, 1919–1927*

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For several decades numerous books have investigated both the decline of the Ottoman Empire, and the rise of the Turkish Republic mainly through public historical archives. The work of Hakan Özoğlu explores these subjects through the observations of one of the most important American diplomats of the early 20th century, Rear Admiral Mark L. Bristol, during his posting in the Ottoman Empire and later in the Republic of Turkey between 1919-1927. Part of the book series Edinburgh Studies on Modern Turkey, The Decline of the Ottoman Empire was edited by Alpaslan Özerdem, professor of peace and conflict studies at George Mason University, and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, lecturer in international relations and politics at London Metropolitan University, who both have expertise in subjects related to Turkey’s contemporary history and politics. The author of the book, Hakan Özoğlu, is professor of history and director of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Central Florida, and has published extensively in English and Turkish, including books about the Kurds in the Ottoman Empire, and the Caliphate and secular state. The work of Özoğlu is unique in many ways as it reviews one of the significant parts of Ottoman and Turkish history by observing the fall of the Ottoman emperors and the rise of the Turkish republicans. Moreover, it uncovers the personal stories and historical events that happened between 1919-1927 mainly through the views and letters sent by Mark L. Bristol to Washington, D.C. In addition, when
conducted the study, Özoğlu relied on not only primary American and Turkish archival resources, but also private letters and memories.

The Decline of the Ottoman Empire and The Rise of the Turkish Republic seeks to provide an alternative portrait of the historical American perceptions of the Ottoman Empire and then the Turkish Republic right after the end of the Great War, through the fall of the Empire and the rise of the Republic. The work is composed of six chapters, including the introduction and the conclusion. In the first chapter, Özoğlu aptly provides a clear introductory note with a quote attributed to Hiram Johnson as saying, “The first casualty when war comes is truth” and extends this to the main study of the book which “aims at bringing in primary documents to help recover the lost balance of “truth” and its alternative in the historical narrative” (1). The chapter then goes on to offer further information about US-Ottoman relations until the Great War, the sources used in the book, and the review of literature. The author notes that only two English unpublished dissertations, in addition one Turkish book, have previously explored Mark L. Bristol’s contribution to American-Turkish history and relationships. He finds that “there is no publication in any language that exclusively deals with themes as diverse as those in this book” (11).

Chapter 2, “Bristol: An American Naval Officer and Diplomat,” uncovers the story of the appointment of Bristol first as a Naval Officer to Turkey and later as the US High Commissioner to the Ottoman Empire. It also documents the claim or accusation of Bristol as being pro-Turk and discusses the views of his opponents and proponents in both Turkey and the US. Bristol was born on 17 April 1868 in Glassboro, New Jersey, and later graduated from the Naval Academy in 1887. He then served for several years in Naval duties before his appointment to Constantinople. Chapter 3, titled “The Collapse of The Ottoman Empire and The Rise of Turkey in US Consular Reports,” reviews the reports Bristol made about the decline of the Empire and the rise of the Republic. As an acknowledgment of Bristol’s hard work, the author notes that “He was the first one to recognize the potential for the nationalist/Kemalist movement in Ankara and advised a policy to Washington friendly towards the Kemalists” (19). Bristol was in contact with the Turkish nationalists including Mustafa Kemal mainly through Halide Edip (adivar), who spoke English. Bristol favored the Turkish nationalists, and encouraged the US, based on his belief in the Open-Door Policy, to engage with the Turkish Republic following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

Chapter 4, “Bristol and Conflicts Between Turks, Greeks and Armenians in Anatolia,” highlights how Bristol documented the situation of minorities including the Christians (principally Greeks and Armenians) as well as others like the Kurds. In fact, some politicians in Washington, D.C. made several complaints about Bristol for being closely aligned with the Turkish elite. Bristol, according to Özoğlu, was also tasked with the Inter-Allied commission for the investigation of the Greek issue, including their occupation of the Smyrna region (now the Turkish city of Izmir) because of Turkish complaints about the Greeks’ unjustified occupation. Chapter 5, “Political and Human Landscapes of Turkey in Diplomatic Reports,” explores the conditions of people and cities, mainly Istanbul, in the aftermath of the Great War. Moreover, it explores some pressuring issues including the escape of the Sultan, and the abolition of the Sultanate and Caliphate. Özoğlu also provides details about the internal affairs of Turkey through the American reports presented by Bristol, especially minority issues and national
Kemalist agendas. According to Özoğlu, Bristol met with Kemal at least twice. Thus, the last chapter covers some sensitive subjects in Turkey’s most critical time.

Overall, The Decline of the Ottoman Empire and The Rise of the Turkish Republic is a scholarly work that examines not only the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of the Turkish Republic, but also the American account of such events through the eyes of one of the most experienced diplomats in that region, Mark Bristol. The work does have one minor shortcoming in that it does not provide details of the American account of the Ottoman Empire’s and the Turkish Republic’s policies toward the independence of their former colonies, especially in the southeast of the Anadolu and the Arabian Peninsula, and how a US diplomat reported them at the time. However, the work is successful in providing us with a historical investigation that seeks to tell “not the truth,” but an alternative truth. Moreover, the author has managed to avoid terminological subjectivity in relation to issues that are still sensitive today, such as the Armenian and Greek atrocities, genocide, or massacres. In addition to this work, it would be very interesting to compare European reports including French and British accounts of the decline of the Ottomans and the rise of the Turks. The book is a worthwhile read for those interested in Turkish modern history, Turkish-American diplomacy, minorities in Turkey and Mark Bristol’s historical accounts of Turkey between 1919 and 1927.

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