

# From an American Journalist to a Converted Ottoman Bureaucrat: Muhammed Alexander Russell Webb

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## Context

The document concerns the appointment of Muhammad Webb Efendi, an American citizen, as the Ottoman Consul General in New York and his receipt of a merit medal. It provides insight into the Ottoman Empire's procedures for appointing officials to foreign diplomatic positions and its mechanisms for recognizing and rewarding diplomatic service. The date recorded on the document is 28 Jumada al-Awwal 1319 in the Hijri calendar, corresponding to September 7, 1901, in the Gregorian calendar. The document is cataloged under the archival code 373-29 and classified within the 'İ..HR..' series, which denote the *İrade-i Hariciye* (Imperial Edicts on Foreign Affairs) collection, preserved in the Ottoman Archive (Osmanlı Arşivi), formerly known as the Prime Ministry Ottoman Archive (Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, BOA). This collection of documents includes appointments issued by the sultan pertaining to foreign affairs, indicating that the document forms part of a broader framework of diplomatic policy and governance. It is written in Ottoman Turkish using the Rika script style.

Alexander Russell Webb was born on November 9, 1846, in Hudson, New York. His father, Alexander Nelson Webb, served as the editor of the *Hudson Daily Star* newspaper. Webb received his primary education at the Home School in Glendale, Massachusetts, and subsequently attended Claverack College. After completing his formal education, he embarked on a career in journalism at an early age, contributing to various newspapers. Raised within the Presbyterian tradition, Webb actively participated in church services and Sunday school during his childhood and adolescence. However, he found this faith unsatisfactory and began seeking alternative spiritual perspectives. His involvement with the Theosophical Society exposed him to a variety of philosophical and religious ideas. While serving as editor of the *Missouri Republican* newspaper, Webb developed an interest in Islam and, starting in 1886, established contact with Islamic communities.<sup>1</sup> Seeking to gain a deeper understanding of Islam and the Muslim world,

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<sup>1</sup> İlhan Ekinci, "Webb, Muhammed Alexander Russell," *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, accessed January 18, 2025, <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/webb-muhammed-alexander-russell>.

Alexander Russell Webb decided to travel to the East. As part of this decision, he accepted an offer to serve as the United States consul in Manila in 1887. According to his own account, Webb embraced Islam in early 1888, shortly after his appointment to the Philippines. Following his conversion, he adopted the name Muhammad and later returned to the United States, where he began formulating ideas for propagating Islam within American society. It has been suggested that Webb's efforts were rooted in a broader vision of reimagining the structure of American society. During his tenure as the U.S. consul in Manila, Webb established connections with Muslim intellectuals and merchants in India. Among them was Haji Abdullah Arab, who took an interest in Webb's ideas. The two corresponded, and Haji Abdullah Arab pledged financial support for Webb's missionary activities in America.<sup>2</sup>

Returning to New York in 1893 with financial promises from Indian Muslim merchants, Muhammad Webb began publishing newspapers. He first launched *The Moslem World* (1893), followed by *The Voice of Islam*, and later merged these into *The Moslem World and Voice of Islam* (1895–1896). That same year, Webb participated in the Chicago World's Parliament of Religions, where he delivered two lectures: "The Influence of Islam on Social Change" and "The Spirit of Islam." These lectures were later published in *The First World Parliament of Religions* (1894). Webb also established working groups across various regions of the United States. However, the movement he led—referred to as *The American Mission*, *American Islamic Propaganda Movement*, and *American Moslem Brotherhood*—faced significant financial challenges. These difficulties arose primarily because the financial support initially promised by Indian Muslims was not fully realized.<sup>3</sup>

Through his pro-Abdulhamid II and pro-Ottoman articles published in *The Moslem World* newspaper, Muhammad Webb garnered the attention of the Ottoman government in Istanbul. As a result, Mavroyeni Bey, the Ottoman envoy in Washington, invited Webb to the embassy to express gratitude for his writings. This meeting also

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<sup>2</sup> Ekinci, "Webb, Muhammed Alexander Russell."

<sup>3</sup> Ekinci, "Webb, Muhammed Alexander Russell."

brought Webb's financial difficulties to the attention of the Ottoman authorities.<sup>4</sup> The Ottoman Empire, in response to Webb's financial struggles and request for support, decided to provide him with a regular monthly stipend to sustain both his publishing and missionary activities. Additionally, the Ottoman government aimed to utilize Webb as a soft power tool against anti-Islamic and anti-Ottoman propaganda. Webb played a significant role in countering the growing Armenian claims in the West by disseminating the Ottoman Empire's arguments in the United States. These allegations are extensively analyzed in the anonymously published pamphlets attributed to Alexander Russell Webb, specifically *A Few Facts about Turkey under the Reign of Abdul Hamid II* and *The Armenian Troubles and Where the Responsibility Lies*. *A Few Facts about Turkey* was initially published in early 1895, as corroborated by its first advertisement in the May issue of *The Moslem World and Voice of Islam*. The subsequent pamphlet, *The Armenian Troubles*, appeared in early 1896 and directly engaged with the intensifying Armenian crisis within the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, the issue was indirectly raised during the debates at the 1893 World's Fair and the Parliament of the World's Religions. Armenians and Western missionaries alleged that large-scale massacres targeting Armenians had taken place within the Ottoman Empire. In particular, the events of 1895–1896 had become a major point of contention, and these claims remained highly topical at the time the pamphlets were published.<sup>5</sup> The Ottoman Empire and Webb both maintained that the Armenian question was purely a political issue. Webb regarded Western powers' demands for "Armenian self-government" as dangerous attempts aimed at destabilizing the Ottoman Empire.<sup>6</sup>

Alexander Russell Webb's writings, which emphasized the perceived superiority of Islam over other religions, were translated and disseminated through newspapers published in Istanbul. This activity is documented in the official archival records of the

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<sup>4</sup> Cezmi Eraslan, "Muhammed A. R. Webb'in Amerika'da İslâm Propagandası ve Osmanlı Devleti'yle İlişkileri (1893-1896)," *İlmî Araştırmalar* 2 (1996): 87.

<sup>5</sup> Umar F. Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America: The Life of Alexander Russell Webb* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 203.

<sup>6</sup> Abd-Allah, *A Muslim in Victorian America*, 204.

Ottoman Empire, notably in a document preserved within the *Cumhurbaşkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi* under the *Yıldız Sadaret Hususi Evrakı* collection. This source provides valuable insight into the Ottoman state's involvement in the translation and circulation of Webb's works, illustrating an official effort to promote his ideas to a broader readership.<sup>7</sup> Over time, this mutually beneficial relationship deepened, reaching its peak with the document we have transcribed. On September 29, 1901, the Ottoman Grand Vizier issued an order to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, confirming that Muhammad Alexander Russell Webb had been appointed Honorary Consul General in New York through an imperial edict dated September 12, 1901. Thus, a career that began as an American journalist concluded as that of a convert serving as an Ottoman bureaucrat. Webb passed away in 1916.

## Transcription

*Yıldız Sarāy-ı Hümayūnı*

*Baş Kitābet Dā'iresi*

3874

*Ma'rūz-ı çāker-i kemīneleridir ki*

*Amerikalı Muḥammed Vebb Efendi'niñ Niyu York faḥrī baş-şehbenderligine ta'yīni ve mūmā-ileyhe üçüncü rütbeden Mecīdī nişān-ı zī-şān ve gümüş liyākat madalyası iḥsān buyurulmasına mebnī mu'āmele-i lāzımenīñ ifāsı şeref-şādır olan irāde-i seniyye-i ḥazret-i ḥilāfet-penāhī iktizā-yı 'ālīsinden olmağla ol bābda emr ü fermān ḥazret-i veliyyü'l-emriñdir.*

*Ser-Kâtib-i ḥazret-i Şehyārī, Tahsin*

*fî 28 Cemāziye'l-ülā sene [1]319*

*fî 29 Ağustos sene [1]317*

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<sup>7</sup> BOA., Y.A...HUS., 271-40 (officially known as Presidency of the Republic of Turkey Directorate of State Archives - Ottoman Archives - BOA)

## Translation

Yıldız Imperial Palace

Office of the Chief Secretariat

3874

It is the humble petition of your most devoted servant that, in accordance with the exalted decree of His Imperial Majesty, the Refuge of the Caliphate, the necessary procedures are to be carried out concerning the appointment of Muhammad Webb Efendi, the American, as the Honorary Consul of New York, as well as the conferment upon him of the distinguished Order of the Medjidie, Third Class, and the Silver Medal of Merit.

Since this directive arises from the royal will of His Imperial Majesty, the Custodian of Authority, the execution of this matter is thus subject to his command and decree.

Chief Scribe of His Imperial Majesty, Tahsin

Issued on the 28<sup>th</sup> of Jumādā al-Ūlā 1319

29<sup>th</sup> of August 1317

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## Facsimile

