Source Materials for the History of the Middle East in the General State Archives (ARA) of the Netherlands at The Hague

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The lack of a knowledge of the Dutch language among most students of the modern history of the Middle East seems to have as a consequence a certain disregard for the collections of source materials available for research in public record offices and libraries in the Netherlands.

One such repository of research materials are the General State Archives, that is the central public record office of the Netherlands in The Hague. With its holdings of documents and records series written in Dutch as well as in other languages like Italian, Spanish, French, Turkish and Arabic this record office is ranking on a par with institutions like the PRO in London or the Bibliothèque Nationale, Archives Nationales and Archives des Affaires Étrangères in Paris or the Archivio di Stato at Venice. This fact has been recognised already a long time by researchers of the history of Asia and Oceania. Students of Middle Eastern history would certainly be able to profit from the archives at The Hague as much as they are already making use of the well known collection of oriental manuscripts and documents of the Leyden University Library.

Around the beginning of the 17th century Holland, that is the Dutch Republic, established regular diplomatic relations with the Islamic governments in the Middle East. One reason for this was the rise of Dutch commercial activities in the Middle East and North Africa undertaken in the wake of Venice, France and England.

Relations of various nature were put on an official footing by means of treaties or so-called ‘capitulations’ with:
- Morocco in 1610
- Ottoman Empire (= Sublime Porte) in 1612
- Persia in 1623 (concluded by the V.O.C., the Dutch East India Company).

Separate agreements were reached later on with local governments in the Ottoman Empire, its provinces in North Africa: Algiers in 1617, Tunis in 1622, Tripoli in 1703, the Yemen (Mokha and Sana) in 1616. Muscat/Oman later came into contact with the Dutch like other Arab and Persian rulers in the Gulf area.

On the whole friendly relations between Holland and Middle Eastern powers remained uninterrupted till the present.

Evidence of the history of Dutch relations with the Middle East in modern and contemporary times may be found in a number of local and provincial record offices, libraries and private collections in the Netherlands. By far the most important are the holdings of the General State Archives (ARA) at The Hague. Their collections may be compared e.g. to those of PRO and India Office combined.

I will offer now a summary description mainly of the so-called First Section of this well ordered record office. The records available reflect the main fields of Dutch interests in the Middle East and North Africa (1600-1800), which are:

First: policy countering the dangers of piracy against Dutch navigation in the Mediterranean and outside the Strait of Gibraltar done by Ottoman and Moorish corsairs (at the same time explaining away Dutch equivalent activities in the same area).

Second: advancement of trade to the Levant and Barbary: Istanbul, Aleppo, Cyprus, Izmir, Egypt, etc.

Third: political activity in the Ottoman Empire in search for support against Habsburg power and the influence of the Pope (1600-1648).

Fourth: diplomacy of mediation towards peace in central Europe at peace congresses since the 1690’s till the end of the 18th century.

Fifth: political observation of developments in the Middle East from a neutral point of view. This was the main rule of conduct for Dutch diplomatists, consular officers and naval personnel in the Middle East and North Africa (1600-1800).

Sixth: diplomatical protection of small but sometimes influential groups of non-muslim inhabitants in the Middle East everywhere (1612-1914).
Wellcome to the Dutch in Mokha by the local governor. Conditions of trade imposed on the first Dutch merchant vessel arriving, under the command of the well-known Pieter van den Broecke. Signed Hasan Aga, and dated 3 July 1616. Slightly reduced. (ARA, VOC 1063, p. 9).
Many Leiden orientalist scholars from Thomas Erpenius (d. 1624) onwards worked as official translators to the Dutch government, the States General at the Hague, rendering treaty texts and diplomatical correspondence from Turkish, Arabic, Persian and Hebrew into Dutch (or Latin). Doing so they often kept the original documents with their private papers which sometimes entered this way into the manuscript collection of Leiden University Library by bequest or purchase.

Jacobus Golius (d. 1667) was actively involved in Dutch diplomacy in the Middle East as well. From 1622 to 1624 he joined the embassy to Morocco (exploring the port of Agadir and collecting MSS). In 1625 he left for the Levant, working as a dragoman and chancellor of the consulate at Aleppo and later at the embassy in Istanbul till 1627. Here apart from collecting MSS he had a good time as may be gleaned from ambassador Haga’s letters describing Golius’ amorous oriental diversions on the island of St. Andreas in the Sea of Marmara.

A. The Archives of the States General (Arch.S.G.) 1576-1795:
— diplomatical and commercial correspondence letters in Bundles (‘Liassen’) Barbaryen en Turkije (‘Secrete Kas’ ‘Loketkas’, ‘Secretet’) arranged by receipt.

These letters often contain annexes consisting of original Arabic, Turkish, Persian letters, documents, extracts or translations thereof. Such annexes are not listed as a rule and provide the researcher in Middle Eastern history with interesting surprises of information. These former secret archives of the States General (1576-1699), their ‘Secret Cupboard’ and its successor series of treaties contain splendid examples of Turkish, Persian and Moroccan calligraphy and a representative series of documents issued by local North African authorities.

The copies of the three Dutch capitulations (1612, 1634, 1680) the successive treaties with the provinces of Barbary with Persia and Morocco are superior examples of a rich collection of oriental documents.

B. The Archives of the Board of Directors of Levant Trade (D.L.H.) (1625-1825).
This organisation of trade was not in any sense a Levant Company but a body of local deputies of the principal Levant merchants established upon the initiative of the central government to organise and direct the trade in order to reduce risks at sea and competition. Amsterdam was the main centre of this organisation. Its records are ‘resolutions’, correspondence with embassies and consulates and also the merchants’ factors in the East established in the so-called ‘scales’ (‘factories’). The letter series are more or less complete from 1670 onwards. No oriental documents are kept here.

C. Records of the Boards of Admiralty bear upon Dutch naval actions in the Mediterranean.


The Governor General of the Dutch East Indies at Batavia exercised sovereign rights in the name of the Republic east of the Cape of Good Hope. His deputies were resident at times in Basra, Kharg and Bandar Abbas, Isfahan and Mokha. Resolutions of Governor General and Council plus letters and reports received from the local deputies in Asia are part of the extensive records remaining from (the Amsterdam and Zeeland Chambers of) the V.O.C. Scattered one may find precious documents and data on Middle Eastern history as well as geographical descriptions, travel accounts and maps.

E. Archives of the States Provincial of the Province of Holland (in ARA Section III).

‘Resolutions’ in printed form (1576-1795). Data on Middle East affairs may be found here e.g. the first appointment of a Dutch consul at Aleppo already in 1608 upon recommendation of Holland Province.

The Grand Pensionary of Holland functioned in all effect as foreign secretary of the Republic. The papers of some of them have a direct bearing upon our subject. E.g. of John of (Olde-)Barneveldt (1586-1619) who was the instigator of Dutch policy in the Levant since 1610. No oriental papers are to be found here.

F. Archives of diplomatic and consular posts in the Middle East (ARA I) consisting of 1) correspondence received at The Hague; 2) records transferred at one time to The Hague including some private papers of trading firms gone bankrupt before 1810. Survived have the records of the:
— Istanbul Embassy
— Smyrna Consulate
— Tangier (+ Mogador) Consulate.

Documents date mainly from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Plenty of oriental documents are to be found in these series. These archives consist of two sections each: secretariat (i.e. correspondence of ambassadors and consuls): chancellery (i.e. justice, notary public, finances, protection of Dutch nationals and protegé’s)6. These collections contain correspondence with Ottoman officials at local and central level and private persons at Edirne, the Aegean Archipelago, Cyprus, Izmir, Dardanelles, Ankara, Aleppo, Iskenderun, Tripoli (Lebanon), Beyrouth, Acre, Jerusalem, Baghdad,
Berat (Certificate of admission for a foreign resident) issued by the Ottoman central government at Istanbul for the benefit of the newly appointed Dutch consul in Egypt at the request of the Dutch ambassador Calkoen, on 27 Shawwal 1143/1731. Reduced. (ARA. Legatie Turkije tot 1811, No. 1090).
Specimens of letters and documents in French, Armenian and Arabic, handled by the Dutch consul in Aleppo, Jean van Maseyk, during a lawsuit at the qâdl’s court in 1196/1781-2. Reduced. (ARA, Legatie Turkije tot 1811, No. 1266).
Basra, Alexandria, Cairo, Tripolis, Tunis, Algiers, Salleh, Mogador, etc.

These consular and embassy records offer important data on regional, economical and social conditions and present a picture of the daily practice of political and commercial relations as distinct from the better known but theoretical framework of the capitulations.

G. Collections of Private Papers (in ARA I).

There are many quasi-official records of former ambassadors, consuls and merchants who lived in the Middle East. Many of such collections known to have existed have now been irretrievably scattered or lost, for instance those of Cornelis Haga (1612-1639) and Cornelis Pauw (1613-1622). Some are to be found elsewhere for instance Ernst Brinck’s papers (1613-1614) and Levinus Warnerus’ bequest at the Leiden Library.

— Calkoen Papers (1727-1744) Ambassador at Istanbul.
— Pieter v. d. Broecke i.e. the East India Company at Mokha (1620).

H. Miscellaneous Acquisitions (Aanwinsten I).

I. Collection of Maps and Atlases of ARA. Mss. and printed maps of various (western) origins kept in a special department. Important are the maps belonging to the famous (formerly ‘secret’) Atlas of the V.O.C. kept at the Amsterdam Main Office (‘Het Oost-Indisch Huis’) of the company (e.g. views of Basra, plan of Djeddah, of Muscat, Kharg).

I have dealt so far only with sources for the period of the ancien régime, of the Dutch Republic, that is.

Another paper would be necessary to discuss the records of the Foreign and Colonial Offices of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (1814- ) relative to Middle Eastern and Islamic history. Dutch relations with the Middle East remained relatively extensive till 1918. The affairs of the Dutch East Indies had their effect upon policy concerning the Ottoman government in Istanbul and the Hedjaz as well as Cairo and the Hadramaut.

Panislamism kept government advisers such as C. Snouck Hurgronje (d. 1936) at work. A Dutch consulate was established at Djeddah in 1871. Persia saw new Dutch commercial enterprise in the Gulf area: in 1868 a consulate was opened in Bandar Bushir.

A number of commercial treaties with Middle Eastern states confirmed Dutch interests established of old albeit these were of much lesser interest than the period before 1815. Holland was only a minor western capitulatory power during the 19th century.

All the same Dutch interests in the Middle East produced a sizable amount of records available for students but rarely tapped yet for research in the history of the Middle East in modern times.

Some relevant literature:

— Slot, B. J., ‘Shirkat al-Hind al-Sharkiya al-Hilandiya... wa-l-Bahrayn’, Al-Watheeka (The Document) III-6 (Bahrayn, 1405/1985) 64-70.
— idem, ‘Commercial Activities of Koraïs in Amsterdam’ in O Eranistis 16 (Athens, 1980) 55-139.

— The Netherlands-Bulgaria. Traces of Relations through the Centuries. Material from Dutch Archives and Libraries on Bulgarian History and on Dutch Contacts with Bulgaria. Sofia 1981.

— Vermeulen, U., 'L'Ambassade persane de Musa Beg aux Provinces Unies (1625-1628'). Persica VII (Leiden 1975-8) 145, 153:
— idem, 'L'Ambassade néerlandaise de Jan Smit en Perse'. ibidem 155-163:

Notes
3) The General State Archives, in Dutch: Algemeen Rijksarchief (= A.R.A.) are housed in a new building next to The Hague's Central Station. Its address is: Prins Willem-Alexanderhof 20, next to the likewise new building of the Royal Library (Koninklijke Bibliotheek = K.B.).
4) The A.R.A. is organised in four main sections: I central governmental records to 1795, II dito 1795 - ca. 1940, III provincial records of Holland proper i.e. one of the United Seven Provinces and today the province of Southern Holland, IV Inspection of Records and Destruction.
7) The records and papers of the Dutch ambassadors to the Imperial Court at Vienna 1690-1701 are important for Ottoman history in relation to the negotiations which led to the Peace of Carlowitz (1699) cf. Inventory C. van Heemskerck Papers (1983) by Th. Thomassen, typescript available at A.R.A.
8) Ernst Brinck left three highly interesting Alba Amicorum, now in the Royal Library collection of Miss. Cf. F. A. van Rappard, Ernst Brinck, Utrecht [1868] and a forthcoming paper on the same subject by the author of this article to be published in Manuscripts of the Middle East.
9) A.R.A. possesses a specialized reference library which is holding often nationally unique copies of rare printed books, not mentioned in the Netherlands' central catalogue.
10) Dutch collections on Persia and the Gulf area are e.g. the Hotz Bequest in Leiden University Library and the Said Ruete Collection including old photographs of the area, Arabia, Muscat, Oman and Zanzibar, kept at the Netherlands Institute of Near Eastern Studies (NINO) likewise in Leiden. Printed catalogues of both collections are available from Leiden University Library Department of Oriental Books and Manuscripts (Keeper Drs. J. J. Witkam).