

# How do Syrian-Orthodox managers fill in their leadership role in the Netherlands?

Author: Thomas Aksu  
University of Twente  
P.O. Box 217, 7500AE Enschede  
The Netherlands

## ABSTRACT,

*This paper presents the results of a study on how Syrian-Orthodox (Suryoye) managers fill in their leadership role in the Netherlands, and to what extent this relates to the literature about cultural characteristics. Five interviews were conducted, and the findings demonstrate that Syrian Orthodox managers in Dutch businesses in the Netherlands carry out a Paternalistic leadership role. The results support Hall's theory in dimensions of cultural differences between countries, which is also in line with literature regarding the Suryoye cultural background, where studies have revealed that elements of paternalistic leadership have a strong influence on the Syrian Orthodox community.*

## Graduation Committee members:

**Dr. Arnold Enklaar**  
**Dr. Lara Carminati**

## Keywords

Culture, Dutch, Leadership, Netherlands, Suryoye,  
Syrian-Orthodox, Traits

---

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Problem statement

In today's globalized world, cultural differences are a key aspect in understanding business partners from all over the world. Unless we know how to decode other cultures, we are very easy prey to misunderstanding, needless conflict and ultimate failure (Meyer, 2014).

In cultures that differ radically from each other, human interaction develops along the lines of entirely different rules of conduct and regulations. Not knowing the rules, or not understanding how to apply them, inevitably leads to misunderstandings in a given country (Thomas, 2010). Therefore, managers must act on these diversities among cultures. Intercultural experience and competencies acquired by managers are a valuable resource in the organizations. It is important to maintain and update this useful information for use on future challenges posed by both intercultural leadership and management issues. Upon their return from an extended assignment abroad, managers often find there is little interest in their experiences and competencies within the organization. Managers should be given the opportunity to contribute to organizational practices, for instance, by using the experiences to review and update selection criteria and improve training measures. Managers with international experience should be encouraged to act as mentors to employees preparing for work in an intercultural context (Stumpf, 2010). Understanding these cultural differences can be done with cultural dimensions described by the theory of Edward Hall. Hall describes culture as form of communication, where words and behavior form the medium of communication. Hall's dimensions are *high and low context, space, time and speed of messages* (Hall, 1990).

For example, the dimension of the Context is explained as the information that surrounds an event; it is inextricably bound up with the meaning of that event. The elements that combine to produce a given meaning to a message—events and context—are in different proportions depending on the culture (Hall, 1976). In a high-context culture most of the information is in the person and little information is in the delivered (coded) part of the message is measured as high context. Whereas for low context, low-context messages are focused on transmitting coded meanings to another entity in words, which forms communication (Hall, 1976). High-context cultures, rely heavily on context, meaning the tone and the meaning of a message that is communicated, and not just words. Whereas low-context cultures the communication relies on words which share information in precise ways.

In the Netherlands there are several ethnic minority groups, one of them being the Syrian-Orthodox (Suryoye) originating from the Middle East. Hall's distinction between high-context cultures and low-context cultures is very useful for explaining the cultural differences between Suryoye Dutch and majority Dutch. Suryoye Dutch have a far more high-context culture than majority Dutch, which may easily lead to frictions and misunderstanding. Miscommunication and misunderstanding can result from poorly encrypted messages that the receiver may not correctly interpret (Aririguzoh, 2022). High-context and low-context is only one aspect in which Suryoye, and majority Dutch may differ, there are many more. Since this bachelor circle is about leadership, I chose to study Suryoye leadership in a Dutch context. I would like to know in what way Suryoye men and women in management positions combine (or not) leadership behaviors from the Syrian and from their Dutch background. When doing a literature review, it appeared that there are hardly any studies on Suryoye managers in the Netherlands, nor on managers from other ethnic minorities. The reason for this can be that until recently there were only few managers from ethnic minorities in the Netherlands, but their number is rising. This seems to be a field of research that has been neglected thus far.

### 1.2 Research question

The aim of this research is to gain knowledge about how Syrian-Orthodox managers fill in their leadership role in the Netherlands. Therefore, the following research question has been suggested:

- *How do Syrian-Orthodox managers fill in their leadership role in the Netherlands?*

To fully address the above research question, the subsequent questions are going to be addressed:

- *To what extent is their leadership influenced by their Suryoye background?*
- *To what extent is their leadership influenced by their Dutch background?*
- *What do they consider to be the biggest challenges for leading in the Netherlands?*

### 1.3 Academic relevance

It was challenging to discover literature regarding migrant leadership in the Netherlands, particularly literature about Syrian-Orthodox leadership. This field is lacking several information and literature about it. Therefore, this thesis researches whether these Syrian-Orthodox managers run their leadership in a typical Dutch way or in their own way. Besides that, both cultures are compared to understand how they combine the Dutch and Syrian-Orthodox traditions and if this is done by accident or consciously. In addition, this thesis shows which Dutch leadership characteristics are perceived as the most difficult to adapt to for these managers.

### 1.4 Practical relevance

By doing this research and writing the thesis, the goal is to provide practical information to both Syrian-Orthodox managers and managers with other migration background, how to successfully operate leadership in the Netherlands and the including pitfalls that they experience in this. This is useful for the combination and work relation between these managers with a migration background and employees, who do not have the same culture. By providing information about these aspects the work relation and understanding between both parties is much smoother which can reflect in better results from cooperation.

## 2.0 Literature

### 2.1 Culture characteristics of Hall

Edward Hall, Jr. described how people behave and react in different types of culturally defined personal space (Hall, 1966). Below, the four dimensions of his theory are described and reflect these dimensions on two different cultures.

A message where most of the information is in the person and little information is in the delivered (coded) part of the message is considered as *high context*. This in person information relies on non-verbal communication, where signals and cues are significant. It is not only about non-verbal communication, but also about the fact that a lot of information is assumed to be known and is therefore not literally included in the message. A high context culture is related to close relationships with the same level of characteristics. The Suryoye show great aspects of high context culture since non-verbal communication conveys an important part of the message. One of the reasons for this, is their origin from Middle East countries, like Syria, Turkey, and Iraq where this kind of communicating is normal.

Hall describes *space* as another dimension in which perception is culturally determined. People from different cultures perceive space in several ways, which can lead to miscommunication in cross-cultural environments. Hall used the term 'proxemics' to address the conceptualization and use of the space (Hall, 1966). The Suryoye suffered a lot during the Genocide back in 1915, called the 'Sayfo', when (officially) almost millions of them were killed in the Ottoman empire (Gaunt, 2019). This is one significant reason, out of more, why Suryoye highly value personal space and space with family, which is strictly different from space with outsiders of this virtual bubble.

Hall divided the structure of *time* into two terms, monochronic time and polychronic time (Hall, 1966). Monochronic time is described as performing one activity at a certain time and paying all the attention to this activity. Monochronic time is linear, which means that each activity follows, after one is finished. This explains why people tend to focus on their activity and don't like to be interrupted. Regarding relations between people, this means that intensifying one relationship means shortening another one (Hall, 1966). Polychronic time addresses involvement in many things at once. Instead of focussing one activity at a time, in polychronic time activities are performed simultaneously. Schedules are not significant, plans are more flexible, and the emphasis relies on people's involvement with each other. As a result of this, people tend to be highly distractible (Hall, 1966). Time is used as communication in organizations to conduct proper business in different cultures and countries. Informal rules are of big importance, because they differ around cultures. Lead time is an example of an organizational aspect that varies in every culture. Rhythm and speed are also regarded as an important aspect of time, which are related to the differences between cultures (Hall, 1966). Hall addresses intercultural communication, in which transmitted messages by one party must be decoded by the other. The decoding of process messages can be measured in speed. Cultural differences are the biggest barriers in intercultural understanding of messages. The speed of messages is not only influenced by cultural differences, but also by the medium. For instance, tv commercials are messages that are delivered fast, while poetries and verses can take a long time to understand.

### 2.2 Minorities

This thesis is about the leadership of Syrian-Orthodox in the Netherlands, but it appeared that there is no literature whatever on this topic. Therefore, literature about minorities in the Netherlands and in other countries are used as a substitute. Studies about certain minorities might show great resemblance with the Syrian-Orthodox community and can in this way be very helpful to fill in missing information.

An article by Carroll (2019) investigates how minority managers navigate the pressures of their organization versus the pressures of their community. Navigating these two competing pressures, minority managers often experience role conflict in their work. Carroll theoretically explored and empirically examined how race affects minority managers' perceptions, networking behavior, and hiring outcomes. Testing the hypotheses is done by using 6 years of school superintendent survey data. Carroll found that racial minority managers behave in similar ways to their white peers as they have similar perceptions of their role in the organization and engage in professional networking behavior at similar rates. However, minority managers separately address the interests of their same-race minority community by hiring same-race street-level bureaucrats. As public organizations have grown increasingly diverse, this research revisits the experiences of minority public administrators and contributes to our understanding of

how race and social identities contemporarily influence public managerial behaviors (Carroll, 2019).

Whilst Carroll's study (2019) is not specifically related to Dutch firms, a paper from the Erasmus University Rotterdam (Singeling, 2016) is added. This article shows some advantages of hiring foreign Managers in Dutch companies. These advantages are about the effectiveness of teams, compared with local leaders and clients of firms. The study demonstrated not only that migrant managers increase team productivity by comprehending various cultures, but also that they have an advantage in leadership because of their experience working with other cultures. Since the origin of Suryoye is from Mesopotamia, its population has lived for centuries under the Ottoman Empire, in which it was a must for Suryoye to adapt habits of the Turkish culture. That is why despite the different religions, these two groups may share a lot of characteristics, which are especially based on being proud of their own heritage and live by principles. Çuhadar investigated how these characteristics affect Turkish leadership in foreign policies (Çuhadar, 2021). The study examined six Turkish leaders, Süleyman Demirel, Bülent Ecevit, Necmettin Erbakan, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Abdullah Gül, and Turgut Özal, and 18 foreign policy cases to answer the questions whether Turkish leaders differ from each other in terms of their personality traits and styles, how their styles affected their foreign policy choices and how they reacted to various domestic and international constraints they encountered in cases of foreign policy. (Çuhadar, 2021). It resulted in a pattern of Turkish leadership clashes with western leadership. Main causes for these clashes are the cultural differences. For example, a clear difference is the decision-making, which is fully controlled by the leader in Middle East cultures, while it is more democratic in Western cultures. Syrian Orthodox managers exhibit a number of paternalistic leadership traits. A strong authority figure who behaves as the father and treats partners and employees as though they are part of one big, extended family is known as paternalistic leadership. As a result, the characteristics of paternalistic leadership are examined and used in conjunction with the interviewees' conclusions (Soylu, 2011). Understanding the key cultural events that shape a significant portion of Suryoye's cultural behaviour can be gained from Gaunt (2019). The Sayfo in 1915, the Armenian and Syrian Orthodox "Holocaust", is the subject of investigation in his literary works. This makes the origins of the interview findings more clear (Gaunt, 2019). The study by Gaunt is relevant to this thesis because it examines the effects of the most significant historical development in the history of the Syrian Orthodox community. The cultural traits that Suryoye managers likewise exhibit may be explained by his research. Schukkink (2012) refers to a typical Syrian-Orthodox family who serves as a representation of the Suryoye as diligent workers with a strong capacity for career advancement. Reading up on typical family traits in this literature can aid in understanding interview results.

Summarising, very little research has been done on ethnic minority managers in the Netherlands, let alone on Syrian Orthodox managers.

## 2.3 Dutch culture

Enklaar (2007) gives in his book a broad overview about the Dutch culture and standards. Insights from this book are used as a standard for Dutch culture. These understandings are needed, because they form the aspects on the Dutch work floor and are the basis for a typical Dutch manager's profile. The description of the Dutch business environment and leadership by (Breukel, 2018) is taken as standard for leadership of a typical Dutch manager.

A more specific view about a Dutch manager's leadership profile, is provided by an article written by de Waal (2010). On behalf of big empirical research, he has analyzed and described the whole profile of a Dutch high performance manager. This research is not only focused on leadership within the organization but also regards the leadership in society. The insights of this article show deeper understanding about all characteristics of a typical Dutch manager. For the thesis this profile can be compared with Syrian-Orthodox managers, to see where it clashes and what similarities there are.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research design

Since this thesis is about understanding how Syrian-Orthodox managers fill in their leadership role in the Netherlands, data needs to be collected to form a new theory. This can be done by using an inductive qualitative method. This method allows it to move from specific observations to broader generalizations and (new) theories. This is more appropriate for in-depth analyses of complex cultural phenomena. (Saunders, 2009). A big advantage of this approach is that it allows the researcher to be flexible as the researcher does not have to follow certain pre-determined information and can generate new ideas. On the other side, a general disadvantage of this approach is the time it takes to conduct this research type.

### 3.2 Data collection

The data have been collected via five interviews with Syrian-Orthodox managers, who operate in various Dutch companies in several industries in the Netherlands. The inclusion criteria are, firstly, that they should be managers with a Syrian-Orthodox background, secondly, they should operate in firms within different layers of management and lastly these firms should be completely Dutch and not owned and staffed by other Syrian-Orthodox. Besides of that, a balanced representation of male and female interviewees is sought. All the participants were directly contacted through personal networks. Every interviewee was personally contacted and invited to participate in the study.

Interviewee No.	Gender	Age	Total years of working for the Dutch Firm	Location	Position
1	W	30	7	Enschede	Team manager
2	W	36	16	Enschede	Sales department manager
3	M	45	22	Almelo/flexible	Relationship Manager
4	M	26	8	Enschede	DKW Chef
5	M	27	8	Hengelo	Assistant filial manager

Table 1, Information of the interviewees

### 3.3 Research instrument

A semi-structured interview technique has been used, because this supports loosely structured questions which give the interviewees more opportunities to fully express themselves, which is what is needed for this thesis. The open-ended questions allow the researcher and participants to discuss the topics of interest in more detail (Adams, 2016). To support their trust to express themselves, strict anonymity was respected; thus, their real names were replaced by fictive names. In order to sustain the quality of the interviews, Amberscript was used to transcribe the recorded interviews into text in a Word document. The interviews were conducted online in Dutch and translated into English. They took between 45 minutes to an hour.

### 3.4 Data analysis

After completing the transcription, the data collected were analyzed, using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach uses the transcripts to examine data and identify common themes, ideas and patterns of meanings that are shown repeatedly (Caulfield, 2019). To do so, first the data were to be coded, which was done by Delvetool's coding interview software. Once the coding process was done, the Delve qualitative data analysis tool was used to analyse the data and get deeper insights.

## 4. Findings

The parts of this paragraph cover the main themes that emerged from the interviews. These characteristics symbolise the leadership style of Syrian-Orthodox managers within Dutch Firms.

### 4.1 Foreign and Dutch consideration

There was a topic on which all the interviewees agreed, this was the believe that Dutch colleagues were being preferred in the selection process for a particular job or function. *"In a manner, you are one step behind a Dutch person"*, said an interviewee. This basically means that Dutch persons seem to be preferred within firms in the Netherlands. The respondents believe that their appearance and names reflect the characteristics of a foreigner, which is not desired within certain jobs and especially at manager roles. Interviewees continue to believe that discrimination has a major impact on business. All five interviewees therefore felt the pressure they had to work even harder and deliver better results than other employees to still be regarded for a job.

*"As a foreigner, you have to work twice as hard as a Dutch person"*, is said by another interviewee, which literally says that as a Syrian-Orthodox employee you must deliver twice as much as a Dutch employee. The interviews together show that Suryoye learn early on in their life that one of the main points of life is to work towards a successful career. One interviewee said, *"I got tough at a very young age, that nothing is for free in my life, and that I must work for everything I desire, this message will I also forward towards my kids in the future"*. To exemplify this, one respondent experienced that his Dutch co-manager, with whom he closely works together, got the same position while being less effective in his work throughout the years. He does not mean that his colleague was doing much less, but that he had rather less influence on all the results of the team compared to the interviewee. The Syrian-Orthodox managers, who did not complain about it at all, was stated that if it was not for his great impact on the team and the following results, another Dutch employee with less achievements would be in this function. So, for Suryoye managers, it appears to be a challenge to be regarded on the same level as a Dutch manager, therefore they feel the need to prove their abilities more than a Dutch colleague.

## 4.2 Being the best

According to the interviews, Suryoye show great willpower and are dedicated towards achieving goals and having a successful career, but this has also its clear downsides. Being asked about how important it is to be the best in the Syrian-Orthodox community, the answer of an interviewee was “*enormous, in our culture everyone wants to be the best in everything*”, said an interviewee. Followed by confirmation in other interviews, it is told that Suryoye strive to be the best in such a way, that you must give them the feeling they really are, because once they see their self as the best, they will also act on it. Due to this Suryoye managers, highly value their position and their tasks, not only because it brings status with it,

## 4.3 Pride and honour

For Suryoye it is very difficult to change their vision and view about work and life. They have overall an intense strong opinion and strong perspective about points in life, which can neither be changed nor discussed on many aspects. They view many things from a particular perspective, which they believe cannot be any other, in part because of their faith and culture. The difficulty in accepting sexual groups that are different from heterosexuals is an illustration of a theological concept of sticking to preconceived ideas inspired by the Syrian-Orthodox church. An interviewee said, “*Being gay or trans for example is not tolerated neither in our culture as it is from our religion view, it can be viewed as a family scandal*”.

Another example, from a cultural perspective, it is always the case that the oldest male in a family holds the position of power. When being criticized about these aspects, where they have a strong opinion on, Suryoye might be quick tempered in way that their reaction can appear to be a bit aggressive to Dutchmen.

These phenomena are resulting from specific behavior characteristics of Suryoye, which establish a shared view of the Syrian-Orthodox community on a variety of aspects about life in general, which can also be work related. The main characteristics which cause this, are pride and honour, which were mentioned multiple times by interviewees. To illustrate this, an interviewee gave an example where there was no agreement with his co-

## 4.4 Strict but Justified

Observing Suryoye managers’ actions in the workplace, they show a hard, but justified approach to their staff. Just like Dutch people, Suryoye can be very direct within their communication, but the difference between those two forms of being direct is that Suryoye execute it in a different tone, which is much more focused on telling someone what to do, without further reproach. Unlike Suryoye, Dutch managers are overall more willing to explain why they think in a particular about an issue by using argumentation, whereas Suryoye managers just want to make clear what they think and expect. “*If the boss tells you what to do, you should not ask too many questions but rather start with the tasks*”, said an interviewee. The interviewees experienced some miscommunication due to this directness; it happened that personnel sometimes wrongly interpreted the message the managers wanted to send, since the original intention is to be clear

but also because it provides them of a certain feeling of satisfaction to have power over others. Having responsibility is a joy for Suryoye, which is also something to show off within the Syrian-Orthodox community. Not every single interviewee wanted to be called *boss*, but all of them are proud of the different levels of authority they possess among people, especially at work but also based on their position in daily life “*During the years I definitely created my own status, where my opinion on aspects is highly valued, if I compare it to opinions of other from lower layers, not only when I am at work, but also within my private life I see a clear increase within this, which I definitely don’t dislike*” an interviewee said.

manager about the handling of new workload, so this workload was planned to be worked out the next morning. Concerning this, the co-manager of Dutch origin slightly showed disagreement with the plan. Subsequently the interviewee clarified to the co-manager that his plan shall not be questioned in any way. The interviewee said, “*Within this disagreement my pride and honour were really touched, which felt like a lack of trust in my abilities as a leader. I could see this as a form of attack, which cannot match with my pride. That is why I got quick tempered and had a kind of rude reaction*”. Such actions show that Suryoye, especially within managerial functions, can be quick tempered when their pride is questioned or touched by others. Besides pride, also honour plays a key role within the handlings. Honour is told to be a principle which is sometimes even more meaningful for Suryoye than rules and laws. When asked about why someone reacts in a certain way, often the answer is “*it is about principles*”. This can be shown by the example of an interviewee, whose handling of the situation was not according to the rules but according to honour. In this case, a thief was caught and taken to this manager. Where it is not allowed to assault a thief in any way, the interviewee though ignored the rules in this case, and hit the thief before the police were involved, accordingly to personal principles and honour which is above the rules in such cases for the interviewee. These situations show that Suryoye react more impulsively and emotionally due to their values of honour and pride.

and is about justice. Even though Suryoye managers mentioned that they were often seen as being very strict, for them it is all about fairness. According to the interviewees, they recognized injustice within their life multiple times in many ways, hence they value justice extremely high and implement this also on the workplace. One interviewee said, “*I always tell the employees under my care directly what I expect from them, also when they are new and the message can overwhelm them in the first place, I truly believe that they work better and more focused when they know what my desires are*”. In the story told by another interviewee, there was a situation in which he himself interfered with group formation. In this situation he selected the group members for each group to ensure that people from different origins would work together and prevent them from forming groups by themselves.

The interviewee said, *“Often times I try to build groups with mixed cultures, so they can learn together how to accomplish tasks and learn from different cultures views and perspectives”*. In another situation, an interviewee explained that an employee did not follow the rules of work procedures for a longer time, and was caught by an intern security team, but would be considered to get another chance, because of its good relations with the team manager.

The Syrian-Orthodox manager, who is one rank higher than the team manager, clearly did not like this injustice

#### 4.5 Body language

Body language is for Suryoye, like many others originating from the Middle East, a frequently used form of communication. By using body language many signs and gestures can be sent, which is not limited to handshakes, greetings, and goodbyes. Suryoye use body language in all sorts of situations and in most cases, it is about showing respect to others. It is usual in the Syrian-Orthodox community, that if someone elder comes to stand up offer them a place, and when persons have a certain rank within the community, mostly related to the church, their hands need to be kissed to show respect and obedience, no matter where it is, private or public. On the other side, by ignoring this body language, a sign of huge disrespect is shown. It is not done, to keep sitting and not greet formally when someone elders join a room. This wrong body language can be on purpose, but more often it is done accidentally or by ignorance. Ignorance plays a key factor in the misunderstandings between cultures on body language, where for some cultures certain behavior is obvious for others it is completely unknown. These misunderstandings happen also at work. Suryoye managers expect respect at work, which is related to body language, but within the Dutch culture this kind of communication is much less present. This cultural difference reflected also in the interviews, in which the interviewees experienced different kinds of clashes with Dutch colleagues due to body language causes. An interviewee explained that once an employee at the firm

#### 4.6 Loyalty

Despite being very strict, like mentioned before, justice is a key factor for Suryoye managers. Justice for them means to give everyone the same chances and treat others in an equal way. When this is being recognized, great relationships can be developed, which are highly valued by Suryoye managers. According to Interviewee three responded to the question of why justice is so crucial to Suryoye management by saying, *“The main reason we are now settled in European nations is because we, as a community, endured great suffering over a very long time and numerous times as a result of injustice. Because of this, I am aware of how difficult it is to be inferior to others, which is why I constantly work for justice”*. Regarding relationships, Suryoye managers tend to be very old fashioned, whereabout loyalty is very important to them. During the interviews it appeared that Suryoye managers seem to be very strict in a good manner, trying to build good relationships and truly to form a real team. Syrian-Orthodox managers know about the responsibilities they have within their position and are not afraid to take those responsibilities when needed. They see their team results and team work as one of these

since no one should be favoured within the firm. These situations show the strict, but righteous approach Suryoye managers strive for. This approach is often misunderstood by majority Dutchmen. Since this approach seems to be a leadership style where the manager acts as a prototype boss that does not pay any attention to its employees. On the other hand, talking about the prototype ‘boss’, it can be concluded from the situations in the interviews that Syrian-Orthodox managers like the possibility as a manager to be entitled to the decision making and to owe the obedience of other employees.

used his hands frequently when talking to the Syrian-Orthodox manager, who was not quite amused with it and ended the conversation. When being asked why they ended the conversation directly, the interviewee said: *“It were those constantly throwing hand signs, which form a lack of respect for your manager”*. The employee did not understand the reason and felt it was not right to be treated this way and therefore complained about this manager. Apart from this situation, another interviewee experienced once outside with colleague spat in the direction of the Syrian-Orthodox manager, who was disgusted and insulted by the behavior of his colleague. The interviewee explained that spitting in the direction of a person in the Syrian-Orthodox culture is even worse than offending someone.

Where in the Dutch culture, spitting during a regular discussion may also be considered rude and disrespectful; however, this behavior is not necessarily associated with insulting someone, as it is for Syrian-Orthodox people. For Suryoye this kind of body language is worse than hurting someone with words. Spitting hurts a Suryoye's reputation, while a Dutchman's reputation is not truly affected; they just think you're an idiot. These situations clarified that different cultural body language can let arise misunderstandings which can even result in conflict

responsibilities, whereby they always want to make sure their team works within a good atmosphere with healthy competition. To ensure this, Suryoye managers feel the

need to protect their team whenever needed, which is a crucial distinction from Dutch leaders. When being asked why they feel obligated to do this, the answer from an interviewee was: *“Your team need to work for you, and to reach this it is up to the manager to also show loyalty”*, while another answer was: *“It is the workers on the lower layers who are the most important, my work is to help them”*. It is those words, which are turned into action. This attitude to protect their team members as a manager is very characteristic of patriarchal leadership. According to one of those interviewees, one of his former members was once being criticized in a threatening way by a different team manager via email. When the interviewee saw this, not the team member but the other team manager got learned a lesson. The Syrian-Orthodox manager told the other team manager, it is none of their business, and next time he should inform the right manager instead of speaking in such a tone to someone else's team member. The interviewee told that the employee concerned was

extremely thankful for it and did not expect to be protected by his manager, but rather expected to be punished for his fault.

#### 4.7 Motivator

As shown by the interviews, Suryoye see themselves as a hardworking community, who work towards goals, hence Suryoye managers expect their staff also to show a hardworking mentality. Suryoye managers feel the urge to influence their teams with the vision they have. To achieve this, they need to act as a motivator for their team. *“Every decision a manager takes has impact on the team members, so when all the members have the same vision there will be better common understanding”*, an interviewee said. For Syrian-Orthodox managers it very important to convince others about how they think about issues, because they wish to have a supporting crew. Another distinction between Suryoye managers and Dutch managers, according to an interviewee, is the desire to push their opinions on others. Pushing their viewpoint refers to measures taken to prioritize their own desires over the opinions of others. The fourth interviewee assumed that Suryoye managers want to push their opinions more than, for example, Dutch managers. Regarding this, Suryoye managers are not the type of what they call ‘a lazy boss’, who leans back and does not show up on the working place. They see themselves as a head of a team, who needs to support the team wherever possible, even when it is for aspects which are outside not work related. This is another characteristic of patriarchal leadership. A significant portion of the interviewees emphasis to support the mental wellbeing of their team by talking to them one-on-one, where the team members have the right feeling to talk about things, they might not want to talk about in groups, but more important to also gain insights about how everyone experience a specific period and its associated work. Some of the interviewees also used such one-on-one talks to discuss points of improvement for each individual. When asking why such approaches are used, the second interviewee said: *“Being a true motivator for your team is not only about talking to a whole group, but also focus a lot on individual talks and conversations, this builds empathy and even more important, it builds huge trust”*. The second respondent stated that these one-on-one discussions were greatly lacking in the traditional Syrian-Orthodox community in the Middle East when being asked how the importance of personalized assistance is determined. In the traditional Syrian-Orthodox culture people must accomplish things on their own quite frequently, so they must be mentally strong. Reason for this is that the oldest children take on duties from their parents, owing to the large size of the families. Because Suryoye historically place a great priority on interpersonal interactions that involve extensive trust-building. As per the interviewee, in the Dutch culture, where employees are granted more patience, to learn the way of working. The appearances of these personal conversations are much more included than in the traditional Suryoye community. For Suryoye managers, trust is the start and the end of a true relationship, whether it is at work or somewhere else. Based on trust the fifth interviewee told to motivate the workers by recognizing the good work delivered and explained that employees are willing to work harder when they feel their work is being appreciated. All in all, these managers want to be involved in the work

These situations show that the interviewees are concerned about their employees’ best interests and see them as a sort of ‘family’ which is based on loyalty and trust.

process of the employee from a beginner until they are an experienced professional, trying to get the best out of them by teaching the employees how to do things in relation to what vision and to support them in reaching this.

#### 4.8 Refutation

Another aspect which characterizes Suryoye leadership is how they deal with rebuttal, which can be for instance on their decision making. The boss decides everything, is a dominant principle in the leadership attitude of Suryoye managers. They take decisions by themselves and don’t expect someone to question this. An interviewee said, *“Yes is yes and no is no, as simple as that”*. Whenever someone has still something to say about the decisions of the manager, that person is not taken seriously. It is a no go for Suryoye managers to accept the rebuttal of their employees. For example, one of the interviewees made the decision to implement a new strategy to gain clients, consequently also introduced this to the whole group together, whereas one of the employees had the nerves to disagree with it. The interviewee saw this reaction as a form of disrespect and a lack of trust in his leader capacities. When asked why, the interviewee responded, *“Disagreeing with my approach is just being polite in saying: ‘Your notion is inappropriate and it should be done in a better way’. This is essentially challenging my skills and strategy without any supporting evidence or reasons”*. As a result of that, the interviewee invited the person for a personal conversation and said that such an attitude will not be appreciated. During another interview, the employee got told that no decision of the manager can be questioned. During the interviews it became very clear that rebuttals are not being tolerated by Syrian-Orthodox managers.

#### 4.9 Feedback/Criticism

All interviewees mentioned the cultural disparities in feedback-giving and -receiving between Dutch managers and Syrian-Orthodox managers when discussing differences in leadership style. All interviewees used feedback as part of their leadership approach, and the majority of them thought that the Dutch businesses had integrated this concept. While Suryoye managers are able to provide their teams a lot of high-quality criticism, they find it difficult to receive it when it is given to them.

Receiving feedback, according to one interviewee, greatly depends on the circumstances and the person giving it. Samira Demirbay, the first interviewee asserts that providing feedback or criticism to the management is not prohibited, but it must be done so for a genuine, legitimate purpose. In the absence of that, the interviewee predicts that follow-up conversations are pointless and unneeded. Additionally, Suryoye managers do not easily adopt criticism. All interviewees agree that not every employee can simply criticize a management, and they all have the same perspective on receiving criticism. One of them stated that the individual seeking input should, if they haven't already, have a track record of being a diligent



worker If this is not the case and the individual is someone who constantly jokes around, the criticism is not taken seriously, and the individual will be dismissed. It can be taken into consideration if a hard worker offers a good suggestion or some legitimate areas for development. When being asked why the interviewee emphasises so much the mentality of the person to provide feedback or criticism, the interviewee responded, *“If someone does not take work seriously enough, it also means he does not take me, as a manager, seriously”*. However, when it comes to questioning his manager, that person cannot expect me to take him seriously. *“Because I feel mocked at that point, that individual cannot mess around in the first place, and expect to have the right to give any form of feedback to me. When I accept this, I am a weak leader”*. The interviewee recognized that his Dutch co-manager is considerably more tolerant of this sort of conduct and open to criticism and suggestions. As a result, he says, you stop being seen as their boss and start becoming more of their friend. This makes him a weaker leader, because it is possible to even make jokes about them, which is clearly not accepted in Syrian-Orthodox leadership.

#### 4.10 Confrontation

Avoiding the conflict is something that is not done by Suryoye managers, whereas Dutch people are very conflict-avoiding. Suryoye have the guts and temperament to engage in a fight and win it. These managers are also not easily intimidated by those in positions above them in the organizational hierarchy who hold opposing viewpoints. Confronting their staff on improvement points is something that must be done according to all respondents, where one of them said: *“If you are not able to confront your own staff directly when they do something wrong, you cannot call yourself a leader”*. Most of these respondents do not change their leadership style overnight for senior managers who are even higher in the hierarchy but are only willing to act differently when it is proven that their actions are not efficient. Based on such assumptions, Suryoye leaders do not shy away for conflicts. One interviewee provided a good example in a situation where a conflict occurred. A senior manager insisted that the Syrian-Orthodox manager would invest less time in personal talks with his team members and instead use that time for other tasks. The interviewee was apparently not amused to hear this from his boss, who according to him does not know what the best way is to keep the team working well. Hence the interviewee asked to speak the senior manager privately for a moment and explained that the current way of working would not change, not out of disobedience, but rather because the benefit of it would show in the results, so that it is better to stick with it. This raised a discussion, which took over a week to conclude, but at the end the interviewee got his point and was allowed to continue in the current way. It is clear from this conflict how Suryoye and Dutch handle their managers differently. The Suryoye emphasis on being very courteous and polite when they address their boss, including the respect for the Boss' position, in contrast to the Dutch who address their boss in a common informal manner. The level of pride held by Syrian-Orthodox managers, which makes them feel too proud to deviate from what they perceive as right, may also help to explain this analysis of being confrontational. When comparing this to Dutch culture, Dutch decision-makers prioritize reaching a compromise over a conflict, but Syrian-Orthodox managers are resolute about their position.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Answering the research questions

By analyzing the findings, this thesis helps to understand how Syrian-Orthodox managers fill in their leadership role in the Netherlands. The most important differences in how Syrian-Orthodox managers fill in their leadership role in the Netherlands compared to typical Dutch leaders are influenced by their cultural background and their ancestors. As a Syrian-Orthodox person compared to a Dutch person, there is a realization and belief that you have less opportunity in the professional world. This is impacted by your cultural heritage. They appear to be distinct from individuals of Dutch majority descent because of the connection to their cultural backgrounds and the overall rich cultural history, in terms of traditions, that preserves Suryoye a community that has maintained its own identity. Many Suryoye believe that because of this they are not preferred by employers while applying for jobs. As a Syrian-Orthodox person compared to the majority Dutch person, there is an awareness and belief that you have *less opportunities* in the professional world. This is impacted by your cultural heritage. They appear to be distinct from individuals of majority Dutch descent because of the connection to their cultural backgrounds and the overall rich cultural history, in terms of traditions, that preserves Suryoye a community that has maintained its own identity. Many Suryoye believe that because of this they are not preferred by employers while applying for jobs. Another consideration is the element of *being superior* for Suryoye, which indicates that the Syrian-Orthodox community highly values the status and power positions of a human being, therefore being the best serves a certain satisfaction of feeling to have a particular kind of status. Hence within this community the parents teach their children that is important to be the best at work to acquire good jobs and climb on the social ladder.

The impact of pride and honour within the Syrian-Orthodox community shows how heavily Suryoye rely on

their cultural background and the beliefs that go along with it; most of these beliefs are strictly upheld, making Suryoye appear somewhat out-of-date in their beliefs, which are not modern in accordance with Western views and beliefs. The *strict approach* of dealing with their staff showed that the influence of parents and teaching is still valid under these managers, where the manager has the classic strict method of dealing with a team. Due to *body language* which is different between Dutch and Syrian-Orthodox people, conflicts could arise. This is again related to the cultural traditions of Suryoye which are kept within the community throughout generations. Dutch communication is far less reliant on body language. The factor *Loyalty* indicated that Suryoye act as protective leaders, who see themselves responsible for their team. The term of *family* describes the type of relationship, which is also originated from the Middle East cultural leadership style.

Acting as a *motivator* became a crucial factor for Suryoye manager to deal with. The interviews revealed a lot of interest in inspiring teams. This part of staff motivation is typical of Dutch business culture, and Suryoye managers now embrace it. Employee satisfaction is highly regarded in Dutch company culture, and incentives are frequently utilized to inspire workers. Managers who are Syrian Orthodox use these strategies. *Refutation* towards the leader within the Syrian-Orthodox community is unacceptable, and so it is towards Suryoye managers. Without a doubt, Suryoye culture is recognized for honouring elders and leaders, and this trait is visible in Suryoye managers. The role of feedback and criticism is for Suryoye an aspect which is bonded between two different cultures. While feedback is lacking in the Suryoye business culture, it is important in the Dutch business culture and must be acknowledged by the directors and executives. The interview results show that Suryoye try to be open to input, but they are sensitive to criticism that hurts their ego, especially when it comes from certain staff.

The last characteristics of Suryoye leadership analysed is being *confronted*. This aspect shows that conflict avoidance does not go along with Suryoye leadership. The cultural background of Suryoye is all about confrontations, which preserved a mentality under Syrian-Orthodox people that does not bow down to confrontations. Accordingly, it can be said that most aspects of Syrian-Orthodox leadership, including parental education, community traditions, historical events, and religious views, are shaped by their cultural background. But on the other hand, characteristics like feedback and motivation, which play a major role in Suryoye leadership, are influenced by their Dutch background developed throughout the years in the Dutch culture. All these findings from the interviews together, show that Syrian-Orthodox managers are using a Paternalistic leadership style.

The Paternalistic leadership style is family based framework at work which also contains maintaining individualised relationships, non-work involvement, loyalty seeking and maintaining authority. Exact these characteristics describe the leadership functions that were analysed in the interviews.

## 5.2 Theoretical implications

According to Edward Hall's research (Hall, 1966), High-context cultures emphasize implicit communication and strongly rely on context. Low-context societies, on the other hand, rely on explicit verbal communication. High-context cultures encourage interpersonal relationships, are collectivist, and have people who create enduring, close bonds with one another. Including this argument, Suryoye are a part of a group with a high-context culture, which illustrates some of the findings from the interviews. This explains the Suryoye body language study's findings that nonverbal communication is best understood by those who share a similar level of cultural traits. According to Hall's research, eastern nations like Turkey are high-context societies, which explains why Suryoye's body language differs from what Dutch colleagues would expect. Another dimension Hall described is space, which indicated how different cultures cope with distance to others. This dimension explains the aspect of loyalty from the findings. The appreciation for Loyalty and close relationship with employees and co-managers can be explained by the conceptualizations (*proxemics*) of personal distance and social distance.

Personal distance refers to the distance towards family members and good friends, which are very close, where social distance is about the relation towards co-workers. Suryoye are people who do not easily trust others, and therefore the social distance is very high, where no relationship can be built on. That is why for Suryoye managers it is important to let co-workers be within the personal space. To achieve that, trust must be built, which explains the finding of loyalty. This demonstrates why Syrian-Orthodox managers value long lasting work connections, where the manager act as a *parent* towards their team, which can be thought as a *family*. Gaunt (2019) describes the scientific research up to date on the genocide that took place in 1915 on Armenians and Syrian-Orthodox in the Ottoman Empire, mentioning that "It is well documented that the genocide of 1915 was a state-organized and state-sponsored campaign of destruction, aimed at eliminating from the emerging Turkish Republic the native Christian populations and wiping out evidence of their culture, which dated back more than three thousand years" (Gaunt 2019, 219). Schukink (2012, 76) said, "I noticed that the genocide is increasingly central as a way in which people express their culture and identity". This statement shows that Suryoye are a community of those people who identified and based their culture a lot on Sayfo, which is still honoured every year and is especially told that it should not be forgotten. As a result, Suryoye dedicate a lot to pride and honour, which also explains why Syrian-Orthodox managers value it so much. From the findings, it was evident that Suryoye managers highly value their own principles, resulting from pride and honour. These terms emerged from the beliefs and views Suryoye have as a community, where Sayfo has a vital role. Another characteristic of Suryoye managers, which can be referred to this literature, is the strict but fair approach. This part is concerned with acting as a strict parent, where justice is significant.

The focus on fairness is also related to the times of genocide and following times of pursuits, which led to massive migration of the Syrian-Orthodox community, who fled towards countries all over the world, but especially west European countries. The injustice that is felt by the Suryoye throughout many years, is the main

point that Suryoye managers feel to act with fairness. According to the article of the Erasmus University Rotterdam (2016), several advantages can be acquired for firms by including managers that descend from minorities. The article's findings are related to the interview results and explain certain behavior characteristics of Syrian-Orthodox managers. Within the article it is stated that foreign managers can achieve greater results, because they are able to handle and understand multi-cultural aspects. It is shown that employees with a foreign manager worked harder and were earlier finished with their tasks. This refers to Syrian-Orthodox managers interviewed, who are convinced to stay within their approach, and continuously emphasized the good results derived from it. Enklaar (2007) argues that typical Dutch managers try to resolve a conflict through compromise in order to appease all sides. This feature does not fit with the Syrian-Orthodox managers' style, which often does not seek a compromise but instead holds on to one's position until the opposing party renounces their own. Another part of Paternalistic leadership style which refers to the findings of this article, is the refusal of rebuttal by Syrian-Orthodox managers. This aspect shows how Suryoye managers do not waste time on discussing or question the current style of leadership and focus more on the effectiveness in achieving the desired results. The study of Çuhadar (2021) showed that Turkish leaders clash with the west European leadership. This study can also be used for the Syrian-Orthodox managers since their native countries are Turkey and the countries around. The interview respondents' responses were very similar to the study's conclusions. Managers from middle eastern nations demand full decision-making authority without further involvement of subordinates, as the Study of Çuhadar demonstrated. This explains why the respondents who identify as Syrian Orthodox reject all forms of interference in their judgments and are not entirely accessible to criticism. The conflict between these two ideas and the West European corporate culture, as highlighted by Çuhadar, also explains why the Syrian Orthodox respondents and their Dutch colleagues had different opinions.

## 5.3 Practical implications

Thanks to the results of this thesis, in the future, Syrian-Orthodox managers and employees working in the Netherlands may be better able to understand the leadership differences between Suryoye and Dutch managers. The findings show that Syrian-Orthodox manager represent a Paternalistic form of leadership style. The results also demonstrate that Syrian Orthodox managers find it challenging to update their leadership styles within Dutch firms, although they attempt to adopt typical Dutch qualities, they believe add value to leadership. It is therefore advised that when a new Syrian-Orthodox manager is introduced, the manager should extensively describe which behavior is not acceptable and how to expect employees to act. In addition to that training to increase cultural awareness would help to fill in the gaps between different cultures.

#### 5.4 Limitations and future research

There are some potential limitations in this study. This study's sample size is its biggest limitation because only five persons were interviewed. The outcomes might alter slightly if the sample size were bigger. This opens the door to future research that goes further into the topics covered in this paper. Due to the limited sample size, the results are not representative and cannot be generalised. The outcomes would have been more accurate with a larger sample size.

A second limitation is the interviewees' dispersion. All the interviewees appeared to work in the same part of The Netherlands (Twente). It would be interesting to interview Syrian-Orthodox managers from different regions of the Netherlands as well. Another limitation within this study is the fact that there is only one coder. Using Multiple coders helps to increase the reliability of the analysis.

#### 6. Conclusion

This research shows the how Syrian-Orthodox managers fill in their leadership role in the Netherlands.

The most important differences are feeling undervalued, striving to be the best, having a lot of pride and honour, being very strict, using body language, value relationships, acting as a motivator, handling refutation, handling feedback and criticism and being rather confrontational.

Syrian-Orthodox managers exhibit a lot of paternalistic leadership traits. The dimensions developed by Edward Hall illustrate how many cultures interact in various ways. The results of this study were supported by data from Hall. In addition, the cultural literature about the background and history of the Syrian Orthodox community highlighted the key elements that shape their society and, as a result, affect Suryoye's behavior.

#### 7. Acknowledgements

Dr. Arnold Enklaar oversaw the drafting of my thesis, and I would like to thank him for that. Thank you for taking the time to answer my inquiries and for providing regular feedback. I also want to express my gratitude to Dr. Lara Carminati for serving as the second thesis supervisor and providing extra inputs. I also like to thank the members of my bachelor's thesis circle for our fruitful yet fun meetings. Finally, I'd want to thank all the interview subjects for their cooperation and time.

## 8. References

- Hall, Edward T. and Hall, Mildred Reed, *Understanding cultural differences – intercultural press*, INC., 1990.
- Hall, Edward T., *The hidden dimension*, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Chicago 1966.
- Thomas Alexander, S. S.-M.-U. (2010). *Handbook of Intercultural Communication and Cooperation*. In T. Alexander, *Handbook of Intercultural Communication and Cooperation*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co.
- Meyer, E. (2014). The Culture Map. In E. Meyer, *The Culture Map*. Public Affairs.
- Enklaar, A., (2007). *Nederland tussen nut en naastenliefde*, Scriptum, Schiedam
- Breukel, E., (2018), Dutch business culture and etiquette; egalitarian, individualistic, direct. Retrieved from Intercultural communication: <https://intercultural.nl/dutch-business-culture-and-etiquette/europe/e-breukel/>
- Messo, J., (2018), *Arameeërs en de creatie van Assyriërs*, Brock, P., Oxford University, England
- Den Biesen, K., (2010), *De Suryoyo gemeenschap in Nederland, Nieuwe vormen van verbondenheid*, Almere: Parthenon
- Aririgozuh, S., (2022), *Communication competencies, culture and SDGs: effective processes to cross-cultural communication*, Humanities and Social Sciences Communications
- Delve Tool. (2022). *How to Do Thematic Analysis*. Retrieved from Delve: <https://delvetool.com/blog/thematicanalysis>
- Gaunt, D., (2019), *Let Them Not Return: Sayfo – The Genocide Against the Assyrian, Syriac, and Chaldean Christians in the Ottoman Empire*, Volume; 26, Published by: Berghahn Books
- Carroll, K., (2019), *Minority Public Administrators: Managing Organizational Demands While Acting as an Advocate*, Vanderbilt University.
- De Waal, A., (2010), *Het profiel van de Nederlandse high performance manager*, Holland Management Review & Belgium Management Review, 131, 2010, (2010), pp. 17-22
- Çuhadar, E., (2021), *Turkish leaders and their foreign policy decision-making style: a comparative and multi-method perspective*, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey.
- Caulfield, J., (2019), *How to Do Thematic Analysis*. Retrieved from: <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/thematic-analysis/>
- Adams, W. C. (2016). In H. H. Katryn Newcomer, *Handbook of Practical Programm Evaluation* (pp. 491- 493). Wiley.
- Schukkink, Jan., (2012), *De Suryoye gebundeld*, 12 Antropologische verkenningen, Enschede.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- Singeling, R., Erasmus University Rotterdam, (2016), Retrieved from: <https://www.eur.nl/nieuws/buitenlandse-managers-maken-multiculturele-teams-effectieverhttps://www.eur.nl/nieuws/bui>

## 9. Appendix

### 9.1 Interview questions

1. Kunt U even uitleggen welke functie U heeft binnen welk bedrijf?
2. Hoelang werkt U er al?
3. Hoe heeft U de weg naar uw positie toe ervaren?
4. In wat voor soort team werkt U?
5. Heeft U regelmatig contact met uw collega's?
6. Hoe ziet de communicatie tussen de hiërarchie eruit?
7. Hoe zien er dan bepaalde onenigheden of misschien zelfs clashes op werk uit?
8. Kunt U uitleggen hoe dat verliep?
9. Hoe gaan andere managers in uw positie daarmee om?
10. Ik vind je veel te streng, kan personeel het wel gezellig met je hebben?
11. Waar denk je dat die verschillen vandaan komen?
12. Welke rol speelt cultuur hierin?
13. Hoe gaat U met resultaten om, zowel als het meezit en tegenzit?
14. Hoe spreekt U personeel aan bij het behalen van resultaten en ook bij het niet behalen?
15. Hoe gaan ze met die reactie van U om?
16. Hoe motiveert U het personeel?
17. Hoe reageren ze op uw motivatie?
18. Op welke manier geeft U kritiek?
19. Hoe gaat het personeel met uw kritiek om?
20. Op welke manier gaat U met kritiek om?
21. Zijn er eventueel nog opmerkingen?