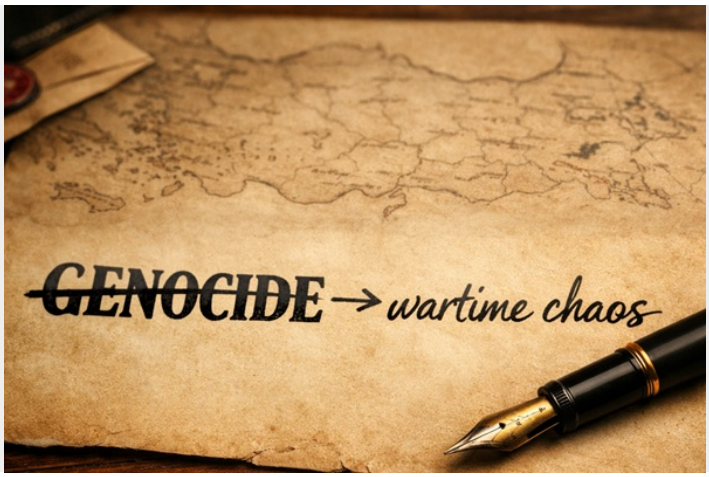
FROM GENOCIDE TO DIPLOMACY

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Category: Opinions

By Nurnisa Erismis, Denizli, Turkey, March 15, 2026

Mark Bristol and the Birth of the Turkish–Western Alliance

In the Shadow of a Diplomat

(*Based on Varouj Pogharian's article "Mark Bristol: A Case Study in the Institutional Bankruptcy of U.S. Diplomacy"*)

Article Teaser

Diplomacy does not merely respond to history—it often rewrites it. This article examines how U.S. diplomat Mark Bristol helped reshape international narratives of the Armenian Genocide and how similar mechanisms of "diplomatic normalization" continue to influence contemporary conflicts from Rojava to Artsakh.

Introduction

The history of the Armenian Genocide is often told through the actions of its perpetrators: the Young Turk leadership, the machinery of deportation, and the catastrophic destruction of Ottoman Armenian society in 1915. Yet the story of genocide does not end when the violence stops. What follows—the diplomatic management of memory, responsibility, and narrative—often determines how the crime itself will be remembered.

In this sense, genocide is not only carried out by those who organize and execute violence; it is also shaped by the diplomats, institutions, and political actors who later reinterpret it, soften its meaning, or redirect political attention away from it.

Varouj Pogharian's important study of Admiral Mark Bristol illuminates precisely this second dimension. As the last U.S. High Commissioner to the Ottoman Empire and later the first American ambassador to the Republic of Turkey, Bristol was not merely a witness to a historical transition. His actions and reports helped shape the diplomatic language through which the Armenian Genocide was interpreted—and often minimized—within international political circles.



Admiral Mark Bristol in Istanbul

Pogharian's analysis reveals three interconnected processes: the early relationship between Western diplomacy and the emerging Kemalist movement; the reframing of the genocide narrative within diplomatic discourse; and the gradual construction of a narrative that portrayed Armenians themselves as destabilizing actors.

At this point, the contrast between Mark Bristol and his predecessor, Ambassador Henry Morgenthau, becomes particularly revealing. Morgenthau, who served as U.S. ambassador to the Ottoman Empire during the genocide itself, described the destruction of the Armenians as a deliberate policy and documented it in some of the most important contemporary testimonies of the crime. Bristol, by contrast, represented a different diplomatic posture—one less concerned with moral witness than with political stabilization and commercial opportunity. Where Morgenthau exposed the reality of genocide, Bristol's reports helped soften its diplomatic implications. The transition from Morgenthau to Bristol therefore illustrates a broader shift in international politics: from witnessing atrocity to managing its political consequences.

Understanding these dynamics is essential not only for interpreting the past but also for recognizing how similar mechanisms continue to operate in contemporary international politics.

An Alliance Before Lausanne

Official Turkish historiography often portrays the War of Independence as a heroic struggle against Western imperialism. According to this narrative, the Treaty of Sèvres represented a Western attempt to destroy the Turkish nation, and the nationalist movement led by Mustafa Kemal emerged as a unified resistance against foreign domination.

The historical record, however, reveals a far more complex picture.

When Admiral Mark Bristol arrived in Istanbul in 1919, the Ottoman Empire was collapsing and the

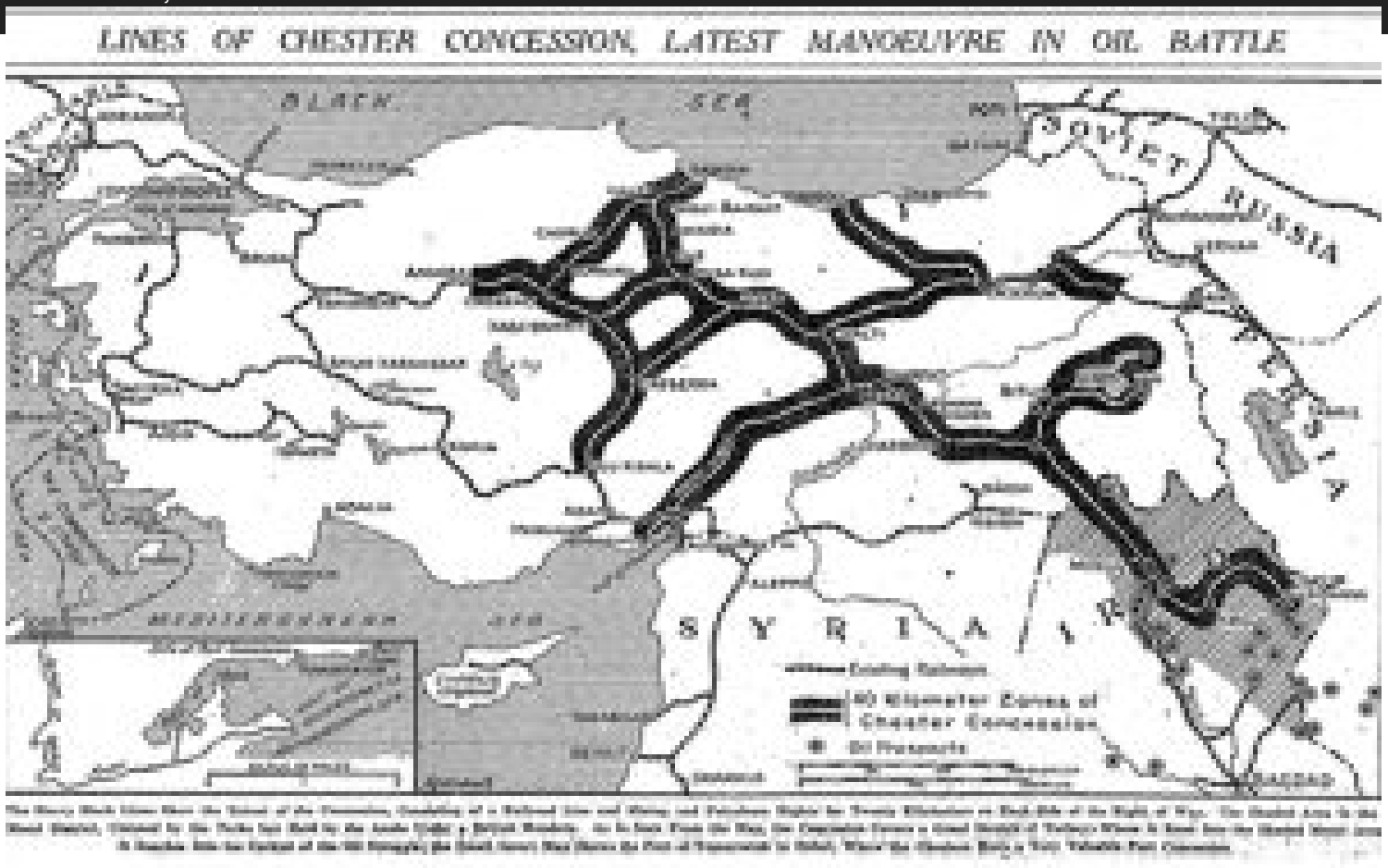
nationalist movement in Anatolia was gaining momentum. Rather than relying solely on the Allied occupation administration in Istanbul, Bristol began positioning the United States to engage with the emerging Ankara leadership.

The most visible expression of this early engagement was the **Chester Concession**, an ambitious project granting American investors extensive rights to build railways and exploit natural resources across Anatolia.

What makes this particularly striking is the timing. The Republic of Turkey had not yet been proclaimed. The Treaty of Lausanne had not yet been signed. Yet diplomatic and commercial channels between the United States and the Ankara government were already being explored.

The territories covered by the Chester Concession were largely regions from which the Armenian population had been violently removed. The project therefore reflected more than economic opportunity; it signaled a tacit acceptance of the new demographic and political realities created by the genocide.

In this sense, Bristol's diplomacy challenges the simplistic nationalist claim that "the West tried to destroy Turkey." At least some Western actors were already preparing to cooperate with the emerging Turkish state—long before its formal international recognition.



Reframing the Genocide Narrative

One of the most significant contributions of Pogharian's article is the distinction between crude denial and what might be called **diplomatic reframing**.

Bristol rarely denied outright that massacres had taken place. Instead, he reframed them within a broader narrative of wartime chaos. Violence was portrayed not as a coordinated campaign of destruction but as a tragic consequence of war in which multiple communities suffered.

This approach operated through several rhetorical strategies.

First, the systematic nature of the violence was obscured by emphasizing the chaotic conditions of the First World War.

Second, Armenian suffering was often balanced against the suffering of Muslim populations, creating an impression of symmetrical violence.

Third, eyewitness reports—particularly those from missionaries and humanitarian workers—were frequently treated with skepticism or dismissed as biased.

Taken together, these strategies did not deny the events outright. Rather, they blurred the lines of

responsibility and transformed genocide into a complex and morally ambiguous tragedy.

Such reframing proved extremely effective. It shifted the debate away from the question of systematic destruction and toward the more ambiguous terrain of competing narratives and shared suffering.

Constructing the Narrative of "Armenian Guilt"

Perhaps the most enduring consequence of this diplomatic discourse was the gradual emergence of what might be called the **"Armenian guilt" narrative**.

In Bristol's reports, Armenians were often described as politically disruptive actors whose nationalist aspirations threatened regional stability. Their claims regarding the scale of violence were sometimes portrayed as exaggerated or politically motivated.

This rhetorical framework contributed to the idea that the events of 1915 represented not a unilateral campaign of destruction but a tragic conflict between rival ethnic groups.

The significance of this shift cannot be overstated. Once violence is reframed as mutual conflict, the distinction between victim and perpetrator becomes blurred. Responsibility is redistributed, and the moral clarity of the historical record begins to fade.

Importantly, this narrative did not originate solely within Turkish nationalist discourse. Pogharian's research suggests that elements of it were already circulating within Western diplomatic circles, where strategic and commercial considerations often took precedence over humanitarian concerns.

Contemporary Echoes: Reframing in Rojava

The diplomatic strategies Bristol employed a century ago are not confined to history. Similar mechanisms of reframing can be observed today in how Turkey's military operations in northern Syria are presented to international audiences.

Since 2016, Turkey has launched multiple cross-border operations aimed at dismantling the Democratic Autonomous Administration in northeastern Syria, commonly known as Rojava. These operations have resulted in civilian casualties, displacement, and the destruction of infrastructure. Yet in official discourse they are consistently framed as "counter-terrorism" measures.

Just as Bristol portrayed the Armenian Genocide as wartime chaos rather than systematic destruction, contemporary diplomatic language portrays Turkey's military campaigns as legitimate security operations.

This reframing has tangible consequences. By defining the conflict in northern Syria through the lens of security rather than political rights, international actors are provided with a convenient justification for inaction.

Contemporary Echoes: The Case of Artsakh

The dynamics described above are not confined to the early twentieth century or to Syria. Elements of the same narrative logic can be observed in contemporary international responses to crises involving Armenian communities.

The displacement of the Armenian population of Artsakh in 2023 provides a striking example. More than 150,000 Armenians were forced to leave their homes following Azerbaijan's military operation. Numerous international observers and human rights organizations have described the event as ethnic cleansing.

Yet the international response remained cautious and limited.

Once again, geopolitical considerations—including energy partnerships and regional stability—appeared to shape diplomatic language and policy responses.

The reframing strategies Bristol helped normalize are visible here as well: military operations described as security measures, victimhood balanced with geopolitical narratives, and humanitarian concerns subordinated to strategic interests.

Conclusion

Varouj Pogharian's examination of Mark Bristol offers more than a historical portrait of a controversial diplomat. It reveals a broader pattern in international politics.

This pattern can be summarized in three stages.

First, early diplomatic engagement with emerging regimes, often prioritizing stability and economic opportunity over accountability for past violence.

Second, the reframing of mass violence within narratives that emphasize complexity, chaos, or mutual suffering—thereby obscuring systematic responsibility.

Third, the gradual redistribution of blame, in which victims themselves are portrayed as contributors to instability.

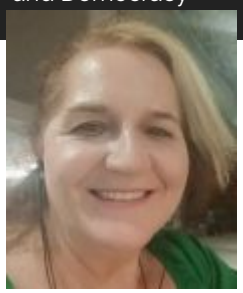
This pattern could be described as the **diplomatic normalization of genocide**.

Recognizing this mechanism is essential. Without confronting the ways in which diplomatic narratives can obscure responsibility, the international community risks repeating the same moral failures.

Genocide does not disappear when the killing stops; it often survives in the quiet language of diplomacy that teaches the world how to forget.

This article is adapted from a longer academic study originally published on Academia.edu.

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Born in Kars with maternal roots in Yerevan, **Nurnisa Erismis** now resides in Denizli, Turkey. She is a retired health manager with a degree in sociology. Inspired by the life story of her paternal grandmother, she has dedicated herself to feminism and human rights. She has been active in politics, defending equality among peoples and justice, and opposing racism and xenophobia. She has also been engaged in issues of memory, justice, and reconciliation in Turkey and the Armenian diaspora, with a particular focus on the Armenian Genocide.

There are no comments yet.