The social construction of military unity and a post-merger integration of the unified Peshmerga forces in the Kurdistan region of Iraq

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The Social Construction of Military Unity and a Post-Merger Integration of the Unified Peshmerga Forces in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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Dedication

My gratitude goes out to all members of the Kurdish armed forces who dedicated their time to help me understand their region, who were brave enough to share the truth with me and who made sure I was protected throughout every one of my visits.

- zor supas, mamnunam

Acknowledgements

Abstract

Originally, this thesis set out to explore the sustainability of a military merger between previously hostile forces in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Given that a previous merger ended in civil war and that recent merger attempts were pursued in a similar fashion, this research's hypothesis was that the unification would break apart over internal or external dividing influences. In the course of my research, on 16 October 2017, the suspected separation occurred. Consequently, the focus of my research shifted. Given that the separated forces reunified, I set out to explore what could make the merger sustainable. Thereby, a social-constructivist paradigm, an interdisciplinary theoretical approach and qualitative fieldwork were applied.

Starting with a review of military-merger literature, I realised that any study of merger is necessarily confronted with the idea of creating military unity. Thereby, both academic research and policy practice seem to share a predominantly structural perspective of unity. The underlying assumption is that once the forces are legally, bureaucratically and structurally unified, they are merged. Having observed the Kurdish armed forces during the war with ISIS, I had reasons to be sceptical of structure alone being sufficient for sustainable unification. Instead, I argue that underlying perceptions, values and beliefs of unified soldiers need to be accounted for in order to generate a merger that can withstand dividing forces.

Therefore, I interviewed unified soldiers of all ranks, trying to identify *their* perceptions, judgement and feelings about unity. In this process, the ideal form of unity stood in stark contrast with the daily experience of working in unified brigades. To make these differences more tangible, I approached the measurement of ideal and prevalent forms of unity from an organisational-culture perspective. Reviewing the findings, I realised that an additional contribution of this thesis is a theoretical approach on how to conceptualise (military) unity.

This dissertation puts forward the theory that unity - the often implicitly assumed goal for any (military) merger - is neither a structure nor a tangible state that can be reached. Instead, it is a social construct constituted along the range from an ideal

form to the prevalent organisational culture of unified forces. The closer the idealised vision is to the unified structures *and* the organisational culture, the more sustainable (i.e., resilient to dividing forces) the merger.

Notes on spelling and abbreviations

Bashur: 'Greater Kurdistan', the region encompassing Kurdish majority areas in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, is separated into four parts due to the presence of international state borders separating the territories. These different parts are called '*Bakur*' (Kurdish for 'North') in Turkey, '*Bashur*' (Kurdish for 'South') in Iraq, '*Rojava*' (Kurdish for 'West') in Syria and '*Rojhelat*' (Kurdish for 'East') in Iran. Here, *Bashur* is used to refer to all Kurdish territories or Kurdish-claimed territories in Iraq and therefore stands in contrast with KRI (see below).

ISF: Iraqi Security Forces

IS/ ISIS/ ISIL/ Da'esh: The US Congressional Research Service defines the entity all these acronyms refer to as *'a transnational Sunni Islamist insurgent and terrorist group that controlled large areas of Iraq and Syria from 2014 through 2017'* (Blanchard and Humud 2018). This transnational terrorist group is known by several names and acronyms: the Islamic State (IS), the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and Da'esh (the Arabic acronym short for *al-Dawlah al-Islamīyah fī l-'Irāq wa-sh-Shām*). For simplicity, I refer to this entity as 'Islamic State' in its written form and as 'ISIS' in its abbreviated form (as IS might too easily be confused with the ISF - Iraqi Security Forces, and because ISIS is more commonly used in my cultural background than ISIL).

KDP: Kurdistan Democratic Party (locally spelled as PDK - *Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê*; the English KDP spelling and abbreviation is used to ease reading and differentiation to the PUK)

KRG: Kurdistan Regional Government (the official abbreviation of the autonomous region's government)

KRI: Kurdistan region of Iraq (defined as the legally recognised borders of the autonomous region)

MoP: Two names and acronyms exist for the ministerial institution responsible for unified peshmerga. The KRG website spells it 'ministry of peshmerga affairs' (MoPA), while the website of the ministry itself reads 'ministry of peshmerga' (MoP). In this paper, I use MoP. This choice was taken because the Kurdish spelling '*wasarati peshmerga*' (literally: ministry peshmerga) is closer to MoP than to MoPA.

PMU: Popular Mobilisation Units (also known as '*Hash'd al-Shabi*' or **PMF** - Popular Mobilisation Forces)

PUK: Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

RGB: Regional Guard Brigades (another name for Kurdish armed forces; as they are referred to in the Iraqi Constitution)

UK: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

UN: United Nations

UNSCR: United Nations Security Council Resolution

UPF / 70/UP / 80/UP / PUK/70 / KDP/80: Differentiating armed forces in the KRI is difficult, as one recruitment call from 2014 underlines: '*We are _all_ peshmerga* [emphasis added by author]' (see Appendix III, Picture 1). Aside from specialised security units (such as *Zerevani*, *Parastin*, *Assayish* and others), every soldier is called 'peshmerga' (even the MoP's website does not differentiate distinctly, calling unified peshmerga also simply 'peshmerga'). Although there is a lot of pride and history connected to 'being peshmerga', this terminology does not allow for the necessary level of differentiation to specify whether one talks about unified soldiers, the unified forces or the former members of 'Unit 70' and 'Unit 80'. In addition, other available terminology, such as the Iraqi constitution's use of 'Regional Guard Brigades' (RGB) for all officially recognised peshmerga (i.e., non-party-related peshmerga), is either politically sensitive or not sufficient for all required layers of differentiation.

Therefore, I have created my own set of names and abbreviations in order to be able to ease readers' understanding of the different actors and their complex inter-connection. To refer to unified soldiers, I use the phrases 'unified soldier' and 'unified peshmerga'. 'Unified unit' or 'unified brigade' refer, as the names suggest, to unified units and brigades. To refer to the entire armed force of unified peshmerga, I use the term 'unified peshmerga forces' (**UPF**). As 'UPF' does not refer to any official name, it is not capitalised in its full spelling.

70/UP and 80/UP: 'UP' stands for 'unified peshmerga' and in order to avoid having to repeat the expression 'former 'Unit X' peshmerga' when differentiating statements made between former members of 'Unit 70' and 'Unit 80', I apply the shortening 70/UP and 80/UP for each respective background.

PUK/70 and KDP/80: Contrary to 70/UP and 80/UP, PUK/70 and KDP/80 refer to the political parties' armed forces. Given the politically sensitive nature of defining which 'status' (from 'militia' to 'military') these forces should be attributed to, I apply the neutral form of PUK/70 and KDP/80.

US / USA: United States of America

A final note on grammar:
*he: There *are* female peshmerga in the KRI. There is one entirely female peshmerga brigade and another female para-military 'Zerevani' unit. Given that these units are not unified and since the focus of this research is exclusively on *unified* brigades, these female units were not included. Therefore, the interviews I conducted were exclusively with men (with the exception of one context interview). As a result, I exclusively use the masculine form of pronouns as a supplement for 'commander', 'soldier' and as a general reference.

*she: To make it easier to contrast between researcher and interviewee, and to avoid having to repeat both male and female versions, as the author and researcher is a woman, exclusively female form of pronouns are applied as a supplement for researchers in general.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In *Nathan the Wise*, G. E. Lessing (2006) answers the question which religion is 'the right one' with a parable of three rings. In this parable, a king possesses a ring which makes the owner both powerful and kind; a ruler beloved by all. He also has three sons and cannot decide who to crown his heir. Therefore, he copies the ring to absolute perfection and gives one ring to each son. Whoever possesses the true ring, *Nathan* concludes, can only be known after thousands of years, depending on which house has ruled for centuries in the most admirable fashion. This dissertation does not deal with religion. Instead, it deals with the concept of military unity. Just like in Lessing's ring parable though, I will show that 'true unity' (like the true ring) can neither be 'known' nor simply 'established once and for all'. Instead, it requires continuous work and commitment on the part of anyone involved in creating military unity. Military unity is what people make of it.

This thesis is created as a contribution to the young field of military merging. Therefore, by extension, it is also situated in the wider fields of post-civil-war reconciliation and security sector reform (SSR). The most valuable contribution to these fields is a theoretical one. By questioning the core, goal and essence of military merger, I argue that military unity is not a state or structure that can be tangibly 'reached' or 'achieved' at one point. Instead, it is a social construct which is determined between the idea(l) of military unity and the daily experience of unification. The wider the gap, I suggest, the less sustainable the merger of formerly hostile forces.

This conceptualisation was developed on the basis of one unique case study: the merger of formerly hostile party forces in the Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI). This case study, as I will show, defies almost every assumption, hypothesis or practical approach that has ever been undertaken in the young field of military merging. Kurds are divided despite possessing the same nationality and a strong sense of nation. Their peshmerga forces separated and turned against each other after a first unification attempt in 1992; the political will towards unity and a mutual power-sharing agreement notwithstanding. Finally, even high international engagement and a common enemy (the Islamic State) could not sustainably merge the forces, who recently split again on 16 October 2017.

Studying and observing this unique case over the last six years and trying to understand how they could (ever) be sustainably unified, has led me to the two questions which guide this thesis: What is military unity? How can military merger become sustainable?

All approaches - be it SSR, post-civil-war reconciliation or military merging - implicitly pursue some form of 'unity' or '(re)*uni*fication' of war-torn societies as a goal to their efforts. In military-merging literature, the concept of 'merger' is widely defined, challenged and questioned. However, the underlying supposition that merging is a process of creating a new 'one' out of several (previously hostile) parts is hardly ever reviewed. This thesis does not want to challenge the definition of 'merger' per se. Yet, the observation of the unique KRI example has led me to question whether the underlying concept of 'one-ness' - in other words '(military) unity' - has been sufficiently understood to conduct military mergers sustainably. My answer is no. Thus, I propose an alternative way to conceptualise 'military unity' and demonstrate the ways in which - at least theoretically - military merging can be conducted more sustainably.

To do so, I proceed in the following fashion: In this chapter, I introduce the case study[1] as well as the unique circumstances and personal observations which led me to ask questions and pursue an alternative perspective. To further clarify and delineate this dissertation, I conclude this introduction by specifying what I do *not* intend and what I do *not* accomplish in this research. Thereafter, I turn towards everything that *has* been achieved. First, I review the military-merging literature and propose an interdisciplinary approach to answering the research questions (Chapter 2). When reviewing business-management literature on 'merger and acquisitions' (M&A), I also found no answer to my concrete questions. Yet, I found inspiration on how to approach the merger, unification and reform of unified peshmerga forces (UPF): By turning my attention towards post-merger integration and organisational culture, my own constructivist paradigm instructed me how to conduct fieldwork to answer the research question (namely in a mixed inductive and deductive approach). The subsequent chapters are dedicated to further specifying the case study (Chapter 3) and the methodological

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[1] I halt this first historic review on 9 June 2014; the day the Islamic State took over Mosul and my fieldwork and research interest took an unexpected turn. The most recent history (2014-2019) is provided in Chapter 3.

approach (Chapter 4), as well as the presentation (Chapter 5) and analysis (Chapter 6) of findings. Finally, a conclusion brings together the most valuable insights from this PhD project (Chapter 7).

1.1. A historic review of the unique case study: the Kurds, KRI and UPF

Kurds are recognised as the largest ethnic group in the world who do not posses an independent state (Stansfield 2003, McDowall 2007, Caspersen and Stansfield 2011, Caryl 2015, Valentine 2018). Even though actual numbers on this group vary widely, a predominantly Kurdish territory is acknowledged to span across four states: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria (map 1). These international borders notwithstanding, the different groups are strongly interrelated and the idea of 'Great Kurdistan', as the entire region is called, is still alive in peoples' minds. At the same time, different experiences shaped Kurdish societies along these borders. Consequently, academic research has largely developed separate studies on Kurds in Turkey, in Iran and so forth[2] (Bengio 1999, Stansfield 2003, Freji 2007a/b, Schmidinger 2014, Posch 2016, Aziz 2011). This research follows in the tradition of focusing on one region, the Kurdish region in Iraq, called '*Bashur*'. Hence, all other regions are exempted from this review.

Map 1: The Kurds in the Middle East (Source: Anderson 2017).

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[2] With the obvious exception of cross-border research topics such as ethnic-nationalistic and linguistic analyses of Kurdish societies (van Bruinessen 2004, McDowall 2007, Özoglu 2007, Ahmed 2012, Bengio 2014) or identity and nation building (Bengio 1999, van Bruinessen 2004, Kaya 2012).

Bashur is located in the north of Iraq, along the borders of Turkey, Iran and Syria. As of 2017, the region is said to cover 46,861 km2 and inhabit 5.765 million people (Schneckener et al. 2018: 135). Exact knowledge about territory and inhabitants is difficult to determine because *Bashur* is split between a territory which is constitutionally recognised by the state of Iraq as well as several disputed territories which are claimed by both the government of Iraq and the Kurdish region (map 2). For this dissertation, the differentiation between these territories is not relevant[3]. Nonetheless, to achieve a level of distinction in this paper, the officially recognised region is referred to as 'Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)'. The KRI was originally constituted by three governorates: Dohuk in the North, Erbil in the centre and Sulaimaniyah in the South. Since its official split from Sulaimaniyah in 2014, Halabja constitutes a fourth governorate in the South east. Beyond these administrative distinctions, a second, political split is relevant for the region: the north-western 'yellow zone' and the south-eastern 'green zone' (map 3). These 'zones' are differentiated based on the colours of the dominant political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) (yellow) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) (green). They also reflect the areas of absolute power for each party. How these regions and political zones developed shall be explained in a short historical review.

Map 2: The Kurdish region of Iraq and the surrounding disputed territories (Source: BBC 2014)

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[3] The issue only arises in the context of the independence referendum and the subsequent military confrontation between Iraqi and Kurdish forces in October 2017.

Historic accounts on Kurdish and KRI history are extensive. Some studies include history as distant as the Medean and Roman empire (Valentine 2018). More often, the history of Kurdish tribes in the Ottoman empire (Lortz 2005, McDowall 2007, Eskander 2012) and the immediate post-WWI era (Stansfield 2003, Anderson and Stansfield 2004, Chapman 2011, Bengio 2012, King 2013, Hadad and Wallace 2017) is recalled. Many researchers also start at the moment of the Mahabad Republic; a first attempt at Kurdish statehood, which, with the help of the Soviet Union, seceded from Iran in 1946 (Yassin 1995). For this paper, a review of this distant past is unnecessary. The only points relevant to note are that the name 'peshmerga' was first introduced in Mahabad for the armed forces (and later for all forms of Kurdish fighters) and that the political elites and parties, which shape KRI until today, also became visible in this first attempt of Kurdish statehood.

The most relevant period for this research begins much later, in the Gulf War of 1991. This is where the foundations of a modern KRI were prepared. Between the Mahabad Republic and this first foundation, the Kurdish political and armed forces led a predominantly partisan lifestyle, interchangeably cooperating and fighting with the Iraqi regime as well as with each other. The most important milestones in this long history are 1964 and 1975. In 1964, tensions between different wings of one united Kurdish party escalated, making apparent an underlying difference in ideology, interest and attitude. It was not until 1975 that the left-wing, urban intellectuals finally split from KDP to form their own party: PUK. It is this split which has since dominated history in KRI. Fighting both the different Iraqi regimes and each other, the two parties developed a love-hate relationship. This tension was also visible when the Kurds received their first opportunity at ruling themselves in 1991.

The relevance of 1991 for KRI cannot be overstated. Not only did the Gulf War engage the government in Baghdad in a way for the Kurds to gain territory and increase their resistance, but the resulting revenge bombings of Saddam Hussein's regime prompted a UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR), which effectively protected the Kurdish region in the north of Iraq. Under the cover of UNSCR 688, an international armed force established a no-fly zone above the 36th parallel on 5 April 1991. In this safe-haven, the Kurdish population had a first chance at ruling itself. This task was

taken on by the political parties, KDP and PUK, who provided security and basic services to the population. During this time, the parties are said to have remained largely cooperative; they held first elections, formed a common government and even attempted a merger of their armed forces under a unified ministry.

The harmony was short-lived, though. Small tribal struggles, intervention from neighbouring states and Kurdish spoiler parties triggered an all-out confrontation between KDP and PUK, starting in 1993 and escalating into a civil war by 1994. The civil war (called *'bra'kushi'* or 'brother's war' in Kurdish) marks one of the bloodiest eras in Kurdish history[4]. With different international actors intervening and local alliances shifting opportunistically, KDP-loyal forces (Unit 80, here KDP/80) and PUK-loyal forces (Unit 70, here PUK/70) maintained an equilibrium throughout the fighting. As a result, the only viable end to the conflict was a negotiated settlement. This settlement was reached in Washington in 1998 and a ceasefire line was created from Koysinjaq to Haji Omran. Instead of bringing the warring parties together, the agreement only succeeded in ending the fighting, with each party turning 'inwards' towards their own 'zone' (map 3). Consequently, the ceasefire line developed into a tangible border between these 'zones', which, according to several accounts by interviewees, was at times more difficult to penetrate than the surrounding state borders.
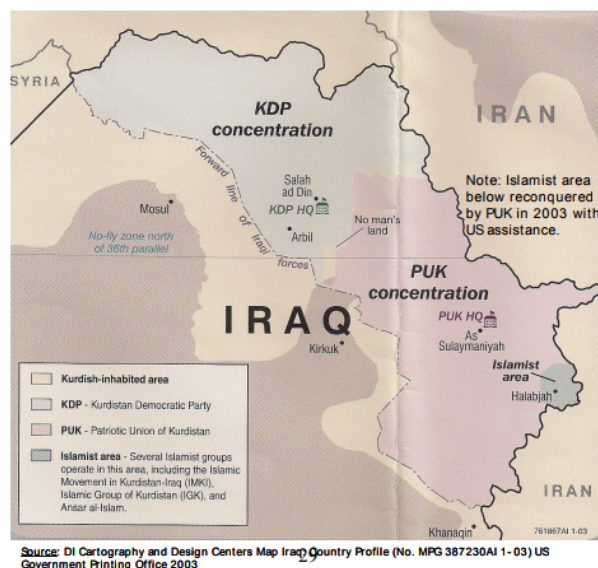
Map 3: KDP and PUK zones of influence (Source: Chapman 2011)

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[4] The brother's war was characterised as a land-grab and power struggle. Following a zero-sum logic, each party intended to dominate the entire region.

It was only with the 2003 US invasion of Iraq that a first true effort towards overcoming the political division was taken. With a power vacuum in Baghdad and the chance to gain rights and liberties in a new Iraqi framework, the parties moved to speak in one voice. As a result, in the new US-administered framework of ethnic representation, the Kurdish parties positioned themselves in Baghdad and the Iraqi Federal Constitution (2005/06), which grants the region a federal status of relative autonomy. Since then, the KRI has drafted a constitution, held several parliamentary elections in 2005, 2009, 2013 and most recently in 2018, as well as one presidential election in 2009.

After the elections in 2005, KDP and PUK consented to a 50/50-power-sharing agreement and divided the offices of government between themselves[5]. Part of the agreement was also a return to unified institutions, including the armed forces[6]. While several ministries were merged from 2006 onwards, work on unifying the Ministry of Peshmerga (MoP) did not commence until 2009. As a result, the establishment of a unified MoP occurred amidst significant changes in the political landscape: In October 2008, a new political party called 'Gorran' ('change') was created (Schneckener et al. 2018). A breakaway from PUK, the new party was guaranteed to disrupt the parliamentary elections in 2009. As a result of the changed circumstances, the presidential law was also amended, changing the initial appointment to a direct election. In the parliamentary and presidential election on 25 July 2009, the ruling president's position was reconfirmed (until 2013) and the new party, Gorran, won 25 of 111 seats. The significant new player notwithstanding, KDP and PUK formed the government with each other, making Gorran the first opposition party in KRI history. In the new government, work on unifying MoP was further pursued and the first unified brigade was formed in January 2010 (Borsari 2019). Up until March, three more brigades were formed and by April Nouri Al-Maliki, then Prime Minister of Iraq, recognised the unified brigades as a part of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) (ibid., GlobalSecurity.org

[5] This office shuffle included an agreement to allocate the KRI presidency to the KDP (Masoud Barzani) and the Iraqi presidency, which had been allocated to the Kurds by the US system of ethnic representation, to the PUK (Jalal Talabani). Critical voices question how much of this arrangement was due to US pressure and bargaining and how much can be attributed to the Kurdish political party's willingness to cooperate. In either case, the 50/50 arrangement has shaped the region since.

[6] The merger of the armed forces was also to be conducted in a 50/50 matter, unifying half a KDP/80 and half a PUK/70 force into one unified brigade (Chapman 2011, Gruber 2015). In this system, each KDP commander would be allocated a PUK deputy, or vice versa.

2012). In addition, two Kurdish divisions were formed within the Iraqi army (Division 15 and 16).

As history between 1991 and 2010 has been amply covered by previous research[7], it has only been briefly sketched here. I will now pay greater attention to the most recent history, starting with the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq on 18 December 2011. As an immediate effect of the US withdrawal, instabilities and insurgencies ensued across Iraq. Even though KRI was least affected by the increasing level of insecurity, nonetheless, Kurds sometimes were entangled in the events. In one particular incidence in April 2013, Kurdish ISF forces were directly affected by sectarian violence in Hawija. After demonstrations in the city escalated, a conflict ensued between Baghdad and Erbil. Drawing their own conclusions from the situation, the Kurdish Division decided to leave ISF and return to the Kurdish MoP. Because the Kurdish Division had not been mixed between PUK/70 and KDP/80, MoP also called the other Kurdish Division back from ISF, ensuring the agreed 50/50 representation of both political parties in UPF (albeit in a different form). Until today, Brigade 14 and Brigade 16 of UPF are dominated by members of PUK/70 and KDP/80 respectively[8]. With these two brigades switching allegiance, the MoP counted twelve unified brigades under its command by the end of 2013.

The protests in Hawija and the desertion of Division 15 and 16 from ISF, were only one reason for increased tensions between Baghdad and Erbil in 2013, though. A new oil contract, selling Kurdish oil directly via the Turkish port in Ceyhan, was signed between Erbil and Ankara in November 2013, which gravely angered the government in Baghdad (McDermid 2010, Rudaw 2013/2014). As a result, Baghdad suspended all payments to KRI[9], triggering a financial crisis in the region. In addition to the problems with Baghdad, tensions between Kurdish political parties spiked as well. Despite broad

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[7] See Chapman (2011), Devigne (2011), Gruber (2015), Fliervoet (2018), Schneckener et al. (2018), Smith (2018) and Valentine (2018).

[8] Interviewees estimated 90 per cent of soldiers and commanders in these brigades to have a background in one particular party unit. Not surprisingly, these brigades also did not separate in October 2017.

[9] KRI is supposed to receive 17 per cent of the federal budget (Smith 2018). In 2014, interviewees cited as a reason for pursuing the oil contract with Ankara that Baghdad never actually delivered these 17 per cent.

opposition, the presidential law was amended to extend the ruling president's term for two more years, until 19 August 2015 (Schneckener et al. 2018). Loud public debates ensued about this change and continued all the way into the parliamentary elections on 21 September. Interestingly, these critical debates hardly affected the outcome of the elections, though[10]. In the elections, KDP received 38 seats in parliament, Gorran took 24 and PUK 18. In the following eight months, the eight cabinet was formed among the three dominating parties; lifting Gorran from the opposition to join the government in four ministries, including MoP.

Under Gorran, the modernisation and institutionalisation of MoP to unify all peshmerga forces was a continuing priority (interview with Minister Mustafa Said Qadir, 2014). However, efforts were hampered by several factors: The economic stress, which KRI had experienced since 2013, limited the budget of MoP; the new Gorran minister was only able to assert limited influence over the party-dominated ministry; and a decreasing level of security in the immediate neighbourhood put the priority on more pressing issues than reform. The situation escalated on 9 June 2014, when the insurgency group 'ISIS' (or 'Islamic State') took over Mosul - the second biggest city in Iraq. With ISF crumbling under the insurgency, peshmerga forces stepped in to protect their borders. By 10 June 2014, forces were stationed in Kirkuk and other disputed territories, which the Kurdish region extended its protection to[11]. By 14 June 2014, an extensive recruitment campaign was initiated[12] and it seemed as though the entire population was mobilising (personal observation in Erbil, 2014; see Picture 1, Appendix III). It was at this moment that I arrived in Erbil for the first time.

1.2. Background, problem and terminology

Having travelled to KRI for a vacation, I - an Austrian citizen and a Master's student of Lund University's Centre of Middle Eastern Studies - suddenly found myself in the

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[10] This demonstrates that political parties in KRI are built on relatively stable supporter bases.

[11] It remains a matter of debate whether the Kurdish military posture was conducted with or without ulterior motives for independence (Gruber 2014, van Heuvelen 2014, Fache 2016).

[12] This increase is also represented in peshmerga figures (in so much as figures need to be treated with caution in the KRI context). By 2010, Chapman counted 127.200 peshmerga - including PUK/70 (27.800), KDP/80 (40.000) as well as Zerevani (30.000) and Division 15 and 16 (14.700 each) (2011: 109). After 2014 estimates ranged between 140.000 (Fliervoet 2018, Borsari 2019) and 190.000 (Valentine 2018) soldiers.

middle of a war. I observed how the general public were mobilised, how international companies withdrew their staff and how international media attention resulted in more weapons, soldiers and international support being delivered to the region. Having been originally interested in the political divisions of the ethnically and nationally unified region (as well as its peculiar status as a de-facto state), my research interest changed towards the question how the politically divided armed forces would cooperate on the frontlines with ISIS. In addition, I decided to return to the region for fieldwork during the third semester of my MA, from August until December 2014. After conducting a few interviews with political parties on that subject, I learned that it was fairly simple to attain permission to visit a frontline. With a mixture of curiosity and trust in my translator, I visited my first frontline in September 2014. There, in the south of Kirkuk, I learned the value of visiting the front. Not only did the soldiers report a different story than the political rhetoric of harmonious unity, also the observations I made on the set up of each frontline section, the interaction between soldiers (particularly in unified units), the presence of international forces and the interaction between soldiers and commanders proved invaluable to my research.

During my fieldwork and also in later trips, I managed to visit countless frontlines from the North in Zumar (three days after the town was liberated from ISIS, Picture 3, Appendix III) to the South in Jalawla. The closest I approached ISIS was in Mullah Abdullah, west of Kirkuk, where only the 40 meter width of a river separated the Kurdish forces from ISIS (Picture 2, Appendix III). Having decided on a civil-military-relations perspective for my MA, I conducted interviews with political-party forces KDP/80 and PUK/70 as well as with unified units (for the 'military' side). In addition, I interviewed political representatives of these forces in the KDP, the PUK and MoP (for the 'civilian' side). Based on the collected data and personal observations, I drew two conclusions in my thesis: One, there is no gap between the 'civilian' and the 'military' side, because there is no culture of separating public (offices) and private (persons). Instead, (almost) every politician has a military (or guerrilla) background and within power structures it is the person, their family, tribe and bloodline - not the office a person holds - that determines their status and level of influence. Two, there is a 'gap' between what I differentiate as 'the structure' and 'the system'. Thereby, 'structure' refers to everything written, tangible and official - such as laws, organigrams and formal

hierarchies. In contrast, the 'system' is constituted by unwritten and informal rules which guide how formalities are actually obeyed[13]. To give one example of this difference, the reigning MoP Minister at that time had no say in the appointment of the highest military commanders - the eight frontline-section leaders (personal interview, 2014). His rank and office had no impact on his actual level of influence in the organisation. Therefore, the structure, while officially unified, seems to provide no insight over actual power relations and dynamics in the peshmerga forces (and UPF in particular).

Based on this division between structure and system, I concluded that the unified forces were not sustainably unified. Any sign of political division could potentially break the unified facade apart and have soldiers return to their previous positions in the yellow and green zone (like in 1994)[14]. Following this logic, I started to wonder how peshmerga forces *could* be sustainably unified. Reviewing the most recent literature (academic and public policy research on peshmerga picked up significantly after 2014), I noticed that despite other academics arriving at a similar conclusion as I did (that peshmerga were not successfully unified), their reasoning seemed to be different from mine. Their argument was that peshmerga forces could not be considered unified because *other* forces (predominantly KDP/80 and PUK/70) still existed outside UPF and MoP (Fantappie 2010, Chapman 2011, Devigne 2011, Fumerton and van Wilgenburg 2015, Gonzalez 2015, Hawramy 2015, ICG 2015, Hadad and Wallace 2017, Fliervoet 2018, Schneckener et al. 2018). While itself a conclusive argument, I started to wonder what the value would be to unify *all* KDP/80 and PUK/70 under MoP if - according to my observations - UPF themselves were not sustainably unified? In other words, why extend the facade of unity to all forces if it is just that - a facade? Due to my reasoning, I turned my attention towards UPF exclusively and applied the term 'sustainable' to the unification attempt in order to guide my research.

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[13] Many times during fieldwork I encountered people referring to official lines of hierarchy, institutions and laws. Yet, judging from their actions and a myriad of stories, it appears that these formal 'structures' are adhered to at random, depending on who the individual is (the better connected the person by blood or personal relations, the less they need to adhere to rules).

[14] This suspected separation actually occurred on 16 October 2017.

In designing this research, even before entering the field, I was guided by a social-constructivist paradigm. Struggling with a definition of what it means to achieve 'unity', I realised that any attribution from my end would imply that *I* create a standard by which I judge UPF merger. The potential for a western, institutionalised bias in this process was too big for me to take. Thus, I decided against it. Instead, I determined, it would have to be UPF soldiers and commanders who should tell me what 'military unity' means to them[15]. Accordingly, the first part of my research design focused on an inductive enquiry to determine unified soldiers' perceptions on 'military unity', 'merger' and the situation in the region in general.

Upon reviewing my Master thesis' findings, a second dimension was added to this PhD's research design. In my observations, I frequently noted a sense of divergence between what soldiers envisioned to be an 'ideal' form of unification and working together, and what they actually experienced every day[16]. Based on these insights, I added a second distinct line of questioning to my interview guide: I specified to look explicitly for *both* - the unified soldiers 'idea(l)' conceptualisation of what 'military' unity *should be* like *and* their everyday experience working in unified units (i.e., the 'daily experience' of unity).

Finally, a third aspect shaped my research design: Chasing the question what *could* make military mergers sustainable, I searched for literature on this subject. In the course of my efforts, I was alerted to a different, yet relatable field of research - mergers and acquisitions (M&A) from the business-management literature. In particular, the specialised literature on post-merger integration (PMI) seemed well fit to allow for inspiration and insights to be drawn for the peshmerga case study. What M&A and PMI literature have in common is their stress on '(organisational) culture' to be a deciding factor for successful, sustainable and efficient mergers. Intrigued by this interdisciplinary approach, I wanted to test the business literature's findings on a case of

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[15] It is fair to ask whether my analysis should not have included the wider society (civilians, politicians, KDP/80 and PUK/70) instead of focusing only on the construction of 'military unity' by UPF soldiers. The following reasoning guided my choice for a limited focus: UPF soldiers, based on their everyday experience of unity, have a more nuanced and 'substantial' (i.e., based on experience) perspective of 'military unity' than soldiers or civilians who have yet to experience co-operation beyond partisan division.

[16] E.g. I often encountered expressions such as *'…should…, but actually…'*.

military merger. To that end, I added a deductive dimension to my research: Following PMI's hypothesis that understanding and managing organisational culture is key to successful mergers, I designed a part of the qualitative interview guide in a way to help me understand prevalent UPF culture. The respective findings were later visualised through 'culture maps' (Sagmeister 2016). To show the difference between prevalent culture (i.e., 'daily experience' of unity) and any 'ideal' form of culture, I also presented the findings on 'idea(l) of military unity' in this map. After all, what is the 'idea(l)' of military unity if not an expression of how things should function, how people should work together within the unified forces and what values should guide daily actions? In order words, what is the 'idea(l)' of military unity if not a description of an 'idea(l)' UPF culture? With this, all three parts of my research were drawn together, showing the links and connections between unity, (organisational) culture and the sustainability of merger.

At this point, a brief review of the suggested terminology of 'idea(l)', 'daily experience' and 'sustainability' is required. The term 'idea(l)' is chosen in this unusual form of writing because the two aspects that are to be tested in this research are both that of the *idea* of military unity as well as its *ideal*. By using the wordplay 'idea(l)', it is possible to capture both, equally valuable aspects. According to the Oxford *Living* Dictionaries, the definition of 'idea', which comes closest to the usage of the terminology in this thesis, is that of *'a mental impression'* (2017b). 'Ideal', in contrast, refers to *'satisfying one's conception of what is perfect; most suitable'* (2017c). With these two definitions the relevance of both dimensions - on top of the reason for the wordplay in this writing - becomes clear. This dissertation explores the idea of military unity in its range from 'ideal' to 'daily experience'.

'Daily experience', in this context, refers to the everyday experience of working in unified units. This includes habits and routines together with stories and anecdotes. It also relates to what I called 'the system' in previous research. Further, after seeking support in interdisciplinarity, I found that in business-management literature these 'daily experiences' constitute the prevalent 'culture' of an organisation. As I will show, applying the business-literature concept 'organisational culture' yields insightful results on the sustainability of current UPF merger as well as on their recent reform project.

Both the *ideal* and the *daily experienced* form of 'military unity' can be expressed in organisational-culture patterns (see the culture maps in Chapter 6). Given this valuable backing from the business literature on M&A, I also refer to this literature to define 'sustainability'.

Despite it not being the main object of research itself, sustainability is a core term. It captures the measure of success for UPF unification. In a similar fashion, Studt (2008) applies the measure of sustainability to determine the success of corporate mergers. Thereby, he initiates his definition of sustainability by tracing it back to its origins in forestry. According to his observation, the term was first transferred to an economic context in 1952 and has since been defined along three pillars of development: ecological, economical and social sustainability. In weighing the factors of climate and natural resources against the production and expansion of capital and the wider economy, different types of sustainability were created[17]. All of these concepts share the idea that work, production and the use of resources *today* should be conducted in a way as to allow for them to continue *tomorrow*. Similarly, Studt applies the idea of sustainability by employing a long-term vision for the consequences of current actions in corporate mergers. He argues that sustainability in mergers means to conduct integration not just for short-term goals (i.e., changes of structure) but also for a middle and long-term perspective (i.e., a change of culture). For a merger to count as sustainable, in his definition, a positive impact of change needs to be seen beyond the actual integration process. In order to achieve this sustainability, he claims it is necessary to pursue three goals: 'economic goals' that allow for a quantifiable measurement of progress, 'organisational goals' - from integrating structures and processes to proactive leadership of organisational culture, and 'qualification goals', which focus on competence, skill and diversity management. In these goals he also shows that mergers need to be more than changing structures and processes. Organisational culture and post-merger integration need to be considered. He reiterates

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[17] Studt (2008) aligns the different types along two poles from 'weak' to 'strong'. A further differentiation of the neoliberal and innovation-based forms of sustainability are not relevant to this dissertation, though.

this definition by saying that in order for a merger to be sustainable, a change of behaviour needs to be effected as well[18].

This research adheres to a similar understanding of sustainability. In order for a merger of armed forces to be sustainable, it needs to adhere to its new military unity not just *today* but also *tomorrow*. In the UPF case, military unity is challenged by several internal and external dividing forces. Therefore, I define 'sustainability' as *the ability to overcome, absorb and withstand these dividing forces*. To achieve such a sustainable unification - my previous research findings concur with Studt (2008) - it needs more than a unified structure. By focusing only on structures, laws and processes, a facade of unity is created - just as UPF and MoP are often judged today. To achieve sustainable military unity, a more substantial integration between formerly hostile forces needs to be pursued. I propose to start this process by identifying the soldiers' conception of 'military unity' in both their idealised form and in the way it is experienced in unified units every day.

My interview guide was structured accordingly: I enquired directly and indirectly how unified soldiers conceptualise military unity theoretically and what is their ideal vision for a future UPF. In addition, I gathered stories of everyday working habits, behaviours and routines in unified brigades, to understand the prevalent UPF culture. Based on the information I received during the interviews, which I later analysed with a thematic analysis, the following findings were made: Firstly, there is a stark difference between the conceptualised ideal of military unity and the daily experience of unified soldiers. To visualise this finding, I applied a 'culture map' as a second method of analysis (see Chapter 6). Based on this organisational-culture perspective, three findings on culture could be deducted: One, there is no significant organisational-culture difference between PUK/70 and KDP/80 as to warrant an integrating-competing-cultures approach. Two, nevertheless a proactive management of culture is vital for the sustainability of the unified forces. Particularly, the stark gap between ideal and prevalent culture needs to be minimised in order to also minimise the disappointment that unified soldiers experience in being confronted with this gap

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[18] Unterreitmeier (2004) echoes this approach indirectly by noting that cultural differences or a failure to establish a new culture after a merger can produce problems far into the future.

between what they think UPF *should* be and what they experience every day. Three, within UPF there is a culture clash brewing beneath the surface between 'academics' and 'non-academics'. To prevent this clash from escalating, a proactive integration has to be considered as a part of the merger[19]. Finally, observing the UPF case, it seems to me that the more relevant question for this and future research is not just how to sustainably unify the forces but how to conceptualise 'military unity' in the first place. Based on the findings of my research, this dissertation offers a first attempt at theorising 'military unity' (see Chapter 7). To further clarify and delineate what this PhD does and does not achieve, I now turn towards a discussion of delineations and limitations.

1.3. Delineations and limitations[20]

Since stating what one is *not* doing is equally as important in social scientific research as naming the decisions and intentions of what one is doing, I explicitly list the choices taken to delineate my focus. As this research is based on a very narrow specialisation, I had to consider and eliminate several layers of interest, which could have equally been studied. The reasoning behind my eliminations shall be outlined here. In total, four delineations were taken. Firstly, I decided to disregard the state of Iraq and instead focus on the Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI) exclusively. Secondly, within the KRI there are many security sector actors and countless armed forces. I decided to delineate my research to the unified peshmerga forces (UPF). Thirdly, in studying the merger and integration, I take a primarily institutional perspective; mentioning but disregarding all factors that influence the unity or division of UPF outside the unified military institutions. Finally, within UPF I placed an exclusive focus on the 'military staff' (soldiers and commanders of unified units) over 'civilian staff' working at the Ministry of Peshmerga (MoP). I review these delineations in the same order.

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[19] Note the terminological difference. In this dissertation, the term 'merger' is used to refer to the unification of formal structures and processes. In contrast, the term 'integration' is applied when specifying an effort to unify the people and system beneath this structure (i.e., change organisational culture).

[20] The presented dissertation is based on a highly focused research topic. To achieve this focus, many decisions and delineations had to be taken. I do not want to deny that some choices could have been taken differently. In my understanding, this can be claimed of any research, particularly in the social sciences. However, I am confident with the choices taken.

International armed forces, who are currently assisting both Iraq and KRI in reforming their armed forces, are very concerned with the integration of PUK/70 and KDP/80 along with KRI-Iraq relations. They call these integration processes 'horizontal' (within the KRI) and 'vertical' (between Erbil and Baghdad) (context interview, 2019). This focus on Iraq is largely due to the political nature of international advisory missions. As an international armed force, the official non-recognition of the Kurdish autonomous region - which became particularly visible during the 25 September 2017 referendum and the international community's unwillingness to recognise the 92 per cent vote for independence - does not allow them to ignore Baghdad. As a scholar, I have the benefit of disregarding political realities, such as international recognition of statehood, in favour of an almost clinical focus on one particular dimension. For this dissertation, a first delineation is taken by focusing exclusively on the armed forces in KRI. While I acknowledge KRI being a part of Iraq and the relationship between Erbil and Baghdad being crucial also for the future of UPF, I argue that small scale, in-depth research on the military merger in KRI is also useful. Its value derives from the current lack of in-depth research on already merged armed forces (Licklider 2014a) as well as from the ability to apply insights from post-merger-integration literature to the socio-cultural level of unified armed forces. In addition, such research is easier to undertake, as I (a 28 year-old woman from Austria) am able to move freely and receive wide support for my research in KRI. Conducting the same research for the ISF in Baghdad would have been significantly more challenging. Therefore, and due to my narrow focus, I dare to disregard Baghdad to understand the integration of UPF. In fact, for this dissertation I dissected 'my patient' even further by not even including PUK/70 and KDP/80 into the equation.

Up until now, research on unifying armed forces in KRI has focused on the structural integration of all partisan forces under MoP and on dismantling other forces (Chapman 2011, Fumerton and van Wilgenburg 2015, Fliervoet 2018). The goal of this research is neither to test the success or failure of centralising partisan forces nor the disarmament and demobilisation of other forces. Instead, the sustainability of the already unified forces (UPF) is to be tested - an approach which led me to review the concept of 'military unity' altogether. Why I have chosen to focus on UPF exclusively has already been discussed (see footnote 15). More importantly, at this point, the third

delineation - my disregard of UPF/MoP-external factors that influence the unification or division of UPF - demands an explanation.

Without a doubt, international actors - be that regional neighbours, like Turkey and Iran, or international forces such as the United States - play a role in the unification of peshmerga forces (see, for example, Jüde 2017). Even more so, local political realities - such as a tribal heritage, patrimonial structures and an unchallenged omnipotence by the Kurdish parties - cannot be realistically separated from neither UPF merger nor integration. Therefore, these realities are also partially covered in this thesis (in Chapter 3). However, for the analysis of data and the findings, these 'outside' factors are dismissed in favour of a more practically oriented, institutional perspective of UPF merger. While it is certainly fair to criticise the approach to artificially conceive UPF merger as a stand-alone institutional project, the reasoning for this deliberate delineation is twofold. Firstly, it is *not* the intention of this thesis to create a list of obstacles or reasons for the failure of UPF merger. Previous research on peshmerga unification has already produced such 'lists'[21]. Moreover, military-merging literature has previously tested the different reasons for failure against each other. In several cross-case examinations, Licklider (2014a) showed that neither local political will[22] nor the involvement or absence of the international community necessarily leads to failure or success in merging formerly hostile forces. With these factors being undetermined at this point, I decided (secondly) to focus on what I believe *can* make a difference in making UPF merger more sustainable instead. Therefore, this study is driven by an interest in generating knowledge with practical applicability. To do so, I prioritise perspectives, theories and methods which demonstrate a potential to be practically applicable to integrate UPF and armed forces.

In comparison to these critical choices, the last delineation seems a minor one. Nevertheless, it is worth deliberating. In this thesis, I contend that 'military unity' is

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[21] The most common factors for the failure of peshmerga merger are expressed as a lack of honest political will, interference from Turkey and Iran (and Iraq) to avoid any unification between the Kurdish parties, as well as the tribal, patrimonial and clientelistic-corrupt structures of Kurdish society.

[22] Even the different reasons for pursuing mergers in the first place, do not provide a reliable variable to determine the outcome of unification.

socially constructed. Although social constructions are certainly always an interplay between all members of society (as well as external forces impacting this society), I delineate my research by focusing on unified soldiers of all ranks and how *they* view 'military unity'. Consequently, this research is not concerned with political or civilian views on the matter[23]. Therefore, even within UPF, the focus is placed exclusively on soldiers and commanders of unified brigades, even disregarding 'civilian staff' in MoP. On a practical note, this last delineation provides a clear definition to the boundaries of the chosen target group. Interviews conducted with civilians or international military forces during fieldwork are included here as 'context interviews'.

Besides the deliberate delineations, there are also limitations placed on this study. Three are worth mentioning: the absence of numbers, the question of realistic doability and time constraints. The absence of numbers (also covered in section 'talking culture', Chapter 5) refers to a particular phenomenon in the KRI. Concrete numbers are largely lacking, due to the absence of a census and conclusive bureaucratic registers. As a result, all numbers provided for UPF have to be treated with caution. At best they can be understood as rough estimates. As a result, quantitative studies are difficult to undertake in the region. Hence, a first limitation was placed on this research as qualitative research is simply easier to conduct. With that, the second limitation, briefly called 'doability' is raised. Certainly, it is conceivable that hundreds of interviews could have been conducted. However, from a realistic reflection of doability, this is hardly possible for one researcher alone; particularly since the interviews were all conducted in-depth, lasted two to three hours each and required an additional time investment in order to generate access, arrange the appointment and establish rapport with each interviewee. Therefore, only a few interviews were conducted. The absence of quantity notwithstanding, this research focuses on quality and can therefore provide both valuable and valid results even from a small number of interviews. In fact, I argue that

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[23] Given the Kurdish grey zones between what constitutes a 'civilian' and a 'military' person (almost all politicians have a peshmerga background), here, 'civilian' refers to anyone who is not (or has not recently been) part of the 14 unified brigades.

the depth of these interviews is much more relevant than the quantity of interviews conducted[24].

Finally, time constraint is also an issue. This research was undertaken for a PhD at King's College London. With a regular trajectory of a three-year timeframe, I decided from the beginning that this limited time was hardly sufficient. Instead, I chose to conduct a part-time PhD, which allowed me to simply observe the developments in the region for a three-year period, from 2015 until 2018. Only after this time of observing the developments in the war with ISIS and the unification of armed forces, did I conduct fieldwork again. Coincidentally, it turned out to be well timed to conduct fieldwork in early 2019. The separation in October 2017 demonstrated a structural weakness in the unification, which led to a call for reunification and overall reform; a programme which commenced in late 2018. In addition, the war with ISIS was, at least officially, 'over', which allowed the armed forces to turn 'inwards' towards their structural problems again. Finally, the elections in KRI and Iraq produced new governments and new power relations, which, so far, seem promising for the future. To conduct this research at 'the beginning of a new era' is therefore particularly well suited.

Having reviewed the historic background of the case study and having illustrated the problem and guiding considerations, as well as the delineation and limitations of this thesis, I want to conclude this introduction by demonstrating what this dissertation *does* contribute to. This dissertation has three main achievements: One, by studying UPF merger from a bottom-up, social constructivist perspective, findings on the unified soldier's values and beliefs are gathered. These include a first sketch of both the ideal form of military unity and prevalent UPF organisational culture, which shapes daily experience of working in unified units. Further, insights into social, political and military cultural patterns together with particular cultural expressions of power, leadership, decision making and conflict management are discovered.

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[24] Throughout this process, I benefited from my previous fieldwork (both in terms of networks and socio-cultural knowledge), from strong support from the MoP and from an extraordinarily engaged translator, who, with his own character, demonstrating kindness and respect, managed to not only capture the essence of each of my questions (and as far as my impression goes also the essence of each interviewee's answer) but also created a trusting environment for soldiers to speak openly. Under these supportive conditions, I was enabled to conduct a small amount of interviews with a high level of depth. I conducted these interviews until I reached a tangible level of saturation for the information.

Two, by combining different disciplines, this dissertation shows how adding post-merger integration and organisational culture to UPF merger provides an invaluable new perspective to the theoretical and practical approach of merging formerly hostile armed forces. Thereby, this work contributes to both military-merging literature and to the field of Kurdish studies. Three, based on my findings, I put forward a proposition to question and theorise the concept of 'military unity'. This final contribution provides a new perspective to military merging as well as to the wider fields of SSR, post-civil-war reconciliation and possibly even to M&A. Each of these contributions will be further expanded upon in Chapter 7. For now, I turn towards the different chapters and steps that make up this dissertation.

Chapter 2: Literature review

The presented research is situated in the intersection of three academic literatures: military merging, post-merger integration and Kurdish studies. Thereby, the first two relate to a wider field of study - security sector reform (SSR) and mergers and acquisitions (M&A) respectively. In contrast, Kurdish studies constitutes the main field of research, in which this dissertation only addresses a small aspect (the Kurdistan region of Iraq and Kurdish peshmerga forces). To discuss these fields, a pragmatic approach was chosen, selecting and discussing those aspects of literature which are most relevant[25]. I review these three fields in the presented order. Military-merging literature and post-merger integration are discussed in Chapter 2. The review of Kurdish literature has been integrated into Chapter 3, which is concerned with the case study.

2.1. Military-merging literature

Military merging (often synonymously called 'military integration') is a concept as much as it is a process. Both the concept and the processes are employed in post-conflict environments, particularly in the context of civil wars and negotiated settlements. Licklider (2014a/2015) traces the origins of the concept back to the end of

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[25] Particularly when working between disciplines, as with M&A literature, not all aspects can be compared. Therefore, I only provide a brief introduction to the field and then select those aspects which are relevant to this study.

the Cold War. Connecting it to the increasing absence of military victory in civil wars since then, he asserts that the alternative to winning (civil) wars, namely negotiated settlements and power-sharing agreements, necessarily implies contact and compromise between different warring parties trying to reestablish governance in a state (also see Bussmann 2019). In the immediate aftermath of civil wars, these parties face a myriad of challenges[26]. Among them, Licklider (2014b) identifies three requirements that lead to military mergers: security needs to be provided to a war-torn society, the number of weapons, soldiers and (para)military non-state organisations have to be reduced, and one nation ought to be forged out of the divided groups. For all three problems military merging is considered a viable option[27]. In addition, the attempt to unify formerly hostile forces is often interpreted as proof of commitment[28] to peace. Not surprisingly, therefore, Hartzell (2014) finds that 40 per cent of negotiated settlements[29] include provisions to merge military forces.

With the number of negotiated settlements increasing (Burgess 2008, Glassmyer and Sambanis 2008, Toft 2010, Licklider 2014a, Hartzell 2014) and military merger taking a prominent position in these settlements, it is not surprising that a separate branch of academic enquiry has developed in this direction. While often perceived as *'a side effect'* to 'disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration' efforts (DDR) in SSR (Wilen 2015: 85), and despite still lacking a cohesive theoretical underpinning (Licklider 2014a, ibid.), military-merging processes undeniably play a role in the overall effort for peace-building and reconciliation in war-torn societies. To underline the relevance that I have recognised in this narrow and highly specialised field of research, I proceed in three steps. First, I briefly sketch the background and field (SSR), which 'military merging' belongs to, in order to better understand its roots and the particular line of questioning that dominate its research. In a second step, I discuss military merging in more detail, providing a definition to the concept and looking at different

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[26] For a comprehensive list on security challenges after civil war refer to Burgess (2008).

[27] The argument is: A representative armed force can best provide security amidst divided societies; its unity provides a first symbol for new beginning; also, merging allows dissolving rebel organisations within new structures and appeasing soldiers by providing employment.

[28] Due to the 'high costs' associated with both merger and premature disintegration (Glassmyer and Sambanis 2008, Licklider 2014a, Bussmann 2019).

[29] Her measurement relates to the timeframe 1945-2006.

factors that have been studied so far. Finally, I conclude by relating my own research to this field.

2.1.1. Background

Military merging is part of SSR. For this dissertation, it is not necessary to understand the history or depth of debates within SSR. What is relevant here is that this well-known acronym refers to a field of academic research which is tightly interlinked with international organisations' efforts to assist post-(civil)-war states and societies in dealing with all types of security challenges that arise after a conflict. Thereby, SSR applies a holistic perspective on reforming the security sector (Knight 2009, Toft 2010) - it includes the armed forces as well as the police, the justice system and many other state and non-state actors. This research delineates itself clearly to only *one* actor in the security sector: the (unified) armed forces. Further, SSR is organised along different types of post-conflict settings. After all, different cases have different requirements and challenges; therefore, they necessitate different approaches. One example of such differentiation can be seen between post-intervention (Simonsen 2007, Toft 2010) and post-civil-war studies[30]. For this research, a post-civil-war context is applicable. Even though the civil war lies more than 20 years in the past, the same warring parties and the same leadership work towards unifying the armed forces in KRI today.

SSR literature on post-civil-war contexts is extensive, as security challenges are manyfold in such environments. Due to limited space, I selected two aspects of this literature that seem most relevant to discuss (and distinguish from one another). These aspects are clearly captured in their guiding questions: What should be done with all the military men in society? And how to avoid reigniting hostile flames between formerly warring parties? Both of these challenges have developed into a field of their own. The first is called 'DDR' (Knight and Özerdem 2004, Berdal and Ucko 2009). The second deals with negotiated settlements and power-sharing agreements. Both of these fields can also be broken down into even smaller research areas. For example, one field of DDR specialises in rebel-to-party transitions (Weinstein 2007, Söderberg Kovacs

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[30] Barany (2014) shows how forming a national armed force post civil war is very different from forming armed force after military rule, socialism, colonialism or interventions. The difference in the first case is that armed forces are formed between formerly *hostile* elements.

2007/2008, Klapdor 2009, Podder 2012) and settlements can be studied from an angle of negotiating and bargaining (Findley 2013) or can be tested on their quality and duration (Hartzell et al. 2001, Mukherjee 2006, DeRouen et al. 2009). Also connected to this literature on settlements is the young field of military merging. However, in some cases, military merging is also interpreted as a part of DDR (for example, Wilen 2015).

Although I concur with military merging developing from research on negotiated settlements, I disagree with it being intermixed with DDR. Even though both DDR and military merging answer the question what to do with the mass of soldiers after civil war, they actually pursue diametrically opposing goals. DDR tends to prioritise the reintegration of soldiers into society (i.e., *demilitarising* them), while military merging looks at integrating soldiers and armed organisations into a (new) government force (i.e., *militarising* rebels by adding superior training, weaponry and tactics). In cases such as KRI, but also Rwanda and Bosnia Herzegovina, military merging becomes even more distinct from DDR. In these cases, individual soldiers and sub-state security organisations are not simply integrated into a previously existing state structure. Instead, an entirely new force is created from previously warring factions. Such a symmetric merger (the conflicting parties tend to have similar strengths and an equal say in the merger process) creates an entirely different set of needs and challenges. Given that this process is also a part of military merging, a distinction from DDR seems warranted. Therefore, I understand military merging and DDR as related, yet separate parts of SSR[31].

2.1.2. Definitions, fields of research and previous approaches

So, what is this field of military merging? What are the guiding questions? What are the definitions? Which perspectives and concepts are applied? Military merging is a young field and therefore there is no uniform terminology yet. Therefore, any enquiry on military merging ought to be undertaken for both the term 'merger' and 'integration'. As

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[31] Bussmann (2019) and Martin (2017) indirectly support this distinction, as they also treat the concepts separately. Bussmann even shows that tension can exist between DDR and military merging.

a result, different fields are found[32]. In total, I distinguish four distinct fields covered under the double heading: one focuses on bringing together former warring parties; a second discusses civil-military integration; a third studies integrating minorities, such as women, homosexuals and different races; and a final one looks at operational or technology integration[33]. The second, third and fourth line of enquiry are too far from the intent of this research and are therefore omitted. In order to avoid cross-overs with other fields and for clarity on the focus of this study, I deliberately use the term 'military merger' instead of 'military integration'[34] from now on.

In literature, military merger is defined in several ways. All of the definitions stress the fact that there are two or more armed forces which create one new force (Glassmyer and Sambanis 2008, Wilen 2015, Krebs and Licklider 2016). While the rhetoric is often placed on creating a *new* force, Licklider (2015) concedes that mostly rebels are integrated into an already existing framework of national armed forces. Notable exceptions are Ruanda, Bosnia-Herzegovina and the KRI, in which an entirely new structure was formed from previous warring parties. Beyond this basic definition, some scholars provide more specific descriptions. Licklider (2014a), for example, defines merger as a process that ensures former rebels are integrated into a new army *in the same position.* Warner (2013) goes even further by deviating from the idea of merger needing to result in 'one armed force'. Instead, he conceives a statuary security framework as sufficient success for reintegration. For this thesis, military merging is defined as the *structural unification* of two or more armed forces[35]. Only in a second step is 'merger' contrasted to the concept of 'post-merger integration' (PMI).

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[32] That the synonym use of 'military integration' can be confusing is exemplified by Wilen, who observes that previous research focuses only on how national armed forces can become more integrated on aspects of gender, minorities and disabilities (2015: 85). While it is true that this line of enquiry exists, it only covers one aspect of the 'military merger' literature.

[33] This field of research is mostly undertaken in the context of US or NATO forces.

[34] I also supplement 'military integration' used by other authors (e.g., in their definition) with 'merger' whenever the sense of the author's terminology applies to what I intend to say with 'military merger'. (Note that the terminology of 'integration' is still maintained, though.)

[35] In my previous research, the terms merger and unification were used synonymously. Recently, rhetoric has shifted towards the term 'reform'. Nevertheless unification and unity still play a role in KRI military merging. Therefore, the definition of 'military merging' here is strongly connected to the idea of creating some form of unity.

Integration, in this context, refers to the unification of *people*[36] and therefore stands in contrast to the unification of structure in merger. With this differentiation, I can rephrase the argument of this paper into the following words: In order for a merger to be sustainable, both structure and people need to be unified[37]. To substantiate this argument, PMI literature will be presented in the next part of this chapter. For now, I continue reviewing previous research on military merging.

Military-merging literature seems to be based on four main lines of research. The first focuses on definitions of success, the second on models and methods, the third on effects and the last one discusses reasons for failure in mergers. I shall look at each of them a bit closer. Defining what constitutes success in mergers is a vital step for this academic field. After all, only when one knowns the end state, one can start to identify factors that might assist in researching this goal. Three definitions of a successful merger are found in literature. Melin (2016) differentiates success either along *external capacity* (e.g., military efficacy (Licklider 2014a)[38]) or along *internal processes* (e.g., the level of working together, the level of professionalism (Melin 2016) or the level of civilian control (Licklider 2014a)). A third, very specific[39], definition can be found in Licklider (2014a) who identifies the *absence of a return to violence* as a measure of success[40]. This research introduces 'sustainability' as a fourth measure. In this approach, I veer towards the definition of success as 'internal processes'. At the same time, I challenge the idea of 'a return to civil war' by suggesting that a failure of merger is not just constituted once civil war reignites, but even earlier once forces separate. In order

[36] Melin also provides a definition of integration which aligns with this thesis. She identifies integration as *'a process which aims to transform relationships from hostile to more cooperative ones'* (2016: 3).

[37] In order to unify people, post-merger integration and a focus on organisational cultures helps. That this approach also allows to reinterpret and theorise the concept of 'military unity' was not intended at the outset of this research.

[38] Licklider (2014b/2015) finds that newly merged forces are always less capable than previous forces. For a study on the capability of new forces and whether this outcome matters for integration, see Toft (2010).

[39] While very specific, this measurement for success is also applied in SSR (Toft 2010) and negotiated settlements literature (DeRouen et al. 2009, Mukherjee 2006). It is at this point that military-merging literature's roots become apparent.

[40] Opinions on whether military merging helps avoid a return to civil war are divided. Optimistic (Hoddie and Hartzell 2003, Samii 2014) and sceptical (Licklider 2014a, Krebs and Licklider 2016) accounts exist. There are also studies which altogether deny such a connection (Glassmyer and Sambanis 2008).

to avoid a separation of merged structures, *internal* institutional capacities need to be strengthened (through post-merger integration) to withstand dividing forces[41].

In terms of models and methods that can be applied to military merging, research has come up with an extensive catalogue of factors; some of which were derived from data of different case studies and others which were primarily theorised. Burgess and Licklider (2015) started a first attempt at pulling the different variables together by identifying two main models of merger: a technocratic and an indoctrination approach. The technocratic approach views merger as a predominantly technical problem. It focuses on building institutions and providing training for soldiers. The authors note that this approach constitutes the predominant way how military mergers are currently conducted. In rare exceptions, such as Rwanda and China, an indoctrination approach is chosen to accompany a merger (Licklider 2015). In the case of Rwanda, 'indoctrination' was applied to soldiers by attending workshops and group sessions, in which they addressed their past and tried to come to terms with it before proceeding to fight side by side.

In addition to those two general models, several other factors were also tested in research. Simonsen (2007), for example, finds that *trust* is a central element in mergers, while Call (2012) highlights the need for *elite inclusion* and Warner (2013) shows how providing *amnesty* to rebels can be a key to successful mergers. Moreover, Verweijen (2018) shows how *patronage networks* inside and outside integrating forces can corrode the newly merged unity, Bussmann (2019) finds that military merger is less successful when rebels hold on to their forces during the integration process, and Gaub (2011) notes that multi-ethnicity does not necessarily correspond to defection and lack of cohesion. In another research, Melin (2016) tests the variables *identity* and *resource base.* She finds that rebels who rely on social endowments have stronger identities and are therefore harder to dissolve and integrate (as well as more likely to ignite violence within merged forces). Finally, Wilen (2015), by applying Galtung's integration theory to the comparative cases of Burundi, Rwanda and Congo, finds that *professionalisation*,

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[41] Krebs indirectly supports this approach by highlighting that the failure of military mergers, in his observation, is usually due to two factors: *'underlying distrust or incompatible win-sets'* (2014: 245). Both of these factors relate to what I call 'organisational culture' (and 'internal capacity') in this dissertation.

socialisation, *welfare-provision* and *political education* are employed as tools to foster integration.

For this research, a combination between the technocratic and indoctrination approach is chosen. Observing the KRI case over the last six years, I conclude that a technocratic approach alone is not sufficient to create a sustainable merger. While not going as far as suggesting an indoctrination approach, I put forward the idea to include 'human factors' into merger, integration and reform processes of armed forces. These 'human factors' are incorporated in several ways: in the assumption that military unity is socially constructed - and hence a product of human minds and social interaction, in stressing the need for integration beyond mere structural merger and in the interdisciplinary perspective of 'organisational culture'. Moreover, in the list of factors that others have studied before, this research contributes by adding organisational culture as an additional factor.

A third line of research in military-merging literature focuses on what I call 'effect'. Effect is studied from three perspectives: Which factors affect mergers? Which effect does merging have on the armed forces? And does military merger affect peace and post-civil-war reconciliation? As this research focuses on military merger from an institutional perspective and does not consider the effects of mergers, I omit the latter two perspectives. Instead, I review literature regarding the question which factors affect military merging. For a holistic overview, Licklider (2014a) provides a good starting point. As space is limited, I focus on only three factors which seem most relevant: international involvement, quotas and local political will. So far, research has found that international involvement (as well as the amount of resources invested in mergers) does not have any effect on the success or failure of mergers (Licklider 2014a/b, Krebs and Licklider 2016). Similarly, quotas are identified as being useful only for the negotiation of military merger. However, there seems to be little evidence that quotas generate sustainably unified forces (Walter 2002). In terms of political will, logic would suggest that local support is vital to assure success. However, comparative research shows that also this factor does not necessarily lead to sustainable merger (Licklider 2014a). Even more so, some cases show that successful mergers *can* be achieved amidst an absence or low level of political support (ibid.).

In the case of KRI, these findings are telling. As will be shown in more detail in Chapter 3, the military merger of UPF has been conducted with and without international pressure, has been led by the idea of quota (in a 50/50 system; until the most recent efforts in 2018) and has experienced different levels of local political will. When asked for the reasons to pursue military merger, three answers are frequently provided by interviewees: Firstly, sentiments of nationality and the dream of independence are combined in the rationale that in order to be independent, all Kurds need to be unified and a future state needs to possess one armed force. Unifying the forces *now* is seen as a helpful step towards achieving the dream of an independent nationstate. Secondly, soldiers hope that by unifying the armed forces, they can limit or even abolish unwanted interference from third-states - particularly from Turkey and Iran - as well as from local political parties. By creating a unified force, so the argument, corruption can be targeted, political authorities can be held accountable in front of the law and the regions development can flourish. Finally, a third reason to pursue unification is the need to avoid another civil war.

No matter what the reason is for unification, political parties have pursued military merger since the beginning of their regional autonomy in 1991. The first time it was pursued with little international involvement and based on substantial local will (in a 50/50 merger). Nevertheless, the first merger ended in civil war. The second attempt commenced in 2006 and saw an increasing international involvement. Since then, local rhetoric remained positive towards unification. However, many soldiers concede it to be international (in particular US) pressure that actually motivates military merging. With military-merging literature suggesting that neither of these factors has necessarily to lead to success or failure, I decided to turn my attention 'inwards' towards UPF instead. By applying an institutional perspective to the question of military merger in the KRI, I hope to identify how the unification can be strengthened from within.

This leads to a final point on military-merger literature: the question of failure. There seems to be a particular debate in literature over whether military merging, and particularly its failure, is primarily a political or a technical 'engineering' problem. Jarstad and Nilsson (2008), Licklider (2015) and Krebs (2014/2016) take a stance on the

side of politics. They argue that all difficulties in post-civil-war militaries are rooted in politics rather than in ignorance or the inability to implement mergers (Krebs and Licklider 2016). Jarstad and Nilsson (2008) even find that one-third of military-power-sharing provisions were never properly implemented and thereby stress how a lack of political intention can impact the engineering of mergers. Glassmyer and Sambanis (2008), Knight (2011) and Call (2012), in contrast, demonstrate how flawed implementation of military merger has been at the root of different merger's failure. Some cases, such as Baaz and Verweijen's (2013) demonstration of Democratic Republic of Congo merger failures, also take a middle ground by highlighting a connection between both political and engineering problems. In their case study, they show how military merger can - if done badly - even lead to militarisation of the economy, politics and society. In this case, a weak central state was forced to rely on cooptation of local elites to provide security, which, in turn provided incentives for desertion, inter and intra community conflict and economic opportunities of military entrepreneurs. They also show how weak and inefficient military and state institutions can inhibit the relevant decision-making processes during mergers. For this research, I stand in line with those in the middle, suggesting that both politics and engineering need to work in order for military mergers to succeed. The argument is simple: without political will, the best military merger is likely to fail. However, without the right 'engineering' of merger, all the best political intentions are worth little, if the wrong measures are taken.

2.1.3. Gaps and my contribution to the field

In the review of military-merger literature, I have already alluded to the several stances and factors I take and contribute to. To conclude this first part of literature review, I want to revisit the contributions that this thesis provides to the field of military merging. While studying yet another individual case study, I believe my research adds five new aspects to the field: it adds the often called-for microanalysis by providing an in-depth study with a bottom-up perspective; instead of looking at reasons for merger or at technicalities within the merger, I study already merged forces and the sustainability of their unification; it adds an interdisciplinary approach by bringing in lessons from the post-merger-integration literature; it adds the factor 'culture' as another way to approach both military merger and security sector reform; and, based on the findings, it brings to

light a new way of theorising the concept 'military unity'. I shall enlarge upon these aspects.

In a review of prevalent literature, Licklider (2014a) points to the need for more aggregated data as well as for more micro-level research in the future. In addition, he also notes a need to strengthen research on already merged forces. While not being able to provide for the first[42], this thesis caters to the second and third gap of military-merging literature. By studying unified peshmerga forces in-depth, initial research on merged forces is undertaken[43]. Thereby, I propose 'sustainability' as a new measure of success for military mergers and provide three new concepts, post-merger integration (PMI), organisational culture and a theory on how to conceive 'military unity', to achieving such sustainable mergers. In addition, my research provides a unique, bottom-up perspective on merger processes. Instead of viewing the merger top-down, from a decision-maker's perspective, I start with the average soldier. Certainly, it can be claimed that soldiers have little impact on mergers, as they are simply recipients of decisions. While this is true, I refuse to equate the lack of decision-making capacity with an absence of agency. In fact, I assert, it is the willingness of these soldiers to obey the decisions, structures and orders that effects the daily workings of merged forces. Since, in any law or rule, there is a grey zone which can be exploited, it depends on the soldiers' will, interest and judgement whether the grey zone is used to support unifying or dividing forces within newly merged armed forces. Therefore, it is relevant to test what soldiers think and feel about the proposed unification processes.

In studying unified (peshmerga) forces, I focus on internal capacities as a factor for successful merger. With defining sustainability as institutional resilience, the soldiers' level of professionalism, how harmoniously soldiers work together and whether they are able to turn division into cooperation and a sense of unity, is central to this work. The focus on these internal capacities derives from information in business literature on corporate mergers. In M&A literature, 'human factors', such as organisational culture, were identified as a key to success and failure of mergers (see

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[42] Bussmann (2019) recently added the aggregated data of 77 case studies.

[43] At the time of my fieldwork, soldiers had already been unified between two to nine years.

below). In addition, the field post-merger integration (PMI) provides a solid theoretical and methodological approach worthy of being combined with military-merging literature. Particularly since this thesis has an interest in generating knowledge which has the potential to be practically applicable, a relation to the practice-oriented field of PMI seems warranted. Moreover, PMI literature provides several 'engineering' suggestions - primarily the proactive management of organisational cultures to guide both merger and reform processes - that seem equally applicable to the integration of formerly hostile soldiers.

In relying on M&A literature or on organisational culture as a valuable measure and variable, this research is not alone. Laitin (2014), for example, compares M&A and the merger of armed forces. Thereby, he focuses on identifying areas in which the two fields are in fact comparable (such as the phenomenon that, once integrated, the skills of incorporated rebel forces are undervalued, which is why mergers generally yield less efficient fighting forces) and those in which they are not (e.g. contrary to corporations, armed forces do not suffer the pressure of efficiency and immediate delivery after merger, as there is no more imminent security threat). In another study, Johnson (2007) applies the concept of organisational culture on the merger of the American Air Force and National Guard to find that incompatible cultures can inhibit performance. Many researchers of military merging actually allude to 'culture' being a factor, without ever focusing on it explicitly. Gaub (2011), for example, highlights the necessity for equal opportunity and fairness in mergers, Simonsen (2007) talks about trust, and Melin (2016) looks at identity. Each factor is part of what I call the organisational culture of armed forces. Also Wilen's (2015) definition of a successful merger, namely the ability to break free from previous loyalties in order to work together as one unit, reflects this need for cultural change during merger processes. Similarly, Burgess (2008) notes that the management of any merger needs to be based on principles and values - two elements which rest at the heart of designing organisational cultures. Even at a macro level, Cronin insists that all militaries in the Middle East required an *ideological and cultural shift towards discipline and obedience'* in order to modernise successfully (2014: 242). With so many researchers concluding that 'culture' plays a role, I underline the value of including PMI in military merging. PMI assists in providing a theoretical

framework as well as a methodological tool (the 'culture map') to assess organisational culture in military mergers and reform processes.

Finally, by mere coincidence, the crossover of military merging and M&A literature has led me to a finding which provides another (albeit unintended) contribution to prevalent literature on military merging. Based on the findings, I concluded that in order to fully understand (and to properly approach) military mergers, the underlying goal and concept 'military unity' needs to be conceptualised. Approaching my research from a social-constructivist paradigm, I found that 'military unity' can neither be known nor established 'once and for all'. Instead, military unity is what people make of it - how it is lived, experienced and idealised every day. While discussed more extensively in Chapter 7, this unintended finding also contributes to military merging, for theory and practice, by providing a theoretical conception which adds 'the human factor' to the merger and integration of formerly hostile armed forces. With this final contribution, I conclude my review of the first field of literature. Thus, I turn towards the second field, covering business management, M&A and PMI literature.

2.2. An interdisciplinary approach: a detour through business literature

Given that military-merging literature is young, it does not yet offer many answers to the dilemmas of merging formerly hostile armed forces. Why, for example, do the unified structures of UPF not withstand dividing forces? What constitutes sustainable unity if unified structures alone are not sufficient? Does the fault lie in a lack of political will for unification or in failures of engineering this unity? To answer questions to which a young field did not yet develop solutions for, interdisciplinarity provides help. By taking assistance from a different yet comparable field, attempts to conceive possible responses to these questions can be made. For my research, I sought support from business-management literature; particularly on merger and acquisitions (M&A) and post-merger integration (PMI). This choice is made on the basis of two considerations. Firstly, since the unification of PUK/70 and KDP/80 constitutes a *merger*, relying on the extensive M&A literature seems appropriate. This approach is supported by previous research, which has, ever so rarely, applied a similar perspective to the study of merging armed forces (see, for example, Laitin 2014). Secondly, given that a part of the Kurdish forces are already (structurally) merged, the focus here is not

on the merger per se but rather on everything that happens *after* the structural unification. Hence, *post-merger* integration is judged to be a well-suited discipline to compare UPF integration to.

As will be shown in this literature review, PMI assists this research both theoretically and methodologically. Firstly, PMI manages to answer the conundrum between political will and flawed engineering in failed mergers of armed forces by pointing towards the factor 'organisational culture' as a major hurdle which is often overlooked. Thereby, PMI inspires my research's theoretical approach to look at underlying values, patterns of behaviours and implicit expectations of unified soldiers towards their idea(l) of military unity. In addition, PMI literature provides countless tools and methodological approaches to study organisational cultures. For this thesis, Simon Sagmeister's (2016) 'culture map' was chosen as a second data-analysis tool. This choice was based on two factors: It manages to make cultural patterns visible and it coincides with this research's constructivist and practice-oriented approach.

Certainly, despite many overlaps between M&A, PMI and military-merging literature, not every aspect of business management can be applied to a merger between armed forces. For example, the goal of corporate mergers to increase shareholder value is neither comparable to the role of the military nor to the aims pursued in their mergers. Similarly, the wide perspective PMI literature takes, including all sorts of measures from IT integration to production-line planning, is equally irrelevant to the merger of armed forces[44]. These differences notwithstanding, an interlinking between these disciplines is valid[45]. Both, corporations and the armed forces, are organisations which are highly structured and mostly undemocratic in their hierarchy and decision making. Even more importantly, both types of organisations are made up of human beings. No matter the area of the world, the country or culture or even the size of the merger, research finds that the social challenges when merging corporations are similar. Therefore, it can be assumed that similar 'human factors' (such as fears, mistrust and

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[44] Some aspects, such as the integration of IT infrastructures can prove relevant to merge armed forces. However, for this research, these aspects still deviate too far from the intent and focus of this study. Therefore, they are disregarded here.

[45] Also see Laitin's (2014) judgement that M&A and military mergers are comparable in some aspects.

unwillingness to change (Berner 2017)), which PMI focuses on, can also be encountered in other organisations which attempt mergers (or change in general). In addition, previous research has also linked these disciplines. The effect of organisational culture on military performance[46] (Johnson 2007, Falconer 2006), safety perceptions (Falconer 2006, Rachman 2018) and organisational change (Schein 2004, Losekoot et al. 2008) has been previously studied. With all of these reasonings and precedents, the chosen interdisciplinary approach is judged valid. To further underline the particular value I see in adding post-merger integration and organisational culture as new perspectives to the study of unifying and reforming UPF, I proceed by providing a literature review of PMI. In a second step, I turn to culture to explicate why it matters. Finally, I present Simon Sagmeister's (2016) tool, 'the culture map'.

2.2.1. Post-merger integration

Post-merger integration (PMI) is part of the wider M&A field of study. M&A literature deals with the buying and selling of corporations, the different reasons and types of such expansions[47], as well as factors for success and failure. The history of this field is said to span over 100 years (Mohibullah 2009, Gerds and Schewe 2014). Not surprisingly, literature covering this subject is extensive and diverse. A review of this sizeable body is not necessary for this dissertation. Instead, I focus on those aspects about (recent) M&A literature that seem most valuable. Two aspects are identified. Firstly, literature demonstrates that the odds for mergers failing are high[48]. Even though several causes of

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[46] Studies on how national cultures impact the armed forces are also conducted (Visser and van Dyk 2011, Rachman 2018).

[47] Depending on the literature, 'merger' and 'acquisition' are used as synonyms or are starkly differentiated between mergers, acquisitions (Koi-Akrofi 2016) as well as joint ventures (Cornelius 2007) and conglomerates (Epstein 2004, Kuhn 2010). Since I only apply the term 'merger', a review of the terminological distinctions is not relevant.

[48] The percentages of these failure rates vary from 50 to 80 per cent, depending on the approach and sample of the respective study. For example, Bradt (2015) references a KPMG study which shows a failure rate of 75 to 83 per cent. At the same time, Ruess, Voelpel (2012) and Heffernan (2012) put their estimates at 50 to 80 per cent. Again others, estimate 60 to 80 (Cornelius 2007) or 50 per cent (Cartwright and Cooper 1995, Unterreitmeier 2004, Gerds and Schewe 2014).

failure are mentioned[49] (Christensen et al. 2011, Heffernan 2012, Bradt 2015, McMorris 2015, Koi-Akrofi 2016, Lewis and McKone 2016, Henman 2018), the most frequent and most widely acknowledged factor for failure is culture (Unterreitmeier 2004, Stafford 2015). To be precise, the failure lies in '(organisational) culture' being overlooked when planning a merger (Johnson 2007, Kuhn 2010, Henman 2018), in the failure to properly implement post-merger integration (Gerds and Schewe 2014, Berner 2017), or in a general cultural incompatibility of the merging corporations (Unterreitmeier 2004, Gelfand et al. 2018, Henman 2018). For studying the merger of UPF all three dimensions are relevant to consider.

Based on the findings that (organisational) culture matters for mergers, M&A is said to have taken a 'humanistic turn' since the 1980s (Unterreitmeier 2004, Johnson 2007, Mohibullah 2009), focusing on the different 'human factors' from attitudes (Falconer 2006) to different aspects of behaviours (Robbins et al. 2010, Schermerhorn et al. 2012), values (O'Riordan 2015) or the willingness to change. One of the main discussions in M&A literature surrounding this 'human factor' is the question at which stage of the merger this human factor plays a role. Literature differentiates between three stages: pre-merger (the phase of negotiations), transit-merger (the phase from due diligence until signing the agreement) and post-merger (the actual process of integrating the legally merged entities). The discussions range from arguments for integrating 'the human factor' in all stages (Kuhn 2010, Bradt 2015) to it being most central to the final, post-merger phase (Ruess and Voelpel 2012). Considering that unified peshmerga are already formally and structurally merged, the wider discussion of M&A literature is largely irrelevant. For the unification and reform of UPF, the post-merger phase and its processes for integrating two formerly hostile entities efficiently and sustainably is the most important aspect. Thus, I focus on it exclusively.

'The success or failure of [mergers] *lies in the nuts and bolts of integration.'*

Christensen et al. (2011)

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[49] There is no overall agreement on which factors cause failure. To provide two examples, Epstein (2004), mentions seven: the strategic vision and fit, the deal structure, due diligence, pre-merger planning, post-merger integration and the external environment. In comparison, Bradt (2015) mentions the following five factors: the environment, clarity on values, attitude during the merger, up-keeping relationships with employees throughout the merger and behaviours at a strategic, organisation and operational level.

No matter whether 'the human factor' comes in at the post-merger phase or in all phases of merger, M&A literature identifies PMI as the most important phase of any merger - as the quote demonstrates. Therefore, it is worth looking deeper into PMI literature as well. Post-merger integration, just like M&A, constitutes a wide field of study. PMI is strongly oriented towards practical application. As a result, its definitions, solutions and tools demonstrate greater width than depth[50]. A good, even if incomplete, oversight over the myriad of disciplines, perspectives and units of analysis in PMI is provided by Bodner and Capron (2018). In their attempt to integrate two PMI fields - reconfiguration and organisational-design scholars (i.e., the questions of 'what' to merge and 'how' to merge) - they provide a good oversight over the wider field[51]. They identify PMI as covering all issues from creating synergies to structural integration, employee retention as well as loss of status or identity from the merger. Both for theory and for practical reasons, this width of PMI is too broad for this thesis. A useful definition of what PMI encompasses is provided by Pablo (1994). He defines PMI as '*the implementation of changes in functional activities, organisations structures and cultures to create one functional whole from two (or more) unifying organisations*' (1994: 806). Taken together with the general width of the field, it becomes clear that post-merger integration covers every process at every level in every unit and for every discipline after two organisations finalise their agreement to merge. In which way, intensity or towards which goal this integration is pursued, depends on the respective case; as do factors for success and failure. Since the case, which is studied here, is the merger of armed forces, PMI literature needs to be reviewed for those aspects which are applicable to a military context. Three are considered relevant for this dissertation: a review of PMI lessons learned, a typology of different intensities

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[50] Finance, business management, change management and countless other literatures cover PMI from their respective discipline.

[51] For example, they identify three different units of analysis in PMI research: a focus on the acquired firm, attention on the acquiring firm, or prioritisation on the newly combined firm. From this perspective, this research focuses on the last example - newly combined armed forces. In a similar fashion, Bodner and Capron (2018) differentiate research along five sub-units of analysis: resources, product lines, business units, top-management teams or systems. These differentiations are not deeply relevant here, yet, if a comparison had to be made, this research can be said to focus on a system level of UPF.

of merger, and the reiterated value of 'organisational culture' for any integration process[52]. I shall present each of these three factors in the according order.

PMI is a wide field and it covers a myriad of factors that impact the integration of organisations. A recent review of best practices by Gerds and Schewe (2014) provides a limited, yet insightful example of the multitude of these factors. I provide a review of their work here to demonstrate the general value of applying a PMI perspective on the merger of armed forces. Gerds and Schewe provide a list of lessons learned for PMI practitioners along the analysis of four risks: synergy, structure, people and projects. In order to create synergy effects, they note, merging entities need more than just a vision statement. Successful mergers go the extra mile by aligning financial structures and creating decisive figures as well as reporting systems in order to be able to monitor progress. Moreover, they also systematically articulate the reasons, goals and values of the merger. For structure, Gerds and Schewe insist that successful mergers depend on more than drafting a new organigram. Instead, a strong focus needs to be placed on rewarding integrative behaviour. Moreover, leadership figures have to continuously oversee operations on the integration programme. For these leaders - and 'people' in general - it is relevant to mix the teams of previous entities aligned with their abilities, skills and levels. The value of getting 'the people factor' right is again reiterated in the risk associated with projects. Here, the authors stress that having the right people working on integration is far more relevant than drafting perfect project plans. From these propositions, several valuable conclusions can be drawn. To begin with, as I will show below, military merging in the KRI tends to start with a vision statement and a new organigram but fails to take the actual steps necessary to achieve these goals. Following Gerds and Schewe, this can partially explain the failure of UPF merger. Even more importantly, UPF merger (and possibly many others) focuses on plans rather than people. As I argue throughout this dissertation, it is this oversight of 'the human factor' that limits the success of military mergers. For the UPF case in particular, the tendency to position people along political belonging and inter-party rivalry, instead of skill and meritocracy, shows many negative effects in the

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[52] Also the concept of 'sustainability' as it was applied on corporate merger processes by Studt (2008) was taken from PMI literature. As this definition was already presented in the introduction, it will not be repeated here.

organisation's efficiency as well as in unified soldiers' satisfaction. With this comparison between PMI factors and problems of UPF merger, the value of PMI literature to provide support for the study of merging armed forces becomes apparent.

A second area of backing that PMI literature provides for the study of merging militaries is a differentiation between different types of intensities of merger. Kuhn, for example, identifies three: *'complete integration', 'partial integration'* and *'maintenance'* (2010: 6). In contrast, Bodner and Capron apply Haspeslagh's and Jemison's (1991) differentiation between four types: *'absorption', 'symbiosis', 'preservation'* and *'holding'* (2018: 3). Despite applying different wordings, both list similar degrees of merger intensity[53]. What these differentiations show is that a merger of two forces does not have to imply complete 'disappearance' (complete integration or absorption) of one entity. Instead, partial integration or symbiosis are also possible. For the merger of armed forces, this is an important thought. So far, most military-merging literature starts from the Weberian-state idea of (re)establishing a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence after civil wars[54]. Therefore, literature usually conceives only complete 'disappearance' and neglects the alternative of partial integration or even the option of maintaining two separate units[55]. Also, for the unification of UPF, this differentiation in PMI literature is relevant. Based on this, a separate maintenance of PUK/70 and KDP/80 is equally possible to constitute at least some form of merger. In fact, the current reform programme seems to pursue this very approach by taking the integration of forces as a step-by-step process (or as a 'zipper', as it is sometimes called), leaving PUK/70 and KDP/80 as separate headquarters underneath the wider MoP structure, before eventually absorbing them more and more into the financial, recruitment, training and other structures of UPF.

Finally, just like M&A literature, PMI studies tend to find that organisational culture is a deciding factor for the success and failure of integration. Among all the

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[53] The difference between those two is that the latter provides an additional degree to 'maintenance' by differentiating 'preservation' and 'holding'.

[54] Recall the exception of Warner (2013) who also considers a statuary security framework as a possible outcome to military merger.

[55] In practice this has sometimes been done, though. The maintenance of peshmerga forces amidst the 2003 dismantling of ISF is one example.

factors reviewed in literature, culture is the only one which researchers agree on (Cornelius 2007, Miller and Fernandes 2009, Mohibullah 2009, Stafford 2015, Koi-Akrofi 2016, Sagmeister 2016). Some even believe it to be the most relevant factor of all (Stafford 2015, Gelfand et al. 2018). As always though, statistics on this factor differ[56]. The most relevant figure for this research seems to be from a 2005 study by Isaac Dixon which attributes 30 per cent of all failures to culture alone (Miller and Fernandes 2009). With such a high level of relevance, that 'culture' has for successful integration in all types of organisations worldwide, it can only be concluded that '(organisational) culture' also matters for the merger of different armed forces. To test this assumption, a separate literature review of the concept of culture is undertaken.

2.2.2. Culture and why it matters

> *'Culture,'* it is said, *'eats strategy for breakfast.'*
> *'...and structure for lunch,'* adds Simon Sagmeister (2016: 33).

While often perceived as vague and intangible, culture matters, as both the introductory statements and the previous review of M&A and PMI literature emphasise. Especially in phases of organisational change (such as mergers, but also generally in reform processes), the management of organisational culture plays a key role for achieving success. Considering that armed forces are social organisations just like corporations, I insist that organisational culture also matters for the unification of peshmerga (and military forces in general). As it is still rare to apply culture analyses to the armed forces and as the concept itself can be confusing due to its variable applications, a discussion and definition of 'culture' is necessary.

Culture is a term applied in different disciplines. In biology and medicine it refers to *'the laboratory growth of bacteria'* as well as to *'microorganisms'* and *'plant or animal cells in a nourishing fluid'* (Glazier 1998: 49/133). The social sciences define culture as *'the shared knowledge, beliefs and ways of living, built up by members of a group and transmitted from one generation to the next,'* and as *'a specific group sharing*

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[56] Koi-Akrofi, for example, refers to several researchers noting that *'about two-thirds (about 67%) of all mergers fail to achieve the desired results primarily because of the organizations'* [sic.] *apathy to the employees' reactions and interests'* (2016: 152).

such knowledge, beliefs and ways of living over a defined period of time' (ibid.: 390). Sociology understands culture to be *'values, beliefs, customs'* or the *'art of a specific society'* (ibid.: 395); or, as Geert Hofstede puts it, *'the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others'* (Hofstede Insights 2019). Despite these definitions deriving from different disciplines and implying different dimensions, a commonality can be found among them: Just as in biology cells are defined within a nourishing fluid, so are human beings defined to be within an outer realm of society. Culture, therefore captures everything that happens inside, outside and in mutual exchange between these individual elements and their surrounding[57].

It is important to note that for this research, 'culture' does not imply a reference to the arts of a particular society, nor does it refer to any distinct 'Kurdish', 'Arabic' or 'Islamic' culture. Instead, the term, as it is intended here, focuses on 'values', 'beliefs', 'customs' and 'shared knowledge' or 'patterns of behaviour'. This culture can be found at all different levels of society; in nations or regions as well as in organisations, political parties and even sports clubs. Thereby, these cultures are not mutually exclusive. They impact and influence each other, as can be seen in cross-border regions around the world or in the mix of national and organisational cultures colliding in one corporation (Cornelius 2007, Visser and van Dyk 2011, Rachman 2018). To focus this broad definition of culture even further, I take another step to delimitate the term. Although at times referring to wider social or political patterns of culture, the main focus of this dissertation rests on the *organisational culture* of UPF. It is therefore the terminology 'corporate culture'[58] that this thesis relates to the most.

'Corporate' or 'organisational culture' is widely defined and applied in business literature. Consequently, a holistic definition of this term does not exist. To capture the term nonetheless, I start by reviewing the history of the concept. According to Unterreitmeier (2004), the application of 'culture' in business literature today has its

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[57] Fitting to this holistic view of culture, the theoretical foundations of Sagmeister's tool 'culture map' are also based on the research of a psychologist (Clare Graves) and a biologist (Richard Dawkins) (2016: 13/38).

[58] For the research the more neutral term 'organisational culture' is chosen instead of 'corporate culture'. However, both concepts are understood in a synonymous fashion.

roots in organisational theory and in management research focused on comparing different (national) cultures. He and several others (Schmidt 2004, Ricken and Seidl 2010) point towards the Hawthorne experiments in Chicago (1924-1932)[59] as a starting point for organisational theory. These experiments switched the then-prevalent perspective of viewing an organisation like a machine to a realisation that 'human factors' (the sum of which constitutes the organisational culture) matter in designing and organising corporations. Since these beginnings in the 1920s and 1930s, the rise of culture in business literature is attributed to the study of comparative cultures in management research. Particularly the comparison between US and Japanese corporations in the 1980s[60] triggered intense research and a hype around organisational culture (Schmidt 2004, Gerds and Schewe 2014, O'Riordan 2015). More than academic literature, publications by consultants[61] took a lead in shaping the discussion and design of organisational-culture management. As a result, the literature on organisational culture is largely geared towards practical application. In addition, with research being mostly descriptive and based on individual case studies (Robbins et al. 2010), it is difficult to find any concurrent definitions, models, tools or characterisations (Unterreitmeier 2004). Nonetheless, a review of those definitions and models instructive to this thesis shall be undertaken[62]. In this process, I will also refer to different functions and selective characteristics of organisational culture[63].

Despite definitions of 'organisational' culture being very diverse - ranging from stress on mindsets (Hofstede 2019) to structures or shared actions (Schermerhorn et al.

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[59] A series of experiments, conducted at Western Electric in Hawthorne, found that productivity could be increased by considering and involving employees more proactively in corporate processes.

[60] Despite similar operations and technological parity, Japanese corporations seemed to have superior production capacities to the US; a conundrum which triggered intense research into possible differences.

[61] The bestsellers *'Corporate Cultures: The rites and rituals of organizational* [sic.] *life'* by Deal and Kennedy (1982) and *'In Search of Excellence'* by Peters and Waterman (1982) are often named as kickstarters to the hype (Schmidt 2004, Ricken and Seidl 2010).

[62] For an extensive review of previous literature see Schmidt (2004) and Unterreitmeier (2004).

[63] In organisational-culture literature, the differentiation between 'strong' and 'weak' cultures (O'Riordan 2015) as well as the specific role of leadership in establishing, cultivating and changing cultures (Schein 2004, Unterreitmeier 2004, Robbins et al. 2010, O'Riordan 2015) seem to play a bigger role. As these discussions lead too far away from the original focus, I omit these additional dimensions here.

2012) - there are several parallels which can be drawn. In an attempt to systematise the different views in literature, Unterreitmeier (2004), Kuhn (2010), and Ricken and Seidl (2010) develop a similar perspective. They observe that the field is divided between a functionalist (or 'objective', in Ricken and Seidl) and a subjectivist (or 'symbolic', in Kuhn) perspective. The difference between the two approaches is that the prior sees culture as one among several controllable variables (such as strategy or structure), while the latter equates culture with the organisation itself. In addition, Unterreitmeier argues that the functionalist perspective, needs to be divided into a system and a reflective approach. System-oriented functionalists, he explains, focus on visible cultural expressions. In contrast, those who apply a reflective approach include personal perceptions as well. Schmidt explains this tripartite distinction clearly by differentiating between three assumptions: *'corporations are culture', 'corporations have culture',* and *'corporations produce culture'* (2004: 39 [translation and highlights added by author]). Also Kuhn (2010) echoes the idea of three perspectives by identifying a distinct, third - so called '*dynamic*' - approach. This dynamic approach is said to combine the other two by viewing corporate culture as the organisation in and of itself as well as a controllable variable and tool that can be strategically managed to support organisational success. Since this dynamic view of organisational culture fits the intent and epistemological perspective of this dissertation best, this research fits into Kuhn's typology.

Whether culture is seen as a variable or as the organisation itself, most definitions also acknowledge that culture has both visible and invisible expressions. This duality is also reflected in prevalent models of studying (organisational) culture. Schein (2004), for example, builds his commonly used model along three layers, out of which the first is visible, the second is blurry and the third is invisible. Fittingly, Sagmeister (2016) and Kuhn (2010) put Schein's layers in context with the metaphor of an iceberg, which demonstrates a similar phenomenon of the first third being above the water, the second being only slightly recognisable beneath the surface and the last third being invisible to any casual observer. In comparison, Johnson (1988/1992) identifies six areas that constitute an organisation's 'paradigm', including rituals and routines, control systems, structures of organisation and power, as well as symbols and stories. Yet, even in this model, which provides a tangible roadmap to identifying culture, it is recognised that asking direct questions about culture or paradigms is not possible.

Instead, the uncovering of organisational cultures needs to dissect the 'invisible' (i.e., values) between the lines of 'visible' expressions (i.e., symbols, stories, structures).

Following this differentiation between visible and invisible parts of culture, definitions of organisational culture, such as '*the way we do things here*' (Trompenaars and Prud'homme van Reine 2004: 37), '*a system of unwritten rules*' (ibid.) or a '*system of values, beliefs, assumptions*' (Miller and Fernandes 2009: 1) become understandable. Also the definitions of organisational culture as '*a system of shared meaning*' (Robbins et al. 2010: 457), '*a system or shared action*' (Schermerhorn et al. 2012: 348) and '*the expectation staff has about what is normal and acceptable*' (O'Riordan 2015: 15) suddenly come together despite focusing on different aspects of culture. However, with culture being so holistic and diverse, it is difficult to talk about culture. For this dilemma, Stratford's (2015) definition provides a solution. By simplifying complexity, he presents culture as a triangle between purpose, values and behaviours. This triangular definition, while reductionist in its cause-and-effect perception, is very useful. It is this triangle that I shall therefore primarily apply.

Having established a first definition on the basis of a historic review of the concept and a search for commonalities in literature, I now turn towards effect and functions of (organisational) cultures. Previous research has demonstrated that culture affects the styles of decision making and leadership as well as the ability to change, the willingness to work together and the personal definitions of 'success' (Miller and Fernandes 2009). It will be shown throughout this dissertation that all of these factors are relevant when considering military merging. These effects also connect to the functions organisational culture is said to fulfil. Schmidt (2004) notes that there seems to be a relatively wide agreement on the functions of culture in literature. It is observed to have a positive impact on performance and quality (Schmidt 2004, Unterreitmeier 2004, Johnson 2007, Schermerhorn et al. 2012, O'Riordan 2015), to create stability (Robbins et al. 2010, Schermerhorn et al. 2012) as well as to create identity, commitment and meaning in an organisation (Schmidt 2004, Unterreitmeier 2004, Robbins et al. 2010). Moreover, Robbins et al. (2010) show that culture has a boundary-defining role, creating a clear distinction between 'us' and 'them', and Schmidt (2004) adds the positive effect that culture reduces complexity by providing orientation for

decision making. Robbins et al. (2010) even suggest that by understanding prevalent organisational cultures, behaviours of individuals, units and the wider organisation can be predicted. For these reasons, it is important to understand, study and manage organisational culture in any human context - including the armed forces.

To underline the value of culture even further *and* to critically test the applicability for the armed forces once more, I wish to reference a recent study by O'Riordan (2015) which looks at organisational culture in a public-sector context. In her research paper, O'Riordan finds that even though public service is different from the private sector in regard to their objectives and operating environment, organisational culture and values matter greatly also in the public sector to improve organisation, influence behaviour and achieve objectives. Due to the constraints posed by being linked to political authority, O'Riordan (2015) suggests that culture change might be more difficult to achieve in public organisations than in private ones. This suggestion provides helpful insight to the study of merging UPF. Since the military merger in KRI is a politicised topic and as the political parties are heavily involved in the ministry, the merger and even in the organisational culture of UPF, O'Riordan's findings suggest that a slow development in PMI might not be due to the lack of ability but rather due to political constraints. As previously shown in the review of a debate in military-merging literature - whether failed mergers are a question of politics or of 'engineering', this research takes a stance in the middle, arguing that both factors need to be present, because the absence of one risks the sustainability and success of unification.

Having provided a definition and reviewed the functions as well as a first finding for organisational culture in public sectors, three more notes on culture are relevant. Firstly, cultures develop automatically (Schein 2004, Sagmeister 2016). Be it in society or in organisations, culture develops by people interacting through passive processes of *'imitation', 'variation'* and *'selection'* (Sagmeister 2016: 33). These different values and behaviours, that interact with each other, eventually form a common culture. This common culture is then *that* which just feels 'natural'. Whenever habits and norms become institutionalised, they are no longer questioned. Instead, they provide routine and security to the organisation. At this point, culture is the deciding factor for how structures are actually lived. They become the reference point for

judgement, decisions and everyday behaviour. Secondly, there can be several cultures in one organisation (Hofstede 1998, Schmidt 2004, Schermerhorn et al. 2012). These different cultures can be at different levels of hierarchy, in different local business branches or within particular segments of the organisation (Robbins et al. 2010, Sagmeister 2016). They can constitute subcultures or countercultures, depending on their orientation towards the dominant organisational culture (Schermerhorn et al. 2012). Finally, as we have seen before, organisational culture consists of visible and invisible factors. While 'visible' traces can be found in an organisation's structure, policies and symbolism, the dominant thought of business-management literature suggests that it is actually the 'invisible' parts which need to be understood to influence behaviours. Based on Schein's (2004) original proposition of the three layer model, the invisible two thirds of culture are considered more relevant than those which are visible. As a result, cultures are notoriously hard to 'grasp'[64]. O'Riordan puts it distinctly: '*organisational culture is difficult to identify ... because it encompasses taken for granted values, underlying assumptions, expectations, collective memories and definitions*' (2015: 6). With culture being often 'implicit', recognising it (particularly from *within* the culture) as well as changing it is difficult (Miller and Fernandes 2009). Nevertheless, an entire body of literature is dedicated to the study of culture change - including countless tools to measure, grasp and visualise organisational culture. Both of these aspects shall be visited in the next parts.

2.2.3. Changing cultures

To consider cultural change, it does not initially matter whether the change is triggered by a merger or by a general reform effort[65]. The bigger difference derives from whether or not organisational culture is taken into consideration in the process. To illustrate this point, Sagmeister (2016) provides a tangible example: Why, he asks, does it happen that after a high-level board meeting, in which everyone enthusiastically endorsed a roadmap for change, good intentions are soon lost and 'business as usual' continues? The reason is culture. He further underlines this point by demonstrating that decisions for change which are made without considering prevalent organisational cultures can be

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[64] Schein (2004) himself describes culture to be an abstraction and to be dynamic; neither of which makes culture tangible or 'visible'.

[65] As I will show, in the Kurdish case, both of these changes are interlinked with each other.

so far removed from reality as to discourage any change at all. In contrast, change processes which do take 'culture' into account start by either identifying prevalent cultural patterns (O'Riordan 2015, Stafford 2015, Gelfand et al. 2018) or by inviting participation for defining the goals of change (Robbins et al. 2010, Stafford 2015)[66]. Based on the review of prevalent and future-ideal cultures, they are capable to identify those few areas for change which can provide the most impact. Thus, as Sagmeister (2016) distinctly puts it, they conduct their decision making with 'open eyes' rather than being blind to the possible kick-backs of organisational culture (i.e., people not working along the new (unified) structures). In this process, they also know to recognise and capitalise on strengths of current cultural patterns. This eases the change processes and decreases internal resistance (O'Riordan 2015, Sagmeister 2016). With these insights, Henman (2018) suggests that culture provides both the general direction and a specific criteria for decision making.

In culture-change literature, many practical steps are suggested to induce change effectively and sustainably. For this research, a detailed review of consultancy-based literature is not necessary. At a more general level, Schmidt (2004) points out that literature is divided between those who consider culture as a variable which can be precisely targeted and applied to induce the intended changes (he calls them 'interventionists'), on the one hand, and those who insist that culture is resilient to any form of change (he calls them 'culturalists'), on the other hand. As has been stated before, I apply a dynamic approach in the middle of both propositions. Organisational culture, I argue, can neither be targeted with the certainty that comes from pressing a key on the piano to receive a certain sound, nor can it be ignored, assuming that it is merely an 'invisible membrane' through which some efforts of change are turned into dust. Instead, organisational culture can *and* needs to be used to inform decision making and to trigger a change in behavioural patterns. At the same time, it cannot come as a surprise when a targeted effort informed by organisational culture does not yield the expected effects every time. After all, social organisations are complex. And complexity is only increased by change processes.

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[66] The difference between mergers and general reform processes within organisations is that in the first the analysis of prevalent cultures needs be undertaken for two cultures (for both entities who are about to merge), in order to identify their compatibility as well as their mutual strength and weaknesses.

To illustrate the nature and effects of this 'complexity', I want to contrast it to the term 'complicated' in a metaphorical example I was once provided with by Philippe Narval (private conversation, 2018). Contrasting the two terms, which are often used as synonyms, he started by explaining that building an airplane is *complicated*. There are countless nuts and bolts that need to be applied in perfect precision in order to create a bird of steel. The task is complicated because many parts and a high level of skill are involved. Yet, it remains manageable and fairly predictable. In contrast, *complexity* appears when one brings a football to a children's party. Even advanced mathematics cannot calculate what will happen once the ball is thrown into the group. (However, any parents' intuition to put the valuable vase out of sight is probably a well advised reaction.) In comparison, therefore, a complex task is similar to a complicated one in the amount of factors present in both. At the same time, they are fundamentally different from the manageability and predictability of the options that derive from the surplus of factors and all their available combinations.

When reviewing consultancy literature of M&A and PMI, suggestions are often presented as though merging corporations is like building an airplane (like Schmidt's 'interventionists'). I oppose this perspective and insist that quite the contrary is the case. Merging and reforming organisational cultures is complex. Therefore it cannot come as a surprise, when actions or tasks lead to a different, or the opposite result than expected (or to no result at all). However, this is not to say that organisational culture should be disregarded altogether (hence, I also reject the stance of Schmidt's 'culturalists'). In this thesis, I stand in line with Henman (2018) to suggest that the analysis of organisational culture provides a valuable guide to decision making in change processes and that the proactive management of such culture is necessary to trigger sustainable change in behaviours. Moreover, as we have seen, for the particular change that occurs in mergers, PMI literature demonstrates that overlooking organisational culture can damage even the most solid merger process (Epstein 2004, Bradt 2015)[67]. Therefore,

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[67] Despite this importance culture is often overlooked. This can derive from a lack of awareness that culture is a factor or from a lack of understanding or competence on how to plan and design organisational culture. It may also just be a matter of will. Stafford (2015) and Henman (2018) note that *'most leaders do not know their own culture'*.

managing cultures ought to be considered for any merger or reform process - including the one in UPF.

Previous research has attempted to develop theories, models and tools that can help manage the complexity of changing cultures. Tools, in particular, are created to try and make culture tangible or 'visible'[68]. Unterreitmeier (2004), for example, reviews more than twenty of such tools before creating his own mathematical model to help calculate differences between organisational cultures. Amidst this wide array of tools and models, Kuhn (2010) notes that holistic approaches for PMI are still lacking. The same is true for culture change in general[69]. Therefore, a pragmatic approach has been applied. After realising that military-merging literature does not yet provide answers to my questions regarding sustainability of UPF merger, I turned towards M&A literature for support. There, I found that organisational culture is a main factor in success and failures for corporate mergers. Given that the concept 'organisational culture' overlapped with the intentions of my research to grasp unification 'beneath the structure', including 'human factors' in the measurement and judgement of military mergers, I chose to add this concept to my approach. Viewing military unification from a post-merger, organisational-culture perspective turned out to assist in theorising, as well as in visualising, the social constructs of 'military unity'. When realising that the idea(l) and daily experience of military unity could be visualised along the purpose, values and patterns of behaviour they express, I reviewed several tools that conceptualise cultural patterns of organisations. The best fit I found was Simon Sagmeister's (2016) 'culture map'. I present this tool in the next section.

2.2.4. Analysing and designing organisational culture

As previously examined, the true challenge with culture is to make it tangible. Given that integration processes require active culture management, at the same time as culture itself is hard to grasp, there needs to be a tool to make culture palpable. This was the goal, and I believe success, of Simon Sagmeister, who built a simple, practical and

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[68] For an extensive review of different tools that have been applied to culture measurement and change, see Unterreitmeier (2004) as well as Schmidt (2004) and Ricken and Seidl (2010).

[69] In addition, I realised that many tools and templates which are actually applied in practise are not commonly shared, because they are the intellectual property of consultancies who make a living of keeping their particular 'formula of success' a secret.

widely usable tool: the 'culture map'. Created *'on the shoulder of giants'* (2016: 13) of Clare Grave's (1974) 'open system theory of values' as well as all the scholars who developed his work further, including Don Beck and Christopher Cowan's (1996) 'spiral dynamics' and Ken Wilber's (2001) 'theory of integrality', Sagmeister developed an easily employable tool that makes culture visible. In addition, his tool provides an easy translation for possible action and implication in the future. This tool's theoretical background and practical applicability fits well with both the constructivist paradigm and the practice-oriented intention of this dissertation.

Introducing Sagmeister's culture map[70]

Sagmeister designed the culture map in the context of a theory he calls 'business culture design'. As the name suggests, culture, in his context, is used exclusively in a 'business' sense of the word (i.e., corporate or organisational culture). It also refers to the active 'design' and management of culture. This management is not just relevant in mergers or integrations. It can be applied in all areas of reform. In these moments of change or development, he notes, culture is often simply accepted as an 'unknown' in the equation. Its effects are marvelled about but rarely tackled proactively. Along countless examples, he shows how the best intentions, the most diligent strategies and the best project plans can disappear quickly in day-to-day work rhythms. (This is where the previously quoted statement that culture 'eats' both strategy *and* structure comes in.)

Therefore, instead of trying to reform an organisation 'blindly' on these matters, he claims that cultural patterns need to be made visible. The process of making patterns tangible and then using this awareness to actively manage and guide organisational cultures, is what he calls 'business culture design'. Through this process, strategic and operational decisions can be applied more effectively as they directly reach the root of the cause. To further explain the extent and degree of management, he compares 'business culture design' to attending to a garden or a field. Nature grows, whether you do something about it or not. Yet, professional garden designers or farmers know, if nature is guided, it will grow neatly and sustainably. Therefore, gardeners first design

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[70] Note that all information on Sagmeister's 'business culture design' and 'culture map' refer to the same source: *Sagmeister (2016)* [translated from German by author]. Therefore, I forego additional referencing in the upcoming text (except for direct quotations and any work by another author).

their garden (the ideal of unity, for example) and then oversee the growing process, deciding selectively when to step in and when to let nature grow by itself. Like in a garden, Sagmeister suggests, an organisation's leadership can actively guide which cultural patterns should grow and which should be weeded out in their organisation.

To help identify the current shape of this garden, he designed the 'culture map'. Just like the theoretical background that he bases this tool on, the culture map differentiates between seven types of cultural patterns (he calls them 'fields of culture'). These seven patterns developed along the evolution of society. As societies and tasks grew more complex, new cultural patterns developed to tackle the challenges. In the map, the representation of these fields (in seven colours) occurs in a linear fashion. Just like Clare Graves, the culture map reflects these seven stages without evaluation: the 'higher' pattern is not necessarily better or worse than the 'lower' field; it simply addresses a different task and has different strengths and weaknesses.

Instead of 'higher' and 'lower' ranking, a different distinction is made between these seven fields of culture. In the map, the cultures are represented in a zigzag pattern from right to left. On the one side, represented towards the right side, are culture clusters (or fields) that stem from a predominantly 'collectivistic' value basis. On the other side, to the left, 'individualist' values are prevalent. In this zigzag, the seven fields are differentiated between four colours to the right ('violet', 'blue', 'green' and 'aqua') and three colours to the left ('red', 'orange' and 'yellow'). Based on the collectivist values in all cultural clusters to the right, the group tends to count more than the individual. In addition, an overall stabilising trend is seen in these cultures. In contrast, the left side is dominated by individualism and dynamism. In these cultures, the will to change is high, as is the individual's priority over the group.

All seven cultural clusters will be described in further depth in the next section. Still worth mentioning at this point, as an overall pattern to all fields, is that all cultures can come in positive (or as Sagmeister calls them 'healthy') and negative ('unhealthy') versions. This is easiest explained in an example: Imagine a company's culture which is dominated by values of community and a strong sense of identity. This company is family owned for generations and leadership is still hierarchical and centralised.

Everyone knows their place and everyone is happy to be a part of this '(corporate) family'. The positive dimensions of this culture are the strong identity and sense of belonging. However, this culture can take a negative turn when loyalty turns into nepotism. Also in this distinction, 'positive' and 'negative' are not absolute evaluations. Judgement is *relative,* depending on which behaviours and patterns are helpful or disruptive for the organisation in their current situation[71]. Moreover, in this relative judgement, all seven cultural patterns are considered. As Sagmeister stresses, every organisation is composed of all seven cultural fields at the same time. Consequently, analysing cultural patterns is not a question of 'having' or 'not having' a certain culture but rather a question of degree and (relative) size[72]. Therefore, it is the distribution of all seven fields of culture which shows the organisational culture.

Seven fields of culture

As mentioned, Sagmeister attributes one colour to each field of culture. This colourisation makes an analysis easier to talk about. Rather than needing to specify every time which aspect, dimension or nuance is addressed, a simple reference to the colour 'yellow' or 'blue' already gives significant insight into the referenced character of values, cultures and behaviours. In order for this colour-referencing to work, a description of all colours and their related cultural patterns is necessary. I shall proceed to do so before discussing the implications and relevance of these fields of culture and their relationship to one another.

Violet (collective values): The organisation functions like a tribe. Leadership is centralised, personalised and inheritable. An omnipotent leader oversees the organisation like a family; (s)he is the sole decision maker and (s)he is infallible. Every day, (s)he makes sure to be physically present in the organisation and employees cherish this presence. Daily work is predominantly governed by informal laws; most employees have been a part of the organisation for so long that formal structures and rules are hardly necessary. Should there be a conflict, the leader solves it. This culture provides

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[71] It depends on the environment and the organisation's own goals which cultural patterns are to be seen as valuable and which ones are not.

[72] The more strongly represented a cultural pattern is in the organisation, the bigger the size of the culture's colour code on the map.

security and identity. Loyalty and trust in the 'family' as well as a stark differentiation to others characterise violet cultures. Attacks on this family result in retaliation, and not adhering to the internal values is considered betrayal.

Red (individualistic values): 'The world is a jungle and only the strongest survive,' is the motto along which red cultures function. The leader is (s)he who is currently strongest; until someone else challenges the reign. Laws are based on the 'might-makes-right' principle. Decision making is impulsive, risks are willingly taken and losses are accepted as part of the game. Formal and informal rules and structures are freely broken. Conflicts are loud and aggressive; they are also encouraged. Red cultures provide courage and quick decision making. They get things done before others even dare to get moving.

Blue (collective values): The organisation functions like a clock. Every little wheel is connected to another and only together, in a strictly regulated process, in which each and everyone has a clearly defined role, the organisation functions. Leadership is based on rules and processes, as is everything else. Power is allocated by position, not by personality or experience. All laws are written and clearly defined. Structures, rules and a tight organigram govern everything. Also conflict is solved along rules and procedures. This culture provides continuity and reliability. Work is achieved by a strong sense of duty, by a constant improvement of processes and by a strict focus on quality. Division of labour is fundamental and all processes are transparent.

Orange (individualistic values): Pragmatism is the rule of the game. A strong focus on success, competition and performance characterises orange cultures. Work is project-based. The person responsible for the outcome of a project leads. In decision making pragmatism trumps principles. Laws and rules are seen as suggestions of behaviour. A pragmatic approach dictates how far one may bend the rules. Conflicts are solved pragmatically too. The culture embraces challenges and is quick to find solutions. A strong focus on individual success drives orange cultures. Status symbols are often attributed a high value. In work, they favour quick wins and they put goals first.

Green (collective values): Harmony, consensus and the individual human being are at the centre of green cultures. Everybody is a friend in green cultures. And among friends there is no hierarchy. Leadership is interpreted as coaching and assisting colleagues. Decision making is undertaken only by consensus. Laws are organised following everyone's input, wishes and personal situation. Structures and formal rules are hardly necessary. Everyone has a strong sense of self-responsibility. Failures are never attributed to one person; everything is a team effort. Sharing and being part of the community is more important than winning and owning. Conflicts are generally avoided, though. Harmony is more important. Only constructive feedback is allowed; and it is provided freely to everyone, including the leader.

Yellow (individualistic values): Knowledge, logic and reason dominate this culture. Individuals are free spirits who seek the root cause to every event, topic or subject. They question everything, dig for data and love the freedom of thought. Authority is based on competence. Consequently, leadership is provided by the most intelligent and there is a different leader per topic. Decisions are made on the basis of extensive data and research. Laws and structures are hardly necessary. Conflicts are solved by logical arguments. The culture cherishes curiosity and sober mindsets. Information is shared widely.

Aqua (collective values): Aqua organisations function like an organism. *'When you cut an elephant in two,'* according to the logic of organisms, *'you do not get two elephants'* (Sagmeister 2016: 144). An organism only functions as a whole. The entire world is seen as such a big 'whole' too. This culture's primary strength is to combine and coordinate all other cultures, putting their strengths to work towards a higher goal. Aqua provides vision and mission. This culture always thinks holistically, including internal and external processes and actors, orienting them all towards a higher purpose. Organisations and teams develop and dissolve depending on different tasks and projects serving this goal. Everything is based on self-organisation. Just like in the body - *'if the brain were to start micromanaging the entire body, the entire organism would soon collapse'* (Sagmeister 2016: 149).

Having reviewed each of the seven fields of culture, I now discuss their implications and relevance. To do so, I start with reflecting on the different strengths and weaknesses of each culture. In a second step, I show how the different fields tend to interpret the same issue in different ways. Finally, I deduct three conclusions: different cultures view reality differently, (therefore) they can clash when working together, and there is not necessarily just one cultural pattern per organisation.

As noted before, each culture has strengths and weaknesses (or 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' dimensions). While 'violet', for example, provides a strong identity, the idea of leaders being infallible can fail an entire organisation, too strong adherence to one leader can develop into nepotism and corruption, and the strong risk aversion in this culture can also prevent necessary changes from being undertaken. In 'red' cultures, their strength lies in courage and decisive action. However, too much 'red' can also lead to chaos, as the focus on short-sighted wins can overlook long-term consequences. Moreover, when agreements count for nothing, no grounds for trust are provided either. 'Blue' cultures are reliable and predictable and therefore provide a strong basis of trust. They can however, also become stiff and hampered in their work whenever bureaucracy becomes too extensive. In 'orange' cultures there is just a fine line between pragmatism and opportunism and too much focus on quick wins can easily overlook synergies from slower progress or wider cooperation. In contrast, 'green' cultures are masters of cooperation. However, their high level of harmony and cooperation can create a dangerous comfort zone and due to the lengthy process of finding consensus, they might react too late to changes in their environment. Similarly, 'yellow's' drive for knowledge can easily be lost in the details and fail to put theoretical knowledge into practical action, and also 'aqua' can sometimes overcomplicate even simple things. In addition, due to their focus on a future goal they might sometimes overlook the daily struggles of their workers.

What this selection of seven fields and their positive and negative versions show well is how, depending on the culture, the perception and the way one approaches something can be very different. To provide one example, I shall observe the different cultures' perception of rules: In 'violet' cultures, the leader makes the rules. In 'red', rules are freely broken and defined by the strongest. In 'blue', obeying rules is the

highest precept. 'Orange' is willing to bend rules but not to break them. 'Green' collectively agrees on rules, which are then also followed, since everyone had freely consented. 'Yellow' creates rules based on the best facts available and then changes whenever better data proves otherwise. And 'aqua' acknowledges that one rule is not enough; it needs many, depending on the goal, and they need to be flexible to adapt to a changing environment.

Three deductions can be taken from this comparison. One, there are no right or wrong ways of doing something. There are just different cultures and their different ways of perceiving and judging tasks and behaviours. Two, from the comparison it becomes apparent how different cultures might clash in day-to-day cooperation. A 'green' team might gang up against a 'red' perpetrator, who is trying to upset their internal harmony by raising tough questions and making decisions by him(her)self, just as an 'orange' worker would likely be overwhelmed by a 'blue' working corset. Three, even within one organisation, it might be necessary for different teams to have different 'colour' compositions. For example, it is conceivable that MoP is dominated by 'blue' and 'aqua' structures, while brigades might add some 'violet' and 'orange' to a 'blue' basis. Similarly, individual task forces might be best set up by 'red' and 'orange', yet intelligence units fare better with a combination of 'orange' and 'yellow' attitudes.

With the help of this 'culture map', I will visualise unified peshmerga's expressions on their idea(l) of military unity and their daily experience of unification in Chapter 6. For now, I conclude this literature review and move to taking a closer look at the unique case study. In this literature review, it has been shown that the young field of military merging, while already providing some answers to different variables and questions, does not yet answer this research's quest to understand what could make a merger between formerly hostile partisan forces sustainable. Furthermore, this chapter has underlined the value of applying an interdisciplinary approach. There are several valuable lessons which can be drawn from PMI theory as well as its practical application in the business context. In all of them, PMI literature demonstrates that mergers are not just structural matters but they always include *groups of people with their own personalities, ambitions, behaviours and ways of working'* (McMorris 2015). These people, 'human factors' and group dynamics need to be accounted for. A

leadership decision to include organisational culture as a variable[73], a diagnosis of prevalent cultures and a definition of the ideal future set up (Stafford 2015) are identified as first necessary steps in this direction.

It is at this point that the present research comes in. For a UPF merger, I start at the point *after* the structural unification of formerly hostile forces. In other words, I study the post-merger integration of armed forces (something, which to my knowledge has not been done before). In this PMI, I focus on the factor 'organisational culture', for it is underlined in both M&A and PMI literature to be a central variable for the success and failure of mergers. In addition, culture is also a still highly under-researched factor for the armed forces in general and for merging formerly hostile forces in particular. By applying a focus on organisational culture and by studying this case from a social-constructivist paradigm, I find that in order to answer the question of sustainability in military mergers, the concept of 'military unity' needs to be better understood. Therefore, my research led me to propose a first theory on how to conceptualise military unity. Since this theory has been developed on the basis of findings from a unique case study, I now proceed by taking a closer look at this case.

Chapter 3: Case study

The Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI) and a focus on the unified peshmerga forces (UPF) was chosen along factors of coincidence and rationale. It was certainly a coincidence that I learned about the KRI at Lund university. It was also a coincidence that upon my first visit to the region, ISIS happened to take over Mosul. This event not only gave my research a new twist[74] but it also provided my topic with unforeseen attention. As I had already conducted research in the area before, it also made sense to expand my previous knowledge (and use my existing networks) for a PhD.

Beyond mere coincidence, UPF was deliberately chosen as a case study. The applied reasoning was twofold. Firstly, the KRI is an area which is easily accessible and

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[73] Gelfand et al. (2018) suggest putting these goals into a cultural-integration plan.

[74] I originally intended to study UPF from a socio-political perspective. The war with ISIS shifted my attention to the armed forces.

friendly to international researchers. It therefore provides a surprisingly safe area for fieldwork despite the ongoing war with ISIS and general instability in the region. Secondly, the war with ISIS equipped me with firsthand experience and observations of the coordination and cooperation of multiple armed forces in the region. This unique insight provides a depth of insight which not only enables me to build rapport with soldiers but also allows me to substantiate the deliberate delineations and choices taken in the course of this research.

In order to provide a context for the reader, for both the KRI and UPF, I dedicate this chapter to the case study. To present the details of the case, two approaches are taken: a literature review and a presentation of findings from fieldwork. In this chapter, previous research, 'context interviews' as well as findings from 'core' data in the area 'status quo' and 'future' are summarised. The goal of this chapter is to provide a holistic insight into the history of the KRI, the background of UPF and the previous and ongoing armed-forces unification in the region.

To do so, I start by continuing the historic review on KRI, which already commenced in the introduction. Contrary to the introduction, I sketch the most recent history (from 2014 onwards) here. In addition, I discuss the current (as of early 2019) status quo of the region. In combining literature and data, I provide an overview about the context in which this research has taken place. In a second part, I turn towards the armed forces - the actual object of study. Starting with a definition of 'peshmerga', I cover the first (1992-1994) and second (2010-2017) unification attempt with the help of both literature and data. I then provide an outlook for the third unification (since 2018), based on the information provided in my core and context interviews regarding the future of UPF. This final section covers hopes, wishes and solutions of unified soldiers as well as information about the reform programme, which is undertaken with international assistance.

3.1. The most recent history of KRI (2014-2019)

After ISIS took control of Mosul on 10 June 2014, all forces of the Kurdish security sector were stationed along the frontlines: peshmerga - unified as well as PUK/70 and KDP/80, special forces (*Parastin* and *Zanyari*), the police force, *Assayish* and *Zerevani*.

Even Kurdish forces from neighbouring regions - including PKK, PJAK and others (personal observations and interviews, 2014) - manned the frontlines. Within days, also the international coalition fighting ISIS in Syria mobilised to fight in Iraq[75]. While an exchange between Kurdish and international forces is likely to have existed from the beginning, the contact intensified in August, when ISIS started moving against Erbil and international air strikes helped repel the attack.

In addition to the airstrikes providing cover to Kurdish ground forces, military aid also reached KRI. In this context, due to political and legal difficulties in delivering weaponry to a federal region[76], a new focus on UPF and MoP developed. This prioritisation derived particularly from the United States[77]. Seeing as delivering weapons to sub-state, political armed forces is declined by US Congress, weapons were exclusively provided to non-partisan forces (i.e., UPF) subsumed under a democratically elected government (i.e., MoP and KRG). The same rule applied to other military assistance such as training, salaries and reform[78]. As a result, by August 2014, regional president Masoud Barzani ordered MoP to subsume all forces under UPF within six months (Mahmoud 2014). This short timeline could not be met by MoP, though[79]. The failure of complete merger notwithstanding, the exclusive focus on MoP impacted UPF. Overnight, MoP was turned into the exclusive funnel for international aid and, consequentially, political parties grew increasingly interested in dominating this ministry[80]. Thus, while international pressure certainly strengthened unified institutions,

[75] E.g. Operation Inherent Resolve was initiated by the US government on 15 June 2014.

[76] For an extensive discussion on peshmerga receiving military aid from an international-law perspective, see Smith (2018).

[77] Note that also the US position is divided between Pentagon, State Department and White House (context interview, 2019).

[78] According to interviewees, the coalition fighting ISIS, and particularly European forces, seem to have had a more pragmatic approach than the forces delivering military aid to KRI. Several accounts noted instances in which international armed forces visited, assisted and coordinated with KDP/80 and PUK/70 and other Kurdish security forces as well.

[79] Only two additional unified brigades were created, paid, trained and equipped by the United States (Salih 2015).

[80] Conversations during my visits in 2015 and 2016 were dominated by speculations and mutual accusations between political parties instrumentalising MoP to direct weapons towards their own forces.

it also made them more interesting for the parties, who subliminally spun their networks of influence behind a unified facade - thereby making it ever more divided[81].

Besides security challenges, also internal political tensions continued to plague KRI. Particularly in 2015 the situation escalated with the three-party government of KDP, PUK and Gorran effectively breaking down and a KDP-dominated governance taking over. The events started unfolding in June that year. Still struggling over the amended presidential law, which allowed Masud Barzani to extend his reign until 19 August 2015, Gorran initiated a proposal to change the governmental system from presidential to parliamentarian (Schneckener et al. 2018). PUK and other parties joined this motion, increasing the pressure on KDP. With negotiations failing in October, and demonstrations escalating in Qala Diza, KDP held Gorran responsible for the instability and dismissed them from government. On 12 October 2015, KDP/80 forces physically hindered the speaker of parliament and other Gorran members from entering Erbil and within days, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani reallocated the dismissed offices (the ministries of finance, religious affairs, peshmerga and trade) to existing KDP members of the Cabinet (Reuters 2015). Not surprisingly, as Schneckener et al. (2018) note, these actions made PUK and Gorran move closer together. In May 2016, they signed an agreement for a strategic alliance (Salih 2016)[82].

The next important episodes in recent history, which are important to consider, are the independence referendum on 25 September 2017 and the separation of UPF on 16 October 2017. First notions of a referendum were already voiced by Masoud Barzani in 2014 (The Guardian 2014, Caryl 2015), yet a call to prepare for a referendum was not

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[81] To see different forms of how political parties ensured their control over unified units, refer to Chapter 5, 'political (party) culture'. One concrete example during the war with ISIS can be seen in the organisation of the frontline: The 1000 km long frontline was divided into eight sectors. Four covered the north-western border (of the 'yellow' zone) and four the south-western border (of the 'green' zone). One leader was appointed per sector and he was in control of all security forces in his region. Exclusively, all eight section leaders were appointed by the respective political party in each zone. The MoP had no say on these appointments (interview with Minister Mustafa Said Qadir, 2014).

[82] The alliance was not long-lived though, since both of the parties' leaders died in the following year; Nashirwan Mustafa (Gorran, May 2017), Jalal Talabani (PUK, October 2017). Gorran was more impacted than PUK, though. Since Jalal Talabani had had a stroke in 2012, the PUK had already developed 'alternative' ruling structures. In Gorran, the death of Nashirwan Mustafa was visible in the following 2018 elections: Gorran only achieved half the seats from the previous election (12).

made until June 2017. After the referendum was held[83] and 92 per cent voted for independence (Rudaw 2017), reactions from Baghdad and the surrounding neighbourhood were harsh. International borders to the region were closed by Turkey and Iran. Baghdad suspended international flights, blocked landlines and initiated an economic embargo. Amidst this difficult situation, the founder and figurehead of PUK, Jalal Talabani, died on 3 October. After his death, the exact sequence and timeline of events can only be speculated about. What seems to be known is that several leading PUK figures surrounding the Talabani family signed a deal with Baghdad to withdraw peacefully from the disputed territories, including the oil-rich city and nationalistic icon of Kirkuk[84]. By 14 October, the Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider Al-Abadi, issued a 24-hour warning to the Kurdish region, announcing an attack to retake the disputed territories. After extending the warning for another 24 hours, the attack commenced early on 16 October 2017. As a consequence, eight unified brigades separated.

While different storylines regarding 16 October will be presented in Chapter 5, I will attempt to present a timeline of the events, based on accounts provided in interviews, here. Already before 16 October tensions were rising. Rumours of several high-level meetings between different sides to the conflict - KDP, PUK, PMU and ISF, as well as news of units fortifying their strongholds or strategically relocating their forces, circulated among unified soldiers. Most of them remained optimistic; attributing the low likelihood of a confrontation to previous cooperation between peshmerga and ISF in Mosul, to a low appetite for war after fighting ISIS for three years, and to a belief that coalition forces would not allow a war between ISF and peshmerga. Nonetheless, fighting in Kirkuk started close to midnight on 15 October (Rozhbayane 2018). Rumours about PUK/70 forces having received an order to retreat are said to have appeared at the same time as the first mortar shelling. Indeed, by 4 a.m., the heavy artillery unit of PUK/70 had retreated from Tal Award (ibid.). Moreover, several strategic areas along Tikrit road are reported to have been abandoned, providing PMU

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[83] It was a particular point of contention that the referendum was held not just among KRI governorates but also among all disputed territories under Kurdish rule and protection at that moment.

[84] Note that opinions in PUK were not uniform. Most prominently, Kosrat Rasul - a politburo member and famous military commander, who also led the Kirkuk frontline section during the war with ISIS - publicly resisted the deal. Consequently, his forces were instructed *not* to retreat on 16 October.

and ISF forces an easy entrance to Kirkuk and an opportunity to encircle unified brigades stationed on Baghdad and Hawija roads. Shortly after PUK/70, 70/UP are said to have commenced a retreat as well. According to local accounts, the Kurdish population of Kirkuk even burned tires in the streets, trying to keep the soldiers from retreating. As one soldier recalls: '*[A]fter the big withdraw[al] ... the controls is [lost]. You know, when you lose the control of the military it will be like ... sheep on the open field. ... You can never control it. ... Even civilian people, they tried to control them. But, no one can.*' With PUK/70 and UP/70 forces gone, KDP even ordered *Assayish* towards the frontline. Yet, the reinforcement could not keep soldiers from defecting. Map 4 demonstrates the territorial impact of the PUK/70-UP/70 retreat on 16 October[85].
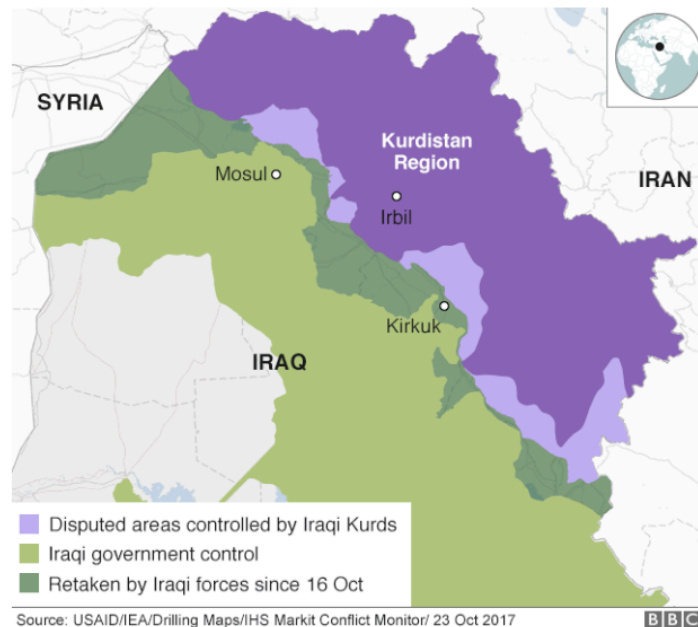
Map 4: Territory retaken by Iraqi forces on 16 October 2017 (Source: BBC 2017)

In these events of October 2017, one particularly fascinating dimension was identified by unified soldiers: the connection between rumours and private mobile phones. In any 'fog of war' it is hard to distinguish between facts and rumours[86]. This is particularly true in peshmerga forces where the main line of communication remains the personal

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[85] Despite the wider territorial implications of the PUK/70-UP/70 retreat, public outrage over the October events focuses on the territorial loss of Kirkuk.

[86] In the KRI, rumours develop particularly easily, because a monopoly of information does not exist. Major TV, radio and print news channels are owned by political parties or individual party members. These different media outlets not only report from a particular party perspective, but, due to a lack of journalistic professionalism and an overall speed of news generation, they also sometimes create actual rumours.

phone (usually a smartphone). Because rumours spread more easily via mobile phones (through websites, social media and personal messages) than via institutionally filtered information, they can quickly impact an entire frontline's fighting spirit. Examples of such rumours, which were reported to having impacted unified soldiers' morale on 16 October, were an attack on the regional president, the death of frontline-section leader Kosrat Rasul and the news of Iraqi forces having had reached Peshawar (a point several kilometres *behind* UPF lines). None of this news turned out to be true. But at the moment of fighting, it brought more and more soldiers to the point of retreat. *'They just made a phone call and left,'* one interviewee recalled[87].

Observing this phenomenon, three conclusions can be drawn as to the consequences that develop for UPF unity if every soldier has a private phone. Firstly, the strategic filter of information is lacking. Therefore, rumours and other information are spread quicker and with less control through the ranks. Secondly, an obvious insufficiency of data protection against foreign hackers provides a weakness to every operation. Finally, it also limits, distorts and biases a unit's line of communication and hierarchy (with one soldier, whose relative happens to be someone higher up the institutional ladder, being able to circumvent unwanted decisions from his immediate superior). All of these consequences of mobile phones and rumours are of importance when (re)unifying UPF.

By the end of 16 October, not only had all peshmerga forces retreated from Kirkuk, also eight unified brigades had separated. As noted before, two of the unified brigades are not mixed. Therefore, to realistically account for the extent of separation, it is better to note that only four brigades remained unified after 16 October. Thus, I chose the wording that '*eight out of twelve* units separated' (even though there are fourteen unified brigades in total). This separation[88] occurred at different stages during the day and along different chains of events. Three main forms can be identified from the interviews: One, UP/70 and UP/80 fought together until UP/70 received the order to

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[87] Not surprisingly, an appeal to *'take their mobile phones away'* is often heard when asking for future requirements.

[88] UP/80 headed to Pirde, Alton Kupri and Erbil and UP/70 returned to Chamchamal and Sulaimaniyah.

retreat and they left[89]. Two, UP/70 and UP/80 fought together, retreated together and only after UP/70 soldiers received threats from PUK leadership[90] they separated as well. Three, two brigades did not separate at all[91]. These differing accounts of separation already indicate that experiences of 16 October vary across unified brigades[92].

To end on a positive note, many unified soldiers noted with delight that the high political tension surrounding October 2017 did not escalate into civil war. Also since then, the region is characterised by mostly positive developments: relations with Baghdad improve slowly but steadily (Borsari 2019); the governments of Baghdad and Erbil seem to have returned to a good rhythm since the elections on 12 May (Iraq) and 30 September 2018 (KRI) respectively; Masoud Barzani resigned from his long reign as KRI president (2005-2017) on 1 November 2017[93] (BBC 2017, Hiltermann 2017), opening the political arena to the next generation[94]; and since January 2019, Baghdad not only reinstated the federal-budget payments to KRI but it announced covering peshmerga salaries for the first time too (Mahmoud 2019). Finally, the reform programme of UPF also provides hope to unified soldiers.

Already requested in 2014, an official reform programme of UPF and MoP was initiated in 2016. Assisted by international armed forces of the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany, the 10-year-reform plan is aimed at creating an *'affordable, accountable and capable'* (context interview) as well as an *'apolitical and*

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[89] A difference can be made here, between those UP/70 units who informed their UP/80 counterparts before leaving and those who left without a word.

[90] *'Some* [UP/70] *stayed with* [UP/80] [in Pirde]. … *But then, unfortunately, it was said "...if* [UP/70] *stay here, … we call you traitor* [sic.]*." So,* [UP/70] *also drove back to* [Chamchamal].'

[91] These two brigades, I was informed, were stationed in the North. Staff at MoP attributed the reason for them staying together as their own intervention. A second explanation, provided by a unified soldier from such a brigade, seems more realistic, though. He explained that the soldiers serving in these brigades are *'Kosrat Rasul's men'* - a political leader in PUK (and frontline-section leader in Kirkuk) who did not support the deal with Baghdad and who resisted the retreat. Consequently, these units remaining unified has little to do with them being 'more unified' than others. They simply followed their 'original' commander's order not to retreat.

[92] More details on these differences are provided in Chapter 5.

[93] Note that this did not stop him from visiting the Jordanian King in January 2019 (Nawzad 2019). Seeing as this pattern goes largely unchallenged in the region, it underlines the often reiterated power of the person rather than the office in KRI.

[94] On 28 May 2019, Nechirvan Barzani was voted into the office of president by parliament (Reuters 2019).

professional' (Borsari 2019) armed force[95]. In order for a reform programme to take place, the starting point as well as an ideal end goal need to be determined. Thereby, the definition of ideal and aim is up to political decision making. To identify the starting point, an analysis of the status quo needs to be undertaken. Here, I argue, the perspective of average soldiers is as equally important as the opinions of unified commanders. Unfortunately, this bottom-up perception is often ignored, though. Therefore, this additional perspective is going to guide the review of the prevalent status quo in the next section[96].

3.2. The current 'status quo' (as of early 2019)

Before starting any interview with unified soldiers on their perception of UPF status quo, previous literature on UPF needs to be reviewed. From this literate (as well as from recent KRI history), a first conclusion can already be taken: the KRI and all its institutions - from KRG to MoP and UPF - are riddled with internal and external problems. Internally, the political tensions between KDP and PUK provide many hurdles to institutionalisation and progress. Third actors or external states can easily throw the fragile alliance between these parties off balance. In addition, the region seems to try finding itself between different forms of democracy - from a presidential to a parliamentarian system. Therefore, the new government (which was formed in July 2019) is faced with countless challenges for the future. Moreover, all these imbalances and tensions occur amidst an uncertain environment. The relationship with Baghdad has proven to be fragile - most recently in 2013 and 2017. And despite ISIS having been declared defeated on 9 December 2017 (Sangar 2017), the potential for unrest and insurgencies remain.

To face these future challenges, resilient structures and institutions need to be in place, for the KRI to absorb internal and external shocks, which are likely to occur along the way. At the moment, unified institutions in KRI still seem to be built on a weak foundation. An analysis of the information provided by unified soldiers shows that

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[95] In another example, Helfont (2017) advises the US to focus on non-lethal aid such as medical equipment and communication technology, in order to avoid potentially negative consequences with Baghdad or between the Kurdish political parties.

[96] To avoid overlaps with the findings' chapter (Chapter 5), the data presented here focus on provided facts and figures rather than impressions and evaluations of the same.

there are three triangular relationships of nine factors that constitute the current status quo in the region. Thereby, one triangle rests at the centre while the other two surround and connect to this centre. I shall proceed to present the data in this order, discussing one triangle after the other.

At the centre of the current status quo in the region are political parties; predominantly the KDP and PUK (represented in their political offices of *laq* (KDP) and *malband* (PUK)). Political parties in the KRI seem to be a *perpetuum mobile* - they gain energy in and of themselves in a seemingly endless circle: Firstly, upon gaining relative independence from Iraq in 1991, the political parties attained a state-like character - they own the land, the resources and the assets within a clearly delimitated territory. Secondly, access and ownership of these lands, resources and assets is distributed exclusively among party members. In a network of patronage and nepotism, the currency that counts is who you know - either by bloodline or personal acquaintance. With the majority of the Kurdish population being therefore required to associate with one or the other party, the party creates an endless flow of new, loyal members, who in return support the party in elections, military campaigns and political squabbles. Finally, one way of ensuring employment opportunities for countless party members, as well as executing control over its wider supporter base, is for political parties to maintain a large number of armed forces. These loyal forces act as guards, police and military forces, depending on the needs of the party. They defend the land and property held by the party, execute laws and ensure leverage in regard to both its own members and the other parties in the region. At the same time, the loyalty (and dependency) of these forces towards the political party also allows senior members of political parties to operate outside or above the laws applied to a wider citizenry. This exemption from laws and the ability to create 'law' at random creates an additional basis of power, reinforcing the first and the second layer mentioned above; keeping the *perpetuum-mobile* wheel spinning in seemingly eternity.

This *perpetuum mobile* can be seen as a wheel or as a triangle between three factors. (Just as light is both a particle and a wave, this relationship can be conceived as *both at the same time* too.) This triangle is composed of sovereignty, patronage and executive capability; or as a unified soldier expressed it, *'power, money and force'.*

Thereby, the parties' power (i.e., sovereignty) is based on historic and ideational legitimacy, on the ownership of resources (which they attained due to the *'historic coincidence of 1991'*, as Gerard Chaliand (2019) aptly calls it) and the reaffirmation of this power through electoral votes. The factor 'money' is based on networks of patronage and nepotism as well as a high level of corruption (see, for example, Krajeski 2015). To maintain this triangle, the armed forces play a vital role, as they are both the executive arm of political parties, individual leaders and the wider KRG legislation, as well as insurance for those actors to remain above the law, to protect their economic and political interests and to maintain power. Taking the armed forces out of the triangle would certainly hamper the *perpetuum mobile.* As such, it is not surprising that those who currently benefit from the current triangle have little interest in relinquishing their influence over the armed forces - even within an official unification effort.

The second triangle reported by unified soldiers is a relationship between the factors 'punishment', 'law' and 'discipline'. With political parties currently maintaining all legislative and executive powers, it cannot be surprising that punishment and enforcement of discipline occurs predominantly along party lines too (thereby already demonstrating the connection between the first and the second triangle). Unified soldiers are equally affected by this predominant position of the parties, as are all other members of society. In fact, the influence of the parties is reported to be so strong as to make it very difficult or impossible to carry out punishment along official military hierarchies. Thereby, most problems are said to occur between UP/70 and UP/80 forces. Yet, even along a similar political background, punishment within UPF can prove difficult, should the subordinate have a personal relationship to a superior of his immediate commander. This inability to carry out punishment naturally affects the level of discipline within the armed forces[97]. So, what about laws? Given the immense power of political parties and seeing as many cases of punishment are treated on an individual basis, it might be surprising to hear that there are in fact many laws in the KRI. However, in daily practice, laws are used as a reference to either explain one's own actions or to blame others for disregarding *'what is written'*. Therefore, in the KRI, the problem with laws is not their absence but the lack of their execution. In addition, just

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[97] What is more, it is also reported to affect the trust between the soldiers (see Chapter 5).

as with the armed forces, also the judicial system is dominated by political parties. For example, UP/80 soldiers are usually taken to courts in Duhok, while UP/70 soldiers would be taken to Sulaimaniyah (context interview). Moreover, the Ministry of Justice is reported to still firmly being in party hands. As a result, high-ranking party members, as well as loyal soldiers and commanders, remain outside the reach of the law (and therefore can hardly be disciplined).

A third and final triangle can be found between the factors 'nationalism', 'regional-neighbour intervention' and 'international community'. In this triangle, 'nationalism' can be seen as sentiments towards a shared nation and ethnicity as well as (the lack of and wish for) statehood[98]. Pride and loyalty is expressed in terms of *'being Kurdish'*. Along this line, a shared nationality and ethnicity is often voiced as a reason for unification as well as a source of hope to overcome division. The fact that KRI is not a state provides hurdles to this process, though. For example, the region cannot sign international agreements and arms shipments. As a result, the wish for independence remains an issue. Particularly this last point interacts with the factor 'regional-neighbour interventions': Turkey and Iran are said to defy nationalist sentiments that arise in KRI. Also Iraq is reported to have no interest in a strong, unified UPF, due to the risk of Kurdish secession from the sovereign state. In this sense, Iraq certainly has a special status among the 'regional neighbours'. Although not always necessarily stronger (there have been times where relations with Turkey and Iran dominated over those with Baghdad[99]), the government in Baghdad influences the region in many ways. Among the most recent incidences of Baghdad's impact on KRI and UPF are the events of October 2017[100]. Additionally, because KRI is part of Iraq, the KRG, cannot unilaterally decide to institute conscription or forbid their soldiers to vote; two measures often named as necessary for UPF merger by unified soldiers. Therefore, it is not surprising

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[98] See 'sentiments' in Chapter 5.1 on 'unity' for examples.

[99] Recall the oil deal between Erbil and Ankara in 2013.

[100] Another example is the controversy between Erbil and Baghdad over which budget should cover peshmerga salaries - the regional or the federal defence budget. This controversy reached a peak when PMU was legally recognised as a part of ISF in 2016 and 2018 (Reuters 2016, Reuters 2018). Since 2019, the federal budget also foresees payment for the Kurdish peshmerga, which relaxes tensions around this issue.

that the relationship to Baghdad is often expressed in conditional terms: *'I am not ready to be your friend in terrorism, if you do not give me my rights also'*.

In contrast, the international community is usually seen as a positive factor in the equation. They are referred to with hope to enable (re)unification and reform, to pressurise political parties not to interfere, to punish those above the law, to help select commanders on a basis of merit, and even to (eventually) support the region in their bid for independence. This positive influence also covers investments in UPF[101], training of soldiers and the prioritisation of MoP and UPF over KDP/80 and PUK/70. However, Kurds were disappointed by the international community's response to the referendum (Hiltermann and Fantappie 2018) and when they turned their back on the region on 16 October 2017. Moreover, positive influences were hampered when it became apparent that superior weapons and training cannot help overcome trust issues and commanders' mindsets[102]. In the end, a peshmerga concluded *'it does not matter how many projects* [the international forces] *make, if there is no agreement between political parties, nothing will change'*.

As with the triangle punishment-law-discipline, the triangle nationalism-regional neighbour intervention-international community also relates back to the central triangle of political-party power. Like the intervention of regional neighbours, the involvement of international forces also impacts the balance between the political parties on one side and the unified institutions on the other side. Moreover, these external forces also interact with the idea and ideology of Kurdish nationalism, which is tightly linked to the political parties and their aims. Due to the intricate interrelations of these triangles, I argue, all nine factors need to be kept in mind when attempting any change from the current status quo of KRI or UPF merger.

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[101] The United States was reported to have covered the expenses of 14 unified brigades, four training centres and the reform programme (context interview).

[102] As an additional challenge, it is noted that international armed forces have a tendency to rotate their staff every six to twelve months. Particularly in a region where personal relationships matter and trust is only slowly built, these rotations decrease the level of effectiveness for UPF reform.

Before concluding this general review of the KRI context from a historic and a current status-quo analysis, and before moving to an explanation of the Kurdish peshmerga forces, I also want to review Kurdish studies literature on KRI. So far, research on KRI has primarily focused on the peculiar political-party division of the region. This occurred from perspectives of history (McDowall 2007, Kücükkeles 2016) and political systems (Stansfield 2003, Özpek 2012, Hassan 2015). In addition, natural resources (Natali 2007/2012, Zedalis 2013, ICG 2017) and social dimensions - including women (Shahrzad 2000, Basch-Harod 2014), identity and nation building (Bengio 1999, Fischer-Tahir 2003, van Bruinessen 2004, Freji 2007b, Aziz 2011), as well as everyday life (King 2013), were the main focus of attention. Also, research on the relationship to neighbour or host states is extensive (Gunter 1999, Olson 2005, Natali 2007, Lawrence 2008, Bengio 2009, Kelly 2010, Gunter 2011, Voller 2012, Stansfield 2013, Richards and Smith 2015, Ünver 2016, Keles 2018). The security forces, in contrast, have remained largely in the background of academic enquiry. They were rarely the focus of individual work - with the exception of Lortz (2005), Fantappie (2010), Devigne (2011) and Champan (2011). Only some research indirectly considered peshmerga forces. For example, Stansfield (2003) theorised how the forces developed from guerrillas to political parties and Devigne (2011) studied their relationship with Baghdad.

Only when the war on ISIS commenced in 2014 did international media and academic attention shift to the peshmerga. As a result, work on Kurdish forces increased drastically. In this effort, most attention was paid to the structural unification of KDP/80 and PUK/70 (Fumerton and van Wilgenburg 2015, MERI 2015, Hadad and Wallace 2017) as well as to the relationship between Kurdish forces and Baghdad (ICG 2015, MERI 2015, Borsari 2019). Of these studies, most look at the armed forces from an institutional, top-down perspective. Only the research of Cancian and Fabbe (2017) stands out. Similar to the approach of this dissertation, they conduct a bottom-up research, focusing on peshmerga beliefs. Contrary to this thesis, they pursued a *quantitative* study with *all* peshmerga forces (KDP/80, PUK/70 and UPF). In their research, they explored peshmerga aptitudes and attitudes in relation to third factors,

such as reconciliation in disputed territories and integration[103]. However, in this, they have not yet focused on how it feels to work within unified brigades, nor which current patterns shape the organisational culture of UPF. This is the gap which this research fills. In order to demonstrate the value of this approach, I take a closer look at the Kurdish peshmerga themselves. Starting from a definition of 'peshmerga' on a terminological, historical and legal basis, I then focus on previous and currently ongoing attempts at unifying these armed forces. Thereby, I show the value of adding an additional, bottom-up perspective to the study of these armed forces and their merger.

3.3. Peshmerga – a definition

The term 'peshmerga' derives from the Kurdish words *pesh* ('death') and *mergh* ('to face'). Therefore, from a linguistic perspective, a 'peshmerga' refers to someone facing death. It is this definition which is most commonly used by scholars and journalists alike (Brendan 2003, Stansfield 2003, Lortz 2005, McDowall 2007, Fantappie 2010, Chapman 2011, Devigne 2011, King 2013, BBC 2014, Danilovich 2014, Fumerton and van Wilgenburg 2015). However, beyond the translation of the word, Fantappie (2010) points out that the definition of what constitutes peshmerga is a highly sensitive, political question which implies numerous consequences for the Kurdish parties, the state of Iraq and the international community. Further, one cannot attempt any definition without diving into history – a task which complicates the search for uniform terminologies, as roles, organisational structures and tasks of peshmerga have changed countless times (Stansfield 2003, Lortz 2005, Chapman 2011, Fliervoet 2018, Schneckener et al. 2018, Valentine 2018). As a result, the attempt to define peshmerga for this thesis ought to start with a disclaimer.

The goal of this dissertation is neither to retell the historic development of the peshmerga nor to take part in any politicised terminological battle questioning the legitimacy of the Kurdish or the Iraqi security and state structure. Instead, the aim of this definition is to provide background understanding of this dissertation's subject and a delineation of what this dissertation refers to with the word 'peshmerga'. To do so, I shall proceed in three steps: first, I provide a short overview over the historic meaning

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[103] The contents of their research is more extensively discussed below.

and formation of peshmerga forces; second, I refer to the modern forms of peshmerga formation and organisation; and third, I conclude with a definition.

The Kurdish peshmerga have been called many things; among them are *'guerrilla'* and *'partisan forces'* (Stansfield 2003, ICG 2015), *'militia'* or *'counter-rival militia'* (Schneckener et al. 2018) and *'hybrid'* or *'multi-faceted security organism'* (Aziz 2017, Fiervoet 2018) as well as *'regular (Kurdish) armed/military forces'* (Lortz 2005, Chapman 2011, Devigne 2011, ICG 2015, Aziz 2017, Valentine 2018), *'the armed defenders of the Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq'* (Chapman 2011) and *'army of Iraqi Kurdistan'* (Fantappie 2010). Historically, the terminology 'guerrilla' was adequate. Taking the Oxford *Living* Dictionaries' (2017a) definition of guerrilla as *'a member of a small independent group taking part in irregular fighting, typically against larger regular forces',* the parallel to early Kurdish resistance movements becomes obvious[104]. Following historic accounts, the Zagros-mountain region was always characterised by strong tribal societies, some of which took pride in a warrior tradition. Even in the Ottoman empire, Kurdish tribal leaders took on important functions in the military forces. After the disintegration of the empire, many tribal soldiers returned to their villages to act as pseudo-military border guards or as regional guerrilla forces (Lortz 2005). By the mid-20th century, as the ideas of nationalism spread across the region, the guerrilla forces became increasingly partisan, rebelling against any form of occupation and later against the state monarchies and governments of Iraq. In all of these fights peshmerga remained primarily local, tribal and organised in small, flexible units who specialised in clandestine organisations, hit and run operations, and the elements of harassment and surprise - classical strategies of guerrilla warfare (Chaliand 1982). Their goals, even though they also vary at times, aligned along a range from gaining independence to opposing the reigning government and claiming autonomy or recognition as a nation. Stansfield (2003) sees these goals as a sign of the guerrilla rebellion being entrenched with both tribal forces and nationalistic ideas.

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[104] For an extensive historic review, Lortz (2005) and Valentine (2018) provide an exhaustive account of the mountain fighters and their different organisational structures since the Ottoman empire.

This division between nationalism and tribalism (O'Ballance 1996, McDowall 2007), in addition to an increasing prominence of left-wing ideology, became the basis of a split between KDP and PUK, as well as their respective peshmerga[105]. Both parties further relied heavily on the civilian population which took on countless tasks in the rebellion - be it for volunteer soldiering, for supply and logistics, or for intelligence gathering. In spite of the fact that this division put additional strain on the soldiers and the Kurdish population, it also lead to a first modernisation of the peshmerga forces as the split and partisanisation of peshmerga was accompanied by a transformation of guerrilla forces into 'civilian' political parties (Stansfield 2003). With each political party maintaining one loyal armed force, the term 'militia' is often ascribed to this period of peshmerga history.

The second transformation of the 'modern' peshmerga forces occurred as an effect of the established no-fly-zone in 1991. Under the international safety umbrella, three important changes could be undertaken, according to Chapman (2011): Firstly, for the first time peshmerga were able to establish permanent training bases in an open environment. Switching from training small forces in mountains to established facilities and institutions allowed for larger forces to develop. Secondly, in the political vacuum, the Kurdish parties spread their influence and took charge of available resources. This accumulation of wealth and land allowed for the establishment of 'state'-like institutions and bureaucratic offices[106]. For the peshmerga, this 'institutionalisation' included a regular income and even more soldiers being attracted to the forces. From a terminological perspective, this is the moment when peshmerga developed from 'guerrilla' or 'militia' forces into a more and more sophisticated 'military'. This redefinition appears even more warranted after the 2003 US invasion and the subsequent training operations by US forces for peshmerga units, which introduced a clearly defined internal hierarchy, a symbolic and ceremonial system, specialised training camps and increasingly more standardised uniforms (Fantappie 2010). At the

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[105] For a macro level analysis of different triggers for intra-ethnic conflicts and an explanation of the change from initial ideological differences to a competition over resources and power, as in the Kurdish region, see Caspersen (2008).

[106] Thereby initiating the *perpetuum-mobile* described in the previous section.

same time, these 'militaries' would remain partisan, divided along party lines (Chapman 2011)[107].

Starting with 1991 the first laws were also created for the armed forces. Whilst eventually drowning in the civil war, these laws were revived in the 2003 to 2006 rapprochement of the political parties. To provide a holistic review of peshmerga, several legal definitions shall be reviewed. In 2003, a KDP-PUK committee defined peshmerga as follows: *'[a] peshmerga is a loyal fighter armed with honourable revolutionary principles and ready to sacrifice for the sake of the Kurdish homeland.'* (Chapman 2011: 39). In 2007, the Kurdistan National Assembly (KNA) Law number 38, article 1, section 9 issued the following definition: *'[a] person who had participated in Kurdistan Liberation Revolution to achieve the democratic and national rights of Kurdistan people, or may [later] join the Peshmerga (The Guard of the Region) Force.'* (ibid.) Both of these legal accounts demonstrate two dominant patterns: Firstly, they take pride in peshmerga as a concept removed from political-party division. Secondly, they indicate a certain level of ambiguity in defining what constitutes a peshmerga today. The legal definition of 'peshmerga' becomes even more unclear when consulting an Iraqi perspective. The Iraqi constitution does not mention peshmerga by name at all. Instead, a constitutional basis is created for 'guards of the region' in article 121.5, which states that *'the regional government shall be responsible for all the administrative requirements in the region, particularly the establishment and organization* [sic.] *of the internal security forces for the region such as ... guards of the region'* (Iraqi Constitution 2005/2006). The mention of these 'guards' is widely understood as a constitutional recognition of the peshmerga as a military force of the autonomous region (BBC 2014, Kelly 2010).

For this thesis, neither the historic development of peshmerga, nor their legitimacy in terms of international or Iraqi institutional law are relevant - at least not in terms of empirical interest and academic intention. Instead, I attempt to construct a definition which highlights those particularities of Kurdish peshmerga which are relevant for this research:

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[107] In addition, from the perspective of Baghdad, they would still qualify as 'militia' due to their low level of integration into the Iraqi security system.

The peshmerga are a predominantly Kurdish armed force of the autonomous, federal region of Iraq. Their current formation is based on a long, historic tradition and countless transformations, which integrates the peshmerga into the societal collective memory of Kurdish society as a cherished symbol of rebellion, resistance and pride, as well as a predominantly well-regarded institution even beyond party division. The peshmerga differ from other armed elements of the Kurdish security sector due to this historic background, their unquestioned social standing and symbolic value. In addition, they are the forces most classically referred to as 'military' in contrast to other policing or para-military security actors.

At the time of writing, the term 'peshmerga' is applied to several groups[108]. For this thesis, a differentiation is required. KDP-loyal forces, also called 'Unit 80', are termed 'KDP/80' in this dissertation and PUK-party forces, or 'Unit 70', are called 'PUK/70'. Since the focus here rests on 'unified peshmerga forces'[109] (UPF), and since UPF are constituted by former units of KDP/80 and PUK/70, a distinction of soldiers inside UPF is also relevant. Therefore, the concepts 'UP/70' and 'UP/80' were developed. 'UP' stands for 'unified peshmerga', identifying the individual soldier or commander as part of a currently unified unit, while the reference 70 and 80 provides an insight into the previous background of the individual soldier. With this definition and terminological clarity, I now turn to uncovering the major learnings from previous attempts of unifying KDP/80 and PUK/70.

3.4. The military merger of Kurdish peshmerga

In the history of KRI, there have been several attempts to unify KDP/80 and PUK/70. For this dissertation I differentiate three unifications. The first attempt commenced with the formation of the Kurdish government in 1992 and ended in the civil war in 1994. The second unification is delineated from 2010 until 2017. Despite unification being officially called for in 2006, the first brigades were not unified until January 2010. Therefore, 2010 is taken as the starting point for the second attempt. During this second unification, calls were made for an all-encompassing unification (which never occurred)

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[108] 'Privately owned' security forces of individual party members or tribal leaders, some city-based guards (from police to paramilitary forces such as *Zerevani, Assayish*) and special forces (*Parastin* and *Zanyari*) do not play a role in this dissertation.

[109] UPF are officially subsumed under the Ministry of Peshmerga, the Security Council and the Kurdistan Regional Government.

as well as for a reform of UPF and MoP. Work on this reform programme officially started in 2016 (context interviews, 2019), yet seeing as eight out of the twelve unified brigades separated on 16 October 2017, I end the 'second' unification in 2017 and I start counting the reform programme and 'third' attempt at unifying Kurdish armed forces from 2018 onwards. 2018 is chosen as a reference, due to context interviews informing me that, on average, it took nine months for the forces to reunify; making July 2018 the starting point for the most recent unification attempt.

3.4.1. The first unification (1992-1994)

On 19 May 1992, the first, internationally applauded elections in KRI took place, forming the Kurdistan National Assembly (later renamed to KRG) and creating a first basis of institutionalisation. In this first attempt at governance, KDP/80 and PUK/70 forces were also united. Since KDP and PUK had reached an almost equal percentage in the election, the parties agreed on sharing power fifty-fifty. In a similar fashion the different brigades were integrated. However, as Chapman notes, this 50/50 arrangement was characterised more by division than by unity as the parties did little to lower *'their mutual antipathy and competition for resources, influence and prestige'* (2011: 173). Additionally, neighbouring and international powers exploited the instability between the parties and created a situation in which it seemed more beneficial for each party to force the other out than to cooperate. Starting in 1993 occasional violence erupted. Disagreeing over where, when and how to deploy the unified forces the rift between UP/70 and UP/80 grew bigger, with the forces eventually separating altogether. UP/70 returned to the South, UP/80 returned to the North and shortly afterwards they turned against each other in a civil war (1994-1998).

This first attempt at unification allows to discern four insights. One, the political parties and the armed forces are strongly interlinked. Two, the political parties have little interest and incentive to forego their ownership and dominance over the armed forces. Three, when political tension is high, it is possible for Kurds to turn against each other. Finally, the often reiterated sense of national identity (*'we are all Kurds'*) seems to be insufficient to overcome these political divisions as well as to avoid a civil war.

It is at this point that another learning can be taken from PMI literature. In business mergers, it is said that common identities are best forged in contrast with a competitor or an 'enemy'. Rather than leaving it at that, though, Berner adds that this identity creation works best when *'the ground is well prepared'* in an ideational and propagandistic sense: when the 'inner' group agrees in its vision of who 'the other' or 'the evil' is and why they themselves are 'better' and morally superior (2017: 97). In the case of Kurdish nationalism, different interpretations of the same national idea(l) exist (van Bruinessen 2004, McDowall 2007). It is along these interpretations that identity groups form. Therefore, albeit Kurds in the North and the South (and in any region of 'Great Kurdistan') acknowledging that they are 'all Kurdish', their actual identity group is based on a particular interpretation of that national-ethnic heritage. These identity groups are usually represented by political parties - particularly in *Bashur*.

With this perspective, it can be explained why a war 'between brothers' was so easily triggered, so quick to escalate and almost passionately violent - because the ground was prepared by decades of negative propaganda between the identity groups KDP and PUK. Further, this perspective also helps demonstrate why the common enemy ISIS was not sufficient either to sustainably merge the unified forces in 2014. Certainly, during the war, the level of mutual assistance was higher than usual. Also, three years of experience in working together did affect how unified soldiers perceive each other. Yet, just as the contact hypothesis shows that a mere sharing of experience does not necessarily lead to a positive impression of the other (Brewer 1996), so too does the idea of 'prepared ground' and 'identity groups' in PMI literature stress a warning against too much optimism in assuming that divisions can be easily overcome without proactive management of differences or dividing forces.

After the first unification attempt failed and ended in a civil war, instead of reconciliation, further separation dominated the socio-political landscape in KRI. Only upon the US invasion of Iraq did the political leadership attempt a first rapprochement. Starting in 2003, the negotiations ended in a new power-sharing agreement between KDP and PUK by 2006 (KRG 2006). Part of this agreement was the second attempt at unifying the armed forces.

3.4.2. The second unification (2010-2017)

The timeline of the second unification can be divided into two parts: before the war with ISIS (2010-2014) and during the war (2014-2017). For the sake of providing a holistic picture, I also briefly sketch the first steps taken from 2006 until 2010. Officially called for in the 2006 Joint Kurdistan Regional Government Unification Agreement, the second unification got off to a slow start. While the newly elected KRG started unifying several ministries, the armed forces remained separate. In the unified cabinet, Umar Uthman ('Zaim Ali') was named Peshmerga Minister (KDP) and Jaffer Mustafa Ali ('Sheikh Jaffer') was recognised as Minister of State for Peshmerga Affairs (PUK). Albeit a first level of cooperation being achieved in this step, KDP/80 and PUK/70 still remained separate under their respective leadership.

To organise details of the second unification, four committees were established to review laws and to determine the appropriate size, personnel and structure of UPF[110]. A High Commission was also put in place to oversee this process. According to the 2006 agreement, the unification of all peshmerga was to be concluded within one year. Instead, it took until 2009 to create a unified MoP and until January 2010 to unify the first brigade in a fifty-fifty structure between UP/70 and UP/80. These first steps of the second unification demonstrate three elements which were maintained from the first merger: Firstly, administrative, regulatory and bureaucratic bodies are easily and quickly established in KRI. Secondly, their work and efficiency is an entirely different matter, though (as reflections from international armed forces on the third unification also demonstrate). Moreover, the expected timelines suggest an unrealistic understanding of the workload and the extent of the challenges faced in mergers. Finally, a 50/50 structure was maintained in the second unification, albeit the first 50/50 merger having failed, separating the forces along the lines of previous party division.

Even as the first unified brigades were established under the unified ministry, it was only a small percentage of the entire force which could actually be unified (Fumerton and van Wilgenburg 2015, Gruber 2015), with the majority of soldiers remaining in KDP/80 and PUK/70. Nevertheless, first steps towards unification were

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[110] A detailed account on the different structures as of 2009 is provided by Chapman (2011). An evaluation of their capabilities as of 2014 can be found in Knights (2014).

undeniably achieved before the war with ISIS commenced in 2014. At the beginning of the war, another call for unification was put forward by the Kurdish parliament on 23 July 2014. Similar to previous patterns, the call set a short deadline to unify all peshmerga within six months. Not surprisingly, this deadline was not met. (The reigning Gorran Minister was struggling with exerting influence over the forces (personal interview with Minister, 2014)). Instead, several steps were undertaken, which, more than ever, ensured the political parties' dominance over the armed forces, including UPF. Chief among these steps was the establishment of eight frontline sections (see footnote 81), which were exclusively staffed with cadres from the respective politburos.

In contrast to this increasing political dominance over UPF, several steps to professionalise the bureaucratic service in KRI were taken during the 2014-2017 period; which, by default, also supported a reform of UPF. In 2015, the KRG pushed for biometric registration for public offices. Initially undertaken by civilian institutions, also the armed forces are increasingly brought under this digital control mechanism. This digital registration not only allows to identify and 'count' the members of staff in public offices properly, it also discourages corrupt behaviour[111]. A second step was the decision to terminate further recruitment into public offices (including the armed forces) from 2015 onwards. After heavy recruitment in 2014, the lack of financial resources to fund the mass of soldiers led to a full freezing of employment in UPF (and, apparently also in KDP/80 and PUK/70, although sources could not ultimately confirm this). As a result, the possibilities of opportunistic hirings and corruption were strongly limited.

With these steps, UPF and MoP are currently constituted in the following fashion: Both are built on a 50/50-KDP/PUK-power-sharing structure[112]. At (almost) every level (few exceptions exist), the leader and his deputy are of different political backgrounds and party belonging. In some situations, an honest cooperation between

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[111] The phenomenon of 'ghosts' - people who receive a salary but who do not 'exist' - is widely spread in KRI. 'Ghosts' can come in different forms: one person can be hired in two different positions (or brigades); additional staff can be invented by the upper leadership for the sake of keeping the salary for oneself; or staff can be registered for full-time work while they actually work part time - with the commander keeping 'the rest' of the salary for himself (creating a win-win situation, as the soldier can run a business at home at the same time). With biometric registration, creating such 'ghosts' becomes significantly more difficult.

[112] Also see Hawrami (2015) on *'the disastrous command-non-command structure'.*

the two creates a good foundation and an honest effort towards unity in their department. As unified soldiers expressed at several occasions, it depends on the commander, whether military-academy graduates or political loyalists are hired, whether a difference is made between the soldiers (on the basis of their tribe, education or political background), or whether the unit functions *'like two armies in one'*. In addition, the 50/50 structure is described as showing significant side-effects. Positions are not always given to the best people but rather to the politically most viable option[113], weapons are not always delivered to the place most needed but rather along political fairness and in the end the effectiveness of the entire brigade hinges on the relationship between commander and deputy.

As a result, the brigades are also not uniform. Instead, they can differ in internal work ethics as well as in structural set up. On average, 'the template brigade' for UPF is said to consist of three battalions, three companies and three platoons each. With one platoons being typically composed of 40 soldiers, mathematically the UPF currently equals to 43.650 soldiers. Estimates in the region range from 40.000 to 45.000, suggesting that the variance from the 'template' should not be exhaustive. At the same time, unified brigades are different in both the way they are run and in the way they are structured - leaving a guess as to the actual variance open. Two obvious examples of this variance are the US-trained brigades 1 and 2. These are organised along a US-template of armed forces and are therefore different from other brigades in several regards.

In any brigade, the command structure is set up along a highly standardised structure. According to official laws, there are four ways to become a commander in UPF. The most acknowledged path is by graduating from a military academy in the region (*Zakho* in the North or *Qalachulon* in the South). However, also other, international military academies are recognised in UPF. Moreover, even if one were to never attend a military academy, one can still make a career in UPF. The law stipulates that graduates from civilian colleges and even individuals with no higher education may

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[113] Which in turn affects the competitive spirit of meritocracy for soldiers to strive for a better position or to develop themselves in order to achieve a higher rank.

attend a special course to become an officer[114] (context interview). Once in office, the ranks are increased based on another standardised mechanism: From lieutenant to captain, one receives a new rank every three years; from captain to brigadier general, the ranks are increased every four years; and from brigadier general to lieutenant general, the rule suggests six years. Ranks are only increased two times per year, on 21 March and 11 September, and no one may receive two increases in rank within one year - according to prevalent regulations. Outside these structures, only the commander in chief may award ranks for outstanding accomplishments. With even the exceptions being firmly regulated, the laws suggest a standardised structure. However[115], in reality recruitment and promotions are often provided on an individual, nepotistic, party-loyalist basis. *'To become a liwa* [major general]*, you need at least 30 years of experience* [according to the law]; *they found people born in 1993 as liwa* [sic.]*,'* is one example that demonstrates how these laws can be amended, overlooked or circumvented[116].

The same can be observed for other laws. Officially, crimes and punishments are defined for UPF, and the institutions of military police and military courts exist as well. For example, fighting with other peshmerga, damaging civilian property and betraying the country are considered crimes. However, unified soldiers stressed that rarely, if ever, courts are involved in the process of such crimes. Mostly it is the commander who decides and executes the punishments. These can range from guard duty to cutting the salary or dismissing a soldier from work altogether. Also the military police does not play a particular role in these punishments. Whereas in many countries, a military police has the task to patrol the military, ensure order and discipline among soldiers and, particularly at war, search and punish deserters, in the KRI they seem to have a different function. There, the military police mostly takes care of transports (according to their own job description; context interview). They transport soldiers to and from courts, training centres and hospitals. They also arrange funerals and accompany international

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[114] This, I was explained, is how 'illiterates' can become high-ranking officers in UPF.

[115] As described in 'status quo', it is not the existence of the law but the execution of the same that matters.

[116] One soldier explained that this is where the true power and influence of *laq* and *malband* over UPF lies.

visitors. But they have no executive function in UPF. *'Everything is'*, as one soldier expressed it, *'upside down'* in MoP.

A similar judgement is also passed for the ministry. Many unified soldiers, upon being asked about MoP, qualified the institution to be a facade of unification, which in itself is rigged with corruption and engrained with problems. The facade is said to draw a veil over an underlying presence of political parties in the unified institution. Only a few people are reported to hold actual power and these were originally recruited by political parties. To make matters worse, they have also been in the same position since the creation of MoP. This dominance of individuals in their respective areas and offices, interviewees suggest, creates a lack of transparency and a high level of corruption, since they operate basically unchecked within their sphere of influence. Below these influential few, a mass of paper characterises MoP. Even KDP/80 and PUK/70 are said to have all papers go through MoP. This mass of paper is naturally accompanied by a large bureaucratic body. Unified soldiers qualify this body as slow, ineffective, superficially unified and so complicated as to only work in times of peace. In addition, problems of budget and human resources also plague the institution. A lack of uniform clothing and weaponry as well as uneducated, corpulent and old staff are only the most visible of these problems. As a factor of great dissatisfaction, unified soldiers also regularly address an insufficient salary. I was told that the same level of education and rank receives double the salary in the Ministry of Interior, compared to MoP. Because UPF are the ones who 'face death' on the frontlines with ISIS, this imbalance is a source for personal frustrations and the feeling that peshmerga as a whole are being devalued, according to unified soldiers.

With this myriad of challenges and dissatisfactions, it is surprising how optimistic and dedicated to unification and reform most unified soldiers remain. According to a recent study by Cancian and Fabbe (2017), 98 per cent of peshmerga still consider unified, apolitical forces an ideal for the future. Seeing as Cancian and Fabbe take a similar approach, by focussing on the beliefs and perceptions of peshmerga to identify the motivations and workings of the forces as well as their views on

integration[117], this study is worth paying attention to. In a quantitative survey across 51 military camps from Sinjar (in the North) to Halabja (in the South east), Cancian and Fabbe enquired on identity, motivations and perceptions on integration from unified and political-party peshmerga. Regarding identities, their findings suggest that the vast majority of peshmerga are Kurdish (98 per cent), male (98 per cent) and Muslim (97 per cent). They vary in age, socioeconomic status, political affiliation and hometowns. Among these soldiers, tribal identities are found to be strong at an individual (92 per cent associate with a tribe) but not at a military level. These findings are interesting for three reasons. Firstly, they quantitatively support assertions and observations made by previous research. Secondly, they indicate socio-political cleavages which shape the armed forces internally. Yet, thirdly, they also show that these cleavages (hometowns, tribes) do not necessarily need to impact the wider military structure. This last part is also reiterated by the findings of this dissertation. Even though tribalism is a factor that still shapes Kurdish society, tribes per se seem not to influence the armed forces significantly. Nevertheless, the findings of my research show (Chapter 6) that, although tribes do not impact the structures of armed forces, the societies' tribal heritage influences the organisational culture of UPF.

Regarding motivations, Cancian and Fabbe find that nationalism is the greatest motivating factor for soldiers to join the forces, to fight and even to withstand grave difficulties (such as a lack of salaries for several months). This finding is equally reiterated here. However, as has been shown above, not only are the definitions and interpretations of this nationalism not uniform, the ideal of one nation is not (yet) sufficient to overcome political division in the armed forces either. It is at this point where Cancian and Fabbe's findings on peshmerga perception regarding integration come in. As mentioned above, they find overwhelming support for unifying armed forces. However, while soldiers are said to support unity, they are also found to be largely unwilling to take the necessary steps to achieve this goal. The example Cancian and Fabbe name is that soldiers are unwilling to have the political offices in their military camps abolished, despite the claims for wanting an apolitical armed force in the

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[117] In a third area of focus, Cancian and Fabbe also study the possibilities for post-conflict reconciliation in disputed territories. To do so, they enquire on Kurdish feelings towards Arabs, Sunnis and Shias. Since this part of their research strays too far from the topic of this dissertation, it is omitted here.

future. This contradiction is telling for the first and second unification attempt. It also shows that the quantitative approach by Cancian and Fabbe requires a qualitative addition in order to explain this seeming contradiction. Following a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach in this thesis, I manage to show that the observed contradiction derives from organisation culture[118]. Finally, Cancian and Fabbe conclude their survey by postulating that Kurdish soldiers are less divided than previously suggested and that this strong unity provided a hopeful outlook for the future. Unfortunately, two month after the publication of their findings, the unified forces separated. Highlighting the strength of political parties and their continuing influence in the unified forces, the separation not only ended the second unification attempt but also interrupted the ongoing reform programme.

3.4.3. The third unification (since 2018)

A first attempt at instituting change in MoP and UPF already commenced in 2016. In this new reform programme (assisted by US, UK and German armed forces), the effectiveness and professionalism of UPF is to be increased. The programme, which no longer aims at unifying armed forces per se but rather approaches the entire structure from a 'reform' perspective, was initiated with a project inception and first project-management courses offered by international armed forces to MoP. Also, the institutions, departments and a new building for the reform directory were created. From 2014 until 2016, a political process of negotiation occurred which ended in the official signing of a 35-point programme for future reform. These first steps notwithstanding, UPF separated on 16 October 2017. Under US pressure, the forces reunified again. On average, reunification took nine months (context interview, 2019). Therefore, the third unification is counted from 2018 onwards.

The goals of the newest reform programme are manyfold. Among the 35 points, Borsari (2019) identifies five key enabling projects: the establishment of the reform directory, a regional defence strategy and operating concept, a deepening of the cooperation with Baghdad, digital registration and payment for UPF, and a review and

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[118] Recall Sagmeister's (2016) example of agreed upon goals not being implemented and newly defined structures not being lived in daily practice - the reason for these phenomena are organisational cultures not being actively managed to fit the new goals or structures.

streamlining of all legislations surrounding the peshmerga, the regional guards and UPF. In the context of this reform, the local think-tank, MERI-K, also organised a conference dedicated to the future of KRI armed forces on 18 May 2015 (MERI 2015). The most important outcome of this conference is that institutionalisation is key for the future armed forces. The current lack of management is suggested to be enabled by a unified command and control (C2), a performance-management system and confidential assessment reports. Furthermore, a need to prepare for the enemy of the future rather than for current challenges, as well as the need for political legitimacy and trust, are underlined.

By the time my latest fieldwork commenced in 2019, the original 35 points were reduced to 31. Among these 31 points, several steps were already successfully taken: The reform directory was founded, built and organised internally; thirty-two officers are already working on different projects; and a Program Management Board (including representatives of international armed forces and KRI) oversees all reform implementation. In the near future, one goal is to also form a Steering Committee superior to MoP, which allows for the inclusion of a wider socio-political context into the reform of the armed forces by coordinating with other ministries, including the Ministry of Interior, Finance and Health (context interview, 2019). In all of these steps, the international advisors play a central role. Hence, during my fieldwork, I consulted with several of the advisory forces to gather their impressions on UPF and the potentials for the third unification.

Speaking with international advisors, I enquired their impressions of UPF, the progress and hurdles in reforming UPF, as well as on their internal processes, goals and institutional challenges (see interview guide, Appendix II). The findings of these context conversations are threefold. Firstly, there seems to be a wide agreement that full unification is neither achievable nor necessary. Instead, a priority is placed on future forces being accountable, affordable and capable (with the first quality being the hardest one to achieve; context interview, 2019). Secondly, there are several cultural hurdles that impede the working process. Among these cultural hurdles are culture clashes between the international advisors and UPF, between the international advisors themselves, as well as certain inefficiencies within UPF. These UPF inefficiencies

derive from a lack of strategic thinking[119], a predominant mobile-phone culture (in which people are constantly distracted), *'childish excuses'* for any lack of progress, as well as a tendency for groups to work in silos and for higher ranks to ponder off work to the bottom of the hierarchy. In addition, a very strict hierarchy[120], a high level of illiteracy[121] and a lack of common vocabulary were mentioned to hamper daily work efforts. Finally, international advisors also report a difference in organisational cultures between PUK/70 and KDP/80. According to their observations, PUK/70 is less hierarchical than KDP/80. Instead, they are organised like a flat network. This network is kept together through nepotism and patronage, binding each subordinate to their immediate superior. As a result, one brigade may be seen to have over 25 commanders, who are each personal friends of family members to the superior, and who in turn command their own units fairly independently. KDP/80, in comparison, is said to be structured more vertically than horizontally. Their hierarchies are rigid and, accordingly, a high level of discipline is found among each rank. As a group, they tend to be more closed, displaying a high level of distrust to any outsider.

In addition to the analysis of scholars and observations of international advisors, also unified soldiers were asked about the reform programme and their impressions on the future of UPF. Based on the conducted interviews, the following conclusions for the third unification can be drawn. Firstly, it seems to be widely agreed upon that the 50/50 structure failed. Instead, a centralised command and control (C2) structure is asked for. Moreover, *all* peshmerga should be centralised under MoP. Thereby, the *structural* unification of KDP/80 and PUK/70 seems to have dropped into the background, as the ideal future was presented in three structures: MoP in the centre and one headquarter, for KDP/80 and PUK/70 each, beneath MoP. Thereby, KDP/80 and PUK/70 maintain a separate command, while all other aspects - from finance to salary, budget, training and logistics - are to be taken care of by MoP. Above MoP, a join centre of operations (with

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[119] Goals are quickly identified and even agreed upon. Yet, the necessary steps to achieve them are neither considered nor implemented; an observation which reiterated Cancian and Fabbe's (2017) findings.

[120] *'Nothing gets done without Sinjari* [the interim MoP Minister 2015-2019] *signing off on it,'* one advisor observed.

[121] Estimates were placed around 50 per cent (context interview).

all other security sector forces in the region) is pursued[122]. The need for an operational command, smaller yet better educated, trained and equipped forces, as well as a system based on meritocracy and professionalism is also wished for by unified soldiers.

In fact, unified soldiers voiced several concrete ideas to this end. Three of them are particularly worth considering. For the problem of corruption *and* in order to strengthen meritocracy, a system of rotation was proposed by one unified soldier. His argument was that if one were to change the position mandatorily every four to five years, it would discourage people from misusing their position. After all, the 'advantages' offered to one's clientele cannot be promised for a long time. Plus, one's successor might be interested in uncovering previous wrongdoings. In addition, the rotation of offices can easily be combined with meritocracy, seeing as the evaluation of previous performance can be an indicator as to where the person should be rotated to next.

A second idea, which was often repeated by unified soldiers, is that trust could be built through law, transparency and accountability. To achieve this goal, laws need to apply to everyone without exception. Therefore, unified soldiers often reiterated the idea of a 'third actor' who is given the power to punish commanders. Finally, a third idea was an increased specialisation of UPF brigades. Currently, brigades are set up as 'all-rounder units'. Instead, a division of labour and specialisation is suggested. There should be one brigade specialised on infantry, another on artillery, a third on logistics, a fourth on engineering and so forth. To coordinate these specialised brigades, Divisions could be formed above the brigade level. These Divisions need to be different from the eight sectors as they need to be staffed with 'academic', professional commanders (instead of politburo members), in order to assure a capable, apolitical command. In such a division of labour, unified soldiers argue, individuals could specialise, UP/70 and UP/80 could cooperate based on their areas of expertise, and the forces as a whole would become more capable. In addition to these three ideas, the need for an increased

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[122] All of these structures run in parallel to the coordination and cooperation with Baghdad. Borsari (2019) suggest to reinstate the 'Combined Security Mechanism' with Baghdad, which was used between 2009 and 2013.

focus on health and medical capabilities, and the prioritisation of highly educated commanders were regularly reiterated.

Among the many ideas for reform, also hurdles to this process were identified. The presence of two ideologies and two different zones (green and yellow) was equally mentioned as were the political difficulty of firing 'fake' peshmerga, the interest of influential members of MoP to resist change, and the absence of Division officers. Particularly the political issue of firing 'fake' peshmerga was stressed. Due to 'fake peshmerga' being hired for political purposes (through the offices of *laq* and *malband*), firing them can potentially destabilise the electoral system of the KRG. Since political parties have little interest in destroying their supporter base for the next elections, it is unlikely for 'fake' peshmerga to forego their lucrative UPF salaries unless they receive some other form of compensation. A similar logic applies to those influential few in MoP. Due to their predominant position providing them with a strong income, they have little interest in abandoning their post. Instead, they apply their current influence to convince political parties that they might lose their influence in MoP if they were to change these structures.

Finally, albeit there being a wide consensus on the role UPF should have in the future (namely, protect the region, fight terrorism and assist, when necessary, in national disasters), there seems to be little agreement among unified soldiers as to the relationship with Baghdad. Some say, they do not care whether KRI or Baghdad pays their salary. Others have very decisive opinions on just that. Also, when it comes to stationing the peshmerga outside KRI, opinions are divided. Three main lines of thought can be found. The first group does not care where UPF are stationed. They see themselves as a part of ISF and are willing to fight anywhere they are needed. The second group is the clear opposite, denying any deployment of UPF to the South, stressing that *'peshmerga should not die for Iraq'*. A third group can be placed in the middle between these two, as they apply a degree of pragmatism agreeing to deployment in Iraq upon certain conditions. As one soldier expresses it: *'I am not ready to be just your friend* [in fighting terrorists] *and you do not let me as a peshmerga to go to Kirkuk to buy my uniform ... So you ... want something from me, you have to give me my rights also.'*

To conclude, the third unification shows significant learnings in comparison to the first two attempts. The 50/50 structure is abandoned for C2, the idea of total unification is supplemented by a more pragmatic approach of binding the control structures of all forces together in cooperation and coordination, and reform is also considered for MoP instead of focusing exclusively on structurally unifying KDP/80 and PUK/70. In this reform, the assistance of international armed forces is seen to provide both positive and negative effects. Whilst they manage to put a focus and priority on MoP and UPF over all other forces, on the one hand, they also have their own interests and goals in mind, which might not always overlap neither with each other nor with the KRG's vision of UPF. Therefore, I can only reiterate Borsari's (2019) warning not to rely too heavily on the international forces and to be carefully aware of the pitfalls of dependency. In contrast to international advisors, I enjoy the liberty of not having to follow and political agenda. With this review, I hope to have illustrated the point of departure for this research. Taking the issue of reform and unification from a purely academic and pragmatic stance, I move to the next chapter, to show how applying a new perspective to the question of unifying formerly hostile armed forces can create valuable insights for both the study of peshmerga and of military mergers. Based on the history and knowledge of the region, a qualitative, fieldwork approach was chosen as an empirical addition to the otherwise theoretical reframing of armed-forces integration. The exact choices that guided this research are presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This research is founded on primary sources and empirical data. Data was gathered through qualitative interviews during two field visits in January/February as well as in April 2019. During the five-week visit, 25 interviews were conducted. These interviews are separated into 'core' and 'context' interviews, with the prior referring to interviews conducted with members of the delineated target group and the latter collecting additional conversations on and off the record with people involved in the unification process - such as decision makers in the MoP, international armed forces advising the reform programme, military academies and political party forces (PUK/70 and KDP/80). All interviews were conducted along an in-depth approach, prioritising quality over

quantity. On average, interviews lasted two hours. All interviews were conducted in a setting chosen by the interviewee. Most interviews were recorded, unless acceptance to record was not provided - in which case notes were taken, transcribed and later destroyed. Since political criticism is still sensitive in KRI, all interviews are placed under blanket anonymity. As a result, I cannot unambiguously identify who said what in this dissertation, in order to avoid putting my interviewees at any degree of personal risk. The promise of anonymity was part of the covenant agreed upon with each interviewee before commencing an exchange on the research topic. Written consent was not provided, as there is simply no cultural understanding to this practice. In fact, a signature on the university's template form poses a greater infringement to the individual's safety than the risk of not being able to tangibly demonstrate the interviewee's consent in hindsight. In my personal data collection, I attained name, rank and unit as well as personal background information from each interviewee. These data are kept separate from this dissertation in order to ensure the individual's safety. Furthermore, individual background or personal data are not relevant to this research. Therefore, I can hardly think of a reason outside an academic request for testing replicability of the research that could warrant a disclosure of interviewees' identities.

To provide transparency for this dissertation, I outline all decisions taken in the course of designing and executing my fieldwork. To start, I discuss the research design of this study. First, I dive into its epistemological background - social constructivism. Next, I present the delineation and definition of the target group (the 'core interviews'), before reflecting on validity, reliability and reflexivity in the research design. In 'data extraction', I focus on the description how data was gathered by operationalising the key terminology, by presenting the interview guide and by reflecting on validity, reliability, bias and ethics. Finally, in 'data analysis', I introduce the main tools applied to analyse - thematic analysis and culture map. Since culture maps have already been described in depth in Chapter 2, the emphasis here lies on thematic analysis. I critically consider questions of validity and reliability for both tools though, and describe the process of applying them, before ending in another reflection on ethics. In closing, I add a short reflection on the overall process of conducting this research.

4.1. A constructivist research design

The value of this thesis derives from its particular epistemological perspective, an in-depth case study and its particular approach to data gathering. In this subchapter, I want to address these aspects before moving on to the different aspects of the research design. Epistemologically, this research is based on (social) constructivism. Albeit itself not being a new epistemology, the value of applying this perspective lies in the fact that it is rarely applied to military sciences. Because military-merging literature is still young, it is not surprising to find that constructivism has not yet been applied in this particular field of research. This is where the current research steps in. By approaching military merging from a constructivist perspective, I argue, the focus of attention shifts from the current consequentialist (i.e., avoiding a return to civil war) and structure-focused (i.e., quota systems, phased integration and so forth) approaches. Instead, 'unity' itself moves into the centre of attention. What does military unity mean? What should it feel and look like? And how does it feel like for unified soldiers to work in unified brigades? These are the questions that arise from a social constructivist perspective and, as I will show in this dissertation, comparing their answers provides clues as to the sustainability of the undertaken merger.

Moreover, these questions lead to an in-depth research. Because their focus is narrow and reaches to the heart and soul of unified forces, this research is conducted on the basis of a unique case study. The KRI is unique in many ways. It is unique for not being a state and for nonetheless maintaining legitimate armed forces. It is unique for having so many armed forces within its region. And, it is also unique for providing a safe and supportive research environment even for young women to conduct interviews among senior members of the armed forces. This in-depth-study approach also connects to the data-gathering process. Certainly, interviews are no revolutionary tool to apply. Also in the region, interviews are common to all participants. The particularity of my own approach is that I chose to interview not only the high-ranking decision makers. Instead, I conducted interviews purposefully along all ranks, from no rank whatsoever to 'amid' (Brigadier General, Brig.Gen.) and 'liwa' (Major General, Maj.Gen.). Interviewing across the different ranks, I believe, provides a more holistic picture to the social constructions of concepts as well as to the culture of the armed forces.

With the particular values of this research outlined, I proceed to providing more background on the epistemological foundation of this research: social constructivism. Afterwards, I outline the target group and sampling strategies. Certainly, data extraction and data analysis are vital parts of the research design as well. Given the extent of these topics, I chose to present each of them in their own subchapter below. Questions of viability, reliability, bias and ethics are spread across these subchapters, focusing on the individual parts respectively.

4.1.1. Social constructivism

Constructivism, sometimes also called constructionism and methodologically related to interpretivism, is an ontological position that assumes social reality not to be fixed and tangible but socially constructed by individuals, groups and societies. As such, constructivism is a philosophy, an epistemology and a research paradigm (Mertens 2005). Bryman defines constructionism as follows: *'It implies that social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction but that they are also in a constant state of revision.'* (2012: 33) Methodologically, the constructivist paradigm relates to interpretivism which is a method that, according to Bryman, *'requires the social scientist to grasp the subject's meaning of social action'* (ibid.: 30). In this research, I refer to the paradigm as 'constructivism' due to the ontological and academic-philosophical tradition that is related to.

This constructivist paradigm proved both intellectually instructive and methodologically helpful. Methodologically, the constructivist paradigm is key to my fieldwork-based approach. It supports self-reflection and awareness of the researcher regarding any personal impact on the field or analysis. This careful approach is a good basis for research in general and for fieldwork in particular. Intellectually, the constructivist paradigm informs the research question of this study. Differing from prior studies on military merging, this research takes the position that '(military) unity' is not a tangible state, which at one point can be 'reached'. Instead, I claim, 'unity' ought to be conceptualised as a construct that in itself is the amalgamation of all individual perceptions on the subject. Based on Giddens' (1984) analysis of societal structure and individual agency, the military unification of UPF is conceived as the interplay between individual perceptions on the idea(l) of unity and the daily experience of unification.

Therefore, the relevance that social constructivism provides is twofold. Firstly, it provides the perspective that 'unity' is not a particular state or template but something that is created, constructed and regularly (re)negotiated. Consequently (and secondly), in order to create military unity (or unification) and a sustainable merger, social constructivism inspires to look beyond structures. Having found that structures - rules, hierarchies and the official organigram - are often freely interpreted and even neglected in UPF (Gruber 2015), trying to understand what lies *behind* these structures becomes of utmost importance. Social constructivism, in this sense, assists this research by providing an additional, ontological exhortation for exactly this type of enquiry.

Furthermore, this paradigm also informs the chosen method. In a constructivist research design, researchers tend to rely on the participants' views of the situation (Creswell 2003). This approach fits well for the intention of the research question to assess the structures of meaning employed by unified soldiers of all ranks to conceptualise 'military unity'. Consequently, following a constructivist research design, a qualitative approach guided the research design and semi-structured interviews as well as thematic analysis were chosen as the primary tools.

4.1.2. Sampling groups and strategies

Upon entering the field, I clearly delineated the target group to 14 unified brigades organised under MoP[123]. Since the goal was to address soldiers and commanders from all ranks, this target group was divided into three levels of hierarchy - high, middle and low[124]. This separation was thought to serve two purposes: to differentiate between sampling strategies and to test whether soldiers at different levels of rank have a different perception of military merger, unity and UPF. However, upon entering the

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[123] For a detailed reasoning as to this limitation, refer to subchapter 1.3.

[124] These groups are referred to as 'levels' rather than 'clusters' for they were established along a hierarchy of military rank. Instead of creating one level per rank, a 'clustering' of ranks was undertaken. This choice was based on two factors: Firstly, it cannot be determined how standardised the allocation of rank was within PUK/70 and KDP/80. It is further unclear how the allocation of rank was affected by merging these units. Secondly, previous research shows that, beyond the existing structures and formalised ranks, an informal system of personal authority and party loyalty provides the actual source of power (Gruber 2015). As the rank therefore does not always have to equal the person's influence, a distinction per every rank was thought not to yield sufficiently valuable results.

field, I realised that a 'targeted convenience approach'[125], combined with a snowball technique, was the most efficient sampling method for all levels. Furthermore, upon reviewing the data along the different levels of ranks, no significant variance in their answers could be attested. Therefore, neither the first nor the second reason for my initial differentiation proved relevant. Nevertheless, this distinction between levels assisted my research: As I entered the field, I sought support from the Ministry of Peshmerga (MoP) and started to conduct interviews with those unified soldiers who were both willing and available. After having conducted several interviews, the differentiation of levels helped me keep an eye on the variety of ranks I intended on interviewing. By regularly checking my interviews with the intended sample, I managed to ensure the necessary diversity in my interviewees. Consequently, I shall present the initial differentiation here as a reference (table 1).

Group	Military rank	Sampling strategy	Data extraction	Data analysis
High level	Brigadier General (*amid*) - Major General (*liwa*)	Targeted convenience sampling and snowball technique	Qualitative semi-structured interview	Thematic analysis
Middle level	Captain (*naqeeb*) - Colonel (*aqeed*)			
Low level	No rank - 1st Lt. (*mulazim iek*)			

Table 1: Three levels of rank

In addition to these three levels of rank, I also paid attention to interview both 70/UP and 80/UP soldiers. This additional attention was necessary to avoid a political bias, on the one hand, and to ensure the greatest possible variance of interviewees within UPF, on the other hand. As such, it can be concluded that three requirements guided my selection of sources: the soldiers had to be part of UPF (1) and among them, I paid attention both on a variance of different ranks (2) and on a balance between 70/UP and 80/UP (3). Once these criteria were fulfilled, 'core' interviews could be conducted and

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[125] The strategy is 'targeted' due to the clear delineation of the target group and different ranks for each level. At the same time, the strategy is based on 'convenience' due to the easy variance between the ranks and the convenience of access to those who are to be interviewed.

all could be classified as trustworthy and credible interview partners. The reason for this derives from my research topic. Since I was inquiring for individual perceptions, any interviewee (who fit the selection criteria) and any of his statements could be considered trustworthy and credible. Moreover, since I was analysing culture, even lies could provide valuable conclusions and insights into prevalent cultural patterns. Given my personal experience in the region, as well as regular feedback from both Kurdish acquaintances and my supervisor to this end, I trust my abilities to detect whether someone spoke openly from their heart or whether he fed me the official party line. Either way, both is valuable and trustworthy for the intent and goal of my research.

After fieldwork was concluded, I counted 15 interviews with unified soldiers and commanders. These 15 interviews are referred to as 'core interviews' in this dissertation. Among them, 9 interviewees were categorised at low level, 5 at middle level and 1 at high level. No significant difference in their answers could be seen according to their rank. Therefore, these ranks are paid no further attention to. Instead, two other differences stand out: Firstly, 70/UP and 80/UP soldiers report differently on the events of October 2017[126] (see Chapter 5). This difference suggests that there are still recognisable differences (at minimum in their perception of political events) between the formerly hostile units which now form UPF. However, I find it even more outstanding that the October events are the only aspect on which a clear difference between 70/UP and 80/UP could be drawn. Therefore, the gap between them might not be as stark as originally suspected either. A second difference in the data was found in the reporting between 'academics' and 'non-academics'. Since this was not a variable I originally looked for, I can only report in hindsight how many soldiers identified as 'academic' among my interviewees: At a low level, it was 6 out of 9, and at a middle level, 3 out of 5[127]. The effects of this differentiation is analysed in Chapter 5 and 6.

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[126] Among all 'core' interviews, 9 interviewees could be identified at 80/UP (KDP) and 6 as 70/UP (PUK). The slight surplus of 80/UP soldiers is not considered problematic for this dissertation for two reasons: Among 'context' interviews, there is a slight surplus of 70/UP and PUK/70 soldiers, and in my previous (MA) research, I also had a slight surplus in 70/UP and PUK/70 perspectives.

[127] The slightly higher number of 'academics' can be explained as a phenomenon of the snowball technique in acquiring new interview partners.

In addition to these 15 'core interviews', 10 'context interviews' were conducted. Context interviews are those interviews I conducted with relevant stakeholders that did not fall into the delimited target group. Among these are PUK/70 and KDP/80 members, as well as military academies and international armed forces. Counting both 'core' and 'context' interviews, the final tally of my interviews accounted for 10 low, 7 middle and 5 high ranking peshmerga as well as 3 international armed forces.

In closing, I want to end with a reflection on ethics. In this research project, particular attention has been paid to the question of 'stigmatisation' in selecting a particular target group. Given the myriad of militaristic organisational forms that are captured under the term 'peshmerga', a delineation on UPF aides both the researcher (by clearly limiting the sampling pool) and the involved participants. With UPF being structurally centralised under the civilian command of MoP, they constitute a part of the armed forces that is both constitutionally accepted by the state of Iraq (Iraqi Constitution 2005/2006: Article 121, Section 5) and (therefore) widely recognised by the international community. In addition, it is possible to conceive that UPF also possess a large base of legitimacy in both northern and southern territories of KRI, as they include elements from both PUK/70 and KDP/80. It is this broad basis of regional, state and international legitimacy that provides less ethical concerns for the research subjects. Moreover, the higher level of professionalism in UPF is considered to be amenable to decrease ethical considerations such as the potential risks of stigmatisation being put on the target group.

4.1.3. *Validity and reliability in the design*

Validity and reliability are two concepts of the positivist research tradition. Validity challenges whether a test measures what it is supposed to measure and reliability refers to the need of an employed tool to produce consistent results (Phelan and Wren 2005). In qualitative research designs, questions of validity and reliability become more complex, given the openness of the approach to measure a greater variance in the data (i.e., semi-structured interviews allow for individual probing) as well as the epistemological conviction that data does not necessarily need to be generalisable in order to be valuable (Golafshani 2003). In either research tradition, validity and

reliability reflect upon the credibility and (if possible) transferability of research (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Even though for qualitative studies this pre-tense is not as strong as for quantitative ones, it is of equal importance to construct the research design systematically and transparently. Such a systematic research design considers validity and reliability at three levels: the design, the data and in terms of the researcher's reflexivity. Since these levels refer to different parts of the research, I reflect on each of them in the according subchapter. Here, validity and reliability need to be addressed for the design.

When designing a research project, attention has to be paid to whether the proposed methods for data extraction and data analysis measure what needs to be known to answer the research question. The aim of this research is to understand the concept of 'military unity' and what could make the unification of different peshmerga forces more sustainable. In approaching this aim, a combination of inductive and deductive research designs were chosen. Inductively, I collect soldier's perceptions on the current situation in UPF, their idea(l) of 'unity' and stories of their everyday experience working in unified units. Deductively, I followed PMI theory and aimed at identifying different cultural patterns underlying both the idea(l) and the daily experience of 'unity' in the hope that doing so would create new insights into potential areas of change towards a more sustainable merger. In both approaches, this research is guided by an understanding that every person constructs an individual conception of 'military unity' and what it should ideally be like. In addition, I suggest, each soldier contrasts this idea(l) against his own experience of working in unified brigades. The sum of these different views from multiple perspectives and different ranks, which are systematically collected along an interview guide, provide answers to the proposed research questions. Therefore, the validity of the research design is guaranteed because the questions are answered by employing a valid method and a systematic process.

In contrast, the reliability of this design can be easily contested due to the suggested method of semi-structured interviews. As a tool, semi-structured interviews do not fully fulfil the original idea of 'reliability' in the sense of providing a tool which always measures the same (Newton 2010). However, the reason this method was chosen nonetheless derives from its ability to go in-depth into a subject as well as into the

process of meaning making. The value of qualitative research is the flexibility to adapt to the different research subjects, their ability to express themselves in their own language and the willingness to talk about certain issues (ibid.). To access culture - through stories, evaluation of events and imaginations of the future - such a depth is necessary. Moreover, qualitative research, and in particular semi-structured interviews, are far easier to conduct in the KRI than quantitative questionnaires. It is therefore considered worthwhile sacrificing reliability to prioritise validity for this research. After all, it is more important that the right depth of meaning and reflection of the research subject is reached through flexible facilitation of the researcher than for the questionnaire to ask the same questions in the same manner and the same order.

4.2. Data extraction

To arrive at the point of data extraction, several steps were required. Firstly, semi-structured interviews were identified as the method of choice, due to general usability in the region, previous experience of the researcher and the ability to access depth and meaning in interpersonal exchange. Secondly, ethical approval for research was sought for and passed by King's College London (Minimal Ethical Risk Registration numbers MR/17/18-242 and MRS-18/19-10371). Thirdly, an operationalisation of key terminology had to be defined and the interview guide had to be developed. This guide was further tested by seeking peer review from senior researchers and applying it to different research subjects, before adjusting and remodelling it to its final version (see Appendix I). Finally, ethical considerations and precautions on personal bias had to be taken before, upon and after working in the field. These different steps will be reflected upon in this section.

4.2.1. The qualitative interview

To gather data, qualitative, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were applied. The semi-structured interview is a qualitative research method which is particularly well suited to access the 'deep' meaning behind a person's rationale as the applied open-ended questions (primarily 'how' and 'why' questions) allow for the research subject to talk freely (Newman 2012). The structure of in-depth interviews is established through the use of an interview guide which serves as a golden thread for the researcher in every

conversation. This thread further provides an order after which the data can later be organised. To understand the proposed method, a brief literature review and definition shall be provided.

An 'interview' is generally defined as a managed verbal exchange (Gillham 2000, Ritchie and Lewis 2003). A qualitative interview is even more refined as *'an interview, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena'* (Kvale, 1983: 174). King reiterates this definition by defining the purpose of qualitative interviews as '[seeing] *the research topic from the perspective of the interviewee'* (2004: 11). Based on the provided definitions, I understand a qualitative interview as a managed verbal exchange between the interviewee and the researcher for the purpose of identifying the research subjects' description of their life-world within UPF and the meaning they attribute to the concept 'military unity'.

In such an exchange, interpersonal skills of the researcher - to listen attentively and to pause, probe or prompt appropriately - as well as their ability to ask questions are clearly very important (Ritchie and Lewis 2003, King 2004). Face-to-face interviews are particularly reliant on these skills as the context of the interview also becomes relevant to the quality of the possible exchange. This context includes the setting of the interview (available time, location, presence of others in the room or area) as well as the influence of the researcher on the interview (through mere presence, relational aspects of sympathy and trust, and personal preconceptions that inform the type of questions asked or probed[128]). In the course of this research, the interviewees were asked to choose the setting - assuming that they would propose places they feel most comfortable in to talk openly. As a result, interviews were conducted in private homes as well as offices and public cafes. Rarely were interviews conducted exclusively between the researcher and the interviewee, since most of the time at least a translator was present. As it is culturally more sensitive to have a man (the interviewee) and a woman (the researcher) alone in a room, the presence of others rarely affected the flow of the

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[128] Since social constructivism assumes that there cannot be one interpretation of a statement, interview or text (King 2004), an active style of interviewing, including many probings, to enquire deeper meaning of words, concepts and ideas is required. To this effect, I employed probing.

conversation. To the contrary, since interviewees have been asked to propose the place to meet and since their point of contact has mostly been the translator, who assisted in the interview (thereby establishing rapport between him and the research subject up front), they usually seemed to feel comfortable in the chosen setting.

Interviews, from structured to semi structured, are frequently contested as a method. Starting with the potential bias that derives from relational aspects in the interview up to countless ethical questions when interviewing people on sensitive issues, there are several valid concerns regarding the application of qualitative interviews as a method. These concerns and the chosen approach how these issues were handled during fieldwork are discussed in the sections on 'validity and reliability' as well as 'bias and ethics' below. Despite several challenges of this method, the reason why semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were chosen lies in their ability to generate depth and a set of rich data on any chosen subject. As King puts it, *'[t]he qualitative research interview is ideally suited to examining topics in which different levels of meaning need to be explored'* (2004: 21).

As the goal is to identify the different levels of meaning which are attributed to the concept 'military unity', in order to understand its construction from a bottom-up, empirical data analysis instead of a theoretical top-down perspective, there could be no better fit for a research tool than the qualitative interview. Additionally, having conducted semi-structured interviews in the KRI before, I can conclude with confidence that the approach of open questions and in-depth conversations is a feasible method. The additional dimension of holding these interviews in person is stressed because face-to-face interviews are most appropriate for studies in which depth of meaning is important (Gillham 2000, Ritchie and Lewis 2003). Moreover, a personal encounter allows for value to be added through observation of behaviour and the ability to establish trust with the research subject. Having reviewed the choice of method for data extraction, as well as its academic definition and foundation in the constructivist tradition, two more issues need to be addressed: a definition and 'operationalisation' of the core terminology and an overview over the applied interview guide(s).

4.2.2. Operationalisation of terminology and interview guide

There are several terms which play a role in this research. Some of them - sustainability, idea(l), 'daily experience' and (organisational) culture - were already discussed (Chapter 1). Some of these are particularly relevant to the interview guide. These terms are 'idea(l)' and 'daily experience', 'unity' and 'unification', as well as 'professionalism' and 'discipline'. Since the concepts 'idea(l)' and 'daily experience' have already been defined in the introduction, I only provide an operationalisation for the other four concepts, including their intention and meaning. To conclude, I also discuss the interview guide which was applied.

An important note for *all* concepts presented here is that I understand their meaning to be subjective, relative and relational. They are subjective, as each interviewee can have a different understanding of the respective term. In addition, the concepts are relative and relational as they are usually understood in contrast with something else. It depends strongly on the individual's social, cultural, political and economic context how different terms are applied. As this research is guided by a constructivist paradigm, it is understood that all a-priori definitions can only serve to discern key topics or questions for the interview guide. For an actual definition of the term, these preconceptions are useless, though. Instead, the definition that matters is the one provided by unified soldiers.

For this research, 'unity' and 'unification' are key concepts. Their centrality derives from my personal encounter of these terms in any context related to peshmerga forces since 2013. Sometimes, unification of PUK/70 and KDP/80 was expressed as the ultimate goal and foundation for a harmonious future (personal interviews in 2014, 2016 and 2019). Recently, however, the term seems to have fallen out of fashion (personal interviews, 2019). Instead of 'unification', the word 'reform' is prioritised. Seeing as unification for the sake of unification hardly ever works as a sustainable goal (personal context conversation with merger and acquisition practitioner, 6 June 2019), shifting the focus towards a reform of MoP and UPF to create *'accountable, affordable and capable forces'* (context interview with international advisor, 2019), seems a worthwhile attempt. Personally though, I do not believe that a new term necessarily changes the original intention. In my personal interviews (2019), 'unification' was still regularly

mentioned as a core requirement for the future. In addition, most problems in UPF are defined under the heading of 'division' (mostly along the previous party belongings or ongoing party interference). Therefore, also the concept 'unity' cannot be entirely dismissed yet. Having started my research in 2015, I commenced with a focus on '(military) unity'. Despite this focus having shifted in KRI discourse, I chose to maintain my focus on unity and unification. First of all, if issues of divisions still dominate UPF, then unity still matters as a concept. Secondly, here 'unity' is not understood as a final state or structural reality. Instead, the focus rests on people working with each other, constructively and sustainably (i.e., post-merger *integration*), in order for dividing factors not to risk tearing UPF apart again. In this sense, 'unity' and 'unification' still matter for the new reform programme. Finally, (military) unity is a concept and goal that does not just apply to UPF but also to other merging armed forces. It is therefore considered worthwhile to be maintained.

With 'unity' as the dominant concept, trying to identify the unified soldier's definition of the term became a central goal. In addition, several indirect questions were asked to better capture the essence how the term is constructed. For example, hindrances to unity as well as necessary steps to achieve 'ideal' unity were raised in this context. Additionally, a quantification of the level of currently experienced unity was enquired on a scale from 1 to 10; 1 being 'non-existent' and 10 being 'perfect'. The indicated average level of unity in current UPF was said to be 5.9/10.

A similar procedure was applied to the terms 'professionalism' and 'discipline'. Pursuing these two concepts out of personal curiosity, I explored the definition together with the perceived level of these two concepts along unified soldiers' accounts. While their definition and terminological distinction is provided in Chapter 5 (section 'military culture'), their quantification shall be discussed here. On a scale from 1 to 10, 'professionalism' was ranked between 6.2 to 6.4/10 and 'discipline' was rated below 5.6 to 5.7/10[129]. Despite all these numerical references having no *absolute* merit, they still offer some *relative* value: Representing the average value of my interviewees' judgement on the level of each term in reference to current UPF, it becomes apparent

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[129] For the references 'below' and 'from-to' in this numerical representation, remember the absence of numbers referred to in 'limitations' and consult section 'talking culture' in Chapter 5.

that the level of professionalism seems to be higher than the level of unity and the level of discipline. It is also interesting to note that the level of discipline is generally evaluated lowest. Even the level of unity seems to be stronger than discipline among unified soldiers. A similar finding can be seen in other accounts provided by unified soldiers (see Chapter 5).

As previously stated, the extent of the definition and discussion on 'unity', 'professionalism' and 'discipline' is presented in the next chapter. For now, it is relevant to note that this research focuses on '(military) unity' and the 'unification' of peshmerga. To this end, it pursued definitions as well as quantifications on the perceived level of 'unity', 'professionalism' and 'discipline'. It was along these aspect, concepts and terms that the interview guide was shaped. To provide an even better insight into the applied interview guide, I shall discuss it in more detail.

The interview guide (see Appendix I) covered four main areas: it tried to identify the current status quo of UPF; it enquired on the prospects for the 'future' (taking a particular look at the reform programme); and it covered 'unity' and 'culture' as cornerstones. These four parts are separated with the first two enquiring on the general context in which this research takes place, while the other two attempt to answer the research questions. Beyond these four areas, along which the interview guide was conceived, several distinct 'topics' were identified. Among those topics where questions regarding the current work situation in UPF and experience of working in unified units. The events of 16 October 2017 and their personal judgement on requirements for the future were also covered. In addition, in every interview I asked for definitions of unity, professionalism and discipline, as well as enquiring three characteristics that constitute a 'good' commander, a 'good' soldier and 'good' armed forces.

Before commencing any interview, I always took particular care to express my personal background and the intent and purpose of my work. In addition, I clarified that all data would be kept anonymous, that any interviewee could deny any answer to any question and that they were also free to stop the interview at any point. After having received agreement to these terms, I also asked for allowance to record the interview, in order for me to be able to focus on the conversation rather than taking excessive notes.

Recording was denied in only four cases. In those, I took notes manually, transcribed the information to my phone (and transferred them to a secure cloud) that same day before destroying the manual notes.

Every interview was also characterised by a 'check-in' and a 'check-out' question. The purpose of these questions is to provide a frame for the entire interview. In this frame, the check-in question allows for an easy entry into the conversation. For this reason, the first question always related to an enquiry on the interviewee's personal background. Assuming that recapitulating one's own story - from wanting to become a peshmerga in the first place to accounting for different steps in one's career - is an easy topic, it was considered to be a well-suited entry question. In addition, personal stories allowed for each interviewee to be 'categorised' along their background; whether they had previously been part of PUK/70, KDP/80, ISF or whether they joined UPF directly. This background later influenced the way questions regarding the current experience of working in unified units were shaped. As a check-out question, I always enquired if there was anything that the interviewee felt I had not yet addressed. I asked if there was anything they still wanted to share with me; anything they felt I should know. In this context, it sometimes occurred that I would be asked questions as well; I answered these questions with my best available knowledge and personal judgement, returning the favour of open and honest rapport.

The same interview guide was used for both core and context interviews (though some questions had to be adapted, depending on the interviewee's background). Additionally, depending on whether the context interview was conducted with MoP, the Military Police, a military academy or party forces, specific questions to the respective field were added in order to understand their tasks, their work environment and their vision on UPF. An entirely separate interview guide was developed for international advisors (see Appendix II).

4.2.3. Validity and reliability in data extraction

When referring to validity and reliability in data, the process of data extraction and data analysis need to be tested. Thereby, validity plays a predominant role in data extraction,

while both validity and reliability are relevant in data analysis. A reflection on validity and reliability in data analysis is provided in the according subchapter below.

At the level of data extraction, the main concerns of validity are the relational aspects which are prone to distort data validity. These aspects include the relationship between the researcher and the research subject, the trust between them and the process of record keeping. As Denscombe (2007) shows, gender, ethnic and physical traits of a researcher have an impact on the participant's behaviour and perception in an interview. For this research, all of these aspects - ethnicity, gender and professional background - apply: I am a young, Austrian woman who conducts an academic enquiry on (mostly) older, Kurdish, military men. Yet, as I have experienced in previous research, these factors are not always harmful. For example, being a woman on the frontline eases the access to research subjects as the level of threat is perceived to be low. In addition to my personal experience, there are multiple methods developed to mitigate relational effects. Writing a research diary and fieldwork notes or planning a regular scheduled time for reflection are available tools (Smith 1999, King 2004). Above all, what is important is the researcher's awareness of and reflection on the impact her own person, personality and academic background has on the research.

In the course of fieldwork, I wrote a research diary and took countless fieldwork notes - all of which I worked through before producing this dissertation. Time for reflection was also accounted for. This reflection was conducted on a two to three day basis, depending on the particular requirements, during fieldwork. After returning from the field, I consciously took some distance from the material before reengaging with the material and my notes to allow for a 'digestion' of impressions. In addition, regular consultations with my supervisor as well as exchange with friends, family and fellow scholars were sought. In these exchanges, I particularly valued the perspectives and feedback of multiple disciplines - from philosophy to working practitioners. All of these processes helped me in maintaining a high level of reflexivity throughout my research.

Reflexivity is a core aspect of qualitative-research validity. Given the underlying assumption of qualitative research that truth is largely subjective, the subjectivity of the researcher needs to be discussed. This awareness on the researcher's subjectivity and its

impact on the research is called 'reflexivity' (King 2004, Haynes 2012). King (2004) provides a summary of literature which produces assisting tips to facilitate reflexivity: these tips include putting down presuppositions in writing, keeping a research diary, reviewing taped interviews with a focus on the own performance as an interviewer and, when working in a team, organising periodical meetings to reflect upon each other's experience of involvement in the study (King 2004). Following these tips, particularly the first three, provided a check on my own perceptions, potential biases and influences. I would like to summarise these reflections in the next subchapter, reflecting on personal bias and ethical considerations before and during fieldwork.

4.2.4. Bias and ethics before and during fieldwork

When conducting any research, especially from a qualitative and constructivist perspective, an active reflection on one's own motivations, intentions and potential biases is vital for the research to produce valid results. Not surprisingly, bias is a particularly well-known concept in qualitative research. It is concerned with any form of distortion of data, be it in the process of collection or analysis (Bryman 2012). As such, the concept relates closely to viability. A second aspect that requires reflection in research are questions of ethics. Ethical considerations need to be applied for the choice of research topic, for the research subjects and for the researcher herself. Both bias and ethics are to be considered in this subchapter.

Bias can occur in many stages and the best way to encounter it is to be, first and foremost, critically aware of its existence. Potential for bias exists in the questions and responses as well as in the interviewer and in the interview situation. Reviewing these four aspects, it becomes apparent that questions and the interviewer are strongly related biases. The same can be said for response bias and the interview situation. While the first two are so similar to be worth considered together, the latter two stand in an interactive relation with each other, which is why they are considered separately.

Bias in questions and the interviewer is to be considered in any research design. The interviewer (or researcher) can be biased by having hidden agendas or unspoken expectations. Distortions of perspectives can also derive simply from having a different

background than the research subjects. All of these factors affect the way the research project and questions are designed, how interviewees are probed and how data are analysed. Additionally, matters of language and interpretations of words are also crucial to be considered in intercultural research.

For this (and my previous) research, I apply what I call a 'blank-paper' approach. Upon entering the field, I assume that I know nothing. I enter the field like a newborn, or like a blank paper upon which I collect the impressions and information I am provided with, without trying to judge or even properly understand them at first. When reviewing this 'paper', I tend to encounter expressions, issues or nuances that I am unfamiliar with. This, to me, is the moment when I believe to have found something valuable. Me not understanding the subject indicates that I found a cultural peculiarity that I might not yet be able to understand. Then, I develop this aspect further by enquiring more explanations on it in upcoming interviews and off-the-record conversations. In addition, I cross-check provided informations anonymously, in order to get a grasp on the dimensions, perspectives and potential response biases. Finally, without trying to 'go local' or to deny my own cultural upbringing, I practice a degree of impartiality in regard to other cultural and social contexts. Whenever I encounter an aspect, a judgement or a situation which I personally would not appreciate or evaluate like that in my own cultural context, I manage to accept the local realities as a different world with different rules and different perceptions.

Certainly, criticism on this approach is valid. There are extensive debates in academia over the extent to which a researcher is supposed to interact and interfere in the observed environment (Arjmand 2014). As there is no wider agreement in social science on whether interference or abstention is ultimately the 'better way to go', I allow myself to choose the approach which I judge to be more professional: to maintain a distance between myself and my own cultural judgement, and my interviewees's reality. I do not care to judge what is right or wrong for my research subjects. Instead, I try to understand their world, their views and their preferences and then help in recognising patterns through a systematic, academic approach which they might be oblivious to. Ultimately, I believe it is up to them though, to come up with their own

solutions. I, as a research, merely provide the opportunity to regard their world from a different perspective.

With this approach, I develop questions which aspire to understand the local conception and perception of the world (and of the particular subject I chose). Certainly, also questions can be biased. Academic literature recognises biased questions, for example, when they are suggestive. Yes and no answers are also not considered a strong tool in academic research, as they provide a limited range of answers, reduce the world to a simple black and white view, and put the interviewee under unnecessary pressure. Sensitivity to cultural contexts and regular feedback with senior academics are helpful steps towards countering these issues.

Lastly, having already reviewed the situational bias above, the phenomenon of response bias needs to be addressed. The response bias is a concept in social scientific methodology that refers to the possibility that participants may give answers which they assume the situation requires (Gomm 2004). In the Kurdish context this is a common phenomenon - one which was often called 'the Kurdish truth' among expatriates in the region (personal conversations, 2014). As with the challenges considered for validity, the most important aspect for a researcher is to be aware of this phenomenon. Based on the experience of dealing with this challenge in previous work, this research relied on additional probing (asking in different ways; indirectly), cross-checking information (where possible and anonymously), and increasing the collaborative work with participants to prolong the engagement (a task which tends to increase trust and thereby decreases the response bias) to counter potential response biases.

Beyond bias, critical questions on ethics also have to be posed. As previously expressed, ethical behaviour and intentions are a core component of research. They lie at the centre of academic integrity (Drisko 1997) and relate to the imperative that, above all, the subject of research cannot be harmed (Punch 1994, Kvale 1996, Orb et al. 2001, Kajornboon 2005, Sanjari et al. 2014). Just like with the discussion of validity, reliability and bias, several levels of ethical reflection are to be considered: on the target group, in the methodology, and in the analysis and publication of data. A predominant amount of literature is concerned with the second point. However, given the sensitive

nature of the KRI as a case study, also the first and the last dimensions are reflected upon. To this end, ethical considerations on the target group have already been provided above; now I focus on ethical questions in methodology; and ethics on data analysis and publication shall be discussed in the subchapter below. To conclude the deliberation on ethics here, I describe various steps that were taken to address the different ethical challenges.

Ethical questions in methodology focus on the individual soldier as 'the research subject'. It is at this individual level that most issues are raised in literature. The first and foremost concern in this context is the safety of the individual interviewee. As Orb et al. put it, *'the protection of human subjects or participants in any research study is imperative'* (2001: 93). This protection is also at the heart of this research. It is the reason for blanked anonymity to be applied over the identity of all interviewees as well as their direct and indirect quotes used in this dissertation. Beyond this general level of security, there are other ethical concerns too.

Depending on the scholar and their field, these dimensions include the relationship between researcher and participant (Ramos 1989, Whiting 2008), the need for confidentiality and for 'informed consent' (Kvale 1996, Punch 1994, Whiting 2008), as well as the dilemma between the right to know and the right to privacy (Sanjari et al. 2014), and participant's rights for autonomy, beneficence and justice (Orb et al. 2001). All these concerns were taken into consideration. To begin with, I started with the best intentions (of contributing positively to the future of UPF; by prioritising quality over quantity[130]; and by placing the individual interviewee at the centre of considerations) and a proactive approach to mitigate my own researcher bias (see 'blank paper' approach). In every interview, the research subject was placed in the centre of attention and care. This included having them select the place for the interview, allowing them to deny to answer questions or stop the interview altogether, and placing their personal comfort and security over my need to provide sources for information in this

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[130] Consequently, building rapport, establishing trust and creating a safe environment to talk were central aims. After all, without these, no quality can be achieved (recall the phenomenon of 'response bias' and 'Kurdish truth', and refer to 'talking culture' in Chapter 5 to see how visible the level of trust is in the answers provided due to a particular cultural pattern in this regard).

dissertation[131]. In addition, I took particular care to explain myself, my intentions and my research before asking allowance to interview or to record. Thereby, I assured what is called 'informed consent', which, in other words, means that participants need to share information willingly. Furthermore, throughout fieldwork, notes were taken regarding the context, personal observations and my own reactions and reflections during each interview. These were later compiled and analysed before conducting data analysis, in order to assure a separation between my own thoughts and my interviewee's accounts.

4.3. Data analysis

After having successfully gathered a sufficient amount of data[132], this project begins in earnest: the analysis of data commences. For this research, a mix of inductive and deductive, latent thematic analysis was chosen. As a secondary data-analysis tool, culture maps were also applied. An introduction into this methodology, together with a critical revision of both why these methods were chosen and how they were applied in regard to validity and reliability will be provided in this chapter. Since culture maps have already been amply covered in Chapter 2, the focus here rests on thematic analysis. In addition, a description of the exact application of both methods as well as a reflection on ethics and bias in data analysis are also presented.

4.3.1. An introduction to thematic analysis

When analysing qualitative data, several analytical approaches are available: content, narrative and discourse analysis are among the most common methods (Bryman 2012). Thereby, content analysis intends, as the name suggests, to understand the content of different documents; narrative analysis focuses on stories and experiences; and discourse analysis identifies the social context of communication (ibid.). Beyond these three common methods, thematic analysis is also widely used to analyse qualitative data. While sometimes criticised for being a 'catch-all method' (ibid.), I assert that thematic analysis is the best method - both in terms of validity and reliability - for this research. Firstly, it allows to include both narratives *and* content in its analysis,

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[131] Individual wishes such as foregoing recording altogether or deleting the records after transcribing the data, were also adhered to.

[132] 'Sufficient' is defined as having reached a level of saturation in the replies (Arjmand 2014).

providing a wider range of data to be analysed. Secondly, it also allows to be applied for both the inductive and the deductive parts of my research design, which makes it easier to efficiently analyse as well as to compare the results. Thirdly, it does not focus so much on the 'how' and 'why' but rather on the 'what' within stories. To identify cultural patterns, such a focus on the findings rather than the underlying reasoning is helpful. Finally, thematic analysis fits in well with this research's social constructivist paradigm. Particularly its relation to phenomenology allows to analyse research subject's perceptions, feelings and experience (Guest 2012). As such, it is particularly well fitted for answering the research question. By pinpointing, examining and recording patterns within data (Braun and Clarke 2006), thematic analysis manages to capture intricacies of meaning - including implicit ('latent themes') and explicit ('semantic themes') ideas - within a flexible data set (Guest 2012). With this reasoning, thematic analysis is considered a valid choice for this project. An additional argument for the use of thematic analysis is that this method provides a clear six-step process for coding and establishing themes. Thereby, it offers a systematic working path for applying this tool.

As the name suggests, thematic analysis is based on the extraction of 'themes' from data. Conveniently, thematic analysis is flexible, allowing for an inclusion of single-word responses as well as several pages of data in the coding process (Braun and Clarke 2006). For this thesis, the data set is split into 'core' and 'context' interviews. Even though both are analysed with thematic analysis, data of core interviews will be presented as findings (Chapter 5 and 6) while context interviews, as the name suggests, will help put the research in an up-to-date context (Chapter 3). Therefore, the data set for thematic analysis comprises the entirety of transcribed interviews, yet the data analysis is undertaken in two separate processes.

Within this data set, patterns are coded into 'themes', before being clustered into categories for analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). In order to create these categories, a six-step process is followed which leads from codes to patterns to themes and categories. Starting with 'codes' as a first step, any noticeable moment in the data is highlighted (Boyatzis 1998). While thereby applying a first selection, it is crucial that no interpretation occurs at this point (ibid.). Only in a second step, when these codes are searched for patterns (thereby creating 'themes'), a first level of interpretation is

applied. The resulting 'themes' are then reviewed, named and analysed. The interpretation of these themes can include identifying co-occurrence, displaying relationships between different themes and comparing theme frequencies[133] (Guest 2012).

The six-step process evolves in the following phases: 1) familiarisation with data, 2) generating 'codes', 3) searching for patterns ('themes') among the codes, 4) reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes (producing 'categories'), 6) writing the report.

Two distinctions are relevant for thematic analysis. This research conducts a mixed *inductive-deductive* and a *latent* approach to data analysis. These choices shall be explained. The difference between an inductive and a deductive approach in thematic analysis lies in the deductive approach using a pre-existing model and frame based on a theoretical preconception. In contrast, an inductive approach promotes a data-driven identification of themes (Boyatzis 1998, Braun and Clarke 2006). For this research, both approaches were chosen. The deductive approach is applied in the analysis of '(organisational) culture: Following a PMI theory proposition that culture matters for successful mergers, I deductively targeted all 'themes' related to culture which appeared in the data. In addition, an open-ended inductive approach was also applied. In order to uncover the participant's meaning and perception of concepts, such as 'military unity', an inductive thematic analysis was better fit. To that end, a combination of grounded coding (gathering themes from the 'ground' of data) and in-vivo coding (developing titles for codes from the text itself) is applied (Saldana 2009). In practice, I employed a primarily inductive thematic analysis, while paying extra ('deductive') attention to codes and themes regarding organisational culture.

Further, a latent approach is chosen. A latent form of thematic analysis relies on interpretation for identifying underlying ideas and assumptions behind expression of interviewees (Boyatzis 1998). A latent analysis stands in contrast with a semantic analysis, which focuses more on the explicit surface structure of words used by participants. Albeit not being mutually exclusive, here a latent analysis is prioritised.

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[133] It is important to note that the frequency of a theme does not necessarily allow for a conclusion to be drawn on its relevance (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The reasoning behind this choice was threefold. Firstly, given the predominant reliance on interpreters, relying on the explicit wording of interviewees is difficult, since their words have already been translated - and hence, to a certain degree, have been interpreted - by someone else. A focus on their explicit wording is therefore considered useless. Secondly, semantic elements can still be brought into the analysis. This mixing is methodologically valid and can make sense in particular circumstance; for example whenever the interview was conducted in English (e.g., category 'blockers') or whenever the interviewees' wording can be applied (e.g., category 'academics' and 'non-academics'). Finally, even though semantic analysis has the benefit of staying true to the initial impulse of this research, to give 'the local' a voice, an identification of underlying ideas in a latent analysis is considered to bring a richer understanding of the construction of 'military unity'.

Certainly, a latent analysis also poses risks and disadvantages. Not only does it leave the voice of 'the local' behind but it also brings in additional bias, given the researcher's increased involvement in the interpretation process. Particularly this last aspect is to be considered carefully. As Braun and Clarke (2006) assert, the researcher's involvement in the method is great due to her judgement being the key tool for determining the construction and centrality of themes. With the researcher in this case having a different cultural background (central Europe vs. Kurdish northern Iraq), a different gender (female vs. male), a different age (particularly at middle and high-level research subjects) and a different professional perspective (civilian-academic vs. military), the potential for bias in the analysis becomes obvious without needing to add additional distortion through prioritising a latent analysis. To counter this bias, three tools are applied: empathy, constructivism and reflexivity.

While personal attributes are hard to quantify or prove, I have experienced my personal ability for empathy to be a strength in fieldwork. It not only allows to de-escalate difficult interviewing situations, to adapt to the level, type and depth of conversation according to the interview partner, and to build trust through authenticity, but it also assists in incorporating the ways of constructivism. With constructivism assuming that reality is a construct based on the individual's analysis of a situation - which in turn is influenced by socialisation, cultural background, age, gender, context

and many other variables - constructivism is more than just a philosophical perspective but a powerful tool for a researcher to accept, legitimise and include arguments, views and expressions that might run counter her personal construction of reality, life and truth. Finally, reflexivity is a cornerstone of qualitative research, which itself is largely aided by empathy and constructivism. Seeing as reflexivity was already covered I will not expand on it further.

4.3.2. A critical review of applying thematic analysis

Having reviewed the choices for thematic analysis to be partially inductive, partially deductive and latent, the choice of thematic analysis as a whole needs to be reviewed as well. It is at this moment, that validity and reliability have to be tested for the data-analysis tool. Validity in data analysis refers to the chosen method fitting the purpose of the research in order to filter the right kind of information from the data. Reliability, in contrast, questions whether the employed method always measures the same in data.

In terms of validity, I conclude that the use of thematic analysis is valid for the intent of this research project. Already partially discussed above, the tools unique ability to identify patterns and point-point intricacies in a flexible manner within and across data sets is especially fit for establishing the depth of analysis I strive for. In other words, thematic analysis filters the information from data that is required to answer the research questions. In addition, given the method's relation to both grounded theory and phenomenology, it takes the best from both worlds and is able to filter meaning, values and perspectives from any data set based on semi-structured interviews (Guest 2012). Moreover, since culture is also approached through individual perceptions, values and behaviours, it is also aptly fit to analyse the deductive parts of this research. All the condensed information can then be used to conclude how unified soldiers construct the concept '(military) unity', what are the patterns that constitute the overall experience of working in unified brigades and which organisational cultures underlie both.

Moreover, thematic analysis is also considered a reliable tool. This judgement is based on three reasons. Firstly, it ensures the comparability of all codes and themes by going over the data set six times. Secondly, by creating the codes from data, it is reliable in uncovering 'the local voice' even among a latent analysis for it excludes any form of

interpretation in the first steps and further insists on additional layers of coding before any actual analysis. Finally, thematic analysis is one of the most commonly used forms of analysis in qualitative research (Guest 2012). Therefore, I dare to conclude that this tool's reliability is guaranteed implicitly by the research community.

4.3.3. The process of data analysis

Having described the theoretical underpinning of thematic analysis and having reflected on the viability and reliability of this tool, I want to present how data analysis was actually conducted. To do so, I go through each step along the six-step process of thematic analysis. Throughout the research, notes were kept on the choice and amount of patterns, codes, themes and categories. These additional details will also be presented here.

After returning from fieldwork, the first task was to transcribe the interviews. Already during fieldwork, all interviews were anonymised along a randomly chosen number sequence, seven digits each. Seeing as I went into the field twice, I transcribed the interviews in two parts. This intermitted process provided me with an additional time for reflection on my own actions and questions. In addition, I was able to collect feedback from my supervisor on the data gathered thus far. Given the two-phased approach in preparing the data for analysis, interviews were transcribed chronologically. This process also concluded the first of six steps of thematic analysis. After all, as I transcribed the data, I had time to (re)familiarise myself with it. Following this first step, I separated core interviews from context interviews. Subsequently all other steps were conducted separately for core and context interviews - with core interviews taking a priority.

Turing to the second step, I read the collective body of interviews, noting the most important moments by marking them bold in the text. Through this process, first codes were established and no interpretation occurred at this stage. Upon completing the reading, I printed the data and proceeded to work without technological assistance. Searching for themes among the codes (step three), I worked with different highlighters

and colours[134]. Upon encountering a code in the data, I applied a random colour and gave the colour a description and purpose (a theme). Whenever I found another example which fit the same theme, I marked it in the same colour. In contrast, when I found a code which did not fit the previously established colour codes, I created a new theme with a new colour. Through this process, 26 themes were colour coded among the core interviews. Only 15 of these themes were identified among the context interviews.

In a fourth step, I reviewed those themes by taking every mention and expression (code) of one colour (theme) out from the original text (manually). As a result, each colour and theme was collected on one paper. As the codes could be extensive, I used an endless-paper roll to provide enough space for the data. On top of that, a first reduction of the data took place at this point. While still avoiding extensive interpretation of any expression, longer examples were represented in a shortened summary of main points. The fifth step was also conducted on endless paper. In this, the themes were organised and given collective names; categories were created. Reviewing this allocation one more time - by transferring the data from endless paper to A4 paper - several overlaps and possible compilations were noticed. For example, the original theme 'first encounter' was combined with the theme 'reencounters after October 2017'. Also the overlap between 'academics' and 'professionalism' was strong enough to warrant a merger of both themes. Through this process, 21 categories for the core interviews were created. For the context interviews, 15 remained.

Finally (step six), to present the data, I organised the categories into four main areas: status quo, future, culture and unity. This differentiation of the data reiterated the main areas covered in the interview guide. In addition, this selection was a necessary step because only 'culture' and 'unity' actually answer the research questions. At the same time, 'status quo' and 'future' provide a contextual understanding to the research. Therefore, data gathered on 'status quo', referring to information on the current situation, laws and structures of merger, and 'future', discussing primarily the reform programme as well as wishes for the future from unified soldiers, are presented together with context interviews in Chapter 3. The area 'unity', which gathers categories aiding

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[134] These colour are not to be confused with the seven colours of the culture map. They are not related.

the conceptualisation of the concept 'military unity', and 'culture', which subsumes all categories expressing daily experience of unification together with particular patterns of the current and ideal (organisational) culture of UPF, are presented in Chapter 5 and 6.

After producing the report of my analysis, I reviewed all the findings and applied the secondary data-analysis method 'culture map'[135]. To create culture maps, a three-step process was applied. At first, the presentation of data was revisited and all elements relating to culture were extracted[136]. These 'elements of culture' in the data - from expressions to judgement as well as descriptions of habits - were then allocated to the different cultural clusters (i.e., the seven fields and colours) in the culture map. Thereby, attention was paid on whether the element *adds* to the cultural pattern (represented as 'plus' value) or *subtracts* from it[137] (represented as 'minus' value). In addition, each element was valued on their strength, with 1 for 'strong examples' and 0,5 for 'weaker' expressions. 'Strength' and 'weakness', in this context, was determined by the frequency of this variable's mention. Through this process, numeric values were created. These numeric values serve no other purpose than to put the different 'colours' into relation with each other. Given that the mathematical calculation of variables also led to negative values or to 'zero', for the presentation and the comparability of data, all scales were adjusted to represent positive values, starting from 1. Finally, these numerical codes where translated for producing the figure of these culture maps by the following relation: 1 equals to 50 pixel (in a circular form of presentation)[138]. Through this process, I was able to produce culture maps that were both accurate and comparable (see maps in Chapter 6).

4.3.4. Ethical questions on data analysis

Once the data collection process has reached a first degree of saturation, there are several steps that need to be taken. Particularly ethical questions along the processes of

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[135] For an explanation on why I chose this tool, see subchapter 2.2.4.

[136] Note, this extraction of 'culture' elements exceeds the part on culture represented in Chapter 5. Instead, the entire data was revisited for this process.

[137] For example, the prioritisation of loyalty over competence demonstrated by 'non-academics' being hired above 'academics' can be seen to 'subtract' from the strength and presence of 'yellow' in UPF.

[138] All figures were produced in Photoshop; credits go to Clemens Gruber.

data analysis and publication are necessary. These primarily circle around three aspects: the protection of data, the generalisability and interpretation of data, and the risk assessment on the publication of data.

The first aspect, data protection, is particularly relevant as it relates to the research ethos of 'do no harm', to the trust between the researcher and the participant as well as to matters of confidentiality. With data - in any form from audio to photo, video or transcribed text - being relatable to the research subjects and therefore able to influence their wellbeing (due to stigmatisation, political consequences or legal liabilities), it is paramount to protect all forms of data; whether physical or digital. During fieldwork, primarily digital tools were used for data collection (recording, photography, transcription of text). For their protection, cloud services provided a handy solution. These digital services allowed for data to be transferred out of the country immediately, making it inaccessible to governments even in case of computer confiscation. Given the sometimes sensitive political environment of KRI, a digital cloud solution was invaluable for this project. To this end, I purchased the Swiss-Hungarian end-to-end encrypted cloud storage *Tresorit*. Installed on my phone (on which I recorded and took pictures) and my laptop (which remained in Austria), I was able to upload my data instantly after each interview[139] and delete any trace of it from my phone. Therefore, the data was actually moved out of KRI as no more traces of it were left on my device. At the same time, even upon confiscating or destroying my phone, the data was still accessible to me through my password-protected laptop in Vienna. The only way to still access the data through my phone was through the mobile *Tresorit* app. However, this app required my fingerprint and a 13 digit code, making me confident that the data could not be accessed without my say so. Through *Tresorit*'s service and countless layers of data protection, I was able to ensure that the data was both secure and accessible to me even after losing my phone. Upon returning to Austria, all data was removed from the cloud and relocated to a physical storage device[140].

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[139] I also purchased the local mobile-internet box, *fastlink*, to make sure I was independent from open-access wifi or insecure networks for the upload.

[140] Except for audio recordings which were explicitly asked to be deleted. These were destroyed after transcription.

In contrast to digital data, physical data are much harder to secure. During the data collection and data analysis I also worked with physical data, though. Several hand written notes taken during the interviews as well as the fieldwork notes and research diary or the print version of the transcribed interviews can be counted among the physical data. To assure a level of protection also here, the following steps were taken: Firstly, whenever I was not given permission to record, I took notes. These notes were destroyed by shredder or fire immediately after digitalising them. Therefore, these interviews also 'left the country' through the digital route. Secondly, in the fieldwork notes and research diary I made sure to refer to my research subjects only by their seven-digit code. The same is true, thirdly, for the print version of the transcribed texts. Names and identifications of each research subject's seven-digit code are kept separately as a digital file in a physical storage device. Finally, in presenting data in this dissertation, not only do I not identify any interviewee in direct and indirect quotations, but also all other identifying markers (such as pinpointing a particular party membership) are removed as well[141].

In addition to data protection, data access and ownership are also to be considered when publishing information. Given the emphasis on traceability and confirmability in scientific pursuits, data might need to be accessed by universities or other research institutions. Also, former participants might ask to check the transcribed interview or other data in the set. Prior experience has led me to believe that the following guidelines work best: The ownership of the data set as a whole lies with the researcher. Access to the entire data set can be granted to academic institutions under special circumstances, such as a formal requirement to allow for evaluation of the PhD. Access to the individual recordings or transcripts can be requested by the individual who participated in the study should he wish to review his participation. Similar access cannot be granted to his relatives, political authorities (neither local nor international) nor any other institution who seeks access to an individual's data. This restriction is taken on the basis of ethical data protection and confidentiality.

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[141] For the purpose of an academic review, I own a copy which attributes each quote to its source (represented by the seven-digit code).

With the data secure, I could begin analysing. In this process, some final reflections were undertaken on the generalisability of data and the researcher's role in interpreting the findings. Ethical questions on generalisability are not relevant to this dissertation as this research does not claim generalisability beyond the individual cases studied. Instead, the potential bias and ethical question of the researcher's role in analysing and interpreting data is relevant. Already discussed before, it is important here to reiterate that the researcher needs to be self-reflective along every step of the research process; and especially in the course of interpreting data. Sanjari et al. put it distinctly: *'[R]esearchers ... play the role of a mediator between the experiences of the respondents and the community of concerned people'* (2014). With this metaphor in mind, it is conceivable that a researcher lives up to the ethical standards of doing no harm and taking herself back as far as the process of research allows. It is with all these steps and careful manoeuvring throughout the research and fieldwork that I am confident to having produced valuable and valid results, which pay attention to local circumstances and the individual's well-being.

In closing this chapter on Methodology, I want to add a brief reflection on the overall process of conducting this research: When starting out with this PhD, I was in the lucky position to enter into a familiar field. During my MA, I had already dedicated more than a year of academic study, as well as several months of fieldwork, to the region. I knew which question I was interested in pursuing: How peshmerga could be unified sustainably. Yet, even with that much clarity and focus, I faced several revisions of my approach. Upon applying to King's College, I envisioned to pursue a state/non-state perspective to the question of military unification. However, as time passed I found myself increasingly uncomfortable in this analytical meta perspective. In addition, due to my knowledge of the region, I was aware of the many party-political hurdles to military (and political) harmony. With the parties largely unwilling to forego their zero-sum-game logic, from a (non-)state perspective, the chances for a sustainable military merger looked dim. Yet, I also did not want to write another analysis on why the unification fails. Instead of another analysis of the problem, I wanted to move towards the identification of solutions. I relied on theory to get there. The first theory I tested was the so called 'contact hypothesis' - a concept in psychology and social science, which tests how intergroup contact can reduce prejudice. After careful consideration, I

found this approach too limiting, though. Instead, I started to follow indications which had, at several occasions, pointed me towards M&A and PMI literature. There, I found '(organisational) culture' as a concept which allowed me to focus without being limited. Moreover, this approach allowed to identify potential areas and actions to further sustainable unification. Hence, I chose this perspective for my PhD. At the same time, to pursue a solely deductive approach does not fit with my epistemological convictions. Coming from a social constructivist background - and having seen the value of interviewing soldiers firsthand during my MA fieldwork - I realised more and more that I wanted to bring the soldier's voice to the forefront. Previous research has already looked at the structural and political necessities for unifying peshmerga forces. I wanted to know how to fill this unified facade with life. And such life is not just provided by those on top, but by every soul that is part of the institution. So, in addition to seeing what unified soldier's of all ranks had to say about their culture, I also wanted to hear what they had to say in general too. To that end, I chose to combine an inductive, open-ended line of questioning with the deductive part on '(organisational) culture'.

At the end, this approach has led me to what I believe are valuable findings on the institution UPF, the political and military cultures in KRI, as well as a theoretical contribution to 'military unity' and the sustainability of military mergers. I am glad to have found several areas (of culture) in which UPF can invest to further the sustainability of their institution and unified forces, albeit the dividing forces in the region. At the same time, I also have to concede that while this deductive exploration of '(organisational) culture' has wielded valuable new insights, its potential is still limited by the political reality on the ground. As such, the deductive part of this dissertation only takes me so far, for the inductive findings suggest that a bottom-up merger will not work in the KRI as long as the political parties block such a process at all levels of power, structure and culture.

Chapter 5: Presentation of findings

This chapter focuses on the outcome of core interviews conducted during fieldwork[142]. As discussed in the previous chapter, qualitative interviews were conducted to explore unified peshmerga's perception, idea(l) and daily experience of military unity. The goal of this approach is to uncover hurdles as well as the potential for a sustainable military integration beyond structural, institutional challenges. To do so, the research was conducted along one inductive and one deductive line of inquiry. Accordingly, this chapter is separated in two parts: 'the idea(l) of unity' summarises the findings which were obtained as a result to an inductive approach, while 'culture - the invisible hand of (military) integration' presents findings which could be gathered according to the deductive research-design part. Finally, a conclusion draws together all the data collected.

With the exception of the conclusion, findings are presented along the main categories developed during data analysis. For the first part, these categories are 'unity', 'working together' and 'October' (referring to the events of 16 October 2017). The second part focuses on culture, which is built on the categories 'talking culture', 'political (party) culture', 'military culture' and 'other variables'. A discussion of these findings, including an analysis of their implications, is provided in a separate chapter (Chapter 6).

5.1. Part one: The idea(l) of military unity

When merging different armed forces, often, the process is guided by the idea of dissolving all previously existing units and integrating them into one cohesive force[143]. This idea is related to the Weberian concept (1995) of creating a *'monopoly over the legitimate use of violence'*, which , until today, constitutes a core element of statehood (Montevideo Convention 1933). Beyond the legal and structural framework that the

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[142] Information from context data may be added on rare occasions (e.g., when a particular quote expresses an example better than a core interview). However, the analysis of data presented as well as the overwhelming majority of direct and indirect references rely on core interviews only.

[143] Though, as we have seen in PMI literature, different degrees beyond dissolving are also conceivable. For example, separate units might be maintained within a bigger integrated framework (see Chapter 2).

state (or international third-party actors) can apply in order to bring different armed forces under one unified umbrella, and beyond all the different ways of approaching this merger (e.g. by quota, DDR or phased integration), the crux of the matter remains how to bring formerly hostile soldiers to working and cooperating together in a manner that is both efficient to the overall armed force *and* sustainable in the sense that they learn to overcome previous divisions.

In KRI, unification was set as the main target for the future of the armed forces (2010-2017). From 2010 until 2013, ten unified brigades - composed of 50 per cent soldiers from PUK/70 and 50 per cent soldiers from KDP/80 - were created. In 2013 and 2014 another two brigades joined the unified MoP - with the difference that both brigades are made up of 90 per cent soldiers from PUK/70 in the one (Brigade 16) and 90 per cent soldiers from KDP/80 in the other (Brigade 14). Finally, with the onset of the war with ISIS, the United States helped create another two unified brigades (Brigade 1 and 2). All of these fourteen brigades faced the Islamic State (ISIS) in a three year war, from 2014 to 2017. However, on 16 October 2017 eight (of twelve[144]) unified brigades separated over a controversial political decision, with 70/UP heading back to the South and 80/UP heading back to the North; thereby proving that the loyalties to political parties are still stronger than identification with UPF[145].

With the Kurdish example demonstrating so well the value and need for understanding additional - interpersonal and sociocultural - dimensions of military merger, the goal is to understand the individual soldiers' and commanders' perception of military unity. What do they make of this concept? What *should* 'military unity' ideally look like according to them? How do they experience the current unification? And how do they explain what happened on 16 October 2017? These questions were asked during each face-to-face interview and later analysed under the categories 'unity', 'working together', 'October' and 'culture'.

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[144] Recall the nuance presented in Chapter 3.1.

[145] Also, the party's ability to exert power over UP soldiers is still stronger than the MoP's ability to enforce rules and punish desertion.

5.1.1. Unity

The Oxford *Living* Dictionaries define 'unity' from three different perspectives: in mathematics, unity refers to the number one, in theatre it refers to the dramatic principle of staging one action in one time and one place, and in general it refers to *'the state of being united or joined as a whole'* (Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2017d). This 'whole' can refer to being a complete and harmonious as well as a complex whole. The later aspect is expressed in the example *'they speak of three parts as a unity'* (ibid.). In all but the last example, the idea of unity centres around the idea(l) of one(ness). In the case of military unity, this idea(l) also dominates academic thought and literature as well as the practical organisation of armed forces[146]. Regardless of the history, meaning or value of this focus on one(ness) in military affairs, the important point is to capture that the idea(l) of '(military) unity' implies the absence of duality; be it in a dual-headed structure, a duality of command or a duality of centres of power and decision making.

Local definitions

Similar to the Oxford *Living* Dictionaries' definition, the predominant answer of unified peshmerga to the definition of military unity is a need for 'one-ness'. Expressions range from *'one voice', 'one spirit'* and *'one aim'* to more demonstrative examples, such as the idea *'to protect both Kirkuk* [in the South] *and Shengal* [in the North]' and *'for their blood* [being] *mixed'* in battle. In addition, a desire for equality - in training, operations and other contexts - was also found to constitute the idea(l) of 'unity'.

Beyond the idea(l) of 'being one', unified peshmerga frequently addressed four other elements: the absence of political interference in military affairs, a reference to nationality, a separation between private person and public office, and trust. The most commonly referred to definition is the need for political parties not to interfere in the structure and organisation of the unified peshmerga. According to interviewees, the political parties still apply strong pressure to both MoP and UPF. In particular, the influence of *laq* and *malband* were mentioned as being central to hiring and punishing as well as for requesting soldiers to temporarily forego their duties for other, party-related requests. Often, this party interference is also linked to a reference of nationality.

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[146] Although, Gaub (2011) points out that forging military unity is an idea which by far is not as much 'the norm' in neither history nor current armed forces as it is often made out to be.

As several soldiers expressed, in order to achieve unity, all unified soldiers need to *'change their mentality to protect the nation'* rather than the political party or its interests. *'To have a force for the country'* is seen as the definition of 'military unity'[147]. This attitude of focusing on the nation, the population and the country is particularly stressed for times of duty - which connects to a further dimension of the soldiers' definition. Unified peshmerga stress that one may have a political belief and personal preference for a party. However, to achieve military unity, it is necessary for all soldiers to differentiate between private opinions and public office (i.e., one's duty). For unity to work, private beliefs *'must be left at home'*. Or, as one soldier expressed it distinctly: *'When I am wearing* (sic.) *this* [military] *clothes, ... I do not relate to any party. If I wear the civilian clothes like you, then I can ... tell you which* [party I belong to].*'* In order to work well together in the unified forces, other than the parties not interfering and the assumption that all soldiers manage to differentiate between their private opinion and their public duty to the nation, 'trust' is expressed as a prerequisite. Soldiers need to be able to trust their fellow soldiers, their surroundings and their commanders for them all to have unity and military professionalism as their main goal in mind.

Asking directly for a definition of a concept, such as 'military unity', can lead to insightful answers. However, the pressure of coming up with an answer on the spot, the perceived need to keep a definition short and understandable, and the unspoken expectation of 'saying the right thing' can lead to a limited understanding of the concept. Therefore, leading a wider conversation about the subject, beyond the mere question of definition, can provide additional insights. For an in-depth understanding how unified soldiers conceptualise 'military unity', the most valuable categories are 'blockers' (as one interviewee called the consideration of hindrances to unification) and 'sentiments', which range from hope to scepticism.

Blockers

Five 'blockers' - or hindrances to future unification - were identified by unified peshmerga: political-party interference, the wider Middle East, a lack of statehood,

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[147] Recall the discussion of nationalism in Chapter 3. Berner (2017) points out an inherent weakness in the 'we are all Kurdish'-idea by suggesting that there are diverging identity groups between KDP and PUK. Nonetheless, the idea(l) of nationalism plays a role in the prevalent status-quo triangles.

culture and professionalism. By far the biggest and most highlighted hindrance to unity are political parties. They apply a high level of pressure and influence to the forces, with several soldiers noting that *'it is impossible to disobey the political order'* even if such an order includes a separation or disobeying an order from MoP. Beyond this direct interference, parties also affect UPF indirectly - for example by placing party loyalists above more professional soldiers in order to assure control over the brigade. Through these regular intrusions, the political parties also impact the trust within the unified forces. As one soldier expressed it: *'You cannot say that the other one is my enemy 100 per cent, but you can also not trust him 100 per cent.'* He goes on to specify this mistrust even further in the following words: *'It's not that you are afraid he will attack you from behind, but you are afraid that he gets an order from his political party and leaves you.'*

A further point, which impacts the mutual trust as well as the parties' reliance on each other, connects to the second blocker mentioned by the interviewees: regional neighbours, such as Turkey and Iran, have a strong influence in the region. They are said to actively discourage Kurdish nationalism and to use the division of political parties in order to play the Kurdish population against each other. *'Divide and conquer'* is the rule of the game, as one soldier pointed out: *'Our surrounding neighbours, ... they also might have interests that they do not want a unified* [force]*; they want us to be separated. I mean, if you split people you can control them. But, if they are unified,* [you] *cannot.'* As a result, knowing that the political parties are influenced by regional powers, who have no particular interest in unified peshmerga, and understanding that many officially unified soldiers remain loyal to or dependent on a political party, the mutual trust between unified soldiers is limited. The fact that KRI is not a state does not aid the unification process either. A lack of budget, the inability to receive equipment via international contracts and the lack of a constitution as an ultimate legal reference are counted among the impediments for unification. In addition, in terms of culture and professionalism, it was mentioned that there is no culture of reform in the KRI and that they lack professionals to implement whatever might be thought of on paper.

Sentiments

The category 'sentiments' collects different expressions of feelings and point of views by unified peshmerga surrounding military unification. As a result of extensive reports, this category is divided into four parts: soldiers' reflections on the wider population, the idea of independence, hope and scepticism. In terms of the wider population, unified soldiers report an overwhelming agreement to pursue a unification of military forces[148]. Beyond the structural level of unification, however, they express a unification of mindsets as well: *'People do not care if the soldier is* [PUK/70], [KDP/80] *or* [UPF] - *they care about his mind: is it for Kurdistan or for the party?'* In connection with the idea of independence, the idea of 'Kurdistan' is also found in the main reasoning for unification. *'Any country in the world has one military force'* and *'to have a free Kurdistan we need an independent military force'* are named regularly as core motivations for unification.

Facing this unification, amid all current hurdles and countless difficulties in the past, soldiers are divided on whether to be hopeful or sceptical. Those who convey hope usually do so in reference to already achieved progress compared to the past, to the new bilateral engagement by the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany[149] to assist in reforming MoP and UPF, as well as to the great fighting spirit and potential of peshmerga. In contrast, the sceptical voices point towards the unification being superficial at best (16 October 2017 is frequently mentioned, as is the inadequacy of a 50/50 system for merger) and to the huge influence of the political parties, who, albeit officially supporting unification, pay great attention to infiltrating the unified institutions with their personal networks to maintain power and control over the forces.

Looking at 'blockers' and 'sentiments', the core findings of 'definitions' of (military) unity are reiterated: Unity is defined as being no longer divided along party lines. In addition to the already mentioned pressure and control parties apply to MoP and UPF, regional-neighbour intrusion is added as a further dimension that incentivises

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[148] Recall, also Cancian and Fabbe (2017) found 98 per cent support for unification among peshmerga forces.

[149] At the time of this writing (September 2019) a 'memorandum of understanding' also exists with the Netherlands. To the author's knowledge, no bilateral action has taken place yet, though.

division along party lines. By repeating the need for nationalism and trust, the categories 'blockers' and 'sentiments' further stress these element's centrality for unity. A further dimension is presented in 'Kurdistan' not being a state *de jure* and therefore facing additional problems. Lastly, the lack of a reform culture is added to the still fairly absent differentiation between private (political) beliefs and public-office roles as possible hurdles for the future. Put together, a first picture of ideal military unity as well as a sketch of upcoming challenges develops.

In this section, I have explored what unified peshmerga think of military unity. Their definition of an ideal unity is equally presented as is their analysis of hindrances towards achieving this goal. In combination with the additional expressions of different sentiments, a holistic picture of their idea(l) of military unity is developed. This idea(l) can be taken as a point of orientation for unification efforts. Whether the ideal can be achieved and which steps are necessary to do so, cannot be answered by merely looking at an ideal itself, though. Instead, an extensive exploration into the current state of unification is necessary. This exploration constitutes the majority of this research and the conducted fieldwork. A myriad of data was collected to this effect: Firstly, I enquired positive and negative accounts from working in unified forces, in order to test how far the everyday experience and 'feeling' of unification might be different from the idea(l) of unity. Secondly, the events of 16 October 2017 were discussed. Thereby, finding out exactly what happened, who decided what and when, was secondary to the exploration. Much more relevant was uncovering what October portrayed about the second unification attempt, what unified soldiers consider to be the cause and consequences of the events, and how it impacts future unification efforts. Finally, along a series of pre-defined variables and through several indirect lines of questioning, I examined the predominant cultural patterns of unified peshmerga forces. As the data on culture is so extensive, and in order to ease the understanding of the reader, 'culture' was split off from the rest of the data and is instead presented in 'part two' of this chapter. Therefore, in this first part of Chapter 5, I now proceed to present the data gathered on experiences of daily life in unified forces (in 'working together') as well as on the events of 16 October 2017 (in 'October').

5.1.2. Working together

'Working together' is a category developed to capture the different accounts how unified soldiers experience working in unified brigades. Given the intent to test how the idea(l) of military unity contrasts to the daily experience of unified peshmerga, this category was created apriori and constituted one 'topic' in the interview guide. During the interviews, the exact line of questioning was adapted to the respective soldier's background. For example, soldiers who had been with either PUK/70 or KDP/80 were asked to compare their previous work with their current one in UPF, whereas those who had no background in the political-party forces were asked to provide examples of functioning cooperation along with problems in the daily work. As expected, the results of this line of questioning were found to be valuable additions, providing an indication to the current level of unification as well as to smaller, 'cultural', day-to-day issues that one might want to pay attention to in the next unification process. To present the data cohesively, three subcategories were developed: the 'first (re)encounter' with opposite party members, 'positive examples' of cooperation and 'negative examples' or difficulties seen when working together. The outcome of each subcategory will be presented in the following paragraphs.

First (re)encounters

Initially termed 'first encounter' in the interview topics, this subcategory was renamed 'first (re)encounter' when those eight brigades, which separated in October 2017, later reunified, thereby providing the basis for a *re*encounter as well. Consequently, the initial line of questioning for 'first encounters' was expanded not just to cover the first moment of working side by side with members of the opposite unit, but to include the particular sentiments on reunification after 16 October. In both instances, the soldiers' answers can be separated in 'positive' and 'negative' examples.

The positive reports stress three particular aspects: Firstly, one is neither fully aware nor needs to be aware who is from which former unit upon joining UPF. This blurring of previous belongings and backgrounds as something that is not necessary to

know is seen as instigating military professionalism and unification[150]. Secondly, in regard to reunification, the soldiers differentiate between the political decision that led to separation and the individual soldiers who had no choice but to follow this order. This clear line between the one aspect, which many express disappointment, anger and frustration about, and the other - their comrades at war, provides an opportunity for positive 'working together' to continue even after the separation in October[151]. Thirdly, several soldiers express the positive experience of '*getting used to*' everything. '[Even] *sitting next to the former enemy eventually becomes something normal,*' one soldier explains. This potential to acclimatise provides hope for overcoming past and future obstacles between soldiers.

In contrast, the more reserved accounts mention negative sentiments, inefficiencies in daily work and a disappointment of their expectations as to what working in UPF should be like. Negative sentiments range from initial '*bad feelings*' and '*unspoken prejudices*' to difficulties in *de facto* working with two separate groups. These separate groups are also the basis for all inefficiencies within UPF. Soldiers lament the inefficient decision making in MoP as well as the regular revision of previously taken decisions, the fact that '*non-academics*' are placed above '*academic*'[152] commanders - thereby adding inefficiency through incompetence - and the inability to enforce discipline through punishment without political or other external interference. These inefficiencies are listed among the disappointments that soldiers experience upon joining UPF. Other disappointments of expectations include the difference between what is taught in the military academy and the actual reality of working at UPF, the difference between the rhetoric of perfect unification and the experienced superficiality of this unity, and the strong influences of the political parties that can still be felt in MoP and UPF. In regard to reunification, the sceptical voices can be summarised in the following conditional statement: '*If there were a guarantee for*

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[150] There are, however, many other accounts which underline whether the difference between 70/UP and 80/UP is seen or felt, has more to do with the commander and how he leads his unit than with UPF.

[151] Although it is crucial to mention that the level of actual *nonchalance* towards the separation and reunification depends mostly on the commander and his deputy, and how they previously led and treated the different parts of their unit.

[152] For a definition of 'academic' and 'non-academic' refer to part two.

October not to be repeated, we would be glad to reunite; otherwise no [emphasis added by author].*'*

Positive examples

Even though quantitative statements have no validity in qualitative research, it is worth noting that the positive examples of 'working together' are significantly rarer than the accounts showing difficult and negative examples of working in UPF. Despite several soldiers differentiating between the soldiers they work with and the political influences exerted via commanders, most brigades are still reported to have significant divisions beneath their official structure. Those accounts which do stress a positive experience of working together mostly focus on a strong sense of equality among soldiers: '*We eat together, we sleep together, if there is difference from those who above us, maybe, but among us there is no difference, you do not feel it. We are all sitting in one room, you do not know which one is one.*' In addition, positive sentiments can be found in expressions of respect either for the other commander or for the other soldiers' readiness to fight and die before receiving the direct command to retreat on 16 October. One account even states: '*A PUK soldier was with me at the frontline in Pirde, in Kopri[153]. That impressed us a lot. We defended together.*[154]' In general, it is also said that the common fight against ISIS enhanced cooperation, particularly since mutual assistance has always been provided in times of need.

Negative examples

Beyond these positive examples, ample accounts of difficulties were provided by unified soldiers contemplating their personal experience of working in UPF. In total, five subcategories were drawn from the data: 'political interference', 'judgement', 'distrust', 'non-academics' and 'ongoing divisions'. The subcategories are listed in frequency of being mentioned, with 'political interference' being the most prominent and all others showing a similar rate of occurrence.

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[153] Pirde/Kopri is a KDP territory and the point to which most 80/UP soldiers retreated after separating in October.

[154] Note that this is only a singular account. It speaks of one individual's choice to remain with 'the other unit' despite a political order to do otherwise - a choice which likely had negative repercussions. For the larger unification, this case is largely irrelevant. However, it is still worth noting, for even singular actions can impact respect and impressions of unity.

Political party interference is a central theme in all interviews. Therefore, it is worth revisiting it in aspects mentioned in 'negative examples of working together': Unified soldiers underline the effect political parties have on UPF in regard to the ability to enforce discipline through punishment, to the constant potential for another separation, and to party biases in recruitment, training and opportunities. Two accounts are especially worth mentioning:

> *I remember last year, one of my soldier did not came* [sic.] *to his duty.* [I asked him]*, why he is not* [in his duty]*,* [he] *said … 'the manager of someone from the political party HQ asked me … "let him to come to us … let him with us for the propaganda".'*

> *If I made an order* [to] *my inferior and there were some clash between* [the-other-party inferior] *and me, the one superior, who is* [from the other party]*, he would tell me: 'be careful, he is from our side'.*

Both of these examples demonstrate the extent of influence political parties maintain over UPF. They can demand soldiers to abandon their duty and give different assignments without the (other-party) commander's knowledge, and they maintain a clear separation between spheres of influence along party lines within UPF - an aspect which becomes particularly apparent when trying to enforce punishments.

The way political interference affects the experience of working in a unified brigade is underlined by the fact that all other subcategories are interlinked with it as well. Judgements[155] that can severely challenge harmonious co-working are made across (former) party lines. Distrust is generated by observing these divisions. And '*non-academics*' are placed in the ranks by political parties, which in turn affects efficiency, professionalism and mutual trust. In addition, unified peshmerga also report 'ongoing divisions' between 70/UP and 80/UP in UPF. The following example demonstrates how differentiation can be maintained even along the unified structure: 'W*e make difficulties for each other, but via "official ways". For example, you come to me to do something for you and I can do it or not. If you are from my group, I will do it,*

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[155] To give an example: one unified soldier concluded that 'the other party' peshmerga were not as willing to die as 'his party's peshmerga' because their commanders ordered more retreats.

if you are from the other, I might not.' In addition, 70/UP and 80/UP are reported to have a tendency to blame each other whenever mistakes or an unwanted outcome occur. Thus up-keeping previous 'us' and 'them' categories and identities.

With all these examples of 'first (re)encounters' as well as positive and negative 'working-together' experience in unified units, it becomes apparent that an awareness of division and difference remains among unified peshmerga. While experiences differ across the brigades, the overall majority of reports demonstrate that PUK/70 and KDP/ 80 continue to live inside the formally unified structures of MoP and UPF. It may therefore not be surprising that one political decision was sufficient to separate eight out of twelve unified brigades on 16 October 2017. In order to understand how different soldiers experienced that day and which impact this separation has on the ongoing unification process, 'October' was chosen as a separate 'topic' for the interview guide and, as a result, became a separate category in data analysis.

5.1.3. October[156]

When eight out of twelve unified brigades separate, it is hard to ignore the significance of this event. What does it say about the unification of peshmerga if unified brigades can dissolve within a day? How does this separation affect the willingness and trust between soldiers to be (re)unified? Aware of the event and its potential implications, asking about October 2017 became a cornerstone of the interviews. In this process, the interviewees were invited to share their experience and impressions of 16 October. Accounts differed, with some having been at the frontlines experiencing the fight and separation first hand while others only had second-hand knowledge of the events (which did not stop them from providing their description and judgement of the day, though). Analysing the many different accounts, three main subcategories were created to capture the nuances reported.

The dominant subcategory is called 'storylines', referring to the different ways unified soldiers observed the happenings of 16 October. In this category, the storylines of 70/UP and 80/UP are presented separately. This choice was taken because the events

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[156] See Chapter 3 for an account of the timeline of events.

of October occurred as a reason of one political party acting without the other's knowledge and because unified soldiers' reports reflected this division. Additionally, identifying the different ways in which 70/UP and 80/UP explain and justify the events provides clues as to which aspects need to be addressed in any future unification. The second subcategory is called 'surprise'. Originally, the question whether unified soldiers were surprised by the events of October developed from my own reaction upon reading the news that day. However, given the insightful answers I received to this line of questioning, 'surprise' was turned into a subcategory. It yields valuable insights of the previous (2010-2017) and current (2018 onwards) unification. The third subcategory 'consequences and reunification' unites, as the name suggests, the dimensions of consequences of the decisions taken on 16 October and sentiments towards reunification (partially already covered in 'first (re)encounters'). I address each subcategory in the according section below.

Storylines

'There are several analyses of this occasion and most of them are political ones,' one interviewee started his reflection on October 2017. Given the close connection between political parties and local media, figuring out what happened on 16 October is less a matter of fact checking and more a matter of navigating the competing narratives. Therefore, this subcategory was termed 'storylines[157]'. The goal of identifying the different storylines surrounding October 2017 is not to figure out 'exactly what happened'. Far more relevant than that, I observe, is how unified soldiers perceive what happened, how they judge it and what consequences they see this event having for unification. Given the political division of the storylines, the 'PUK side' and the 'KDP side'[158] will be presented in separate paragraphs. Given that it was largely a PUK decision which caused the events in October, I will begin with the PUK side of the story.

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[157] Calling an account a 'story' is neither meant to diminish the informant nor to decrease the value of the information given. The wording is chosen to reflect a presence of competing narratives which characterise almost every political controversy in KRI.

[158] The 'PUK and KDP side' here do not refer to the political parties' stance on the events. The separation is organised according to the interviewee's background - 70/UP and 80/UP.

70/UP have two main ways of explaining the happenings of October. The most dominant line of explanation relies on rationality. Operationally necessary retreats, a 'normality' of (former) PUK (soldiers) prioritising the border around Sulaymaniyah and (former) KDP (soldiers) prioritising the border towards Erbil in their defense strategy, as well as a claim to professionalism of having simply 'followed orders' are among the most often named explanations. The separation is attributed to a political dispute over whether the retreat was warranted and several expressions underline a previously existing mistrust towards KDP soldiers' dedication to fight and defend PUK territory. The second line of explanation shows a phenomenon common in the region: the blame is directly or indirectly shifted to another actor. The most direct expressions of relaying responsibility are found in the disappointment about the United States and other coalition members having allowed a conflict to occur between Baghdad and KRI. Similar surprise is expressed towards ISF. Given that ISF and UPF cooperated well against ISIS, an attack by ISF was not expected. Both statements - towards the international community and ISF, imply a sense of betrayal from a formerly cooperative partner. Others rectify ISF by stressing that those who attacked were only PMU, thereby placing the responsibility on another actor. Vaguer claims were made towards international politics and economy having played a lead in the October events. Moreover, some hints are also made, indirectly, towards the other party, with one account insisting that KDP had pulled back first and another saying that KDP had signed a treaty with Baghdad already in 2014, stating that all territories outside the officially recognised KRI would have to be returned to Baghdad's control after ISIS was defeated.

As is often the case with competing narratives, the storyline of 80/UP does not just sound different but is also built along different lines than 'rationality' and 'relaying responsibility'. It is worth noting that KDP accounts can be separated into two overarching themes with the one blaming PUK and the other one trying to rectify 70/UP comrades. Blaming the PUK already starts before 16 October. Some note a connection of PUK's dislike to the referendum and the events of October, making it out as a payback scenario. Others tell of changes in the 70/UP's behaviour shortly before 16 October, listing the observation of separate meetings and a physical relocation of 'their' soldiers away from 80/UP as concrete examples. On 16 October itself, 80/UP report *'a*

deal with the enemy', the abandonment on the frontline and the loss of *'51 per cent of Kurdish territory[159]'* as the most impactful aspects in their consideration of the PUK. Some attribute PUK's decision to money, others to an attempt of sidelining KDP in the KRI. In explaining the separation, unified soldiers demonstrate three points of disagreement: some claim having felt that they might separate before 16 October, others stress their utter surprise by the separation; some think it was a PUK decision to separate, others assert it to be a logical KDP conclusion of the PUK treaty with Baghdad; finally, some express upset over MoP having been unaware of the deal with Baghdad and others stress the need for communication within the unified brigades, saying *'if you make a deal, please tell us 24 hours in advance'*.

With all the different levels of reasoning for it, KDP blaming PUK can hardly be surprising. What is more remarkable is that several 80/UP spent a great amount of effort trying to rectify their 70/UP comrades. Expressions such as *'we all cried when we separated'* and *'they fought with us at the beginning'* articulate a sense of shared destiny. Pointing towards a split opinion within the PUK regarding the deal with Baghdad is another way of underlining that the individual soldiers had no fault in the happenings of 16 October. One interviewee even reports that 70/UP soldiers in his unit had no knowledge of their party signing a treaty with Baghdad and were merely informed about it after receiving the command to retreat. Some accounts even go further by pointing to some 70/UP soldiers and units who had no intention of separating from their unified brigades. However, due to strong PUK pressure and the threat to denounce a refusal of return to PUK territory as 'betrayal', 70/UP were left with no other option but to separate. One unified peshmerga recalls: *'I remember that my Battalion Commander told his deputy, "let's not separate, let's stay together, let's be an example for others". He said no, he have* [sic.] *to, he must obey the political* [command]."*' A final form of maintaining 70/UP's honour is found in those cases in which individual soldiers decided to disobey the political order and remained with their 80/UP counterparts as well as in the stories of those two unified brigades which never separated in the first place.

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[159] This number was named by one source and can neither be verified nor denied as it is unclear which exact territory is referred to.

Overall, two important conclusions can be drawn from these storylines. Firstly, the experiences of 16 October 2017 differ a lot depending on the unit the unified soldier was part of. Secondly, there is potential to overcome previous party belonging even amidst a separation as in October, as the attempts of several 80/UP to rectify their 70/UP comrades demonstrate.

Surprise

As described before, the subcategory 'surprise' was originally inspired by my own reaction to the events of 16 October 2017. In my interviews, I decided to cross-check this reaction with the impressions of unified peshmerga. Given that the findings yielded valuable results, 'surprise' is maintained as a subcategory for 'October'. For transparency, I briefly reflect on my own reaction before presenting the data of this subcategory.

When the forces separated in October 2017, I was not surprised. Three previous observations, during my Master-thesis' fieldwork (from August to December 2014) and on a personal visit in 2016, had convinced me that the unification of peshmerga was not sustainable. My first observation was how geographically scattered 70/UP and 80/UP units were along one unified frontline - they lived in separate houses several hundred meters away from each other, which were hard to reach due to uneven terrain. Looking at this geographical distance, I wondered how often they would take it upon themselves to visit each other, in person, in the other group's house. My second observation was based on a cultural signifier during a lunch I was invited to. In Kurdish culture, one stands whenever someone important enters the room. At the beginning of this lunch, when the-other-unit commander entered the room, half of the room stood, the other remained seated, signifying a lack of respect from one side to the other. The third example was provided to me after a frontline visit during which I observed the most honestly unified pair of commander and deputy I had encountered thus far. Authentic friendship and mutual respect was visible in their interaction. However, driving home from this frontline, the soldiers in the car started a conversation with me which led to the harshest expression of mistrust I have heard in all my visits: *'My true enemy is not in front of me, he stands next to me.'* This deep division stood in stark contrast with the sense of unity I received from this soldier's leaders. Expressing my surprise to his

statement, the soldier further added: *'The only reason I follow [the other-party- leader] is because my leader asked me to.'* Drawing together the physical separation, small cultural proddings - such as signs of disrespect during lunch, and the fact that even among strongly unified leaderships, individual soldiers may still harbour hostile feelings towards 'the other' group, I concluded that structural unification was not sufficient to sustainably unify 70/UP and 80/UP. As a result, I was also not surprised when a separation occurred along these (previous) party lines.

The reaction of unified soldiers upon asking about 'surprise' was divided between utter surprise and none whatsoever. More remarkable - again underlining the relative irrelevance of quantifiable data in qualitative research - is that almost all soldiers expressed surprise about what happened on 16 October, yet only half were surprised that the reaction to the October events was a separation of the forces. In the interviews, the surprise over 16 October happening in the first place ranges from the extent of political influence in UPF and expressions of increased mistrust to a reflection of third actors' involvement. The two most noteworthy expressions of this surprise are, firstly, the shock about the person making the deal with Baghdad and giving the order to retreat did not even hold any political or military office, and secondly, the reflection of one soldier blaming his own party for not having prepared him for something like October occurring.

In terms of surprise about the separation of unified brigades, accounts are split between those who saw a separation coming and those who were genuinely shocked about it. In both instances, a need to separate the political decision (implemented and applied through commanders and party-loyal individuals) from unified soldiers is underlined, though. The two most noteworthy reflections were, firstly, an indication of relief by one soldier noting that *'in war, is better to know who is fighting beside you than someone ...* [who] *is with me and he is deciding* [not] *to fight',* and secondly, particular outrage of one soldier over US-trained and equipped brigades having separated as well. Especially this last statement underlines the extent of hope that several unified peshmerga put on the international force's involvement in the region. This hope for unity through professionalisation (i.e., US training) seems to have been shattered by the October separation.

Consequences and reunification

Factors more important to the unification than the actual events of 16 October 2017, I assert, are the ways in which unified soldiers judge what happened and what consequences derive from the choices taken that day. Presently, all eight brigades that separated have reunified. Yet, as is the general theme of this dissertation, 'facts' and statements of structure can only bring an understanding so far. While the actual consequences of October will be revealed in the upcoming months and years, already it is valuable to understand what consequences unified peshmerga identify and how they feel about reunification. Thereby, 'reunification' constituted part of the topic 'October' in the interviews[160]. In contrast, the subcategory 'consequences' was derived from the data. Due to their strong overlap, they are presented together.

Several consequences are named after the events of 16 October: During the separation, military equipment was split and disappointment as well as increased mistrust were triggered - particularly in those units in which 70/UP retreated without informing their comrades in the field. After the separation, the United States stopped paying salaries, which it had provided to UPF since 2016. Even after reunification, the repercussions are felt in a deeper division and distrust between commanders and deputies, as well as in the hole many experienced professionals ('*academics*' and Kurdish soldiers from ISF) left after quitting UPF in disdain over the October events. Another consequence, which is regularly referred to, is the increased frustration unified soldiers experience because those responsible for 16 October are not held accountable. Several soldiers named the punishing of politicians and commanders as the main way of rebuilding trust between peshmerga, of preventing October from reoccurring in the future and of creating a sustainably unified force. In all the frustration and negative consequences, two positive aspects were also identified by unified soldiers: Firstly, in those units who fought and retreated together before separating, *'our blood was mixed'* and mutual respect largely survived the separation. Secondly, one soldier pointed out

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[160] At the time of my interviews, all brigades had already reunified except for one which was due within the next week. Soldiers were, accordingly, asked for their experience of working together again.

that despite everything that happened, the fact that political tension did not escalate into another civil war was a comforting consequence.

As previously examined, the consequences of 16 October and reunification are directly connected. My interviewees make this connection clear by stressing the US pressure towards reunification. Unified soldiers are aware that the US stopping payment of UPF salaries was a strong leverage over Kurdish parties and institutions. While the president of KRI and MoP both signed off on reunification (and while some in the ministry and in different brigades proactively aimed for reunification), interviewees report unanimously that it was US pressure which reunited them[161]. Beyond this critical involvement of the US to reunify the forces, another theme which dominantly occurs in conversations on reunification (and again connects with 'consequences') is trust. Trust is mentioned in several positive and negative contexts. While some express having had no trust issues upon reunification (mostly in those units who fought and retreated together), others mention increased mistrust as a major hurdle for unity beyond structural reunification.

The events of 16 October 2017 are an important centrepiece of this dissertation. Not only do they substantiate the initial hypothesis, namely that UPF are not sustainably unified, they also encourage the theoretical approach of this research to look beyond structural factors of unification. The most important finding in the category 'October' is that the experiences of 'October' are not uniform. Almost all aspects - the storylines, the surprise, the judgement and even sentiments on reunification - depend on the individual soldier's experience that day. As a consequence, one cannot treat all (re)unified brigades the same way upon reunification: some will require a more proactive approach to rebuild trust und a sense of unity, while others may not need any further work at all, given the unbroken personal ties between 70/UP and 80/UP. These are already first important clues for post-merger integration, which will be further elaborated in 'discussion of findings'.

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[161] One soldier even went so far as to insist that the unification in the first place was a US idea.

5.2. Part two: Culture - the invisible hand of (military) integration

Switching from part one to part two allows for a brief reflection. So far, three things have been accomplished. First, the ideal of military unity was sketched as a point of orientation for future merger efforts and to provide an insight what unified soldiers think 'military unity' should be, feel and look like. Contrasting this idea(l) to the actual experience of working in unified units, the category 'working together' highlights that an overall awareness of previous belongings is still present among 70/UP and 80/UP. Moreover, the category 'October' demonstrates that the often referenced influence of parties is still strong enough to tear unified forces apart. Concluding from this data, one is left to wonder how a sustainable merger can be possible at all.

It is at this point, where I argue for interdisciplinarity and follow a second, deductive approach in my research. At present, the young military-merging literature does not offer answers to the dilemmas of peshmerga unification. In contrast, business-management literature provides an extensive pool of knowledge on all aspects of merger. The most important lessons of M&A, which were extensively discussed in Chapter 2, are twofold. Firstly, studies show that 70 to 90 per cent of all mergers fail (Christensen et al. 2011, Heffernan 2012, Bradt 2015, McMorris 2015, Henman 2018). Among the most prominent reasons for failure is the inability of corporations to make their systems and staff work together effectively. As a result, M&A literature developed an area of specialisation, namely post-merger integration (PMI), which deals with all processes that occur *after* the legal and structural merger of two or more corporations. Secondly, in this PMI phase, out of all factors reviewed in literature, the *cultural* integration of people and ways of working together is seen to be the most important element (Cornelius 2007, Miller and Fernandes 2009, Mohibullah 2009, Koi-Akrofi 2016, Sagmeister 2016). Here, three possible failures for cultural integration are mentioned. Integration fails either if organisational culture is overlooked as a factor entirely, if post-merger-integration processes are not implemented (or not implemented thoroughly), or if the merging cultures are not compatible.

Despite international advisors identifying several organisational and cultural differences between KDP/80 and PUK/70 (context interview, 2019), this research finds that their cultures cannot be judged as incompatible either. Despite some differences, the

political parties operate within the same status-quo triangles and demonstrate similar (even if sometimes diametrical) interests and decision-making priorities. In fact, the public shaming between the parties can often be aptly summarised in the English expression of 'the pot calling the kettle black'[162]. Therefore, the incompatibility of organisational cultures between KDP/80 and PUK/70 cannot be considered the reason for UPF merger (and integration) failing[163]. Instead, the findings suggest that the other two factors - an ignorance of every merger requiring a diligent PMI and of 'organisational culture' being an important factor in this process - are more suited to explain the lack of sustainable integration in UPF merger. To support the conceptualisation of sustainable merger, and based on this backing by M&A literature, a PMI perspective was added to this study, by also focusing on organisational culture.

To identify cultural patterns within UPF, I relied on M&A and PMI literature and their definition and models that conceptualise 'culture'. Following Stafford (2015), organisational culture is understood as a triangle between *'the purpose, the set of values and the behaviours shared by a group'* which define *'how things get done in that organisation'*. Accordingly, during my fieldwork I observed and enquired how things are done in UPF (i.e., behaviours) and I questioned why they are done in a certain way (i.e., values and purpose). To accomplish some level of systematisation, I defined the following variables along which I would explore UPF organisational culture: unity, soldiers, commanders, armed forces, professionalism, discipline, power, external influence on unified units, tribes, trust and civil war. The choice of these variables is based on my previous experience in the region as well as on conversations with several peshmerga.

In analysing the data, some variables turned out to be less impactful than initially thought. Others were uncovered by the interviewees' responses and added later on. For the final selection, three main categories and one compilation of additional factors under the heading 'other' were chosen. The first category to be addressed is

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[162] For readers not native to English, this idiom describes a pattern of blaming 'the other' for something that one does him/herself. (See 'conflict management' below for more details.)

[163] Failure, in this context, refers to MoP being regularly judged as a unified facade which hides underlying divisions as well as to the merger not being sustainable in its present form.

called 'talking culture'[164]. Being both the shortest and the broadest category, it captures common expressions of interviewees which lead to insights into wider socio-cultural patterns of UPF. The second category, 'political (party) culture', discusses unified soldiers' direct and indirect descriptions of the dominant political parties KDP and PUK. Given the centrality of Kurdish parties, both to everyday life and to the armed forces, an understanding of why they are so powerful and which cultural patterns strengthen their preeminence is valuable. The third category, 'military culture', reaches the heart and soul of this research. The extent of this subchapter is therefore not surprising. To organise the countless interview topics and cultural patterns subsumed under this category, this text is organised in three parts. The first focuses on the particular relation between commanders and political parties. The second covers unified peshmerga's thoughts on the role and characteristics of commanders, soldiers and the armed forces. The third part addresses 'military work ethics', examining the difference between *'academics'* and *'non-academics'* as well as the question of professionalism and discipline as core military values. Other dimensions which were also tested in regard to military culture are 'trust', 'tribes' and 'civil war'. Given the limited results these categories yielded in the interviews, they were separated from the larger 'military-culture' category. Instead, they are covered under an additional category, called 'other variables'.

5.2.1. 'Talking culture'

Collecting particular expressions during the interviews was not an initial intention. However, as I interviewed unified soldiers, there were some utterances which were repeated so many times that they became hard to ignore. Notwithstanding having worked with interpreters for the majority of my interviews, even these translated expressions manage to demonstrate socio-cultural patterns. Moreover, since different interpreters have translated similar statements, one can only conclude that even the translated version of some cultural expressions allow for an exploration of organisational culture.

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[164] This category was developed based on the data set.

At content value the utterances and remarks referred to in this section are largely irrelevant. (I would even dare to argue that this is the reason why they might often be overlooked by researchers and policy advisory alike.) Nevertheless, these expressions allow for an insight into the wider social culture in which unified peshmerga operate. Analysing all expressions together, four patterns were identified: a 'do-not-talk-about-it' culture, a custom of keeping face in public, the absence of numbers and trust. They are presented in the same order.

'Do not talk about it'

Not talking about something is a cultural pattern which seems to be widely spread in Kurdish society. It is referred to as the cultural norm when addressing the past - *'It is true that we have a bad past. But we should forget about it.'* - and when crossing topics of potential disagreement in the present - '*When we came together* [in my unified unit]*, they were not talking about politics and me as well. Because we do not want to get angry with each other.'* Utterances such as *'it is not my job to say'* or *'it is not easy for me to say'* underline this greater cultural pattern as much as the intensity in which interviewees insist on *actually* 'having said' something in public.

One particular aspect of the pattern 'to not talk (in public)' is an impediment to naming names. *'I do not want to say the name'* or *'it is not my job to say who'* are common remarks shielding the name of a perpetrator and, in return, oneself. The reason for this particular care of not pointing fingers in public is both connected to the next point, a custom of keeping face in public, and to the fact that, often, political-party leverage or corruption is involved in the issues one is not to talk about in public. The following account underlines this connection clearly: *'In the ministry* [MoP]*, all of the people are corrupted ... so if one talk, everybody will be leaked* [sic.]*. So nobody talks.'*

Keeping face in public

The custom of 'keeping face' connects strongly to the first cultural pattern of not talking about 'sticky' issues. While the first is related to a fear of consequences, the second is a more general cultural trait. One anecdote to this effect is the story of a (non-academic) commander wearing his rank on his shoulder straps the wrong way and (academic)

colleagues noticing but not being able to point out his mistake[165]. Keeping face does not just apply to higher-ranking officers, though. Even in the local culture of punishment, the appropriate behaviour is reported to be a three step process: Firstly, a commander addresses the soldier's unwanted behaviour in private. Secondly, should the soldier nonetheless repeat his action, the commander scorns the soldier *'in public, in front of his friends'*. Only if both of these steps do not lead to a change of behaviour will the commander report the soldier to a court.

How rare it is to speak out in public or to 'threaten' someone's face value is also underlined by examples of soldiers speaking up. One interviewee provides the following example to demonstrate the extent of his and his comrade's willingness to stand up against corruption: *'They said* [on television], *there is no corruption ... But everybody knew that they are lying. ... We said, it is not true, if you want, I can prove you <u>inside</u> the* [TV] *programme, if you want I can prove you <u>outside</u>, because we do not want to say the name but there is the* [sic.] *corruption* [highlights added by author to stress the private-public differentiation].*'* Seeing as the mere mention of someone's readiness to speak up is already perceived as a threat, the strength of the cultural patterns 'do not talk' and 'keep face' is strengthened. At the same time, by repeating the differentiation of 'inside' or 'outside' (the program), this threat is combined with an assuaging signal of cultural respect. It signals that even though one is ready to talk, one still provides the chance to first discuss matters in private - in order to keep the other's public face value.

A final expression that highlights the need for demonstrating respect to the other in public, is a particular structure of 'but' sentences. Whenever criticism is expressed (again, without mentioning names), it is still required to mitigate the personal assessment. The use of 'but' in this context is best demonstrated in two examples. Unified soldiers would express their judgement in the following manner: *'I am not happy saying* [sic.] *this, but…'* or *'with all my respect to them, but…'*. These 'but' expressions assuage the cultural need to maintain respect even when expressing criticism, thereby ensuring the face value of the other.

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[165] It is reported that *'only a friend'* was able to *'take the commander to the side'* and to alert him about his mistake behind *closed* doors.

On numbers

In a way, keeping criticism and incriminating knowledge hidden falls in line with the third socio-cultural pattern regarding numbers. Among Kurdish scholars there is a fair understanding that numbers simply do not exist in the KRI. Any figure provided may only be regarded as a 'general-ballpark' reference, since there is neither a census nor any culture of precision in figures. On the one hand, blurring the numbers can certainly be a strategy to gamble with the unknown - for example, *'there are currently between 140,000 and 160,000 peshmerga in the KRI'*. On the other hand, there is also a cultural pattern hidden in obscuring numbers. When, for example, asked to rank levels of unity, professionalism and discipline for themselves, their unit and the unified forces, I often encountered hesitation. Questions on oneself are rarely chosen to be answered. Figures are more willingly provided for the unit and UPF. Yet, even in these cases, there is often a caveat placed on the information provided. Either numbers are given in a range - *'under five', 'between six and seven'* or the answer is denied based on the rationale that the figure the interviewee would have to provide, in order to truthfully answer, would be so low that it would diminish his own unit. Therefore, interviewees chose not to give any figure in the first place. Particularly this last example, which was encountered on several occasion, connects to 'do not talk' and 'keep face' in public, stressing again the prevalence of these cultural patterns.

Trust

Trust, despite rarely directly addressed or acknowledged, can be observed in a cultural pattern that shapes the way one person talks to another. In the Kurdish context trust comes in three stages: Firstly, as long as there is no trust, one always sticks to superficial topics and, in case political issues do come up, one follows the rule 'never criticise your own'. Secondly, once a first layer of trust is established, more general topics such as society and politics will be addressed. Albeit remaining a clear distinction between one's 'own' and 'the other' group - with 'the other' being the only one loudly criticised - a first exchange ensues. Thirdly, once a basis of trust is established, one starts to also criticise one's own party in the presence of others (but only among those who one trusts). Reasons for these 'three different layers of trust' and the particular

awareness about what is said to whom and how are named as the political parties, as well as the omnipresent infiltration from neighbouring states (especially Turkey and Iran). Due to constant potential for ill intentions from the unknown other, first one needs to establish trust before speaking one's mind. A final reason, though far less prominent, was said to be shadows of the civil war. It is reported, for example, that two soldiers, commanders or politicians would not agree even on basic matters - such as *'this is a wall - no, it is not a wall'* as one interviewee exemplified - simply because they still harbour hostile feelings from the civil war against each other. No matter the reason, what becomes apparent from these 'three layers of trust' and accordingly their speaking pattern, is that trust has a strong influence on behaviour.

Having reviewed four patterns found in expressions of unified soldiers, the wider socio-cultural pattern of not talking about difficult subjects, particularly not in public and particularly not in concrete tangibles such as numbers or names, becomes apparent. Political parties, third states and some unaddressed resentments about the civil war additionally inhibit a more open and transparent exchange. The three stages of trust are a cultural outcome of these internal and external pressures. Judging from these cultural patterns alone, several hurdles for future unification can already be deduced.

5.2.2. Political (party) culture

Given the prominence of political parties in any question surrounding the unification of peshmerga, it is necessary to understand these parties and what makes them powerful. Certainly, the statement that *'UPF is made up of PUK/70 and KDP/80',* provided by one interviewee, is equally correct as it provides a conclusion to ongoing 70/UP-PUK and 80/UP-KDP relations. However, this statement only touches the surface of the matter. Why do political parties still exert influence over 70/UP and 80/UP despite their official rhetoric of wanting professional, unified forces without further party interference? Why do even highly educated, professional and unified soldiers declare their inability to disregard political-party orders as well as a sense of duty in following such a request? And, most importantly, which cultural patterns hide beneath sentiments of loyalty, structures of dependency and 'the way things are always done'? The category 'political (party) culture' summarises these dimensions according to information unified soldiers provided through direct and indirect descriptions of the dominant political

parties. The resulting data are organised along three subcategories: 'Power', 'leadership' and 'conflict management' collect statements on, as their names suggest, the cultural patterns for exerting power, for leading and for managing conflicts.

Power culture

Political parties and armed forces in the KRI were related to each other from the beginning. Even in their historic development, the dominant political parties, KDP and PUK, were armed forces *and* political parties at the same time. In addition, lines between 'civilian' and 'military' party members have always been fluid. Given that UPF is constituted from previous PUK/70 and KDP/80 members, a continuation of cultural patters from previous units in the new, unified structure is not surprising[166]. Consequently, exploring how parties operate and which cultural patterns can be revealed from their priorities, actions and worldview is equally as relevant for military merger as is understanding the prevalent military culture.

Based on the direct and indirect descriptions provided by unified soldiers, political parties have three crucial cultural patterns in relation to the armed forces: Firstly, as one interviewee expressed it, *'they see the power not by the people but by the military'*. This power, provided by the maintenance of armed forces, is projected on dominating the law, the elections and the economy. As several soldiers noted, parties and their members see themselves above the law, because *'here force makes law'*. In the same trend, maintaining armed forces is seen as a way to ensure votes in the upcoming elections - both via the threat potential of using force and via the incentive to provide income through employment in a peshmerga unit. As one interviewee explains:*'If you have lots of military forces, during election, all these will vote for you.'* A similar logic is seen in economic terms, due to the parties' majority of land ownership and the parties' distribution of industries to loyal (often politburo) members upon their initial self-rule in 1991. Until today, connections to the parties and their leadership - be it through kinship or personal relation - is the ultimate guarantee for legal protection as well as for financial and social insurance. That the reign of the political parties is still omnipotent is highlighted by this statement: '*He is the member of* [name of party deleted for

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[166] Some soldiers also joined UPF directly and others have a background in ISF units. These soldiers are still a minority, though.

sensitivity] *politburo and he got this power from the political party. And they used this power to have like business, ... to take over all the people's land, to kill people, to do what they want.'*

Despite the preeminence of political parties and apparent levels of force they apply (in both military and financial terms), they, secondly, also enjoy a high level of legitimacy in the region. At several occasions pride in party belonging is expressed by unified soldiers. Some expressions of this pride can be perceived indirectly in the way the different parties or 70/UP and 80/UP are compared. Others are straightforward, such as this account by one unified peshmerga: *'If one day there is another party better than my party ... I will join that party. But till* [sic.] *now, I ... think that my party is the best party to serve the Kurdish* [sic.] *and to serve the peshmerga. Because of that I am supporting this party to which I belong.'* A noteworthy aspect in this account is the duality of rationality ('I chose the party which is best for Kurdistan') and belonging. It is not 'the party I serve' or 'the party I support and believe in' but it is 'the party I *belong* to'.

This expression of belonging fits with another notion, which is often encountered when expressing the reverse relationship, from the party to the armed forces; namely the expression of parties '*owning*' the forces. Combining both aspects, the conclusion ought to be that this 'sense of belonging' is less an expression of pure emotional attachment but rather a reference to a degree of mental and physical ownership as well. The extent to which a party 'owns' and influences even *unified* soldiers is shown in a tangible example provided by an interviewee: *'When this commander belongs to this party and this soldier from the same party does something for his party, they will be proud, maybe they will promote him.'* It demonstrates that actions, which show loyalty to the party and its interests (even if they might be contradicting UPF intentions or goals), are still generally rewarded rather than punished. Furthermore, countless examples of 'non-academic' commanders being recruited above 'academic' commanders suggest that party loyalty is valued more than military professionalism.

Beyond pride in belonging to a political party, expressions of loyalty towards the parties' leading families are also encountered. This centralisation of power *within* the party towards one person and their family shows a third cultural pattern. Unified peshmerga demonstrate a particular awareness to the leadership *of* as well as the need for loyalty *to* one particular political leader. Claims of this leader having *'the best interests for Kurdistan in mind'* and of him *'representing the Kurds the best'* are found along calls for more international support to this leader. The intensity of expressions, such as *'until the end of our life, we are ready to sacrifice ourselves for* [our political leader and his family]*'*, demonstrate that the pride in one's party belonging is equally attached to a sense of loyalty and a willingness to sacrifice for this party's leadership. It also points to leadership being still attributed to a person and a bloodline rather than a public office (also see 'leadership culture' below).

To summarise, there are three patterns of political power culture that shape the relation to the armed forces. Firstly, the societal power of political parties is based on the armed forces; the ownership of which makes the parties so rich, legitimate and influential that they in return control the armed forces. Secondly, the political parties show a high level of legitimacy and maintain tight relations to their members - as seen in expressions of pride, loyalty and ownership. Finally, power within the party is centralised towards one leader and his family. Thereby, pride and belonging to the party on the one hand and loyalty to a particular leader and his family on the other are almost equalised; the lines of institution and person are blurred. Particularly this last point allows for a smooth transition to the next subcategory which expands on the prevalent leadership culture in KRI.

Leadership culture

When it comes to leadership, unified soldiers' responses revolve around three issues: the individual person, the duration of their rule and a noteworthy cultural pattern on decision making. The first aspect expands on the above mentioned pride towards individual leaders and party members, stressing the extent of power centralisation in political parties. Expressions range from *'if* [this party leader] *says red, all* [members of this party] *say red'* to *'his name is the party* [emphasis added to underline the original stress]'. Moreover, soldiers report that personal attachment to the leader (e.g.,*'I see*

myself as a slave to the [leader's name] *family'*) can even be inherited (e.g., '*my father followed* [name] *and so do I'*). One reason for personal attachments to be so strong and long lasting, according to unified soldiers, is the duration of a leader's rule.

Given the strong personalisation of power, leadership is often only ceded upon death. And just as loyalty to one person and his family can be inherited, so can leadership be passed on to a relative. A unified peshmerga describes the process as follows: '*I think that one problem in the Kurdistan region, because one person 40, 50 years is present* [sic.]. *When he died,* [sic.] *... his son coming* [sic.]*... saying, "I am a leader"'*. Beyond this cultural pattern of attaching leadership to a person and his bloodline, the duration of leaders' rule itself also has several noteworthy effects. As one unified soldier explains, '*because you see one person stay a long time in* [his position], *the people all ... see this guy as a God'*. Expressing an awareness of the consequences of long leadership, the unified soldier goes on to reflect that this 'God' status has a negative impact on the efficiency and work attitude of followers. Namely, whenever the leader stays in power for a long time, it becomes more important to appeal to the individual leader's preferences and wishes than to pursue hard work diligently. Consequently, the motivation for professionalism decreases and the ground for corruption is prepared.

Beside the addressed cultural patterns of personalisation and duration that seem to characterise the local leadership culture, unified peshmerga also voice several judgements on decision making, which are particularly noteworthy due to their contradictions. Before elaborating on these contradictions though, I first cover those aspects of decision making on which unified soldiers seem to agree. During the interviews, several soldiers mentioned a dislike of MoP and UPF changing their commands. This dislike is especially stressed in more favourable comparisons to the previous party-based units (or ISF), in which one political party ordered one command and then remained with this command until a new one was required. When contemplating the famous expression attributed to Brigitte Bardot that 'only idiots refuse to change their minds', one is left to wonder about the fervent aversion unified peshmerga express towards changing commands. On the one hand, this claim can be interpreted as a cry for a unified command and control (or 'C2' as it is called in military

jargon). On the other hand, the judgement on changing commands being a sign of weakness and incompetence suggest a particular, local cultural pattern.

This assumption of a cultural pattern being the reason for this judgement is further stressed by interesting contradictions unified soldiers show in their assessment *who* should be the ultimate reference for commands (or whose command to ultimately afford obedience to). Among the different responses, three main groups are identified. I call them 'the professionals', 'the loyalists' and 'the rebellious hero'. At the same time as the first group stresses a sense of duty and professionalism by prioritising military hierarchy over any other command, the second group concedes that loyalty can be more pertinent than professionalism, stating that whenever a direct call from the political party would require them to forego their military duty or unity, they would do so. Lastly, the third group disregards both professionalism and party loyalty by placing personal heroism in serving the nation above all. Astonishingly, this act of heroism is interpreted to be both professional (in the sense of serving the main purpose and duty of peshmerga) and loyal (to Kurdistan), as this unique expression demonstrates: '[Name of political leader] *always wants the best for Kurdistan. But, still, I have my brain on my head. So, if I'm fighting in* [a town] *... and I know I have the power to hold the place, and he calls me to retreat, I will not retreat. I am ready to die.'* This particular form of rebellious heroism is encountered again in both commanders and soldiers being judged to need *'their own mind'* in order to be 'good' soldiers and commanders. Albeit contradictory to the professional ethos of discipline and the cultural pattern of being loyal to a political party, national heroism is nonetheless a present value among peshmerga and therefore needs to be accounted for.

A final, connecting aspect for these contradictory judgements on who to follow is that conditionality is placed between the decision and it being obeyed. This conditionality is influenced by three different values (expressed in the three different judgements on who is the ultimate source of authority) as well as by another cultural pattern, which is clearly captured in the following example: *'[Our] commander makes good decisions, so usually his followers follow him* [emphasis added by author to highlight conditionality].' Abiding by this logic, obedience (or the level of discipline in general) seems to be conditioned by the quality of a command. Not only does this

culture of leadership and decision making show how party loyalty or direct interference can impact discipline (i.e., the likelihood of commands being followed) in UPF but it also underlines the wide-ranging effects that values can have on the armed forces.

Conflict management

Conflicts are special moments as they bring to the fore the unspoken, underlying cultural patterns that constitute a society, group or organisation. Unified soldiers' descriptions of moments of conflict, as well as their judgement regarding the right way to resolve a conflict, provide valuable insights into cultural patterns impacting UPF. Two distinct patterns are detected in the data - both of which reiterate previously described cultural traits: a centralisation of leadership and a culture of not talking about controversial subjects in public.

Unified peshmergas' views on conflict and appropriate conflict management (once again) stress that leadership and decision making is attached to a few powerful individuals. In the event of conflict, this position is most often connected to *one* leader on each side. '*Whenever something has happened, back then, we used to go back to Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani - they would solve problems by a phone. Big problems. But since Talabani* [died] *... things* [got] *somehow complicated.*[167]' Although this example explains the past, similar wishes are also expressed for the future. One leader to rule fairly and equally over everyone is still considered a precondition for harmony. Similar stress on leaders and their centrality to conflict management is implied in expressions of trust. A widely spread idea seems to be that once political parties trust each other and reach political agreement, everything else will fall into place. Whether this 'easy fix' to harmony would actually work, only the future can tell. (The past certainly suggests that this 'agreement-harmony' is only short-lived.) For now, it certainly seems to be the only recognised alternative to one leader controlling everything.

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[167] With the only conception of conflict management being that heads of political parties clarify tension by phone, it is conceivable how any disagreement in public might quickly be considered a loss of control. In addition, this example once more stresses the role mobile phones play in the region.

Interestingly, at this point the difference between perceptions for 'ideal' conflict management and future harmony do not differ, neither across party lines nor across the different ranks. This might not be surprising when one observes the tendency of political parties to blame each other in a manner that resembles 'the pot calling the kettle black'. However, given that there are (or at least *were*) some differences between KDP and PUK[168], this similar vision of conflict management is actually surprising. Given that PUK is a 'union', by name and composition, in contrast to the tribal heritage of KDP, which demonstrates a centralised, personalised leadership culture[169], one might assume that PUK would be more used to public debates than KDP. However, according to the reports gathered, there seems to be little difference between 70/UP and 80/UP in terms of leadership culture. This similarity in vision also extends to the other cultural traits that, whenever there *is* a dispute, the appropriate reaction is to best avoid talking about it altogether. As this cultural pattern has already been described extensively in 'talking culture', I shall not further expand on this matter here.

To summarise, the political culture of KRI is characterised by particular patterns in its conception of power, leadership, decision making and conflict management. In these patterns, the tribal heritage of Kurdish society becomes visible. Both power and authority are centralised in the hands of one person. The authority and influence of this person extends throughout its bloodline, and in the Kurdish context, to the party's politburo. Decisions are taken - ideally quickly and without revision - and conflicts are solved by these leaders. The public is not awarded any particular role in the negotiation. However, given the general culture of avoiding public conflict, this is not experienced as a deficiency but rather as overall harmony. The only cultural pattern able to 'disrupt' this harmony based on one (or two) omnipotent leader(s) is the moment in which one individual, who perceives his duty and loyalty to be exclusively owed to 'Kurdistan', decides that the military or political command, decision or leadership is not in the interest of Kurdistan. These sentiments of rebellion and heroism, while contradictory to

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[168] KDP leadership centred around peshmerga leader, Mullah Mustafa Barzani, and was constituted by several strong tribes. When PUK was created, the part that broke off from KDP was led and composed of urban intellectuals, who, to different degrees and fashion, adhered to communistic ideologies.

[169] KDP is described as *'a family party'* by one interviewee, who stresses that this party could never fracture as much as PUK (already before, but even stronger after Jalal Talabani's death), noting their intermarriages and strong sense of family unity as the main reasons for his opinion.

the other dominant cultural patterns, is equally present among unified peshmerga and therefore needs to be taken into account.

5.2.3. Military culture

Given the centrality of 'military culture', the presentation of these findings constitutes one of the most extensive subchapters of this dissertation. To aid the oversight for readers, I shall therefore first explain the structure of this section. The presentation of data revolving around 'military culture' is organised in three parts. The first part, 'commanders and their connections to the party', addresses, as the name suggests, a particular connection between military commanders and political parties. In this connection, two cultural patterns stand out. The one revolves around the extent of power individual commanders are reported to have, while the other regards the relationship between commanders and their deputies. Part two, 'commanders, soldiers and armed forces', subsumes a particular line of questioning applied during the interviews, which was aimed at uncovering unified peshmerga's values and beliefs by enquiring about characteristics which constitute a good commander, a good soldier and good armed forces. The data will be presented along the same tripartite fashion. Finally, the third part focuses on the 'military work ethics'. As the name suggests, this section explores values and customs about work ethics - including professionalism and discipline. Thereby, as always, I maintain that understanding the local conception of the term (what unified peshmerga make of professionalism and discipline) is more relevant than any dictionary definition or theoretical conception. However, as a reference, dictionary's definitions will be presented alongside the presentation of data gathered from unified soldiers. A particularly interesting, 'local', expression of work ethics revealed during the interviews, is found in the term *'academic'*. 'Academics' are contrasted with *'non-academics'* in a fashion that leads to conclude that 'being an academic' is the Kurdish expression for what dictionaries and scholarship call 'military professionalism'. This concept shall therefore also be regarded in an additional section.

Part one: Commanders and their connections to the party

It has already been noted on several occasions that political parties in the KRI emanate an overwhelming power on almost every aspect of life - including on UPF. The

particular connection with peshmerga forces has also already been historically described as somewhat of a chicken-and-egg question. As with the poultry paradox, the answer to the peshmerga-party duality is evolution. Just as some 'politicians' fought in the mountains, 'soldiers' later became influential politicians. If any of these two had to be put first, it would have to be peshmerga - at least as far as the past is concerned[170]. Until today, as we have seen in Chapter 3 and in 'power culture', the political parties rely on armed forces and the military (including UPF) is still impacted by political parties in return.

With this background, it is not surprising that one of the (main) channels of influence to the armed forces for political parties are the commanders. Before turning to the particular cultural patterns implied in this relationship, it is worth describing the connection itself a bit further. Two examples of this connection immediately come to mind when studying the region. Firstly, when the frontline with ISIS was split into eight sections, four sections covered the north-western, KDP territory and four others the south-western, PUK territory. In addition, all eight sections were staffed by members of the respective party's leadership circles. Secondly, the 50/50 structure of both the first and the second unification, whilst assuring a duality and symmetry of power between the parties, also creates a division within the unified force that (depending on the commander and situation) can resemble two separate entities in one.

Two additional dimensions of these connections were frequently stressed during the interviews: recruitment and corruption. Both of these come in different forms. Regarding recruitment, it can be the political party which recruits loyal commanders in order to ensure control over unified units, but there are also political members which are said to use their connections to become commanders. The reasons for the latter can be anything from personal glory, to the salary or opportunities for corruption. Corruption is a widely acknowledged, yet rarely openly talked about phenomenon in the region. True to fashion, reports by unified soldiers are vague. Yet, several interviewees highlighted their knowledge and the presence of *'thieving commanders',* who can operate freely as

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[170] This judgement even holds up in factual terms, as the KDP was founded in *August* 1946, while the peshmerga were named the official armed forces of the Mahabad Republic upon its independence in *January* 1946.

they are under the legal protection of a political party. With the connection between political parties and commanders established in the provided examples, I move to describing two cultural patterns implied in this relationship.

The power of commanders

'There is a saying [in the Kurdish region]: *"Whatever the commander wants, is our order",'* one unified soldier notes on the question how powerful commanders are (especially at the rank of *'amid'* and *'liwa'*). Even though this statement is not out of the ordinary from other military cultures, the *extent* of power Kurdish commanders have is astonishing. Not only do they control work schedules, discipline and punishment, as most commanders do around the world, but they step in as the deciding factor in every aspect in which MoP does not yet have the institutional capacity to deliver. According to reports, in UPF, the commander decides on the uniform - when it is to be worn, how it is to be worn as well as how it is to be purchased[171]; on the composition of the unit - if the commander appreciates 'academics', he will hire 'academics', if he does not, there might not be a single academic in his unit; on how his unit works - in all dimensions, from trust and equality to corruption; and he even decides who is considered an enemy.

Beyond these examples, there are two noteworthy cases to reinforce this almost absolute power of commanders. Both of these cases address different legal aspects, thereby highlighting a connection between the categories 'commanders' and 'law'[172]. The first case is provided by a unified soldier whose account I shall not repeat in order to shield him from any consequences that may result from him having shared this story with me. The outcome of the case was that the commander of this judicial case ended up being both the defendant as well as his own judge. Although this story cannot be repeated due to security reasons, it underscores the point already made: commanders have almost unlimited powers. In contrast, the second case does not deal with the execution of law but instead speaks through a particular legislation.

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[171] Given MoP does not yet have the capacity to provide all unified peshmerga with uniforms, they are either bought individually or, depending on the commander, bought per unit, in which case the money is taken from the salary.

[172] This connection reminds about the political parties' unique position of operating above the law and reaffirms both the party-law and the party-commander connection.

In 2010, upon the official call to unify PUK/70 and KDP/80, a law was passed that states that any peshmerga may join the unified forces by his own will *and without* the PUK/70 or KDP/80 commander's permission. Demonstrated by a now-unified soldier, who followed this call and individually decided to leave his former unit to join UPF, I was explained how easy the process of switching was due to this law. Turned upside down, the passing of this law emphasises the power commanders have in PUK/70 and KDP/80. After all, why else would it be necessary to specify that one may switch the forces, no matter whether the previous commander agrees to this choice or not. Based on this second example, I conclude that the commanders' extraordinary level of power is a phenomenon not unique to UPF but instead part of a wider cultural pattern.

The commander-deputy relationship

For leaders to have deputies is a normal custom in most military and civilian institutions. The noteworthy difference about this relationship in the KRI's case is that, often, the commander and the deputy have the same job description. Not only do their responsibilities overlap but they also both hold equal amounts of power. This power, however, only applies to half of the unit. As one unified soldier explains: '*They have to work together but they are ... saying, "you do not come to my way, I do not come to your way; you do your job, I do my job. That is it. I am commander of the half and you are commander of the half* [sic.]. *You give order of the half, you give order of the half* [sic.]*."*' This division between commander and deputy is further underpinned by the 50/50 structure of UPF merger. With commander and deputy being from different parties, it begs the question whether this structure was established to ensure a balance between both entities or whether it provides the opportunity for each party to keep an eye on the other. Either way, reports from unified soldiers about division coming *'from above'* are manifold. In the end, it depends on the personal relationship between the commander and the deputy, whether the unit acts in a unified manner or not.

This division between commander and deputy has far-reaching consequences. Aside from the obvious lack of C2, particularly professional soldiers are often discouraged from joining UPF in the first place. *'In 2010, they announced that they will make one unified peshmerga and they build MoP ... And I did not decide in the beginning to join, because I said I do not believe, I do not think that this works.'* When

aware of the division and accustomed to C2 either in ISF or in PUK/70 and KDP/80, it is difficult for professional soldiers to consider working under such circumstances. In addition, the politicisation of this division further incentivises differentiation along party lines and 'easy fixes' to either blame the other side for a unit's mistake or to make any form of discipline about political bias.

With this connection between political parties and commanders established, the continuing divisions and politicisation of UPF becomes understandable. At the same time, I argue, this connection only remains at the surface of UPF organisational culture. Therefore, it is at this point that I look even more in-depth. If commanders connect so strongly to political parties, do the values of unified soldiers appreciate and support this connection or do they criticise and reject it? To uncover the values behind official structures and connections, I developed a special line of enquiry - the findings of which are presented in the next section.

Part two: Commanders, soldiers and armed forces

The second part addressing military culture is formed on the background of a particular line of questioning during the interviews. In an attempt to uncover unified peshmerga's values and beliefs in military institutions and its individual components, I asked every interviewee to name the three most important characteristics that constitute a good commander, a good soldier and good armed forces[173]. The answers were then complied and while the order in which each soldier enumerated the characteristics was still accounted for, the greater pattern across unified soldiers' responses yielded even more valuable insights. To present these insights, this part is structured along the following principle: I will address 'commander', 'soldier' and 'armed forces' one after the other. In each section, I will first present the most valued characteristics, according to all compiled data, before providing additional information relevant to the understanding of unified peshmergas' judgements.

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[173] One could have also chosen to ask for what makes a 'bad' commander, soldier or armed force. However, given the focus on identifying the idea(l) of military unity, the positive formulation is considered more adequate.

Commanders

As we have seen in 'part one', commanders play a central role in UPF's military culture. The three main characteristics which constitute a 'good' commander, according to unified peshmerga are bravery, equality and the quality of his decisions. Additional characteristics are (in the order of their frequency) his personality, impartiality to party influence, leadership skills, a high level of education and experience. He should also be hard working, fear inspiring, honest, clever, fit, disciplined and knowledgable as well as have a love for his country, loyalty to the job and include others' advice in his decision making.

Some of these characteristics are worth a closer look. In UPF culture, 'bravery' is defined by a commander's readiness to die. Any sign of 'running away' is considered a weakness. Even if it is a strategic retreat (which might still be interpreted as 'running away' by inferiors), it is likely to cost the commander his reputation. The centrality of bravery to the respect a commander receives is clearly summarised in the following statement: '*Bravery and courageous* [sic.][are the most important characteristics]*, because if you are not brave … even if you have a lot of information and vision and you are physically* [fit]*,* [your soldiers] *will not respect you'.*

'Equality' refers to the way a commander should treat his soldiers. Expressions of equality show a range from some commanders not wearing their military ranks and '*sitting among their soldiers* [as though] *they are one of them'* to the request that a commander should '*come from the unit'* (having grown up slowly along the ranks). Another perspective on equality is expressed in the following metaphor:

> [It is] *like in a family: the children respect the parents, younger kids respect their older siblings, but all of them view mother and father as equal. And the parents view all their children in the same way. The parents feel responsible for the children and always hope that they will be happy.*

This metaphor shows that equality and hierarchy do not have to be contradictions. Just as younger children (new recruits) can have more respect for their older siblings (senior soldiers), they can also assist each other and refer to their parents (the commanders) equally. Further, commanders can - and should - regard all soldiers in their unit in an

equal manner. The treatment of each can, just as with children, differ according to the individual soldier's behaviour, but the sense of responsibility should be maintained equally across all inferiors.

'The quality of a commander's decision' refers to a particular cultural pattern of leadership and decision making which has already been covered above. It will therefore not be repeated here. Instead, one characteristic which is worth addressing is 'the personality' of the commander. This personality is defined predominantly along the factors 'respect' and 'empathy'. Connected to each other as well as to the idea of 'equality', the noteworthy aspect is that the factor 'respect' seems to be disputed among unified soldiers. Some stress the need for professionalism and hierarchy and others highlight the need for interpersonal respect - *'he should respect your person, your personality not the stars in your shoulders'*.

This role of respect is also reiterated in additional conversations on when and why commanders receive respect. Three patterns are particularly noteworthy: the need for a commander to lead up front, the personalisation of leadership and cultural hurdles that commanders face. 'Leading up front' is connected strongly to the level of respect a commander receives from his units. At several occasions, unified soldiers pointed out that Kurdish commanders are *'different from European or American commanders'*, because they lead their units from the front - not *'from an office'* or *'a computer'* far behind the frontlines[174]. This comparative distinction stresses a level of pride that underlines the relevance for a commander to lead his units by example - *'in front of all of them'*. The centrality of 'being physically present' is further underlined by not just applying to the immediate commander of a unit but it also extending to the wider political leadership, as the following comparison between PUK/70 leaders and the former Minister of Peshmerga demonstrates.

> *In the last five years, whenever there was any conflict or war, … Sheikh Jaffar* [PUK/70 leader] *was there, personally. He was constantly there. And he sent his people to observe everything. So, he did a real leadership. … Mustafa Said*

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[174] As much as peshmerga often 'look up' to international forces, when it comes to the 'willingness to die', a clear distinction and preference for their own culture of sacrifice becomes visible.

> *Quadir* [the previous Minister of Peshmerga]'s *decisions were not accepted a lot. ... he was only once at the frontline. ... But Sheikh Jaffar and* [Kosrat] *Rasul* [both PUK/70] *are there every week.*

Personal presence is seen as an expression of leadership and care. In return, it provides the leader with respect and loyalty. This cultural trait and connection between presence, leadership and loyalty is so strong that the individual leader becomes almost irreplaceable. '*He did a real leadership. And then someone comes from another party and wants to do this* [i.e., lead], *the forces will not just accept that.*' While an in-depth analysis of this cultural phenomenon will be provided in 'discussion of findings', it is already worth mentioning that this 'personalisation of leadership' (that we have also encountered in 'political (party) culture') demonstrates a low level of institutionalism - in the sense that the individual person is still more valuable than the institutional 'role' or 'office' and can simply not be exchanged.

Finally, even when a commander has both the office and the leadership *cachet*, he is still confronted with cultural hurdles that need to be accounted for. Such cultural peculiarities can be found in the necessary respect that needs to be awarded to elder's (which can impact efficiency and discipline[175]) and in a tendency of relaying responsibility[176] (a phenomenon already previously observed). An additional cultural hurdle can be seen in the differentiation between 'professionals' and 'crowd-pleasing favourites'. This differentiation arises from a duality of values present in UPF. On the one hand, 'academic' quality and professional skills are sought for. On the other hand, commanders who are *'a part of their unit'* and *'equal among their soldiers'* are also valued. Whilst the combination of knowledge, skill and sociability *can* be found in one commander, whenever this is not the case (and particularly when the difference in character is seen between a commander and his deputy), the 'clash' between both values becomes a challenge for daily business.

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[175] This cultural trait is most often reported in the context of younger, 'academic' commanders having to order older, 'non-academic' peshmerga: *'Sometimes if you give them an order ... they will tell you "I was in the military, when I was your age!" They are older than you, so you cannot deal with them as you want.'*

[176] To provide an example: *'The thing ... with non-academics, ... he tells you to do something and you know it is wrong; you do it anyway - if it succeeded* [sic.]*, he gets the credit, if it does not, you get the blame.'*

Soldiers

According to unified peshmerga, a 'good' soldier has two primary, two secondary and an array of additional characteristics. The dominant qualities ascribed to a stellar soldier are discipline and posture. On a secondary level, education and training, as well as steadfastness and adaptability are mentioned. Additional characteristics include (in the frequency of being mentioned) bravery, trust, good equipment, a strong medical record, honesty, intelligence, being informed, the ability for teamwork, having a fighter's spirit and respect. I will proceed by first describing the most relevant characteristics before turning to additional context mentioned in the interviews regarding the qualities of 'good' soldiers.

'Discipline', or the ability to follow orders, is seen to be the cornerstone of good soldering. Given that this quality is extensively elaborated on, in part three below, I will refrain from expanding on it here. 'Posture' is a regularly referred to quality and characteristic of a 'good' soldier. Descriptions range from clothes and shoes to physical fitness and to a correct appearance in military uniform (e.g., the correct display of rank). Noteworthy at this point is that despite 'discipline' being named more often overall, 'posture' is most frequently named as the primary characteristic. This shows a stark contrast to the commander - the judgement of which relies solely on matters of character. In contrast, the soldier is judged more by his appearance. Even after a first impression, a soldier is not judged by his personality, but by his level of 'training and education'. Here, the stress lies on the function a soldier ought to provide, rather than on his personal abilities. A soldier is expected to be an expert in his field (e.g., engineering, medicine or artillery), mentally and physically prepared, and educated enough not to attempt to *shoot a terrorist in 2000 m* [distance] *by* [sic.] *AK47*'. 'Steadfastness and adaptability' echo the need for a soldier to function, as unified peshmerga stress endurance and the readiness '*to do whatever is needed'* as a central characteristic of 'good' soldiers as well.

Despite this strong focus on exterior factors and function, unified soldiers concede that *'a true soldier depends on the person'*. As one interviewee notes: *'Discipline comes first and* [courage]. *If the soldier has these two, … the commander can teach him anything …* [but] *these things you cannot teach …* [He] *should have*

them.' This matter of 'personality' is also brought up in a wider discussion among unified peshmerga about the motivation that should guide someone to become 'peshmerga' in the first place. A love for Kurdistan and the nation is mentioned most frequently as the best (and sometimes as the only acceptable) reason to become peshmerga. Some also mention a necessary love for the job. In general, the question of becoming peshmerga 'as a job' is contested, though. On the one hand, there are those 'doing it for the job' who seek to become a soldier out of love for the military (with 'job' meaning 'profession' or 'occupation' in this context). On the other hand, there are some 'doing it for the job' who join the peshmerga not to fight or to be a soldier but to receive a salary (with 'job' meaning 'income'). Unified peshmerga agree for this being the worst reason to become a peshmerga. In comparison, criticism for being motivated to become peshmerga for a party or an individual person is minor.

Armed forces

Having ascribed values to what defines a good commander and soldier, I also looked at my interviewees' perspective on what constitutes 'good' armed forces. Interestingly, in regard to armed forces, no distinct pattern of 'primary' and 'secondary' characteristics appeared. Instead, a separation between structural requirements and attributes placed on the people who make up the armed forces are distinguished. I shall proceed to present the data in this order.

The characterisation of armed forces from a 'structural' perspective is frequently undertaken in comparison to the current UPF set up - turning the naming of characteristics more into a list of future requirements. This list is dominated by an overall call for a different structure: The number of people in UPF, general organisation, management and logistics, as well as the need for a unified command and control (C2) are frequently mentioned. Other structural requirements are recognised in the general need for budget and infrastructure, a retirement system, reliable allies and a reorientation from generalist units towards more specialisation in order to create a force based on the division of labour. As a second essential quality, a detachment from political parties is listed among the requirements for the future. Equally as recurrent is the call for military unity as a condition for 'good' armed forces. Other states are regularly given as reference, to underline the normality of one country, such as

Germany, having *'sixteen autonomous regions but only one army'*. Beyond a different structural set up and a unified force without political-party interference, technology, weaponry and, in general, equipment are also highlighted as necessary preconditions for 'good' armed forces.

Besides structure, unified peshmerga frequently stress that good armed forces are constituted by good people. *'Good leadership'* and *'experienced officers'* are equally mentioned as good soldiers. In all, the willingness to sacrifice and the need to always be prepared is underlined[177]. While already partially covered in the section 'commander' and 'soldier' above, it is still worth noting which attributes are mentioned as necessary for 'good people'. The features listed in this context are training, discipline and a willingness to protect everyone - first among them, the nation, then the territory and then everyone in the land regardless of their political party, their ethnic or tribal origin and their religion.

Having looked at the different components that make up an armed force, and having presented the unified soldier's views and judgement on them, it is time to address how these different components are supposed to work with each other. This is accomplished in the next part, 'military work ethics'.

Part three: Military work ethics

The terms 'professionalism' and 'discipline', while common concepts in any military language, do not exist in Kurdish. Instead, Arabic or English words are applied. Beyond the words themselves, also their meaning seem not to be widely known yet[178]. However, unified soldiers kept repeating one word in this context, which, according to their definition, can be understood as a local synonym for professionalism (despite it also being an English-language idiom): *'academic'*. 'Academics' are soldiers and commanders who have graduated from a military academy. They are contrasted to *'non-*

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[177] A constant state of alert is a common feature in armed forces. However, so far, peshmerga have a history and culture of activating only when danger ensues. Therefore, while it might sound rather banal to note the need for 'always being prepared', this request actually indicates the need for a strong cultural shift.

[178] Several blurred lines between the definitions and some reactions of unified soldiers indicate a low level of usage of these terms.

academics', who are described as those soldiers and commanders who did not attend an academy and who (usually) received their position due to some form of favouritism. Given the tripartite nature of distinction on behalf of unified soldiers, this part addresses all three aspects.

Before doing so, it is important to note that 'professionalism' and 'discipline' were topics specifically identified for the interviews. The differentiation and relationship between 'academics' and 'non-academics', in contrast, is a category developed exclusively on the basis of data. The original intent of raising the question of professionalism and discipline was based on personal judgement. I wish I could account for my choice to a tangible academic reference, but the matter of fact is that this choice derives from a gut-feeling upon reviewing all possible factors of military culture I had come up with on the basis of everything I have ever read on war and everything I had observed in the KRI up to that point. I do not regret following this intuition, for it ended up yielding an important result of this research.

For both professionalism and discipline, the terminological definition stands at the centre of attention. In each section I present those attributes that unified peshmerga associate with each term. As always, I underline that understanding the local conception is more relevant than any dictionary definition. As a reference, I will, however, also provide a dictionary's definition in a second part of each section. The final section, 'academics and non-academics', summarises the descriptions, differentiations and accounts of frustration collected from my interviewees on that subject.

Professionalism

Unified peshmerga explain professionalism along two dimensions. On the one hand, they reference physical and external factors. On the other hand, they point to traits of character and personality. Accordingly, I present these dimensions in separate lines of argument. In both cases, the different aspects are named in the order of their stress and frequency. Concluding from the data set, while a wider range of personal attributes is mentioned, structural, physical, external factors are clearly more stressed in the unified peshmerga's definition of professionalism.

When it comes to 'physical and external' factors, as I call them, the most recurring answer to the question how to define 'professionalism' or a 'professional soldier' is simply *'look at him'*. A professional can be discerned from non-professionals by the way he talks, walks, stands and works. Or as one unified soldier illustrates it: *'When the civilian comes with us in the bazar, they always say, "why you are so quick in walking* [sic.]*?"'* With this example he refers to the difference in physical fitness as well as to the habit of different walking speeds. Beside these physical dimensions of professionalism, technology and equipment are second in being most frequently mentioned. In order to be professional, it is argued, one needs the same weaponry as the enemy, advanced communication technology and a suitable budget to fit these needs. Finally, the military structure itself is mentioned as both a hurdle and precondition for professionalism. When the armed forces are run by a government - efficient and capable of providing services (from uniforms to retirement) - then one can talk of professionalism according to unified peshmerga's descriptions. Solid procedures based on uniformly applied laws, from first recruitment to the process of turning a civilian into a soldier, are also mentioned as part of a professional structure.

Next to these practical, physical and structural elements, also personal factors of character and attitude are mentioned. Three overall clusters can be identified in the data. The first one stresses discipline. The need to obey orders and follow military rules is equally listed here, as is self-responsibility (which also constitutes part of the unified peshmerga's definition of discipline[179]). The second cluster focuses on education. '*Academics*' are equally mentioned, as is continuous training in order to make someone professional. The third cluster subsumes several aspects that can be captured under the wider description of 'personal attitude'. *'To be a good fighter'* and bravery are mentioned among factors such as teamwork, respect for superiors and a necessary loyalty for the nation. In addition, the need to remain without political influence *'when in military clothes'* as well as the honour of not using favouritism to advance one's career are also listed.

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[179] For further explanation refer to section 'discipline' below.

To provide a holistic reference and comparison, a dictionary's definition on 'professional' and 'professionalism' is equally consulted as is the academic literature's definition on 'military professionalism' as a concept. For the dictionary definition, I forego specifying the different usages of the verb, the noun and the *-ism,* as both terms are similarly defined. Instead, I focus on those aspects relevant to understand the different nuances that 'professionalism' comprises. The dictionary displays two noteworthy nuances. On the one hand, it defines professionalism as '*a high level of skill and competence'* (Lexico 2019b/c). On the other, the definition distinguishes an amateur from a professional as being someone who performs the same task as an *occupation*. Therefore, according to the dictionary, a professional is someone who carries out an occupation with a high level of skill and competence (for monetary rewards).

Comparisons with the unified peshmerga's definition can already be drawn at this point. In order to provide an even more solid basis, however, I also consult an academic-literature definition of the concept 'military professionalism'[180]. Literature does not seem to be united on the definition of what exactly constitutes military professionalism (Sarkesian 1981). However, most literature returns to a 1957 definition by Samuel P. Huntington. Huntington defined three characteristics as the cornerstones of professionalism: Firstly, 'expertise', understood as specialised knowledge and skill, taught through a broad and prolonged education. Secondly, 'responsibility', which refers both to a social responsibility and sense of 'higher calling' to serve the nation. This responsibility is said to be exhibited as a goal and motivation by armed forces and individual soldiers alike. Finally, the third characteristic of professionalism is 'corporateness'. As the name suggests, it compares the armed forces to the functioning of a corporation. What characterises corporations and the concept of corporateness is that they have clear rules and requirements for entry, promotion as well as for performance standards. In addition, it is said that they also develop their own '(sub)cultures'[181] (Huntington 1985).

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[180] A literature review of military professionalism is not the goal of this comparison. A comprehensive discussion of military literature on professionalism is unnecessary for two reasons. Firstly, the literature focuses predominantly on civil-military relations, which are secondary to this dissertation. Secondly, the disagreements of academic literature are not relevant to understand what unified peshmerga make of 'professionalism'.

[181] Subculture can be read as a military culture which is different from the wider socio-political culture. In addition, there can also be different subcultures within the armed forces.

Both, the dictionary's and Huntington's definition, compare to the unified peshmerga's understanding of what 'being professional' means. Skill and competence, or as Huntington calls it, 'expertise', is echoed in the unified soldiers definition when stressing the need of *'being academic'*. The responsibility for society, that Huntington identifies as the armed forces' motivation, can also be seen in UPF - especially in soldiers' judgement that a willingness to sacrifice for the nation is the best motivation to become peshmerga. In a way, the request for weaponry, technology and overall functioning structures can also be seen as an expression of wanting to deliver on this responsibility. Also the sense of 'corporateness' is stressed in any UPF soldier's explanation of necessary structures for the unified force.

Only the differentiation between an amateur and someone doing the same thing as an occupation are not mentioned by unified peshmerga. While a 'visible' difference between a civilian and a professional soldier is expressed in the example of different walking speeds as well as in the overall notion of *'look at him* [and you will know whether he is a professional or not]', there is no particular sense of 'professionalism' being associated with 'it being a job'. This lack of awareness on the occupational dimension of professionalism can be due to the fact that 'doing it for the job' is often paralleled with 'doing it for the salary' - an attitude which is strongly criticised due to its overlap with the 'ghosts' phenomenon. Alternatively, it can also express that being peshmerga as an occupation is considered insufficient, as (for example) the higher calling to serve the nation is considered a better reason to become peshmerga. Either way, it can be concluded that there seems to be little to no connection between 'being a professional' and 'doing something (only) as an occupation'[182].

Discipline

Discipline is most generally described to be '*military law*'. These laws dictate to '*follow orders*' as much as they demand a level of '*self-responsibility*'. The last term requires an explanation. Self-responsibility is described in two different ways; as a sense of duty on the one hand and as independence on the other. To clarify this distinction, two examples

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[182] Note the significant difference this understanding has to the meaning of 'professionalism' in western cultural contexts.

shall be provided. *'Discipline means getting up every morning, shaving your beards, going to your duty from 8am to 1pm; if you see someone who is above you, you salute - this is the discipline,'* is one explanation which stresses a strong sense of duty. In contrast, the following example underlines the need for soldiers to work independently: *'A professional soldier, for me, is the one who is waking without someone watching him. He feels responsible. He is not working because I am their commander, I am watching them.'* The difference between 'a sense of duty' and 'independence' is a matter of nuance. Yet, this nuance underlines the point which both examples make even stronger.

Both examples are seemingly predictable definitions of discipline. However, seeing as the observable, dominant culture in the region is centralisation of leadership - which comes with adherence and constant reference to one's superior - defining discipline as an *independent* sense of duty not only underlines the often expressed lack of discipline in UPF but it also brings to the fore that there are two different cultural patterns clashing underneath the surface of unified structures. This clash is based on two different worldviews between those who understand discipline as independent work and an endogenous sense of duty, and those who see discipline in the context of the prevailing leadership culture, subverting everything below the leader to an extent that one would not move without someone *'watching him'*[183].

A final dimension in the definition of 'discipline' is that some unified soldiers stress it as being a two-way street, affecting both soldiers and commanders alike. This observation is interesting at two levels. Firstly, given that commanders are also asked to lead by example, one is left wondering whether this stress alludes to commanders acting as thought they are 'above (the law)' (including the *'military law'* of discipline) in everyday working contexts. Secondly, there seems to be a different definition of discipline for commanders than for soldiers. For commanders, it is said, discipline means *'to take responsibility for others'*. Therefore, the discipline of the soldier is to follow orders while the discipline of a commander is to look out for his subordinates. Both of these aspects reiterate the power of commanders, already encountered in part one of 'Military Culture'.

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[183] The implications of this cultural difference are reiterated in the culture clash between 'academics' and 'non-academics' (also see Chapter 6).

In defining discipline, the dictionary first distinguishes between the noun and the verb. This distinction is noteworthy insofar as the same word takes a different meaning depending on its function in the text. For the sake of considering 'military discipline', the combination of both definitions is most valuable. Lexico (2019a) defines the noun as *'the practice of training people to obey rules or a code of behaviour'* and *'the controlled behaviour resulting from such training'*. Sometimes this definition is also shortened to *'a system of rules of conduct'*[184]. The verb, in contrast, is defined to mean both '*to train (someone) to obey rules or a code of behaviour*' as well as *'to punish* [someone (*or rebuke formally for an offence*)]'. While at times alluded to in a subordinate clause, the connection between discipline and punishment is revealed in this definition. Whether one disciplines another person or oneself is a secondary matter. Concluding from the dictionary's definitions, discipline is connected to the aspect of training, rules of behaviour, obedience or controlled behaviour as well as to punishment.

Comparing the dictionary's definition with that of unified peshmerga, an interesting conundrum is shown. The peshmerga mention (almost) all dimensions that the dictionary lists as different elements of discipline. However, the central connection between discipline and punishment is not mentioned in unified peshmerga's conception of discipline. It is only addressed, once the question of weakness and improvement of discipline is raised[185]. This conundrum regarding punishment shows an awareness of the factor on the one hand but does not attach it to the *definition* of discipline on the other hand. Another factor, raised by the dictionary, which is entirely overlooked by the interviewees' definition is the emphasis on 'practice and training' of a particular behaviour. The lack of understanding discipline as a need for repetition, also called '*drill*' in the military context, is not surprising when observing the prevailing system of training in UPF.

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[184] Fairly repetitive definitions and the usage of discipline for *'a branch of knowledge, typically one studied in higher education'* (Lexico 2019c) is omitted here due to its lack of relevance.

[185] Upon asking what factors weaken and strengthen discipline, unified soldiers report that the ability to punish is equal to the ability to enforce discipline - just as the ability to control someone is connected to the ability to trust that person (refer to section 'trust' below).

Academics and non-academics

As mentioned above, the term '*academics*' derives from unified peshmerga regularly repeating it. Particularly upon crossing this term on several, unrelated occasions, I drew the conclusion that it is generally acknowledged in the region. In discussing 'academics' and 'non-academics', I found it most useful to this research's purpose to compile all the different mentions of characteristics and explanations along with comparisons between the two. I will proceed by, first, providing a description of what constitutes an 'academic' before, in a second section, addressing 'non-academics'. Finally, frustrations and estimates on academic/non-academic distributions among UPF are also addressed.

'*Academics*' are generally defined to be those soldiers and commanders who have attended and graduated from a military academy. Beyond being reported to be more educated and disciplined, they also share beliefs in merit over favouritism, on taking commands from a political party being dishonourable and on corruption being harmful. Another aspect they mostly share, as one soldier points out, is, on average, a younger age than 'non-academics'[186]. This dimension of age is particularly stressed in reference to the civil war. '[Academics are] *not like the old ones, like those who caused the civil war; there is a chance that they can cause it again, but those who have become the victim of the civil war, there is no chance for them* [to repeat the civil war].' A particular frustration for these 'young academics', then, is not just to have political favouritism recruiting 'non-academics' above them but they also run into the cultural hurdle of age which makes it difficult to command battle-hardened 'mountain peshmerga' (consult footnote 175).

In contrast to 'academics', the term '*non-academics*' covers literally every other peshmerga and soldier in the region. As a result, the range of what constitutes a 'non-academic' is wide. Abstracting the different accounts provided by interviewees, I suggest there are three types of 'non-academics': 'mountain peshmerga', 'illiterates' and 'nepotists'. All of these types can be combined within one person but they can also occur individually or in any other constellation. The term 'mountain peshmerga' I

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[186] From my own observation, I can support this judgement. However, I would like to add a nuance based on another observation, namely that there are 'older academics' as well - some who even lived and fought through the civil war. These, to my observation, are usually graduates from the military academy in Baghdad who later joined UPF.

mostly encountered with a positive connotation of respect. The term refers to those battle-hardened soldiers who fought in the 1991 liberation or even at previous times of Kurdish struggle. While their ways of soldiering are said to still reflect the guerrilla past and is therefore outdated for modern battles, they are also the only type of 'non-academics' to be recognised for the positive effect they bring to young (and even 'academic') soldiers. *'Old* [mountain] *peshmerga ... can give high morale to your* [units]*,'* one interviewee explains the *cachet* they carry.

In contrast, the term 'illiterates' refers to a group of 'non-academics', who struggle with problems arising from their low level of basic education. Descriptions range from commanders not being able to read or write official communiques with MoP, to some peshmerga who have difficulties to count their own salary and others who are illiterate in every sense of the word. Often, these 'illiterates' compensate for their lacking capability by employing someone capable of reading, writing or translating. They also rely on friends or relatives to assist them. Yet, despite them managing to 'function' within an increasingly modern military institution, the arising inefficiencies are frequently named as frustrations by 'academic' soldiers.

Finally, 'nepotists' are 'non-academics' who, in contrast to the other two types, are usually young and mostly educated. They are placed in a certain rank not by military merit though, but by nepotism - hence the name.

> [One] *problem* [with] *non-academics* [is, that] *only 10 to 20 per cent have fought in the mountains. There are non-academics my age* [mid 30] *who are superiors. ... One thing we are afraid of, maybe this phenomena will be continuous ... because if they give ranks to people the same as my age without any academic background, without any fighting experience,* [16 October 2017] *can happen at any time.*

The implications of nepotism trumping merit are far reaching. Not only do they risk unity due to their strong loyalties to the political party, they also infringe on the efficiency and safety of the armed forces at war. Another 'academic' reports: '*If it's summer, your clothes should be yellow, if it's spring, your clothes should be green. But if they are non-academics, you see them. They wear blue or red jackets ... I cannot stand to be with them.*'

Frustration and disappointment are sentiments often encountered when discussing 'non-academics' with 'academic' peshmerga. Most often, these frustrations are reported at an operational level - like the example above. Additionally, irritations also expand to 'non-academics' being recruited *above* academics and thereby impacting the level of discipline and effectiveness as well as the overall level of political influence in the respective unit[187]. Looking at the extent and intensity of the presented frustrations, it becomes clear that a clash of cultures is brewing between 'academics' and 'non-academics'. Several aspects are worth reviewing in this context; in particular those who combine the two core matters of the conflict: operational effectiveness and political-party influence.

Three different examples are provided to exemplify the tensions between an increasing need of operational effectiveness and an (apparent) attempt by political parties to maintain influence over UPF. The first example is based on an estimate provided by an interviewee that training centres are staffed with '*between 90 to 100 per cent academics*', while, on average, the ratio in brigades is estimated to be '*the other way around*'. While assessments on the amount of 'academics' in UPF vary greatly (with the most optimistic account considering it to be around 70 per cent), an overall differentiation between training centres, military academies and specialised units[188] in comparison to 'all other units' can still be seen. Whether this differentiation derives from a consideration of efficiency (namely that 'academics' are put to better use in training 'non-academics', therefore spreading the skills most efficiently) or instead a strategic calculation (while political parties want their soldiers to be well taught, they also want to maintain control over them, therefore they staff the frontlines primarily with loyalists) is impossible to know. Either way, I argue that an analysis of the amount and use of 'academic' soldiers, now and in the future, can yield important conclusions to underlying political intentions.

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[187] As always, also the level of 'academics' per unit depend largely on the commander. Reports range from '[in my unit] *80 per cent are academics ... this is no coincidence, because our main commander, he respects academics and if there is an empty space for new soldiers to be hired, he says, "I am not accepting non-academics."'* to '[in my unit] *they mostly cared about those non-academics'*.

[188] For example, intelligence units - they are said to be small (10 people) but fully staffed with 'academics'.

A second example, which rather tends towards the suggestion of political parties having little intention of relieving the armed forces of their influence, is that, until today, one needs a political recommendation to attend any military academy in KRI. Whether one attends the academy in *Zakho* (in the KDP north) or the academy of *Qalachulon* (in the PUK south) is said to make no difference. Both require some political connections in order to attend a course. In terms of educational outcome, unified soldiers report no significant difference between the academies. They maintain that the crucial difference is not *which* academy someone attends but between 'academics' and 'non-academics'.

A third example, is based on the optimistic account provided by some unified soldiers who notice an increasing awareness and value of 'academic' peshmerga from political parties since the war with ISIS. Some soldiers even observe that political parties send more and more 'nepotists' to the military academy. While I agree that this is good news for military capability and efficiency, I caution against the simplistic equation that attending a military academy is equal to reducing the political parties' influence on UPF. Given that there is still an obvious connection between military academies and political parties, and given that even the most professional peshmerga I had the pleasure of interviewing still expressed a sense of obligation towards dropping everything upon a political party's command, any idea of linearity between attending an academy and the loss of political parties' impact have to be discouraged.

Having defined 'academics', the different types of 'non-academics' and the frustrations and tensions arising between the two, a first conclusion to the relevance of this aspect can be drawn. It becomes apparent that instead of one integration process - between PUK/70 and KDP/80 (or 70/UP and 80/UP) - there is a second integration process in UPF that needs addressing on a vertical level - between 'academics' and 'non-academics'. Due to their difference in values, with meritocracy on the one hand and nepotism on the other, and the expressed intensity of frustrations on the side of 'academics', a clash of culture can be seen brewing underneath UPF structures. It is this culture clash that deserves attention and proactive engagement in any future unification or reform process.

This first conclusion - a point which will be further elaborated on in Chapter 6 - constitutes the main finding for the section called 'military work ethics'. To summarise and review the overall impression gained by unified-peshmerga interviews, three points can be made. Firstly, the definition of both professionalism and discipline differentiate between dimensions of structure and dimensions of character. While the first aspect can, therefore, be certainly addressed with structural measures of reform, the second can only be impacted by a proactive management of UPF organisational culture in the future. Secondly, it is interesting to note that while single accounts on the different definitions vary widely, the amalgamation of all accounts comes close to the dictionary definition. This shows that there is an overall understanding of these concepts, but also that the individual understanding of it can still be improved. Thirdly, an even more pressing matter, according to unified soldiers, is the cultural clash brewing between 'academics' and 'non-academics'. Consequently, I allocate a part of my attention to this clash in the 'discussion of findings' (Chapter 6).

Finally, it is time to conclude on 'military culture' as a whole. 'Military culture' is an extensive subchapter, discussing the bridge between party culture and military culture (or the parties' cultural influence and connection with the armed forces), the different elements constituting UPF (commanders, soldiers and the organisation) as well as the basis of values upon which these different elements work (professionalism, discipline and '(non) academics'). The exploration of 'military culture' shows that there are many challenges within prevalent UPF organisational culture. These are expressed in different values, beliefs and patterns of behaviour of all the different types of soldiers (and their backgrounds) that constitute the unified forces. Before moving to a deeper analysis and discussion of these patterns, I shall move to review the final three variables which impact UPF culture: trust, tribes and the shadows of civil war.

5.3.4. Other variables: trust, tribes and civil war

Just like 'professionalism' and 'discipline', 'trust', 'tribes' and 'civil war' were topics originally identified for the interviews. Contrary to 'professionalism' and 'discipline', the latter three did not yield many results. When addressing trust, tribal influences or the civil war, interviewees often stressed how little influence these factors have. At first

glance, neglecting these factors altogether seemed warranted. However, given there are some unified soldiers, who *do* acknowledge the persistence of trust issues, tribal influence as well as the shadows of civil war, and seeing how, while officially being denied, tribal heritage and a difficulty of overcoming mistrust due to the past (including the civil war), are visible 'between the lines' in several accounts, these categories cannot be dismissed either. Instead, I summarise the most relevant findings of each subsumed under the heading 'other variables'.

Trust

Accounts of trust vary strongly between those who deny there to be any trust issues between 70/UP and 80/UP and those who provide tangible examples and judgement on prevalent mistrust. Those unified soldiers, who emphasise there to be no issue, refer to three lines of argument: the individual unit and its commanders, a sense of Kurdish nationalism and the political parties. Expressions such as *'we are all Kurds, of course I trust them'* can equally be found as *'trust is not our weak point, our weakness ... is being politically involved'*. These accounts demonstrate that trust can indeed be strong within individual units, no matter whether this trust is based on the commander's leadership or a strong sense of nationalism. In addition, they relay the focus from trust between soldiers to the trust between the political parties, thereby commanding the responsibility up the hierarchy.

In contrast, those who stress a presence and relevance of mistrust predominantly point to political parties and military leadership. The history of the parties[189] (including civil war and, most recently, 16 October 2017[190]), a lack of common vision towards who is an enemy and who is a friend of KRI, as well as different ideas about how to reach the shared vision of 'Kurdistan' in the future are mentioned as core elements of continued mistrust. One particularly noteworthy description of trust also highlights a connection between trust, control and political parties.

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[189] While not mentioned by unified soldiers, studying the history of political parties shows a pattern that leads me to conclude that they largely share a zero-sum-game vision. This means that they cannot conceive 'winning' in any other way than to be the exclusively leading party over all of KRI or *Bashur*. The discovered patterns of local leadership culture, comprising the idea that 'one leader' leads everyone, further support this conclusion.

[190] As one soldier said about October: '*We do not have problems that we are together but now, ... this glass shattered, it cannot be collected. Our trust shattered.*'

For example, now this room is full of [members of my party]. *I do anything, no one can say outside, he did this. But if we have half* [the other party], *half* [my party] [in this room], *if I do something, I do not trust this guy* [from the other party], *maybe he goes out and says something ... Because he is* [from the other party], *I have no power over him. The PDK* [sic., KDP] *leaders they control PDK forces, the PUK leaders they control PUK forces. ... If* [anyone] *says something, you just do whatever you want. You kick him out from military, you put him in jail, you do bad thing about his family. Anything. You kill him. I mean, everything is possible.*

Control, in this example, is shown to derive from the possibility to punish unwanted behaviour - which in turn is strongly linked to party membership. This example underlines, yet again, that even if legislation is increasingly unified in the KRG, the most efficient executive powers seem to remain with political parties. Their executive power is so strong that it even translates into compliance to demanded behaviours before any negative consequences need to be reminded[191].

For unified units, this ability of exerting control over party members translates into the commander and deputy. It is, therefore, said to be based on their relationship, whether unified peshmerga experience trust or maintain a high level of mistrust against each other. Finally, unified soldiers conclude that the best way to increase trust is to strengthen meritocracy (i.e., decrease nepotism, corruption and 'non-academics' in MoP and UPF) and laws as well as to increase punishments for military commanders and political party leaders, in order to decrease the current freedom of party preferences and loyalties to override unified decisions and institutional structures.

Tribes

As countless scholars have pointed out, Kurdish society is constituted by tribes (Bengio 1999, Koohi-Kamali 2003, Stansfield 2003, van Bruinessen 2004, Ronfeldt 2006, Champan 2011, Amarilyo 2014, Kennedy 2015, Ross and Mohammadpur 2016). It is

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[191] To illustrate this point, imagine the difference between driving a car in Erbil and driving a car in any German city. In both areas, safety regulations of traffic laws (as well as the mere presence of road markings) suggest cars to stay within predefined lines. Yet even despite the presence of traffic police being higher in Erbil, German drivers comply more with the demanded behaviour. One can therefore conclude that this particular traffic rule has already reached a point in German culture that no longer requires a reminder of possible punishment (traffic police) in order for the rule to be complied with. Such compliance of behaviour can be observed in KRI regarding soldiers' adherence to (mostly informal) party rules.

therefore not surprising to assume that tribes are still an existing social variable in the KRI[192]. However, I was wondering how much tribes affect the unified forces[193]. Therefore, interviewees were asked for their opinions and accounts. According to the responses I received, tribes play none to only a marginal role in UPF[194] - *'maybe among the higher ranks'* as one unified soldier speculated. Cancian and Fabbe (2017) already found similar results in their quantitative study across different peshmerga forces. However, while tribes per se have little to no impact on UPF, my findings suggest that the *cultural* heritage of tribalism and its effects on armed forces today is actually underestimated.

Tribal heritage indirectly impacts the military forces. Four distinct forms are identified in unified-peshmerga accounts. Firstly, tribal leaders can be made commanders by political parties in order to efficiently draft a large part of the population. Since every tribal leader can stand for several hundred men under his command, by recruiting him, his men will also follow him into battle. In this sense, tribes can show a presence in Kurdish armed forces too. Secondly, senior commanders or 'mountain peshmerga' are said to adhere to 'the old' rules and loyalties towards one party - or, even more so, towards one family or bloodline. Therefore, the tribal heritage is reflected on UPF indirectly through their 'mindsets' (i.e., their values and beliefs which shape their behaviours and decision making).

Thirdly, tribes, clans and kinship in general are directly related to the networks of nepotism (which impact UPF as well). Therefore, even if tribes do not have any particular role or function in UPF per se, the overall blood relation of anyone related to a prominent family or political-party member allows for access to networks of patronage and nepotism that far exceed those of non-blood-related party members or soldiers. (A particular demonstration as to the range of this 'blood power' is suggested

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[192] Recall, Cancian and Fabbe (2017) find that 92 per cent of peshmerga associate with a specific tribe.

[193] The quantitative findings of Cancian and Fabbe (2017), that tribes play no role in military structures, did not discourage me from qualitatively 'checking' on this factor myself.

[194] Reports of soldiers show that tribes are most relevant in operational contexts, when, for example, needing to clear out a village for a battle, one would best convince the *agha* or *sheikh* of the town to do so most efficiently. While these cases may be of marginal impact for UPF, they nonetheless demonstrate the persisting relevance of tribal structure in society until today.

to be seen in the context of 16 October 2017, when members of a leading family, *'who were not even in government'*, negotiated and signed a deal with Baghdad, ISF and PMU.) Finally, tribal heritage can also be seen in the organisational cultural of UPF. The dominant leadership, power and decision-making culture are but three examples of this effect. Another, tangible exemplar of this influence is a military law that stipulates that two brothers cannot be on duty at the same time. This value of the family and the bloodline, which is carried on by the male line in every family, can also be seen in the following case: In UPF regulations it goes unquestioned when the only son of a family insists on operating close to his home town. After all, the connections between families and their sons is still strong in society - a cultural pattern which clearly derives from tribal heritage.

Civil war

Accounts on the effects of civil war are divided. Some suggest that it has no more influence at all. Others give examples of the civil war influencing the unification of peshmerga behind the scenes. As with tribalism, 'civil war' is an aspect which is definitely less prominent than it might have been ten or twenty years ago. However, just as tribes still throw a shadow in the background, so does the civil war.

Those unified soldiers, who insist that the civil war has no more effect, point their reasoning to the following three aspects: the joy that 16 October 2017 did not trigger a civil war, the fact that civil-war effects are '*99 per cent less than in 2003*' and an overarching national identity of all Kurds. Whether this calmth about the past can be attributed to society having moved on or to the cultural pattern of not talking about difficult issues in public is hard to discern. Particularly since there are still others, who *do* report ongoing effects of the civil war.

These unified soldiers provide three examples to demonstrate their point. Firstly, shadows of the civil war are perceived in a *'not too nice feeling'* sitting next to the old enemy upon first entering UPF[195]. As another interviewee noted mater-of-factly: '*if I killed your father or brother, no matter what I do, you can never love me*'. Secondly,

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[195] Recall the expression of a soldier telling me in 2016 that *'my enemy stands next to me'* (see 'Surprise' in 'October').

effects of civil war are identified in *'high-officials' mindsets'* as well as the fact that 'mountain peshmerga' are still given high positions despite being 'non-academic'. These mindsets include the prioritisation of one family or one party over institutional priorities and hierarchies in UPF. Finally, the civil war is said to still influence structures. Among the most obvious are the political parties and their politburos along with the staff of *laq* and *malband*. In UPF, the 50/50 structure of UPF is seen as such a representation as well.

To conclude, 'other variables', such as trust, tribes and effects of civil war, while being further in the background, still have an effect on unified peshmerga. Trust affects daily interactions and behaviours. Tribal heritage is reflected in some laws and customs as well as in the prevailing culture of nepotism. And the shadows of the civil war still hover in the background of senior political and military leadership. Consequently, these factors are included in the cultural analysis of UPF.

5.3. Conclusion: summarising the body of collected data

The 'presentation of findings' covers two important points: it establishes the unified peshmerga's idea(l) of military unity and it contrasts this idea(l) to the daily experience of unification. The first aspect is covered in 'part one', category 'unity'. The second aspect is presented along a myriad of examples, comprised by the categories 'working together', 'October' and 'culture'. The last category, due to its extent and centrality to this research is presented in a separate, second part. It discusses cultural patterns from wider socio-cultural and political-party perspectives as well as from a narrow focus on military culture. In order to holistically capture and review all these aspects in the 'discussion of findings', I want to summarise what unified soldiers say about military unity, how it feels to work in unified units and what cultural patterns shape UPF.

Looking at the extensive body of data, the most important findings for 'the social construction of military unity' are that unified soldiers define 'military unity' as a sense of 'being one' *without* political interference. Instead, an adherence to nationalism and professionalism is required. In achieving these goals, the biggest hurdle is considered to be the political parties. According to unified soldiers' reports, the parties influence MoP and UPF, ranging from recruitment to punishment via the ability to

command 70/UP and 80/UP against UPF's interests as well as to reward exactly this behaviour. Moreover, the lamented problems of inefficiencies in MoP and UPF, the persistence of 'non-academic' commanders and the seeming lack of substantial commitment to unification is also attributed to the political parties. Beyond the parties' interference, regional neighbours, such as Iran, Turkey and Iraq, are said to actively block sentiments of nationalism by encouraging political division - a factor which increases mistrust between the parties and mutual scepticism between unified soldiers.

The level of 'unification' is judged to be superficial. The 50/50 structure of UPF, dismissive expressions about first encounters or reunification, and countless negative examples how 'working together' actually feels like beyond the rhetoric of perfect unification demonstrate this superficiality. In particular, unification is seen to be surface-level only because the divisions along former party lines still persist in the unified structures. The events of 16 October 2017 are named as the most pertinent example to show there are still political armies inside UPF.

Despite the many challenges to unification and despite the separation in October, many unified soldiers, however, refuse to lose hope: *'Yes, we are reunified and yes we will separate again. But we will never again fight against each other.'*[196] Several positive examples of first encounter and working together with optimism for reunification underline the persisting sense of hope. Also, the already achieved progress in comparison to the last ten to twenty years and expectations for the internationally assisted reform program, bringing the unified peshmerga to a new level, are mentioned as sources for optimism.

A factor entirely overlooked in both sceptical and optimistic accounts is 'organisational culture'. This is not surprising, since exploring culture in a military context is not common - neither in the region nor in military literature. In searching for cultural patterns, distinct cultures of power, leadership, decision making and conflict management as well as military culture and remaining traits of tribal heritage were identified.

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[196] This statement encourages the perspective applied by Licklider (2014a) and their measure of unification along the variable 'avoid a return to civil war'.

Power, in the KRI, is structured around a triangular relationship between force, authority and money. Currently, this power is almost exclusively held by the political parties[197]. Due to the parties' initial, uncontested legitimacy and their availability of armed forces at the beginning of their sovereignty, they quickly achieved access to resources, which in turn expanded their power and military forces[198]. Through this process, they became the uncontested centres of power in the region that they still are today. Their background, power and division affect laws, elections, the economy and the armed forces. Within UPF, their power projection occurs through the commanders. Since commanders have extensive powers over their respective units - in PUK/70, KDP/80 and unified forces alike - the relationship between commander and deputy becomes a cornerstone of unification and division in UPF[199].

The commanders' as well as the political parties' style of leadership is also characterised by a distinct local pattern. Leadership in the Kurdish culture is personal. The claim, legitimacy and values of leadership are shaped by the tribal heritage of Kurdish society. The persistent idea of 'one leader' deciding, judging and rectifying - let alone the culture of inheriting such responsibilities, demonstrate such a tribal background. These particular cultural patterns affect the way leadership, decision making and appropriate behaviour of followers are viewed. In the military forces, this leadership is constituted by valuing sacrifice and the need for a leader to be physically present, to be in front of everybody and to lead by example.

Decision making by such leaders is particularly appreciated when it is thought through on the one hand, and quick and decisive on the other. Hesitation or changing one's mind is seen as unprofessional and weak. Foregoing the value of sacrifice and deciding to retreat can also still be interpreted as a sign of weakness. All decisions,

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[197] Recall the description of three triangles in Chapter 3, 'status quo'.

[198] For an analysis of KRI's political economic see Leezenberg (2006), Natali (2007/2012), Zedalis (2013) and Krajeski (2015).

[199] While the extent of commanders' powers can hardly be overestimated, several examples caution not to overestimate that a change of their relationship alone would affect the sustainability of UPF merger. Recall the example of unified units with positive commander-deputy relations, in which soldiers still harboured negative sentiments towards each other. Plus, this unit also separated on 16 October 2017.

including the resolution of conflicts, are usually taken by a few powerful men in KRI. At the same time, there is a remarkable contradiction to this general adherence to hierarchy and leadership present in prevalent culture as well: Obedience to decisions is regularly put under the conditionality of prior evaluation of the quality of this decision. This 'testing' of higher authority along with a persisting culture of rebellious heroism also constitute part of UPF military culture.

This military culture is currently constituted in the following fashion: The connection between commanders and the political party transfer the wider societal cultural patterns on power, leadership, decision making and conflict management in UPF. Thereby, despite some organisational differences, the broader cultural patterns within KDP/80 and PUK/70 seem to be largely similar. As a result, the cultures cannot be considered to be incompatible and there needs to be little integration between UP/70 and UP/80. However, at the same time, the prevalent organisation culture is still characterised by strong divisions, which run predominantly along lines of previous party belongings. Consequently, instead of a cultural integration between UP/70 and UP/80, an overall culture change seems to be required in UPF in order to achieve a more sustainable merger.

This overall culture change is challenged by two particularities of current UPF unity. Firstly, different unified brigades have different experiences. The separation and reunification in October 2017 is only one example to highlight these gaps of perception within UPF. Also daily experience and the way unification and division are perceived differ largely across the brigades. These distinct experiences determine that separate approaches will be necessary for the post-merger integration and overall culture change within each brigade. Secondly, while there seems to be no cultural incompatibility between KDP/80 and PUK/70, another culture clash is brewing beneath UPF's surface: 'academics' and 'non-academics' do not have many values and beliefs in common.

While some might contest that this matter is a simple case of 'professionalisation of the armed forces', I argue that the case is better understood as an *integration* of 'academics' and 'non-academics' within UPF. The value of this contrasting perception derives from it not ignoring the need to work on both, 'non-

academics' *and* 'academics', in order to make an overall change of culture happen. While a 'professionalisation' approach would focus on 'non-academics' only, the 'integration' perspective acknowledges that both 'academics' and 'non-academics' will have to learn to live and work with each other. In addition, this perspective cautions against the assumption that training or the attendance of a military academy would be sufficient to professionalise 'non-academics'. While this approach might work for 'mountain peshmerga' and 'illiterates', 'nepotist non-academics' will not easily forgo their political allegiance; thereby ensuring a continuing party influence and the persistence of 'non-academics' in UPF.

Further challenges to an overall organisational-culture change in UPF derive from wider socio-cultural patterns, such as the habit not to talk about difficult subjects in public, having to maintain face for oneself and others and being generally vague about any tangible information. Also, the detachment of professionalism and the idea of occupation, as well as the inability to punish offences outside the political-party networks provide impediments to such change. On a more positive note, even unified soldiers - despite not being actively aware of the concept of 'organisational culture' - seem to intuitively acknowledge that there are both structural *and* 'people' or 'mindset' problems which need to be tackled in an effort to make the UPF merger more sustainable. These cultural hurdles will be separately filtered and addressed in the next chapter.

In closing, the most important conclusion from all variables, categories and examples is: *culture matters*. It plays in the background, impacting behaviours as much as judgement on what is considered 'good' or 'normal' or 'appropriate'. With the undertaken 'diagnosis' of current cultural patterns affecting and shaping the purpose, set of values and behaviours of UPF and MoP, a first step towards uncovering the potential of culture for the unification and post-merger integration of peshmerga is taken. It is important to note that, for the merger of peshmerga, it does not matter whether the observed culture is 'right' or 'wrong' - whether it adheres to or defers from international or military standards. What matters is what unified peshmerga think their future *should* look like. This point of reference is what I call the idea(l) of military unity. Therefore, in the 'discussion of findings', this idea(l) and the daily experience of unity will now be

compared and contrasted along the cultural patterns they demonstrate according to my interviewees. In doing so, those areas of structure and culture that have the biggest impact in instigating a sustainable merger of UPF can be identified.

Chapter 6: Discussion of findings

In contrast to Chapter 5, which focused on accuracy in presenting the data, representing all accounts as holistically, abstractly and truthfully as possible, the 'discussion of findings' aims at interpreting these findings. Certainly, drawing conclusions from findings is a first and important step in this direction. I propose to take the discussion one step further, though. By applying an interdisciplinary culture-map analysis to the discussion of findings, not only can cultural patterns of UPF be visualised, but the comparison between the idea(l) of unity and the currently daily experience of unification becomes tangible as well. Also, the often reiterated value of applying a cultural analysis for military mergers will be demonstrated.

In this chapter, I proceed along the following outline: In a first step, I address the idea(l) of military unity. A definition of military unity based on the interviews with unified peshmerga shall be provided. In a second step, I translate these findings into Sagmeister's (2016) culture map. To do so, I first visualise and present those cultural patterns that best summarise the ideal UPF set up. As a follow-up, I address the current UPF organisational culture. Here, the cultural patterns of UPF in general as well as a comparison between 'academics' and 'non-academics' in particular are analysed. In a final step, I compare current and ideal UPF culture with each other. By contrasting these findings, I hope to demonstrate the value of looking beneath the structure of military merger and of understanding the organisational cultures that actually shape this structure. Finally, I conclude this chapter by deducting insights and lessons for UPF merger and the reform programme from the culture maps.

6.1. The idea(l) of military unity

Focusing on unity when merging different, previously hostile armed forces seems natural. For the unification of previously hostile, party-based armed forces in the KRI,

military unity has been a goal from the beginning. To which degree, in which form and through which process this unity is pursued has been treated as a predominantly structural question in military-merging literature and practice. However, the focus on structure alone falls short of creating sustainable unification. Based on my personal observations, I contend that, in a process of unifying different structures, all previously separate forces employ a vision of what this unity should ideally look and feel like. These differences, I argue, are relevant to uncover and address in the process of mergers.

Moreover, even after armed forces are structurally unified - as is the case with UPF - the question of 'ideal unity' remains. How unified soldiers construct the idea(l) of military unity is a central factor for the sustainability of the merger. After all, should the idea(l) of unity and the daily experience of working in unified forces diverge strongly, disappointment and frustration can ensue among soldiers. Especially in a merger of previously hostile forces, these negative sentiments are social poison. On the one hand, they discourage proactive engagement to improve military unity and, on the other hand, they encourage soldiers to maintain contacts and sentiments towards armed groups they previously belonged to. Therefore, understanding the unified soldier's perspective, wish and hope for 'ideal military unity' and contrasting this ideal to the daily experience of unification (i.e., the prevalent organisational culture) is a vital step towards identifying the necessary measures for unifying and reforming UPF. I present exactly this analysis in the following sections, starting with the idea(l) of unity.

6.1.1. How unified peshmerga define unity

An ideal (military) unity, according to those unified peshmerga I interviewed, is defined as

> *a national armed force (of a potential state), dedicated to protecting the land and all people within this land - no matter their political beliefs, origins or religions; who speak with one voice and follow one aim; and whose soldiers and commanders all adhere to the same non-political-party-related standards and protocols from the first induction onwards, who do not take commands from anyone outside the official structures or anyone disregarding the official hierarchy of command, and who are professional in their aspiration, education and work ethics.*

From this definition, it becomes apparent that three dimensions constitute the idea(l) of military unity: a very inclusive form of nationalism, unity - understood as the absence of duality, and professionalism. All three of these dimensions include challenges for the future structure as well as for the organisational culture of UPF. Taking recruitment, punishment, training and education out of political-parties' hands, centralising command and control (C2), and establishing systematic checks to professionalism are aspects that structure can accomplish. The need for nationalism to trump party loyalty in daily decision making, the adherence to a professional work ethics and the need to trust that other soldiers are equally adhering to these values are challenges that structure alone cannot solve. Instead, a shift in culture is necessary.

To aid the comprehension of this culture shift, the differences between prevalent UPF organisational culture and the idea(l) culture of military unity need to be made tangible. This is where the culture map comes in handy. The tool creates colourful maps (based on the idea of seven fields of culture - see page 64-66), which aid both a general understanding of patterns as well as a detailed comparison between different cultures. Having already presented the theoretical background and the details of the tool (including the seven fields and colours) in Chapter 2, and having specified how this tool is applied in Chapter 4, I go directly to presenting the ideal UPF culture along a culture map.

6.1.2. The ideal cultural pattern of future UPF

Based on the cultural patterns that were abstracted from the accounts of unified peshmerga, the following 'colour mix' of cultures and values is considered to constitute the 'ideal military unity' for future UPF[200] (see figure 1[201]).

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[200] Note that the questionnaire did not put this evaluation into the context of external surrounding and how these factors impact what *should* be the ideal cultural pattern for UPF in the future. It will be up to the political and military leadership to decide which pattern best suits the 'internal needs', presented here, *and* the 'external needs' presented by surrounding and UPF-external challenges.

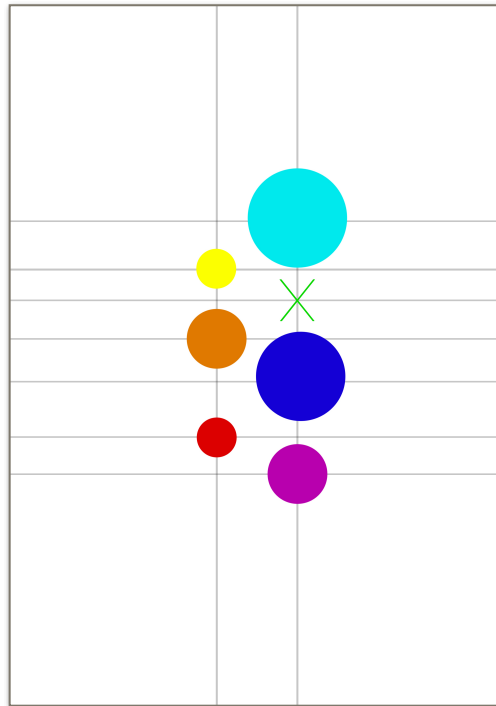[201] The scale for this map starts at 1 and reaches 10.

Figure 1: Ideal military unity

Figure 1 shows that the two main cultural patterns seen as ideal for future unified peshmerga are 'aqua' (with 10 points) and 'blue' (with 9). They are followed by 'orange' and 'violet' values (with 6 points each). The lowest cultural values are 'yellow' and 'red' (with 4 points each). Particularly noticeable is no single mention of 'green'. But what do these colours mean? What do they teach us about the way, UPF soldiers constitute the ideal form of military unity? What culture lies underneath their idea(l) of unity? I shall 'translate' the colours one after the other and conclude by summarising the main findings.

The expressions of 'aqua' can be interpreted as a call for *vision and mission* in UPF. The *will to serve and sacrifice for the nation and country* are equally expressed in this context as is the stance to *always be prepared for a future enemy*. 'Aqua' means that the organisation functions like one big organism which is aligned under one purpose with each part of the whole contributing to an overarching goal. When unified soldiers identify a dominance of 'aqua' cultural patterns as constituting the ideal of military unity, three deductions are possible: One, it is possible that currently there is a lack of any unifying vision or mission for UPF. Hence, the soldiers stress this aspect in particular. Two, an 'aqua' culture is seen as a lever to overcome the current (party-

political) division within UPF and to thereby achieve the absence of duality. Three, unified soldiers recognise that beneath one unified purpose, the individual parts, that make up the armed forces, may still function along their own preference. In other words: as long as all units work towards the same goal, they may very well upkeep their individual cultures and identities.

Next to 'aqua', 'blue' is given a prominence in the ideal military unity. Requests by unified soldiers, such as the need for *transparent processes,* for *clearly defined functions and responsibilities,* as well as for a re-*attachment of power from the person towards the public office,* show how 'blue' cultural patterns are considered necessary for a sustainable UPF. A 'blue' culture is characterised by standardised bureaucratic processes, a strong sense of duty, the priority of rules and processes over anything else, as well as explicit hierarchies and responsibilities. As such, 'blue' organisations are often compared to machines or the functioning of a clock mechanism. Each wheel is clearly identifiable and they are all predetermined in the way they reach into each other to make the system work. By unified soldiers emphasising 'blue' as a necessary cultural pattern for the ideal future of military unity, four deductions can be made: One, transparent and explicit processes, roles and responsibilities are considered key for a successful functioning of UPF. Two, rules and processes are demanded to trump the individual's position, family relation and background in order to provide continuous reliability in the unified institutions. Three, the division of labour is considered necessary to function most productively. Four, it is still overlooked that a 'blue' culture also suggests that the collective output (i.e., successfully providing security, defending a region or winning a war) has to be more important than any individual's preference, comfort or position.

After 'aqua' and 'blue', the second most valued patterns are 'orange' and 'violet'. While the need for detachment from 'violet' patterns becomes particularly clear in the comparison of ideal unity and current UPF culture (see below), it is interesting to note that some values of 'violet' are still considered desirable in the future. 'Violet' cultures are characterised by strong identities, tribe-like and family-focused forms of organisation and leadership, as well as the dominance of informal laws. (It is also within this cultural pattern that the tribal cultures of the Kurdish political parties still yield a

strong social influence within UPF.) Several of these cultural patterns, such as *a sense of belonging*, the continuing need to *'sacrifice for the group'* and the definition of unity being '*like one family',* are considered necessary elements for an ideal military unity. Similarly, the *physical presence of military leaders* on the frontlines are evaluated with such pride (particularly in comparison to international armed forces) that it seems likely for this 'violet' value to also survive within future UPF. What is interesting here is that other 'violet' characteristics - such as centralised, personalised, omnipotent and inheritable leadership, the inability to question decision-making as well as a culture of retaliation and an exclusive right for leaders to solve conflicts - are neither mentioned to be desirable, nor are they mentioned to be unwelcome. Consequently, when shaping the future culture of UPF, making the different 'shades of violet' visible will be central to attaining 'the right version' of 'violet' culture that unified soldiers consider relevant for ideal military unity.

At a similar level to 'violet' is 'orange'. This is particularly interesting, seeing as 'orange' cultures stand in stark contrast to 'violet'. Their dominant patterns are pragmatism, individualism, professionalism and competition. Individual success drives 'orange' cultures, status symbols matter a lot and pragmatism trumps both principles and rules. Calls for 'orange' can be seen primarily in the stress of *professional work ethics* and *mindsets based on efficiency*. Also, a degree of *pragmatism* is explicitly said to be a valuable asset for future UPF. In the way, unified soldiers evaluate 'orange' cultural patterns as necessary - yet secondary - attributes for an ideal military unity, two deductions can be made: One, a pragmatic form of professionalism in both leadership and decision-making is considered valuable for the future UPF. Two, at the same time, this pragmatism is not supposed to grow beyond the stability provided by 'blue' rules and processes.

The least mentioned cultural values by unified soldiers are 'yellow' and 'red' (and 'green'). The colour 'yellow' refers to a culture in which knowledge, logic and reason are given prominence, and authority is based on competence. Calls for such cultural patterns can be seen in the demands to increase *knowledge and proficiency* among unified soldiers - as it is often said, *'we need more academics.'* Surprisingly at this point is that despite the regular stress and mention of necessary increases in

knowledge and competence, 'yellow' cultural patterns are still ranked low in comparison to 'aqua' (a unified vision) and 'blue' (bureaucratic structures), as well as to 'violet' (identity) and 'orange' (pragmatism). Moreover, by focusing solely on knowledge and competence, other 'yellow' cultural patterns, such as solving conflicts based on logical arguments and sharing information are disregarded. One reading of this pattern could be that 'yellow' cultural traits as a whole are still very underdeveloped in UPF (and possibly even beyond the armed forces).

Similarly to 'yellow', also 'red' patterns are identified to contribute a small part to the overall ideal culture. 'Red' culture is defined by the law of the jungle, a 'might-makes-right' principle and impulsive decision-making. Among these many attributes (similarly as with 'yellow') only two are mentioned to provide a positive contribution for ideal military unity in the future: *quick and decisive decision making*, and *the rebellious hero*. While counter-intuitive when regarding the dominance of 'blue' (bureaucratic rules) and the demand for 'yellow' (fact-based decision making) in the ideal culture of unity, the highlighting of rebellious heroes and impulsive decisions (which ought to be guided by 'yellow' knowledge rather than 'violet' experience or blood-relations) goes hand in hand with the presence of 'orange' pragmatism: a small degree of individual judgement and the courage to follow these impulses is considered valuable for future UPF unity. All other aspects of 'red' cultures - such as open conflict, breaking formal and informal rules and moving quicker than anyone else no matter the risk - are not mentioned by unified soldiers.

Finally, 'green' cultural patterns seem not to matter entirely for ideal military unity. Such 'green' patterns are interpersonal relationships and internal harmony. This absence of 'green' can either mean that this sense of teamwork is secondary for the future, or that there is no awareness of this particular trait in UPF. A detailed analysis of this point is undertaken in the comparison (below). As the real value of identifying 'ideal military unity' lies in the comparison with daily experience of unification, I proceed with presenting the current UPF-culture map, before readdressing the ideal in section 6.3.

6.2. The current organisational culture of UPF

The cultural patterns that seem to characterise UPF the strongest are *the power of the commander* and the resulting *relationship between commander and deputy* in the current inefficiencies of a 50/50 structure. Commanders can decide on almost everything, compensating for any lack of MoP capacity. In addition, their connection to political parties, their personal background (both in education and their bloodline) as well as their personality affect cooperation, punishment, unity and even the level of corruption in individual units.

A second big role is played by the political culture which still seems to shape large parts of the forces. The *cultural patterns of power, leadership, decision making and conflict management* are similar between political parties and unified forces. The *focus on one leader* and the *personalisation of this power* is reflected in the duration of their rule, in the way conflict management is conceived as well as in the concept of 'betrayal'.

High-ranking party members and officers are above the law, because *'here power makes law,'* as one soldier expressed it. Moreover, cultural expressions make apparent that a culture of public discourse does not yet exist. Transparency is low, due to the cultural habits of not talking about potentially sticky issues and keeping face in public. *Consensus* finding in conflicts is also still restricted to the leaders and their families. While trust, tribes and civil war are said to play a minor role in comparison to other factors, their influence can still be seen in these patterns of power and leadership. In addition, they also affect customs in public speaking and behaviours of interaction.

A final finding from the data presented in Chapter 5 is that *'academics' and 'non-academics'* require an integration within UPF as well. The structural merger of PUK/70 and KDP/80 naturally demands an integration of 70/UP and 80/UP. As we have seen, this 'integration' ought to accompany an overall change of culture in UPF. However, due to the diverse backgrounds of unified peshmerga in UPF, 'academics' and 'non-academics' seem to clash particularly beneath the unified structures and beyond political-party lines. Because they clash on so many cultural fronts, a separate approach for their specific integration will be necessary. Given the strong cultural aspect of this

second layer of integration, the difference between 'academics' and 'non-academics' shall be developed in a separate section below.

6.2.1. The current cultural pattern of UPF

According to the cultural traits taken from the accounts of unified peshmerga reflecting on their experience of working in unified units, the following colour pattern develops (see figure 2[202]): The most dominant cultural pattern is 'violet' (with 25 points). It is followed at a distance by 'orange' (12 points) and, further back, by 'red' (8.5 points) and 'green' (7 points). The smallest cultural patterns are 'blue' (5 points), 'aqua' (3 points) and 'yellow' (1 point). To demonstrate the insights from this culture map, I address each colour in the order of their dominance by explaining what the colour means in actual cultural traits and how it explicates the prevalent culture in UPF.
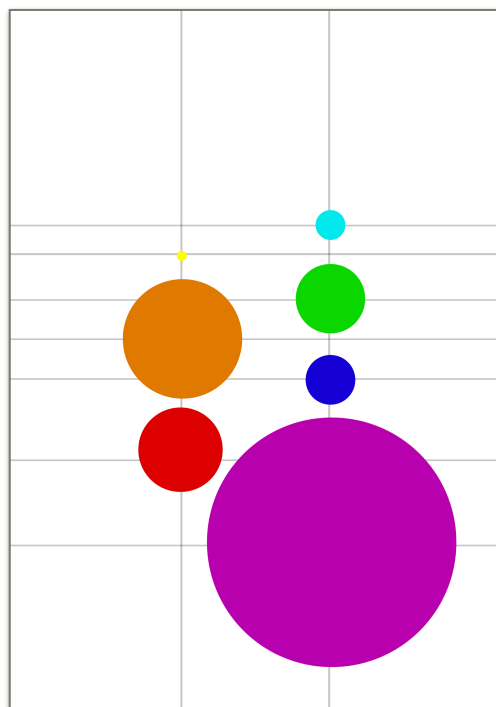
Figure 2: Current cultural pattern

The first and most dominant colour in this culture map is 'violet'. This overwhelming presence confirms previous assertions made towards *tribal heritage* still being visible in UPF. While Sagmeister compares the 'violet' cultural pattern only metaphorically to tribes, the societal background of tribalism in KRI actually still shapes cultural values,

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[202] The scale for this map ranges from 1 to 25.

patterns and behaviours in many aspects of life - including the armed forces. De facto, the description of 'violet' almost reads like a description of UPF (and political-party) values: The prevalent leadership is centred around one person and his family. Power is largely based on bloodline and remains inheritable. An omnipotent leader oversees and decides everything (recall the example: *'the leader says red, all say red'*)[203]. The connection between *physical presence* on the frontline and 'true leadership' is equally reiterated as is the exclusivity of the leader's role in conflict management. The many rules, structures and laws in KRI and UPF notwithstanding, one also perceives a sense of *informal laws* guiding the organisations's decisions, prioritisation and overall behaviour. That this culture provides security and identity is reiterated in expressions of both *belonging* and *ownership*. *Sacrifice, loyalty and trust* among 'the own group' are equally present in 70/UP and 80/UP as is the general scepticism and *mistrust against 'other' groups*. Concepts like *'betrayal'* for group-internal offences and a judgement of *'revenge' or 'abandonment'* for other-group affronts further reiterate the strong 'violet' culture in UPF.

The relatively strong presence of 'orange' and 'red' might be surprising at first glance. However, a high level of pragmatism ('orange') as well as a dominating style of decision making ('red') is actually reported by UPF soldiers. Pragmatism can be seen in several subliminal expressions and examples of unified soldiers. The *conditionality of obedience* and a pattern of behaviour, to pragmatically decide for an individual course of *action to go along, against or parallel to the official chain of command*, are two examples which underline the 'orange' cultural traits within UPF. The general presence of corruption, which is sometimes considered to be *'simply good business sense'* ('unhealthy orange'), or a degree of flexibility to make deals with whoever might be relevant at a certain point (including *'deals with the enemy'*), shows the extent to which individuals and organisations in KRI can be pragmatic. A degree of *'grey zone' in interpreting rules and social codes* is another demonstration of this 'orange' culture.

'Red' values are primarily seen in the need for *quick and resolute decision making*. Competence is perceived when someone can make decisions quickly ('red'),

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[203] Also that this leader being seen as infallible can be read between the lines in UPF accounts.

based on a lot of experience ('violet') and then keeps up this course of action, no matter what ('red'). The *will for sacrifice* and the need for *bravery* are equally seen as representations of 'red' values. In addition, the *'might-makes-right'* principle is reflected in the political-power culture, which translates to UPF whenever commanders are not held responsible for their offences against MoP goals. Less visible are the loud and aggressive patterns of red culture. The 'loudest' expression can be seen in *rebellious heroism*. However, also this heroism requires a legitimisation from 'aqua'-'violet' (e.g., a sacrifice for the nation) or 'blue-yellow' combinations (e.g., a claim to professionalism, either from an perspective of duty ('blue') or from an angle of data - 'I *can* defend this frontline' ('yellow')), which shows that 'red' individualism is not yet widely spread outside the leadership circles.

'Green' is also rather strongly represented (with 7 points), particularly in comparison to it not being mentioned at all in the vision for the future (see 'idea(l)' above). It is therefore particularly interesting to pursue the 'green' examples that unified peshmerga provide for current UPF culture. Judging from these examples, 'green' values in UPF seem to exclude 'typical green' patterns such as seeking consensus and larger-group input in decision making. However, the value of *individual equality* among unified soldiers and a *need for harmony* both are said to be strong values in current UPF. Reports such as *'when we first unified, we did not talk about politics, because we did not want to get angry with each other'* demonstrate such a striving towards harmony. Accounts of *'we eat together, we sit together, we sleep together'* underline a community of friendship and equality among them. A particular habit of 'good' commanders to take into account their individual soldier's personal situation (e.g., changing their deployment duration due to family matters) demonstrates another 'green' sentiment which is again reiterated in the convention of proving 'real trust' by listing personal or family details about the other person[204]. In addition, those accounts which rectify 70/UP comrades over the October 2017 decision also signal there to be a level of 'green' *friendship* present (and valued) among UPF soldiers.

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[204] Knowing or even visiting the other person's family is a sign of interpersonal trust in the KRI.

'Blue' is an interesting cultural pattern to study as it is both the most extensively mentioned variable and the one acquiring most subtractions in the culture-map analysis. This outcome indicates that while there are a multitude of 'blue' *structures* present, the 'blue' *culture* is not yet strongly developed. Values of 'blue' are reflected in the judgement of what constitutes 'good' armed forces or a 'good' commander - such as *duty* and *obedience*. It is also seen in some definitions of professionalism (e.g. the stress on *discipline* and the value of following *rules*) as well as in the overall differentiation between 'academics' and 'non-academics'. By soldiers praising 'academics' not only for their education but also for their *obedience to the chain of command* rather than to political parties or for their *disapproval of corruption*, several 'blue' values are underlined.

Beyond this general awareness of *the value of duty, rules and regulations*, a myriad of examples demonstrate the many fault-lines and superficialities of the prevalent structure. The fact that commanders and politicians are free to disobey the rules (in an 'orange' pragmatic way) and are even seen to be above the law ('red'), the nepotistic recruitment of 'non-academics' ('unhealthy violet'), the overall structural inefficiencies ('unhealthy blue') and the external interference from political parties ('violet-red') are among the examples counted to discourage an efficient 'blue' development in UPF. Such a 'healthy blue' culture would be a reliable system, in which each person has its role, everything is based on rules and processes, power lies in the position not the person and labour is divided. Instead, an unreliable 'blue' seems to shape prevalent UPF culture, taking away exactly those patterns of 'blue' - reliability by continuity and predictability through transparent processes - that are considered its strengths and benefits.

Finally, 'aqua' (the culture which stresses vision, integrality and higher goals) and 'yellow' (the culture which is shaped by a focus on knowledge, facts and deep insight) are also barely present in current UPF culture. Instead of a vision for the future ('aqua'), struggles with day-to-day business and a stark difference between political rhetoric of unification and the daily experience of unity shape prevalent UPF culture. The only aspects of 'aqua' under which unified soldiers come together are the greater sense of *duty for 'Kurdistan'* as well as *a general wish for reform and unity*. 'Yellow',

like 'blue', is strongly dominated by negative examples and subtractions for the evaluation. While recognised as a necessity for the future and a particular hope being placed on the international forces' engagement in the reform process, there seem to be no strong 'yellow' values - such as basing leadership, decisions or conflict resolution on data, facts and the best argument - in current UPF.

As with the ideal UPF culture, the value of analysing current cultural patterns lies in their comparison. Before proceeding to this comparison, however, there is one more dimension in current UPF culture that needs to be addressed: the cultural clash between 'academics' and 'non-academics'. Asserted by the results of my interviews with unified soldiers, 'academics' and 'non-academics' have fundamentally different (almost diametral) values and behaviours. Their difference provides the basis for many frustrations. Several accounts even mentioned 'academics' resigning from UPF due to problems with 'non-academics'. With 'academics' being educated, skilled and professional, their frustration, discouragement and choice to leave UPF poses a great loss in 'yellow-blue' cultural presence for UPF and MoP. Therefore, I argue, it is necessary - in addition to comparing current and ideal UPF cultures - to analyse, understand and include in the integration the 'academics/non-academics' culture clash.

6.2.2. Two cultures inside UPF: 'academics' and 'non-academics'

According to unified peshmerga's reports, inside current UPF, there are different cultures colliding: 'academics' and 'non-academics'. Given this collision is suggested to be of great impact, particular attention needs to be paid to it. Therefore, a cultural mapping and comparison of what interviewees described to be differences and characteristics between 'academics' and 'non-academics' shall be undertaken. To do so, I shall first describe the cultural patterns of 'academics' and of 'non-academics' (figure 3[205]). In two further steps, I then compare them and sketch the consequences to those differences.

'Academics' in UPF are said to be characterised by a dominant 'blue' culture (10 points). This suggests that 'academics' value hierarchies and chain of command, they

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[205] The scale chosen for both 'academics' and 'non-academics' ranges from 1 to 10.

believe in dutifully fulfilling their given role while abiding by the rules and processes of the structure they work in. They also do not harbour interests for personal power or enrichment, but they know that their power is only temporary and derives solely from the position within the structure. Second to 'blue' culture traits, 'academics' are said to have high levels of 'yellow' and 'red' (8 and 7 points respectively). While 'yellow' refers to the ideal of meritocracy and the primacy of knowledge to guide decision making and leadership, 'red' refers to a willingness to seek confrontation, a boldness in taking action and a tendency to venture out alone if necessary. Finally, 'academics' are said to have low levels of 'violet' and 'orange' (5 points) in their culture. This suggests that a sense of identity and loyalty towards the leader ('violet') are equally part of the cultural traits and values of 'academics', as are pragmatism and an individual striving for status and recognition ('orange'). 'Green' and 'aqua' are not mentioned at all. An explanation for this particular phenomenon is provided below.

In comparison, 'non-academics'[206] are said to be characterised by a strong 'violet-red-orange' culture (with 9, 8 and 7 points respectively). This suggests that the dominant culture among 'non-academics' is shaped by values of family-like belonging, identity and strong leadership ('violet'), a 'might-makes-right' principle, courage and quick decision-making ('red'), as well as pragmatism, individual aspiration and status symbols ('orange'). In addition, some 'yellow' and 'blue' traits are also recognised (at 2 and 1 points). As a result, some value for knowledge and data ('yellow') as well as for clearly defined positions and hierarchies or for a sense of duty ('blue') can also be found among 'non-academics'. Again, 'green' and 'aqua' are not even addressed and the answer to it is provided below.

It is not surprising that this data suggests an almost perfect mirroring between 'academics' and 'non-academics'. As 'academics' and 'non-academics' were most often described in a comparative manner, those values or behaviours which were mentioned as positive for one side, were usually counted as negative for the other. Due to some

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[206] Note: As the difference between 'academics' and 'non-academics' arose from the data, it was not tested as systematically as other variables which were part of the original research design. Therefore, the culture map on 'non-academics' has to be understood as a *collective* culture of 'non-academics', comprising of all three types: 'mountain peshmerga', 'illiterates' and 'nepotists'. In dealing with the integration between 'academics' and 'non-academics', it might be a useful next step to conduct a culture analysis on the different 'non-academics' as well.

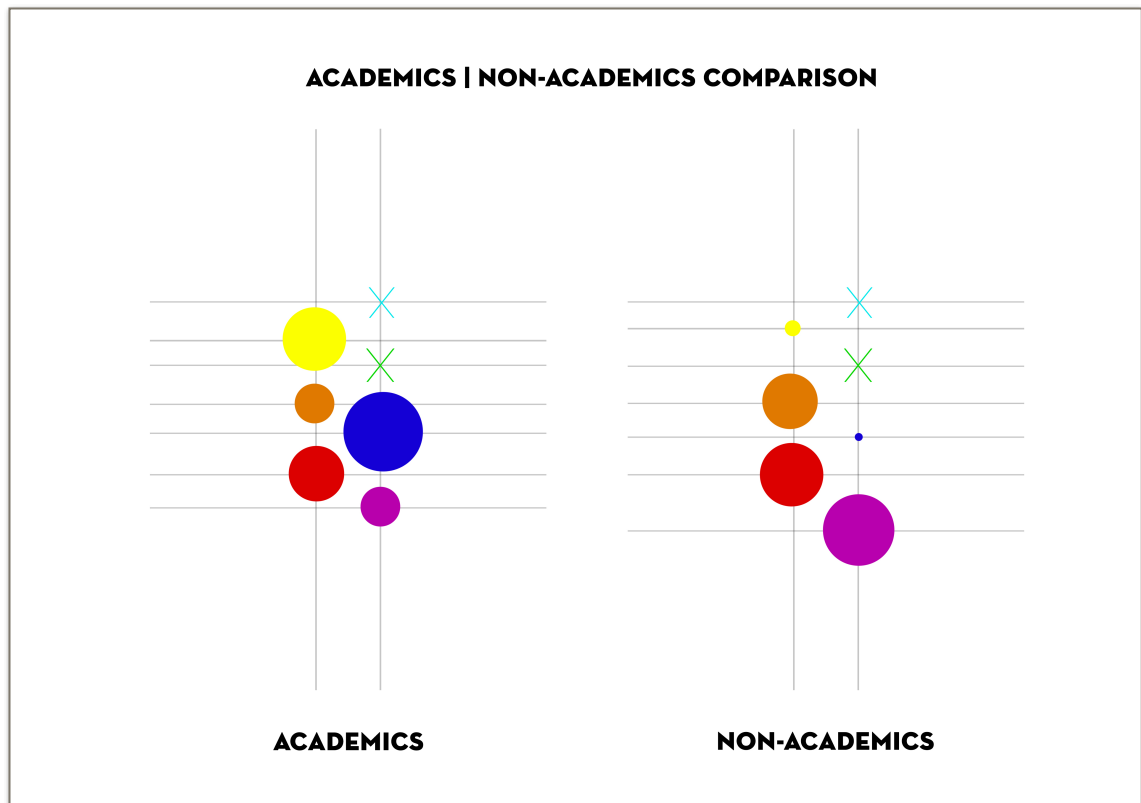examples also being provided in a non-comparative manner, the mirroring is not perfect either, though.

Figure 3: 'Academics' / 'non-academics' comparison

Beyond this first impression, three particular conclusions can be drawn from a comparison. Firstly, the biggest difference between both lies in the culture traits 'blue' and 'yellow'. With 'academics' being basically a local synonym for 'professionalism' ('blue-yellow'), the high levels of 'blue' and 'yellow' are not surprising. The adherence to *order*, *discipline* and *duty* are equally as strongly mentioned as is *expertise*, *skill* and *education*. *Meritocracy* plays a big role for 'academics' and that alone provides a stark contrast with 'non-academics' - in particular to same-generation 'nepotists', who, as the name suggests, gain their position within the officially 'blue' structure neither through 'yellow' knowledge or skill, nor through 'orange' accomplishment, performance or success. Instead, 'non-academics' achieve their position by relying strongly on 'violet' networks and a degree of '(unhealthy) orange' opportunism. A clash of interests is pre-programmed.

Secondly, despite the outspoken distaste of 'academics' that 'non-academics' achieve their ranks through 'violet-(unhealthy)-orange' nepotism, they also maintain a degree of adherence to 'violet' values themselves. The presence of these 'violet' values among 'academics' can be seen in their adherence to several cultural norms deriving from tribal heritage. Among them are the *idea(l) of one leader taking control*, the 'normality' of *only sons operating close to their home*, as well as the adherence to '*do not talk about it', 'give no names' and 'keep face'* in public. Beyond what is seen to be wider socio-cultural customs, 'academics' tend to dismiss 'violet' values and behaviours, though; especially when they interfere with 'yellow' skill and knowledge or 'orange-blue' meritocracy.

A third finding from the data is that the smallest difference between the variables lies between both 'red' and 'orange'. In terms of 'red' values, 'academics' and 'non-academics' even seem to show hardly any differences at all. Both value the general traits of *bravery* and *sacrifice* together with the eventual need to be a *rebellious hero*. Where they do differ, however, is on the 'might-makes-right' principle. Closely connected to the 'violet' supremacy of one 'father-like' leader, the 'red' idea of *individuals placing themselves above or outside the law's reach* is something 'academic' professionals cannot support. Just as in the case of 'red' values, also the case of 'orange' is a matter of degree rather than principle. Arguably, 'academics' seem to have a 'healthier' approach to 'orange' values. Instead of *opportunism* or even *corruption*, they are said to apply 'orange' pragmatism to matters of *efficiency* and *decision-making capacities*. Their outspoken contempt of corruption is one example which suggests this differentiation. In comparison, 'non-academics' seem not to shy away from viewing corruption as 'good business sense' or from shifting blame and responsibility to others.

Finally, on a more 'administrative' note, I want to address the lack of mentioning 'green' and 'aqua' cultural patterns. Looking at the culture maps, I concede that this phenomenon derives from the interview situation rather than an absence of 'green' or 'aqua' values among 'academics' and 'non-academics' per se. As '(non)academics' were not an original topic of my interviews but rather developed from the data itself, the interviews did not systematically cover this dimension. Consequently, the results presented here can only be read as reports from those unified soldiers who felt the need

to address this matter proactively[207]. In addition, since I have not enquired about '(non)academics', it is also possible that some cultural dimensions might never have been addressed. If I had to provide an educated guess though, I would suggest that 'aqua' patterns (i.e., the orientation towards a higher purpose and the willingness to be self-organised) are stronger among 'academics', while 'green' values (e.g. harmony, consensus and team spirit) are more present in 'non-academic' cultures.

Comparing the differences between 'academics' and 'non-academics' on the culture map, the culture clash between them becomes even more visible. Through this tool, a better differentiation of nuances is possible. Thereby, clues as to which areas need to be dealt with most urgently are provided. Certainly, in the end, the question of how the difference between 'academics' and 'non-academics' will be addressed, is a decision only MoP and UPF leadership can take. The culture map merely provides a suggestion. Namely, that the current strategies of retirement and providing additional education are not sufficient to address the culture clash between 'academics' and 'non-academics'. Instead, a proactive management of the different cultures ought to be undertaken as a part of the overall organisational-culture change of UPF. For this change, the culture-map comparison suggests areas of change for both 'non-academics' *and* 'academics'. Moreover, it also highlights those areas in which the two share some common ground, upon which any integration effort can be built upon. I shall elaborate on each of these aspects further.

When one thinks of 'non-academics' strictly in terms of 'mountain peshmerga', one can be tempted to take a passive approach and simply wait for them to eventually retire. Currently, this is one strategy undertaken in KRI to deal with 'non-academics'. Doing so, I argue, gravely underestimates the phenomenon, as it ignores 'the other two types' of 'non-academics'. For one, international advisors observe that the level of 'illiterates' in training camps and in UPF is higher than one might assume (context interview, 2019). In addition, 'nepotists' are both young and educated. Instead, it is their lack of *military* education and appropriate experience, as well as their strong loyalty to

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[207] For a purely numerical reference, these were 8 out of 15 core interviewees (3 out of 7, who did not differentiate between 'academic' and 'non-academic', did mention the necessity and value of graduating from a military academy, though).

the political party that clashes with 'academic' soldiers. Assuming that these other two forms of 'non-academic' soldiers are likely to continue even after 'mountain peshmerga' retire, the approach of 'waiting them out' cannot be considered sufficient to deal with the prevalent culture clash.

Another, apparent answer to solve at least part of the problem is to send more 'non-academics' to military academies. According to my interviewees, political parties have already started to do exactly that. However, as I have argued before, this approach risks overestimating the connection between education and the 'academic' culture. While 'non-academics' might increase their knowledge and skill at an operational level, their difference in cultural values ('violet' tribalism in 'non-academics' in comparison to 'blue-yellow' bureaucratic professionalism in 'academics') cannot be mitigated by this action alone. Therefore, the potential for a culture-clash remains.

Sustainable culture management between 'academics' and 'non-academics' can therefore only be reached by starting to bridge the cultural differences. To do so, both 'non-academics' *and* 'academics' have to make an effort. 'Non-academics', for example, need to shift their 'orange' pragmatism to a healthier degree (e.g. away from corruption and opportunism, towards efficient decision making and individual ambition). In contrast, 'academics' can start by connecting to 'non-academics' on those areas in which they concur instead of creating an even bigger gap by viewing themselves as superior. In addition, the comparison between current and ideal UPF culture (see below) suggests that both should strive towards strengthening 'blue' cultures in UPF; a task which gives them a common purpose to work at.

To aid the integration of 'academics' and 'non-academics' even further, the culture map suggests that despite stark differences, 'academics' and 'non-academics' also share some common ground upon which can be built. For example, shared values can be seen in their appreciation of 'red' sacrifice and their similar cultural background of 'violet' tribalism. With this comparison, first suggestions for future unification and reform attempts of UPF can be deducted. At the same time, this process underlines the value of addressing observable challenges in attitude, mindset and behaviour from a cultural perspective. The culture map provides a tangible and visible tool to this effect.

With this value reaffirmed, I will now, finally, turn to the comparison of current and ideal cultural patterns in UPF.

6.3. Comparing ideal and current culture

The most important findings from a comparison between current and ideal UPF cultures on the culture map in terms of colours are a strong increase of 'aqua' (times 3), a stark decrease of 'violet' (minus 4) and an inexistent 'green' in the future. Also, an increase in 'yellow' can be mentioned among the most important findings: While it still does not reach a high strength within the future culture, it shows a significant *relative* increase to the current level of 'yellow' in UPF (times 4). Other patterns that can be observed are a slight increase in 'blue' (times 2) and a decrease in 'orange' and 'red' (minus 2 in both cases). I will discuss these patterns and particularly their underlying meaning in this order.
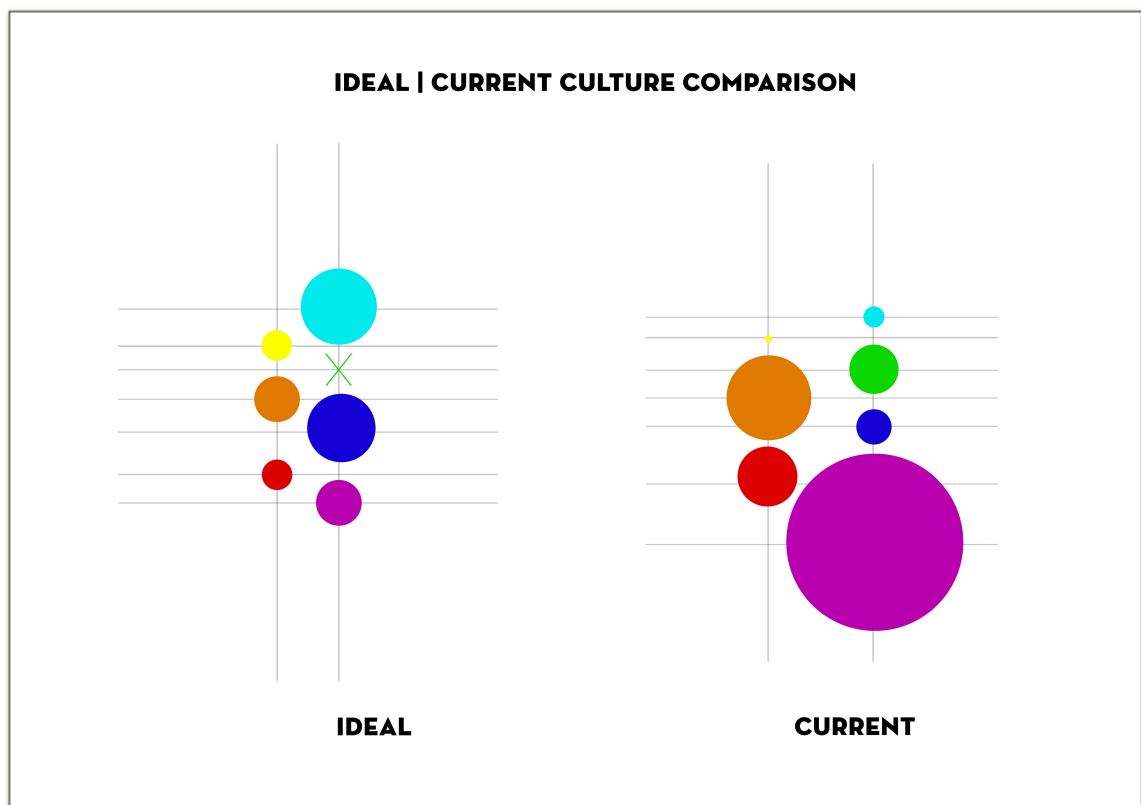

Figure 4: Ideal-current culture comparison

The increase in 'aqua' derives from a strong sense of *necessity for an all-encompassing vision and mission for future UPF*. 'Unity' and 'serving the nation and country' are identified as the backbones of such a vision. In addition, the particular skill of

navigating the difficult waters in the region - from the political relations between KRI and Baghdad to the manifold impact of Iran and Turkey - and maintaining a fluid, flexible oversight over external and internal relations is also considered necessary for a sustainable future. Self-organisation and fluctuating structures, which also constitute 'aqua' cultures, on the contrary, are *not* among the values sought for in the 'aqua' ideal for UPF. One aspect which is as of yet entirely overlooked is a particular skill of 'aqua' values that manages to coordinate and combine all other cultural patterns, their values and behaviours, to achieve the best outcome for the organisation as a whole. This pattern of 'aqua' culture could be considered as a worthy goal for future UPF to be able to handle the diversity among their units, backgrounds and behavioural patterns. Unified soldiers, however, seem not to be aware of such cultural possibilities.

The strong decrease in 'violet' in the ideal underlines the previous assertion that the increase of other colours can be read as a wish to decrease 'violet' values and patterns of behaviour in the future. Such 'violet' values are a centralised, personalised, omnipotent and inheritable forms of leadership, a strong sense of identity which tends towards exclusivity, as well as informal laws to govern 'violet' organisations[208]. To induce change towards the wished-for ideal, I propose that change is necessary at two levels: Firstly, at a structural level. Through laws, regulations and hurdles that keep the political parties' influence out of UPF, 'violet' can be decreased in UPF. Secondly, change has to be also undertaken at a cultural level. Such changes can include, for example: attaching more value to the fulfilment of duty rather than loyalty (i.e., increase 'blue'); fostering a culture of discussion, feedback and open discourse in the relevant committee meetings (increase 'green'); rewarding skill and knowledge over bloodline or background (increase 'yellow'); and pursuing intra-group judgement as a punishable offence (decrease 'violet' in 70/UP and 80/UP). With these structural *and* cultural steps, a decrease in 'violet' values and behaviours can be accomplished.

At the same time, I want to stress that 'violet' values should not be disregarded altogether either. The data suggests that some 'violet' values are also highly treasured. UPF soldiers stress in particular the patterns 'sense of belonging', 'loyalty and trust', as

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[208] Recall that it is also at this cultural level, where the political parties still wield their strongest influence into the unified armed forces.

well as the 'physical presence of leaders' on the frontline. Therefore, the challenge is *not* to simply abolish 'violet' values and behaviours. It is to discourage some 'violet' patterns, one the one hand, and to re-shift 'violet' attachment *from* the parties *to* the unified forces, on the other hand. To this last point, I want to pay some additional attention.

In shifting identity and belonging from the political parties to UPF, some unified soldiers make the case that this is only possible among a new generation of peshmerga. As one context interviewee from a party force told me:

> *I think, in order to have a professional unified force, it has to be unified. But for ... the next 10 years, I believe, it is important to have ... [separate] unit[s]. Why? Because they stand for something. 'Unit 80' stands for something, 'Unit 70' stands for something. And it is hard for them to give [that] up. ... I am now [50+] years old, I [stood] for something for a long time, I cannot give up on these things easily. ... But in the next ten years when they retire, those who stand for things ... [then there] will be professional[s] and they can protect the whole land, our kids, from the [exterior] forces.*

The point that this example makes is that whatever people are used to - especially values, principles and morals - are hard to change. In that sense, it might be a more efficient strategy to simply 'wait until they retire'. Also Sagmeister, upon reviewing several case studies, comes to the conclusion that sometimes exchanging individuals (be that through firing, re-assignment or retirement) is the only way to create a new cultural pattern in an organisation. At the same time, he cautions against undertaking radical changes lightly, comparing the process of exchanging key positions in terms of its impact on the organisation to an *'organ-transplant'* rather than a matter of simple accounting (2016: 167). While this caution is certainly valuable and the strategy of 'waiting out the "violet" generation' seems reasonable, I argue that leaving this shift of culture in UPF until the moment when the 'old generation' retires is also counterproductive. After all, if a 'new generation' of peshmerga enters the forces through 'violet' structures and then further encounters 'violent' values and patterns of behaviour in the organisation, by the time 'the old generation' retires, the 'new ones' will be used to 'violent' patterns as well. Instead, changing values ought to be an act comparable to an engine change on a moving ship. In order for the ship not to sink,

there always needs to be one part working solidly enough to keep the boat afloat and moving forward, while repairs, maintenance and changes are conducted on a different part of the engine.

In order to work on such an engine successfully, it helps to know all the tools available. To this end, the culture map analysis provides a good tool. Having already looked at 'aqua' and 'violet' patterns, I shall now proceed with the other 'tools' (colours) at hand. It is particularly interesting at this point is that 'green' values (such as harmony, consensus and friendship), which are rather pronounced in current UPF culture, are not even mentioned for the ideal future of UPF. Comparing the expressions of 'green' values in the prevalent culture with their lack of mention for a future vision, two deductions are possible: One, they want to abolish 'green' cultures. Two, they are unaware of their own 'green' cultural patterns - as well as the values and challenges that come with it. The second option seems far more likely. After all, while several cultural patterns characteristic for 'green' values, such as consensual decision making, could not be further from UPF realities, others, such as caring for the individual soldier and striving for harmony, are actual cornerstones of current UPF culture. Therefore, it would be very surprising if unified soldiers were to consciously exclude 'green' from their future. What this 'green disappearance' shows instead is twofold: Firstly, 'cultural awareness' or the awareness that culture - habits, beliefs and values - matter for organisations is not well developed in UPF. Secondly, whenever a cultural pattern is very dominant and experienced pleasurably simultaneously, it does not just go unquestioned but it also disappears from conscious thought. It is therefore not surprising that among the long wish-list of cultural changes for the future, the strength and value that currently persist in 'green' might simply be forgotten.

'Yellow' values, in contrast, are not forgotten. Despite their low presence in the ideal future culture, the *relative* increase from the current level to the future is significant. This stark increase only stands to underline the intensity behind 'yellow' cultural patterns being required in the future unified forces. As we have already seen, 'yellow' refers to a culture of knowledge, skill and expertise. The particular need for its values is stressed in calls for professionalism and highlighted in the division between 'academics' and 'non-academics'. In addition, this increase in 'yellow' again underlines

the wish to overcome 'violet' patterns. By pronouncing skill ('yellow') more relevant than personal connections ('violet'), and data ('yellow') more relevant than the duration or infallibility of someone's rule ('violet'), this need to overcome 'violet' through 'yellow' is demonstrated.

In comparison to 'yellow', 'blue' is already more strongly pronounced in current UPF culture. However, it is also still only on place five out of seven. In comparison, for the future ideal, 'blue' values and behaviours are described to be the second most valuable. What does this comparison suggest? In its ideal type, 'blue' organisations function like a clockwork, everything - including power and leadership - is depersonalised and instead governed by clearly defined (transparent) structures and rules. However, when comparing this ideal description of 'blue' culture to the reports of unified soldiers on the actual patterns in UPF, it seems that UPF is characterised by a divided 'blue': One the one hand, several 'blue' *structures* already exist. There are, for example, countless rules, regulations and processes within MoP and UPF. Yet, on the other hand, 'blue' *behaviours and values* seem to be still largely absent. In addition, also examples of 'unhealthy blue' have been reported. Unnecessary over-bureaucratisation, the abuse of rules and regulation for personal enrichment as well as the obscuring of 'violet' loyalties behind justifications of 'duty' are named as such examples. This divide in 'blue' culture between present 'blue' structures and absent or 'unhealthy' expressions of 'blue' values explains well, why, for example, 'blue' only increases half as much as 'yellow'. Soldiers are suggesting that while an increase in 'blue' values (particularly dutiful fulfilment of ones roles and tasks, depersonalisation of power, as well as transparency and equality before the law) are desirable for future UPF, there need not be more 'blue' structures. Also, there might need to be less 'unhealthy blue' behaviours - and those will need to be actively discouraged in order for them to decrease.

A similar pattern can be seen with 'orange' and 'red'. The future culture does not need less 'orange' and 'red' values per se, it just requires more of the 'good orange and red' and less of the 'bad'. Just as with 'violet', there seems to be an innate sense among unified peshmerga that 'orange' and 'red' values are needed in UPF. However, the extent to which they play a role is slightly decreased for the ideal future. In particular, the level of 'orange' pragmatism seems to require a shift away from corruption and

opportunism ('unhealthy') towards efficient project management and pragmatic decision making between different courses of action (which, ideally, are informed by 'yellow' facts and knowledge). For 'red', rebellious heroism and the need for bravery and sacrifice are maintained as core values. The 'might-makes-right' principle, in contrast, is judged insufficient for the future ideal of unity. Just as in the current culture, 'orange' remains overall more pronounced than 'red'.

In conclusion, the stress of 'aqua' vision, 'blue' bureaucracy and 'yellow' knowledge can be interpreted as an attempt to overcome a currently still overpowering 'violet' culture (which in itself is divided as it still adheres to the political parties). The requirement of professionalising the armed forces ('blue-yellow'), as well as the call for political parties to *'wash their hands off the military'* so that they can serve the nation instead ('aqua'), are both repeated expressions that underline a wish to move UPF to a new level of organisation. At the moment, the culture map leads to the conclusion that 'blue' structures are overruled, 'yellow' knowledge is cast aside whenever it can be afforded (recall the high level of 'academics' in intelligence units) and 'aqua' visions are provided as mere lip-service by an overpowering 'violet' culture, which has its roots firmly planted in the political parties.

In contrast, those cultural patterns which are identified to be decreased for the (ideal) future - 'violet' tribalism, 'orange' pragmatism and 'red' rebellion - share in common an admittance from unified peshmerga as to the overall worth of some of their values. A disappearance of 'violet' loyalty, 'orange' pragmatism and 'red' sacrifice are even judged to be negative for UPF. Instead, these cultural traits need to be mitigated and decreased in their 'unhealthy' expressions. 'Violet' belonging needs to be shifted from the political parties to MoP and UPF ('aqua' in combination with a strong 'blue' culture might accomplish that), 'orange' needs to be turned from opportunism and corruption to pragmatism and efficient decision making, and 'red' is said to require less 'might-makes-right' principle while the willingness to go above and beyond, even to be a rebellious hero, are still esteemed qualities for both soldiers and commanders. With that trend of appreciating values which are already working well in current UPF culture, it is likely to conclude that a similar adherence would be maintained for some 'green' values (e.g. harmony, consensus and friendship) as well.

6.4. Conclusion

Many deductions could be taken from these culture maps and their comparisons. As this dissertation needs to remain within limits though, I will focus this conclusion on the most pertinent examples. Starting with prevalent UPF organisational culture, a first conclusion is that 'violet' traits are still overpowering. These customs, values and behaviours derive from the tribal heritage of KRI society. As has been identified in Chapter 5, this heritage leads to particular cultures of power, leadership, decision making and conflict management.

Translated into the colours of the culture map, it seems that *power* is based predominantly on 'violet' cultural patterns: on centralised, personalised, omnipotent and inheritable leadership, on informal laws and on in-group loyalty. In addition, some 'red' ('might makes right') and 'orange' (pragmatism, opportunism, corruption) are also part of the prevalent power culture. In *leadership*, 'violet' and some 'green' elements are visible. 'Violet' traits can be seen in the inheritance, bloodline-basis and personalisation of leadership. Leadership does not derive from the office a person holds (that would be 'blue') but from the person himself ('violet'). The leader is always physically present and cares for his subordinates like his children ('violet'). To do so, some degree of 'green' is necessary. These 'green' expressions are visible in a particular care for the individual soldier's personal (and family) matters, an adherence to harmony (despite not applying any degree of consensual decision making) and the aim to create equality at least among the soldiers[209].

The *decision making* of these leaders is founded on a combination of 'dominant red' and some 'orange' values. Decisions are expected to be taken quickly and decisively ('red'). Hesitation, changing one's mind or choosing to retreat is seen as a weakness ('red'). In addition, a degree of pragmatism can also be found in this culture, though ('orange'). One example is the rebellious hero, who puts his obedience under a conditionality ('orange') and even dares to disobey based on his own judgement ('red') despite the otherwise high level of adherence to superiority ('violet'). Finally, *conflict*

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[209] Some commanders also include themselves in this equality. For example, some refuse to wear their military insignia and rank in order to be more equal to their soldiers.

management is still entirely 'violet': It is the leaders (of the political parties, mostly) who decide. It is them who mitigate, who reward and who punish. It is them who are responsible 'for their sheep'. Therefore, it is also them who manage and solve conflicts.

To change these cultural patterns of power, leadership, decision making and conflict management towards the ideal UPF culture, several deductions can be made from the culture-map comparison. The dominant three factors that the ideal comprises (see the definition above) are unity, nationalism and professionalism. Thereby, *unity* can be read as a combination of 'blue' bureaucratic structures (including the adherence to these structures; in other words a 'healthy blue culture') and an 'aqua' mission. The idea(l) of *nationalism* is based on a mix of 'aqua' (a sense of an all-encompassing ethnic connection) and 'violet' (identity and loyalty to this group). While 'violet' provides the sense of belonging, 'aqua' provides the vision to move beyond the current 'violet' party divisions towards a unifying goal. Finally, *professionalism* is primarily a blend between 'blue' and 'yellow' traits: 'Yellow' data, knowledge and skill informs the 'blue' adherence to hierarchy, discipline and duty.

Therefore, in conclusion from these patterns, power can be translated as needing an 'aqua-blue' mixture instead of the current 'violet-orange'. In other words, unified soldiers identify a necessity for one unifying vision ('aqua'), under which the different parts of UPF - civilian ministerial staff as well as a diverse range of units with their own micro culture - can align and work together just like a human body, in which the heart is different from the lungs, yet they both serve the same purpose of maintaining life in their own way. This organism ('aqua') is said to require a strong 'blue' backbone of bureaucratic structures, transparent processes and a rule-driven, de-personalised and equalising system of internal operation. This future culture poses a stark difference to the current 'violet-orange', where leadership is personalised, infallible and deeply rooted within both the tribal heritage and the political parties ('violet'), where pragmatism ('orange') is lived in 'unhealthy' expressions of corruption and opportunism, and where loyalty and identity ('violet') is still exclusive and borderline hostile towards 'other' political-party members. Therefore, while some 'orange' may likely be considered valuable (i.e., pragmatism) also in the future, the need to reduce particularly 'violet' party division is clear in both the data and the culture map.

A similar case can be said for leadership. While some 'green' attributes, such as harmony among soldiers and inclusive decision making, will likely be considered worth maintaining, leadership needs to move away from 'violet' inheritance of power towards a dominantly 'blue-yellow' culture of giving leadership roles to those skilled ('yellow') but within clearly defined tasks and areas ('blue') and with stark punishment for anyone overstepping their authority beyond this 'blue' structure. Along this new leadership culture, also decision making would change. Adhering to 'blue-yellow' as well, decisions will be based on the best information available ('yellow') and taken by the one whose position it is to decide ('blue'), instead of those who are determined as leaders by their family belonging ('violet') and who act quickest ('red'). Depending on whether this new leadership and decision making is considered for MoP or for unified brigades, it is conceivable that a degree of 'orange-red' values are also appreciated. For example, some smaller, mobile units on the field such as squads and platoons work well with 'orange' pragmatism and a 'red' decisiveness of action. As long as these are both working towards the overarching 'aqua' vision and mission, even 'red' rebellious heroes should no longer be any cause of concern for the unity of UPF.

Finally, also conflict management is likely to also move away from 'violet'. At the current state, only the omnipotent leaders are in a position to solve conflict. Whenever a spat occurs, even between the armed forces, usually the leaders of both political parties sit down and negotiate. As the institutional powers of MoP and UPF are increasing, and particularly should the armed forces decide to proactive tackle culture including the active decrease in 'violet', this reliance on political leaders will diminish. Instead, a refocusing on 'blue', 'yellow' or 'green' conflict management patterns seem likely. In such a 'blue' pattern, conflicts would be solved exclusively by the person who at the moment maintains the according position, role and responsibility at the level in which conflict occurs. So, for a platoon, this would be the platoon sergeant, and should the conflict escalate, it can reach ever higher levels, including a military court[210]. In contrast, a 'yellow' pattern of conflict management would base each decision on facts,

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[210] Note, at the moment such structures and rules are in place in UPF. However, as has been demonstrated in the gap between 'blue' structures and culture, these structures tend to be freely interpreted and acted upon through 'red' (the stronger or more influential person gets to shape it according to their will) or 'violet' (the superior bloodline decides who wins) filters.

and the better argument wins. Such 'yellow' cultures are typically a trait of (military) courts, yet they can also be practiced at other levels of military hierarchy. Finally, a 'green' culture would suggest that conflict is solved with the inclusion of as many people as possible. Particularly in a platoon, it would be likely that the entire unit is taken together to commonly discuss and try to solve the conflict which arose. At larger levels, such an inclusive conflict management is harder to administer and would therefore take other forms, which would nonetheless adhere to values of inclusiveness, consensus and fairness. Whether it is better suited to handle conflicts in a 'blue', 'yellow' or 'green' manner will have to be a decision by MoP - whatever seems to fit the situation, the rank or the committee best. The important thing is that there is an actual awareness and an intentional shaping of this and other cultural patterns, in order for clear 'do's' and 'don't's' to be established within UPF.

Beyond these dominant cultural demonstrations of power, leadership, decision making and conflict management, I want to provide additional examples to demonstrate how culture maps can explain phenomena of UPF which were observed in Chapter 5. In particular, I want to address the following two: the judgement of retreat being a sign of weakness and the phenomenon of strong 'blue' structures which are often not adhered to: The reason why any hint of 'running away', on the side of the commander, often equals to a loss of respect from his soldiers derives from the prominent 'violet-red' culture in decision making. In 'red' cultures, not putting your first through the wall is considered weak. The 'law of the jungle' and the 'might-makes-right' principle ('red') dictate the need for quick decisions and unhesitant action. Losses are taken as a part of the game. In addition, the 'violet' dimension of decision making refers to the overall group belonging. Therefore, it is seen as particularly critical if a commander or deputy from a different political background choses to retreat, as this choice can easily be viewed as a betrayal from his own or from the other group members (or both).

A second example that culture maps help explain is the difference between solidly unified structures and only superficially unified working experience. A tangible example to this point can be seen in the realm of the law: in the region there are many laws and rules, yet they seem to be adhered to only sporadically. The reason for this phenomenon is based on the cultural patterns of 'orange' pragmatism combined with the

practice that laws and rules do not apply to the mightiest (a 'violet-red' combination) and with the presence of 'blue' structures amidst and absence of 'blue' culture. 'Blue' structures, such as laws, regulations and hierarchies, cannot be systematically applied, as long as the 'blue' values - such as adherence to structure, a strong sense of duty and discipline beyond personal relations or family/party belonging - are not considered more valuable (and rewarded more) than 'orange' opportunism which is willing to bend the rules in one's favour. Moreover, the repeated call of unified soldiers for commanders and political leaders to be held accountable for their actions and decisions, also underlines the prevalent weakness of 'blue' rules and regulations. After all, if laws are applied selectively, and if the mightiest are both the ones who break the laws and who get away with it, then all the 'blue' rhetoric and structures can never translate into trust and belief in these structures (i.e., into a 'blue' culture). The strength of 'blue' lies in its reliability, predictability and transparency. Without fostering a 'blue' culture, though, all the structures and laws in the world cannot make people adhere to them. These are only two out of countless examples in which a culture-map analysis allows for a new perspective on phenomena present in UPF. Both examples underline, once more, the value of adding a culture perspective to the study and reform of armed forces.

Having reviewed cultural phenomena in UPF from a culture-map perspective, I also want to also address the reform programme from this perspective. The current reform programme (since late 2018) seems to be broadly based on 'aqua' vision, 'yellow' skill and 'blue' regulations (e.g. MacDiarmid 2015, Mamakani 2015). Looking at the findings of this research, this is good news. However, three points are to be made. One, in spite of the reform programme tackling the relevant areas, they are doing so 'blindly'. Certainly, I do not mean 'blindly' in a way to deny the international armed forces their expertise in military affairs. On the contrary, arriving at the same conclusion from a strictly military, pragmatical, project-based angle as well as from a constructivist research, cultural angle can only underline their expertise. Instead, I use the term 'blindly' in reference to their lack of awareness of culture *within* the structures the reform programme aims to build. As Sagmeister (2016) shows, an operational concept ('blue'), a strategy paper ('aqua-blue-yellow') and a mission statement ('aqua-yellow') are great tools for organisational development. However, these papers only present what people *intend* to do, not what they will actually be doing. After all, all the 'blue'

structures in UPF so far have not led to a 'healthy blue' working culture, with one wheel turning the other like a perfectly functioning clockwork. Instead, 'unhealthy blue' is seen in a massive body of paper and bureaucratic processes along with the everyday usage of 'orange' pragmatism to max-out the grey zones left between the paperwork. Applying a culture analysis and a 'business culture design' to UPF can help translate the creation of these structural tools into an everyday lived reality (rather than another source of frustration and disappointment because reality is so far away from the ideal and rhetoric).

Two, while it's great to build up 'aqua', 'yellow' and 'blue' in UPF, the culture map shows that there are another four fields of culture which are not yet addressed. The comparison of ideal and current culture, in particular, suggests that the decrease of 'violet' also needs to be tackled *proactively*. Consciously applying 'green' strengths, and decrease the unhealthy degrees of 'orange' and 'red' are other examples that the current reform programme largely overlooks. An important finding from working with culture maps is that, in addition to these areas which require changes, there are also areas which can be maintained. Even more so, most cultural patterns have not just 'negative aspects' that demand change, but they also have strengths which can be capitalised on. The application of these nuanced analyses of culture can prove especially beneficial when some existing strengths can be exploited to overcome or decrease another cultural pattern. For example, it is conceivable that a strengthening of 'green', 'orange' or 'red' values and behaviours can decrease the influence of 'violet' in UPF.

Three, although the reform programme addresses the integration of PUK/70 and KDP/80 as well as the relationship between MoP in KRI and MoD in Baghdad, it currently overlooks the necessary integration process *within* UPF. According to my findings, there are *two* integration challenges taking place at the same time: One, a necessary holistic organisational-culture change within UPF, moving the prevalent culture closer to the ideal of military unity (a *horizontal* integration). Two, this process needs to be accompanied by a proactive management of the culture clash between 'academics' and 'non-academics' (a *vertical* integration). As 'academics' and 'non-academics' were already compared intensively in their own section, I will no longer expand on this point here. The important consideration to take notice of is that the

difference between 'academics' and 'non-academics' needs to be accounted for by MoP and UPF in order to create a sustainable unified armed force.

The findings presented here have wide implications. They can serve as an inspirational reference and a new perspective to tackle military unification - both for UPF and, potentially, for other merging armed forces in the world. In addition, they provide insights into the current fault lines of unification as well as suggestions to action for any future reform programme. Certainly, there can always be more research conducted (this is the 'yellow' academic speaking in me): More unified soldiers can be interviewed in order to generate an even more accurate culture map. Interactive workshops among the leadership circles of MoP and UPF are conceivable, in order to collectively design the 'ideal future' of UPF - including the environmental demands and challenges that UPF currently faces and will face in the future. Moreover, a designated team, responsible for overseeing UPF organisational culture, can also be a plausible conclusion to MoP. This team can provide value to MoP (and KRG) to have an oversight into the 'cultural garden' of UPF for strategic decision making. Further, since a garden is constantly growing, employing a designated team responsible for observing the developments and for regularly 'testing the water's temperature' can only be beneficial.

With this range of action and the new insights gained from a culture-map analysis of UPF merger, integration and sustainability, I believe that this dissertation's assertion - that looking beneath the structure of merger by applying a culture analysis is valuable - has been substantiated. It is here where I would like to reiterate the applicability and worth of bringing business-management literature into military-merging research. However, I also have to concede that the analysis provided in Chapter 6 covers solely the deductive part of this research. Albeit being valuable in terms of gaining insights into peshmerga integration and in identifying possible areas of action to affect change within UPF, the inductive part of this research reminds of the limits of this pragmatic culture-change perspective. As of today, the Kurdish political parties wield a strong influence in the armed forces - both in therms of structure as well as culturally. Despite their official rhetoric, they seem to be largely unwilling to let go of this power. At least, this is what the data of my research suggests. Therefore, while MoP can affect

the sustainability of UPF integration through cultural management, any change can only go so far as the political parties allow it to occur. These are the limits that the results of my inductive research suggest for the deductive part on UPF culture change.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Originally, this research started with an exploration of military-merger sustainability in the unique case study of the KRI unified armed forces. Combining a social constructivist paradigm, interdisciplinarity, a partially inductive and partially deductive approach, and empirical fieldwork, this dissertation finds several valuable insights not only on how to integrate unified peshmerga forces (UPF) more sustainably but also on how to conceptualise '(military) unity'.

In total, I argue, this thesis contributes findings at *three* levels ranging from empirical, practical to purely theoretical. Firstly, at a microlevel, the fieldwork results offer operational insights *from* and *for* UPF. These results have a dual value for practitioners concerned with military merging in KRI, on the one hand, and for Kurdish-studies scholars, on the other hand. With this outcome of my research, I hope to provide international armed forces concerned with military merger and security sector reform with a new perspective to frame, understand and approach the multiple challenges of creating sustainably unified armed forces. Here, the value of 'organisational culture' as a guide to manage not just the structures and processes but the actual working together of people in a post-merger integration seems to be the most valuable discovery. For Kurdish studies scholars, I propose several new insights into KRI and UPF. I expect them to find the identified triangles of political-party power, the most recent review of history (2010-2019) and some findings on different cultural patterns to be most interesting for their own purpose and research.

Secondly, at midlevel, the interdisciplinarity of combining military-merger literature with post-merger integration (PMI) seems to yield valuable results. Here, I suggest, the value is provided primarily for the young field of research on military merger and military integration. To begin with, I suggest a differentiation between the

terms 'merger' and 'integration' for future studies. In this thesis, merger refers to structural aspects of unification and integration specialises on 'the human factors' in this process. Further, by going in-depth into the study of an already merged armed force, this research takes a first step in bridging a gap in prevalent literature. Thereby, I approach the post-merger phase from a PMI perspective and focus predominantly on 'organisational culture' as a central variable to understanding why structures can be unified on the one hand, while people still work along previous lines of division on the other (the UPF case offers ample examples of this phenomenon). Finally, I propose 'sustainability' - defined here as the ability to withstand dividing forces - as a new, additional measure for successful unification. Even though my research is solely based on the exploration of one unique case, I claim that these three new perspectives add to the wider field of study. Certainly, they open up a lot of opportunities to conduct additional research.

Thirdly, at a macro-level, I suggest that this dissertation produced - more by coincidence than by intention - a theoretical outlook and a new hypothesis on the concept 'military unity'. Bringing forward this concept, I suggest, can have implications for three different areas: One, military-merging literature is able to apply, test and challenge this theoretical conception (in particular, the hypothesis) in later studies of integration. Two, business-management literature might have an interest in the new conception of 'unity' as well. Theoretically, at least, it could also be applied to corporate mergers. It will be up to business-management scholars to determine whether a social-constructivist approach on conceptualising 'unity' proves helpful to their field. Three, beyond the academic realm, the new perspective of '(military) unity' also has the potential to impact practitioners in both fields of SSR and PMI. By readjusting the conception of the problem and the goal, new methods might be applied (and might even prove more effective) to reconcile, merge and integrate formerly hostile forces (or competitive corporations).

At this point, it is necessary to further substantiate the three levels of contribution. Therefore, I take a closer look at each one. A summary of the main findings, highlights of most important aspects and a final conclusion to this research's potential impact will guide each revision in this final chapter.

7.1. UPF organisational culture

As I see it, there is no argument that factors 'outside' MoP and UPF are detrimentally important for the unification of Kurdish armed forces. Be it third states, the relationship with Baghdad, international organisations' involvement or the Kurdish political parties - external actors interfere and exploit the unified institutions for their own benefits and interests. This research's findings from the inductive approach of questioning, clearly highlight that any institutional effort of MoP or UPF will always be limited by external factors; chief among them the political parties KDP and PUK. Depending on the time and situational contexts, these actors have supported and destructed unification efforts. Either way, their level of influence cannot be overstated.

Moreover, additional MoP-external factors play a role in UPF merger: The digitalisation of the local banking structures, the expansion of medical institutions and the establishment of a diverse private sector are just three examples of necessary developments which directly and indirectly impact the viability and sustainability of UPF merger. In this thesis, the example of mobile phones and politically divided media outlets were also discussed as such 'outside factors' influencing the armed forces.

Despite the many hurdles to military unification in KRI, peshmerga - and even the general public - seem to agree that KDP/80 and PUK/70 *should* be unified. Cancian and Fabbe (2017) find 98 per cent support for unification. At the same time, they also identify that despite soldiers agreeing on the general aim, few are willing to take the necessary steps to achieve this goal. During countless visits to the field, I made similar observations: In spite of the majority agreeing about the general provision of merger and unity, there are countless challenges, some proactive resistance and several dividing forces in the region. In this context, I often encountered a sentiment of capitulation and helplessness. Unified soldiers expressed themselves incapable of changing the political parties'[211], let alone Baghdad's, Turkey's or Iran's interests. At the same time, there were some who wished they could do *something*. Sharing the sentiment of being unable

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[211] As shown in Chapter 3, the triangle of party power relies on the armed forces as one core pillar. Any changes to this pillar are likely to trigger resistance from those who benefit from prevalent status quo.

to change the political parties or geopolitical realities, I decided to study a level of UPF merger at which I believed some positive changes could be pursued: the institutional level.

Here, a deductive approach was chosen. Relying on business-management literature, I followed the hypothesis that the resilience of unified structures could be strengthened through a 'post-merger integration' process (a hypothesis and concept lent from business literature)[212]. At the core of such a process is the integration and systemic change of an organisation's culture. Relaying this theory to the military merger of KDP/80 and PUK/70, I started by identifying the prevalent UPF culture, the perceived level of unity and the ideal vision of what 'unity' should feel and look like (i.e., what culture should shape UPF) in the future. The following insights[213] were taken from the findings of this deductive line of questioning:

Firstly, this research uncovered unified soldier's values and beliefs in what constitutes good commanders, soldiers, armed forces and work ethics. Secondly, it demonstrates that every merger has two levels: a structural (merger) process *and* the integration of people[214]. Thirdly, beneath the structure, 'mindsets', socio-cultural patterns and organisational culture play a key role. For UPF, the findings suggest that instead of having to integrate KDP/80 and PUK/70 cultures, a holistic change to prevalent organisational culture is necessary in order to sustainably integrate UPF. Prevalent UPF culture is dominated by tribalistic ('violet') cultural patterns, which are characterised by internal division. It is also shaped by an inefficient over-bureaucratisation ('unhealthy blue') and a level of pragmatism which does not shy away from corruption ('unhealthy orange'). Furthermore, it is far removed from the idea(l) of military unity, which provides a daily source of frustration to unified soldiers. Thus, it

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[212] The assumption being that increased resilience of UPF increases the institution's capacity to absorb or withstand '(institutionally) external' dividing forces and thereby make the merger more sustainable.

[213] The theoretical value of combining PMI and culture with military-merging research will be discussed in the next section (7.2). Here, I focus on the operational insights for UPF merger.

[214] The goal is to get people from different organisational and ideological backgrounds to work together effectively, efficiently and sustainably. Overcoming previous belongings, establishing a new culture (values and behaviours), as well as creating a new identity are cornerstones to this post-merger integration of formerly hostile forces.

can be concluded that UPF is currently not sustainably unified. Finally, the data suggest that within this overall culture change, a particular integration *within* UPF ought to be undertaken between 'academics' and 'non-academics'. I shall address each of these findings in more detail.

Values, beliefs and work ethics

The first finding, which is valuable at an operational level concerns the values and beliefs unified soldiers express for commanders, soldiers and armed forces as well as overall work ethics. Despite being only based on a small sample, the qualitative depth of this research uncovered first insights into the value systems of unified soldiers on what they believe to constitute 'good' armed forces, commanders and soldiers. Armed forces are qualified as 'good' or 'bad' based on their structure - from logistics to command structure and equipment. Moreover, interviewees stress that 'good people' are necessary to fill these structures with life. An overall will to sacrifice oneself and the need to always be prepared are highlighted for both commanders and soldiers at this point.

'Good' commanders are said to be characterised by brave conduct in battle. They lead up front and show no hesitation. Their decisions are high in quality and they treat their soldiers with a sense of equality. In exchange for these characteristics, commanders receive a personalised level of obedience and loyalty from their followers. In contrast, 'good' soldiers are less determined by character, but by discipline and external appearance. Education, training and steadfastness are highly valued. For soldiers, their original motivation to become peshmerga is said to matter most. Thereby, becoming peshmerga for a salary is judged to be the worst possible motivation.

This judgement connects well to the following point on work ethics: Findings on 'professionalism' suggest that while the compiled definition by unified soldiers largely adheres to a dictionary understanding of the term, one aspect is missing from the Kurdish perspective: the idea of occupation. This gap in the definition underlines that 'being peshmerga' in KRI is still more connected to honour, bravery and sacrifice than to 'having a job'. In fact, 'doing it for the job' is often negatively interpreted, because peshmerga forces are still used for catering to clientalist networks (e.g., hiring a clan in

order to secure votes in elections), for corruption (e.g. 'ghosts' or 'fake peshmerga') and for infiltrating UPF structures with party-loyalists (e.g. 'nepotist non-academics'). Therefore, 'money' - and by extension 'a job' - is usually associated with the opposite of professionalism. Next to professionalism, the concept 'discipline' is discussed in regard to work ethics. For discipline, the most important finding is a missing link between discipline and punishment. Unified soldiers report that any measures of discipline are difficult to enforce within UPF[215]. The reason for this is the inability to punish across party lines and even within one's party, should the inferior have personal contacts to higher-ranking leaders. This gap indicates that the executive power still lies exclusively with the political parties, which in turn cripples discipline and efficiency in UPF as well as trust between UP/70 and UP/80. Finally, the review on work ethics discovered a differentiation between 'academic' and 'non-academic' soldiers. As this differentiation is discussed below, I will not expand on it here.

Structure <u>and</u> culture

Beyond the definitions of professionalism and discipline, the review of these concepts shows a differentiation between dimensions of structure and character. A similar difference is echoed in the evaluation of armed forces. Therefore, albeit subconsciously, most unified soldiers understand and recognise there to be a structural *and* a 'human' level inside UPF. This thesis focuses on the latter aspect.

However, unified soldiers also presented some solutions for the structural level. As bottom-up solutions might prove useful, I want to recall three examples: job-rotation, accountability for all and division of labour. Among the structural solutions offered by unified soldiers, the need for individuals not to 'hoard' job positions (in order to avoid clientalism and corruption) and to be equally accountable to the law, no matter the social standing, hierarchical rank or family background was most often stressed. Further, within UPF, the call for increased division of labour can be interpreted as a wish to increase overall military efficiency, on the one hand, or to allow for more individual specialisation (thereby creating more diverse job profiles and increasing meritocracy), on the other hand. Moreover, it can be read as an (initially

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[215] Recall (Chapter 1) that also the numerical judgement on a scale from 1 to 10 indicates that unified soldiers judge discipline to be even lower than professionalism or unity in UPF.

counterintuitive) idea to create unity through increased division. By placing more focus on specialisation and skill rather than on political background and belonging, it matters less whether the engineering unit or the medical team is mixed or unilaterally staffed with UP/70 or UP/80. What matters is that the medical team needs to rely on the logistics specialists to provide their service efficiently and that the logistics team, in turn, depends on the engineering unit to make sure all systems function. By creating ever tighter interdependencies between the units, an increase in unity is conceivable *if* it is accompanied by an organisational culture which establishes responsibility at the division level - in order for one unit not to be able to blame the other if the operation fails, but instead the entire division is judged on how it delivers results.

Beyond these structural aspects, many 'human' factors play a role in UPF. As said before, these are reflected in 'mindsets', values, types of judgement and patterns of behaviour. In other words, they are reflected in their *culture*. Here, three levels can be differentiated: the wider socio-cultural context, particular 'local' patterns of power, leadership, decision making and conflict management, as well as the organisational culture of UPF. In wider society, cultural patterns such as 'do not talk about difficult topics' and 'keep face' in public reflect the tribal heritage and the shadows of the civil war. These patterns are so widespread, they even effect the organisational-culture change in UPF. A lack of trust and transparency, to name just one example, hinders work efficiency by obscuring true intentions or deviating focus from the subject to relational aspects. In addition, international advisors notice patterns such as passing off work, a strong mobile-phone culture and childish excuses for not progressing in work assignments - additional impediments for progress in any change process.

Along with these cultural habits, which provide challenges to any merger or reform of UPF, particular cultures of power, leadership, decision making and conflict management were also discovered. Each culture is described in this thesis based on findings and examples in Chapter 5 as well as the seven fields of culture in Chapter 6. I will therefore not repeat the nuances here. Instead, I focus on the commonalities between them. Two stand out. Firstly, this thesis showed that from a culture-map perspective different topics can be viewed, lived and valued in very different ways depending along which (of the seven) cultural patterns the matter in question is

interpreted. In Chapter 6, the example of 'rules' demonstrates this assertion. The same is true for power, leadership, decision making and conflict management. Therefore, depending on the guiding cultural pattern, the way these four aspects are lived (and judged to be right or wrong) can differ greatly. Currently, power, leadership and conflict management are said to be guided by a predominantly 'violet' pattern: They relate to one omnipotent (infallible) leader, who looks over followers like a father looks over his family. Decision making in this 'violet' culture is judged on 'red' grounds: Decisions need to be decisive and changing one's mind is considered weak.

It might therefore not be surprising that the second commonality to all factors is a frequent call for them to change. Power, unified soldiers suggest, needs a stronger 'aqua' (vision) and 'blue' (bureaucratic structure and adherence to the 'office' rather than the person) culture. Leadership, decision making and conflict management are said to require 'blue' and 'yellow' traits (i.e., leadership positions should be allocated based on merit ('yellow'), these leaders should be adhered to, no matter their personal or family background ('blue'), and their decisions should be based on extensive information ('yellow')). The current level of 'green' (treating all soldiers alike) is likely to remain valuable in future leadership as well as for conflict management in superior leadership circles (including all people affected). Similarly, some 'orange' (pragmatic) and 'red' (decisive) traits are also judged to be valuable for future decision making. This review of changing cultural patterns already alludes to the next contribution of this thesis: Findings suggest that a change of prevalent organisational is necessary to unify UPF more sustainably.

Organisational-culture change in UPF
Cultural patterns, which have been reviewed so far, have been found to apply to all areas of Kurdish society - including the different armed forces. Therefore, despite international advisors (and myself) recognising some organisational and cultural differences between KDP/80 and PUK/70, the differences cannot be considered substantial enough in order to require proactive management of differences. Along this line of thought, it can also be concluded that incompatible cultures are not a reason for the failure of UPF merger. However, M&A literature points to two other likely reasons

for merger failure: the absence of PMI and the ignorance of 'organisational culture' in these processes. To my knowledge, there are currently no PMI processes in place in UPF and 'organisational culture' is overlooked altogether as a factor in military merging. As a result, I purposefully chose this new approach.

In reviewing the UPF case from this perspective, two findings are made: Firstly, instead of an integration between UP/70 and UP/80, an overall change of UPF organisational culture is necessary to make UPF merger more sustainable. Secondly, within this culture change, a proactive integration ought to be conducted between 'academics' and 'non-academics' in order to avoid a culture clash inside the organisation. To make reading easier, I separated the two parts and discuss '(non)academics' in the next section.

Since the data suggests that there is no significant cultural difference between UP/80 and UP/70, the question remains why the current unification is still unsustainable. As we have already seen, external factors - among them, in particular, the political parties - are one reason for the fragility of UPF institutions. However, there is a second factor, which weakens the institution from inside: The data finds a significant gap between the ideal and daily experience of 'military unity'. Such a gap, I argue, is likely to impact the sustainability of the merger. The reasoning behind this hypothesis goes as follows: The experience that unification does not function as ideally as it is expressed in political rhetoric provides fertile ground for personal dissatisfaction and disbelief in the system. The daily reminders of maintained differences only fertilises this ground and hence negative, disruptive, or 'unhealthy' cultural patterns and behaviours - such as a culture of division and friction - develop. In such a system, even strong rules and structures are characterised by an inherent weakness - they are only adhered to as long as they are strictly monitored and punished, but as soon as the attention drops even for a moment, the predominant behavioural pattern is to ignore, circumvent or reinterpret the formal rules and structures in one's favour or preference. This is exactly the pattern which the data finds to be a prevalent culture trait in UPF at this time. With these inherent weaknesses, the ability to absorb shocks, external interference or dividing forces is low and, therefore, the merger is not sustainable.

As a result, in order to make the merger more sustainable, an overall change of culture has to be sought for. Such a change and strengthening of military unity, I deduct, can be best achieved by moving UPF cultural patterns closer to the ideal[216]. According to the soldiers I interviewed, such an ideal is envisioned along the triangle of *unity*, *professionalism* and an inclusive form[217] of *nationalism*. Translated into an organisational culture, this ideal is based on strong 'aqua' (vision and mission), 'blue' (bureaucratic hierarchy) and 'orange' (pragmatism) cultural patterns. 'Violet' identity, 'yellow' skill and meritocracy, together with 'red' decisiveness, are also suggested as important attributes to an ideal future UPF. In comparison, current UPF culture is reported to be dominated by an overpowering 'violet', which, in itself, is characterised by division[218]. It is in these cultural habits and patterns that the division, influence and rivalry of the political parties lives on in UPF. Aside from this dominant 'violet', a mostly 'unhealthy' form of 'orange' (opportunism), a stubborn 'red' (the 'might-makes-right' principle, unapologetic decision making and the 'rebellious hero') and an 'unhealthy' development of 'blue' (over-bureaucratisation) characterise prevalent UPF culture.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that organisational-culture change in UPF ought to focus predominantly on the following four aspects: Firstly, increase 'aqua' (vision and mission) and 'yellow' (meritocracy). In part, these steps are already underway. The internationally advised reform program focuses on the development of a regional defence strategy and a new operating concept ('aqua'). Even the political parties send more and more 'non-academics' to attend military academies, thereby increasing the level of skill in UPF ('yellow'). However, it should not be overlooked that beyond the strategic papers, a change in the organisational culture to support the new vision and to prioritise skill over political belonging is crucial. Otherwise, if these

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[216] This ideal can either be the ideal vision as it is expressed by unified soldiers (as it is expressed in this dissertation), or an ideal which UPF and MoP leadership decide upon. Business-culture management suggests the 'best' version is a combination of both. MoP leadership is recommended to take unified soldiers' vision into account when deciding which organisational culture is best to withstand the challenges of UPF environment in the future.

[217] As of yet, Kurdish nationalism seems to imply a protection of the territory and all the people who live in it (including other faiths and (to a more limited extent) other ethnicities).

[218] De facto, the 25 points of the 'violet' culture point on the map might as well be divided into two dots with 12.5 points for UP/70 and UP/80 each.

efforts are uncovered as mere rhetoric and lip service, the forces will end up more shattered than ever. Secondly, turn 'unhealthy' 'blue' and 'orange' cultures towards positive expressions - away from corruption and over-bureaucratisation towards pragmatic decision making and an adherence to laws and procedures over personal power. The UPF case aptly demonstrates that 'blue' structures alone do not create a 'blue' culture. Letting the metaphorical 'garden' of Sagmeister (2016) develop without any management and interference, 'unhealthy' forms of 'blue' and 'orange' cultures bloom only to denounce the unified institution into nothing more than a facade.

Thirdly, proactively decrease 'violet' (tribalistic identity, hierarchy and leadership), 'orange' (opportunistic corruption) and 'red' (non-reversible decision-making styles). As shown in Chapter 6, the current weakness of the international-armed-forces advisory mission is that even though they focus on strengthening the 'right'[219] aspects ('aqua', 'blue' and 'yellow'), they ignore learnings from PMI literature which suggest that the increase of some cultural patterns does not necessarily lead to the decrease of others. In particular the decrease of 'violet' cultural patterns needs to be a priority for any reform process of UPF. Findings suggest four areas in which to start tackling such a change: in the prevalent culture of power, leadership, decision making and conflict management. By proactively changing each of these aspects towards other values, priorities and behaviours, the dominance of 'violet' culture can be decreased. In addition, some strengths of 'violet', such as a sense of belonging, which are to be maintained for an ideal UPF culture, need to be refocused and reframed to stress unified identities (e.g., pride in being part of UPF) over currently divided belonging (political party background).

This point already leads to the last aspect of culture change: build on existing strengths of UPF culture. More than just adding *seven* areas of culture or the *nuance* between 'healthy' and 'unhealthy', business-culture design emphasises that change can be conducted more easily when identifying and proactively employing strengths of prevalent cultural patterns. For UPF, the 'aqua' vision of protecting (all of) Kurdistan, the widely shared values of 'red' sacrifice and 'green' equality among soldiers, as well

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[219] According to the ideal as identified in unified soldiers' accounts.

as a strong presence of 'orange' pragmatism were identified as such strengths that can be useful during cultural-change processes.

Academics - non-academics integration

Beyond the change of organisational culture, an integration process ought to be undertaken within UPF as well. As noted before, the difference between 'academics' and 'non-academics' is a central finding of this research. Due to their significant difference in values - with meritocracy on the one hand and nepotism on the other - and the expressed frustrations on the side of 'academics', a clash of cultures can be seen brewing underneath UPF structures. If left unchecked, I argue, this clash has the potential to destabilise the unified institution from inside. Therefore, this culture clash deserves attention and proactive engagement in any future unification or reform process. The most important finding, beyond the clash itself, is the identification of three types of 'non-academics'. As described in Chapter 6, this distinction offers a new perspective on how to deal with 'non-academics' in UPF. Primarily, it disputes the currently undertaken approaches of either waiting for 'non-academics' to retire or sending them to military academies. Since neither aspect manages to deal with the phenomenon of 'nepotists', these approaches cannot be judged sufficient, neither to handle 'non-academic's' presence in UPF nor to preempt a culture clash between 'academics' and 'non-academics'.

To conclude this review of findings and conclusions at an operational level, I want to reflect on the limits, utility and possible repercussions of this thesis. While I assert that the findings of this dissertation are both valid and valuable, they also have their limits. First of all, it is possible that a different outcome might have been achieved when interviewing *other* unified soldiers. This is a general risk of qualitative research. In addition, *more* unified soldiers could have been interviewed or *non-military actors*, such as 'civilian staff' at MoP or the wider society, could have been included as well. However, as explicated in Chapter 4, I purposefully delineated this research to UPF soldiers. Within this sample, I spread my interviewees as far across ranks and backgrounds as possible in order to achieve a good cross-section of perspectives. Further, I interviewed civilian staff at MoP, military academies as well as international

armed forces within my 'context interviews' in order to achieve a broader view on the subject despite my limited basis for data. Finally, thanks to my previous research and the depth of each conversation, my data reached a satisfying level of saturation already at a small number of interviews. Therefore, despite acknowledging that one could always interview 'more', I am content with the data basis this dissertation's conclusions are based on.

Secondly, I want to review the dual approach I pursued in this research. In the deductive part, I followed business-management literature's hypothesis on post-merger integration and organisational culture. This approach has provided new insights into UPF culture, merger and military unity - both at the operational level discussed here, as well as at a theoretical level, which I discuss below. However, the findings of this research suggest that this deductive approach has limits. Here, the inductive part of the PhD comes in. The data suggests that there are major hurdles to the sustainability of peshmerga unification, merger and integration which lie outside the unified institutions. In other words: unified soldiers can only do so much to breathe life into the unified institutions. While the sustainability of UPF unity is in fact determined by the way soldiers chose to act every day, their own dependence on external factors - chief among them, the persisting omnipotence of political parties - harbours the potential to break the unification apart at any point. As such, it needs to be stressed that the deductive part's findings are limited by the political realities on the ground. Nevertheless, I assert that this does not limit the value of these operational findings.

Their value is primarily asserted for practitioners concerned with military merging in KRI and for Kurdish-studies scholars. For practitioners, this research provides a new perspective and frame for the complex task of merging and integrating formerly hostile forces. From this perspective, the effort is not to focus on integrating UP/70 and UP/80 but to change the organisational culture of UPF. Here, the biggest impact is said to arrive when combining structural and cultural changes. After all, UPF itself is the best case in point to show that the creation of structures alone does not necessarily lead to people adhering to them. Therefore, active management of culture is recommended even beyond the change process itself - otherwise 'unhealthy' expressions of relevant cultural patterns might develop. Furthermore, within this

change, an integration between 'academics' and 'non-academics' ought to be pursued. Also here, organisational culture offers a valuable perspective, as it allows for changes not to be implemented 'blindly'. I hope that the Ministry of Peshmerga, the Kurdistan Regional Government and the international armed forces find inspiration in these findings in order to create a stronger unified armed force in KRI. From the data, it can be recommended that a regular check on what unified soldiers think military unity should look like, along with an active management of daily experience (of what 'being unified' feels like), are crucial levers which policy makers ought to master in order to move unification from a superficial, structural level to a substantial, sustainable level.

For Kurdish studies scholars, the qualitative assessment of wider socio-cultural patterns, and the prevalent values and expressions of power, leadership, decision making and conflict management provide new insights into peshmerga forces (plus, by extension, into Kurdish society as a whole). In addition, the presentation of prevalent political-party dominance in the shape of three triangles, together with the most recent review of history from 2010 until 2019 adds to the wider field. With my thesis, I hope to inspire more in-depth studies into KRI phenomena as well as practical-oriented research, which can assist the region with its multiple challenges on the one hand and thereby learn from this unique region, which seems to question most assumptions on statehood and institutionalism, on the other hand.

7.2. Military merging from a PMI perspective

Exploring (organisational) culture in a military context is not common - neither in the region nor in military literature. As such, my interest and intent to pursue these factors did not go unquestioned. My hope is that the extensive list of examples presented in Chapter 5 manages to underline the value I see in pursuing this interdisciplinary approach when studying military merger[220]. While I knew I wanted to uncover the cultural patterns of UPF, I did not know the extent and outcome of this research. During fieldwork, I asked for what I perceived to be the most crucial questions in the context of peshmerga forces and I followed my research subject's expressions, explanations and

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[220] Even albeit the deductive findings presented being limited by political realities on the ground.

judgement in gaining a deeper understanding[221]. Overall, I am content to having taken the most out of the available data without straying too far from the original messages of my interviewees.

With this being said, I move to discussing the most relevant findings regarding the value of crossing PMI and military-merging literature. As the study of UPF highlights, a 'merger' is more than just the unification of different structures. This, already, is a valuable find for future military-merging considerations in both literature and practice. Extensive business-management research on M&A underlines this point by stressing post-merger integration and organisational culture. Here, the focus rests on the question how to get (formerly hostile) people to work together efficiently, effectively and sustainably within new, unified structures. To differentiate this process from merger, the term 'integration' is applied. In military-merging literature, it seems that the terms 'merger' and 'integration' are currently used as synonyms. As shown in Chapter 2, these synonyms can lead to confusion between different areas of focus. Therefore, I suggest that military-merging literature should differentiate between the concepts of 'merger' and 'integration' for practicability.

In this thesis, I follow PMI literature, which suggests that a successful merger needs more than a vision statement and a new organigram. Instead, organisational culture is stressed. This perspective proves particularly valuable when reviewing literature on UPF. Cancian and Fabbe (2017), to name just the most recent example, find contradicting statements between goals and actions among peshmerga forces. While not being able to explain this contradiction from their quantitative perspective, Sagmeister (2016) is able to present an answer. He asserts, when structures or official goals are not followed, the answers usually lie in prevalent organisational culture. PMI literature suggests that organisational culture affects leadership and decision-making cultures as well as the will to cooperate and the personal definition of success (Miller and Fernandes 2009). This PhD research produced similar findings. Even though I did not initially look for it, the data showed a particular leadership and decision-making culture in UPF. Moreover, I found a local culture of power and conflict management. In

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[221] Recall the 'blank paper' approach in Chapter 4.

contrast, the will to cooperate and personal success were not found, but they can be identified indirectly. Personal success is reframed as institutional success and is hence discussed in the ideal form of unity. The will to cooperate in UPF is found to be increased by decreasing 'violet' and by increasing '(healthy) blue' and 'yellow' cultures.

With this strong theoretical overlap, I feel comforted in the choice to cross these disciplines. When reviewing the findings in retro-perspective, I come to the conclusion that the midlevel findings are most valuable to the young field of military merging. To begin with, with a PMI-study of UPF, this thesis takes a first step towards filling a gap in literature. It explores already merged forces from an in-depth, bottom-up perspective. In doing so, this research adds two additions to prevalent military-merger literature and practice: 'organisational culture' as a factor and 'sustainability' as a new measure to evaluate success.

'Sustainability', in this context, is defined as institutional resilience or the ability to withstand dividing forces. To study this sustainability, I chose to work 'dynamically' on every aspect. In other words, this research is situated in the middle between the dominant approaches of both fields. For military merging, I suggest it needs both political will *and* technical engineering skills[222]. Therefore, I also stand between a technocratic and an indoctrination approach to military mergers. Instead of either-or, I claim it needs *both* a technocratic focus on merging structures as well as an indoctrination-level during post-merger integration. Finally, when it comes to culture, I also stand in 'dynamic' middle ground, viewing organisational culture both as a variable *and* as the organisation in and of itself. Therefore, I suggest that one *can* engineer organisational culture, even if one needs to be cautious and aware that the exact outcome cannot always be determined due to the complexity of social organisations (recall the football at a child's birthday party).

Already at this point, the value of combining the disciplines is highlighted. However, I would like to stress one additional value which this thesis adds to military-merging literature: Sagmeister's (2016) 'culture map'. This tool, I argue, is valuable for

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[222] The same is true for culture change as O'Riordan (2015) finds for the public sector.

future military merger and integration research. Four benefits are emphasised: The *seven* fields of culture offer a guide along which more variables of merger can be tested[223]. Further, culture maps allow identifying which cultural patterns need to be increased as well as those which ought to be decreased (e.g., which behaviours to actively discourage). In addition, aside from highlighting weaknesses in organisations, culture maps also help identify strengths of prevalent cultures, which change processes can capitalise on. Finally, the nuances between 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' dimensions of each cultural pattern allow for a better understanding of values, purposes and patterns of behaviour. Therefore, I conclude that PMI as a field and process, 'organisational culture' as a factor and perspective, and the culture map as a tool are valuable additions to military-merging literature. They help to manage not just the structures and processes but the actual working together of people in a post-merger integration of formerly hostile, structurally unified armed forces.

7.3. The social construction of military unity

When exploring the sustainability of UPF merger as well as possible institutional integration processes, I stumbled across a third - as I call it 'macro-level' - finding. Upon reviewing all data and recalling the underlying intention and purpose of my work, I came to the conclusion that conceptualising 'military unity' is arguably even more important than the details of how, who and when to merge or integrate. The reasoning is simple: If the goal of a merger is to create unity among formerly separate entities, then it needs to be understood what 'unity' is. In theorising this question, I followed the logic that the findings of my research seemed to suggest to me. While it is fair to criticise such a theorisation being built on the back of only one case study, I contend that the hypothesis and theoretical conceptions I found are worth to be put forward in order to be further scrutinised and tested by future research.

In trying to grasp the concept '(military) unity' when looking over all the gathered and analysed data, I realised that a perfect, pure form of unity cannot actually exist in a human context. *Absolute* unity would require the entire organisation to

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[223] Recall that international forces currently focus on 'aqua', 'blue' and 'yellow' in the reform process of UPF. Thereby, they overlook the other four fields. As these can pose hurdles or provide support for change processes, potential threats and opportunities are equally ignored.

function like a machine. However, despite machines being regularly used as metaphors for armed forces, the military is also a human creation. Therefore, the workings of this organisation are impacted by 'human factors' just like any other. Arguably, the armed forces are the most machine-like institution of all social organisations. However, I contest that this warrants a dismissal of 'human factors'. The UPF case study provides countless empirical support for this assertion. Similarly, the opposite of absolute (military) unity cannot be supported in reality either. The purest form of 'absolute disunity' implies that not one person speaks with another. Because human beings are social and because organisations could not function without interaction and coordination, also disunity does not exist in any absolute form.

With neither of these poles existing in their purest form in any social organisation, both 'unity' and 'disunity' can only to be conceived as a range of options between these two theoretical extremes. To narrow this span, a hypothetical 'middle' can be imagined. This 'middle' constitutes the tipping point upon which society or a particular group of people (usually those who make up the organisation) no longer refer to a situation as 'disunity' or 'division' but start to conceive it as 'some form of unity'. To illustrate this point, I provide a simplistic drawing of this scale (figure 5).
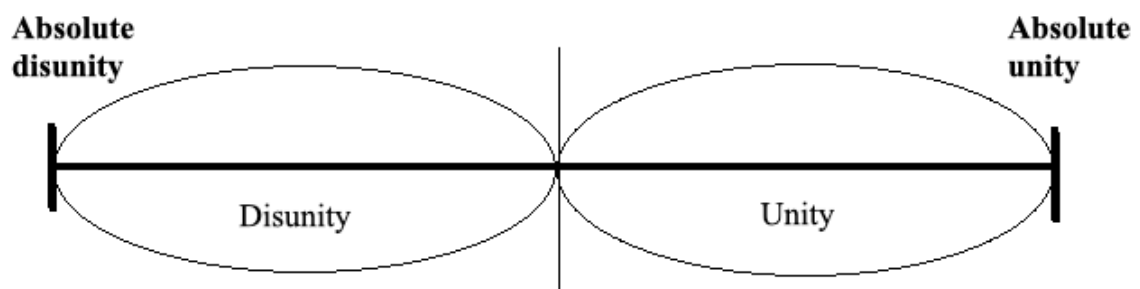

Figure 5: The (institutional) scale of (military) unity

From this line of thought, it can be deducted that there is not one clearly definable, tangible form for neither 'unity' nor 'disunity'. This vision stands in line with previous conceptions of (military) unity having more than one shape: PMI literature identifies different 'intensities' of corporate mergers and integrations; Warner (2013) judges a security framework to be sufficient for military merger; and for UPF, the international armed forces advising the reform programme suggest that 'full unity' is neither

necessary nor provides a practical goal in and of itself (context interviews, 2019). Accordingly, even *structurally divided* solutions - such as security frameworks, or KDP/ 80 and PUK/70 operating beneath a MoP 'holding' - can constitute 'military unity' in the perception of soldiers and society. In terms of options for structural set ups of UPF, this is great news.

However, what intrigues me most about the UPF case study is that *despite* a unified institution existing as a structure already and despite the wide majority identifying unification as a necessary goal, there is no strong sense of 'unity' among unified soldiers (plus, the entire unified force can still break apart easily). Therefore, I contest that 'unity' is only a structural reality which comes in different forms. Instead, the unique KRI case suggests to me that 'unity' has to be theorised as a social construct. As such, every (military) organisation has to define, shape and 'live' unity in their own version[224]. The challenge is to work out what 'unity' is supposed to be like in their particular case. How is this accomplished? Social construction occurs as an amalgamation of individual conceptions. In other words: It is the people within the institution who construct unity collectively every day. And it is the organisation's culture - the values, worldviews, mindsets and behaviours - in which either 'unity' or 'disunity' comes to life. It is the people who chose to follow the one order, rule and value or the other. It is the people who treat each other as friends or enemies along the bureaucratic process. It is the way they interact, they prioritise and they evaluate situations that either makes or breaks and institution from inside.

As the social construction of unity is closely connected to organisational culture, it seemed valuable to me to connect conceptualisations of 'unity' with an analysis of prevalent cultures. Here, I differentiated between an 'idea(l)' vision of what unity *could* (hopes) and *should* (expectations) be like, and the 'daily experiences' (i.e., prevalent culture). While first alerted to this differentiation by results of previous fieldwork, this differentiation provided me with the empirical confirmation that the ideal vision and the daily experience of unity do not overlap within UPF. While this finding in itself is

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[224] This is particularly important for those who want to sustainably integrate different (formerly hostile) forces. In a military post-merger integration, not only does 'unity' need to be defined but previous conceptions of 'unity', as they were constructed within previous units, need to be challenged and changed.

useful for practical purposes, I suggest its value for theory is even higher: The data suggest that a gap between idea(l) and daily experience is possible. This is particularly important in terms of its effects: The data shows that this 'gap' is accompanied by expressions of anger, disappointment and suspicion towards the unified institution[225]. Thus, with the gap triggering such negative sentiments, many effects - including a decreasing trust in and viability of the unified institution - are conceivable. In fact, the data suggest that negative sentiments and judgement also reinforce division and risk to drive the unified parts even further apart than the separate political-party forces were before. With this, I find a plausible link between this gap and the sustainability of military mergers. I would like to put this finding forward in two hypotheses - one relating to the UPF case study in particular and one generalised for the wider field of military merger.

> For the UPF case:
>
> *The further the soldiers' idea(l) and their daily experience of unity are apart, the less sustainably UPF are merged.*
>
> In more general terms:
>
> *The smaller the gap between ideal and daily experience in the collective construction of military unity, the more sustainable the merger.*

Whether this hypothesis holds up in other case studies, or whether it is unique to the KRI case, has to be tested in future research. Several areas of enquiry can be envisioned: For one, the hypothesis itself invites to be applied, tested and challenged. Is there a correlation between this gap and the sustainability of mergers? Are similar phenomenons observed in other case studies? Can this conceptualisation be generalisable to all military-merger processes? A second line of examination which arises, should this correlation be confirmed, would be to quantify or measure the size of the gap, to see whether any difference in terms of sustainability can be observed. Does the ideal need to overlap 100% with the daily experience of unity in order for mergers to be sustainable? How much do they need to correspond? And where is the tipping point?

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[225] Also see Chapter 7.1.

Beyond this new field of research, which is opened up by the proposed hypothesis, I suggest another insight can be found by connecting the general theorisation of 'unity' with this hypothesis: When putting the dimensions 'ideal' and 'daily experience' into the scale (figure 5), it can be assumed that the ideal of military unity is somewhere in the right half of the matrix - between the 'middle line' and the (inexistent) 'absolute' form of unity. In contrast, the daily experience of working in unified units can be allocated anywhere on the scale[226]. Seeing as we have established that 'unity' can come in many shapes and forms, it is possible that the overlap of ideal and daily experience actually determines where the most sustainable construction of 'unity' is[227]. In other words: *No matter where* the ideal and the daily experience of military unity lie on this scale of (institutional) unity, what matters to identify the sustainability and durability of military unity and merger is *how big the gap* is between them (or how much they overlap).
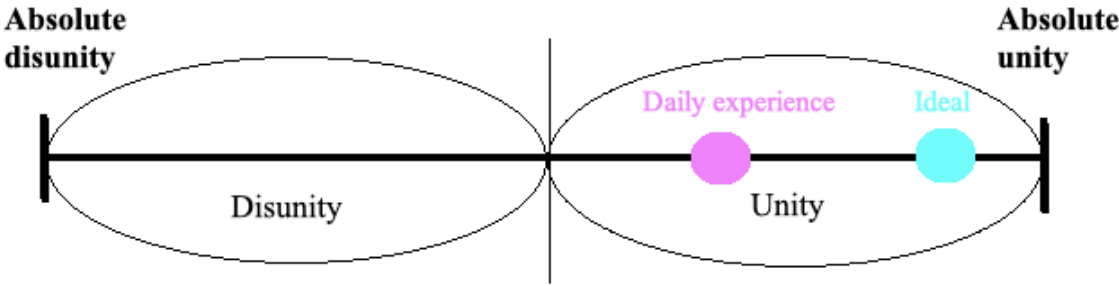

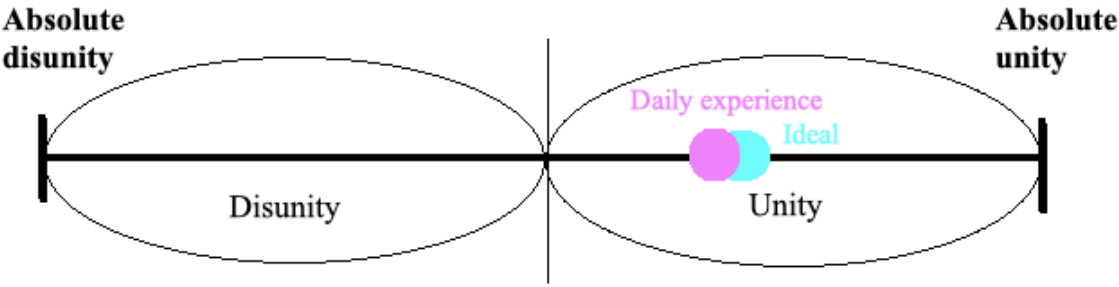Figure 6: No (sustainable) military unity

Figure 7: (Sustainable) military unity

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[226] An interesting next step would be to develop a way to quantify where exactly the ideal and daily experience of 'military unity' lie for any case study (including UPF). This is neither the goal nor within the scope of this dissertation, though.

[227] To be clear, the goal here is not to identify where *exactly* the ideal and daily experience of 'military unity' in UPF lie. Instead, these matrixes simply serve to visualise the reasoning behind the theorisation of military unity as a social construct.

Figure 6 and 7 visualise this theorisation: The military unity of an armed force with an organisational-culture gap as in figure 6 cannot be considered to have achieved (a sustainable level of) military unity. In contrast, figure 7 is thought to have achieved military unity, despite both ideal and daily experience being 'lower' on the overall (institutional) scale of unity. What this tells us is that no matter the structural set up of a 'unified' military force, when the prevalent idea(l) of what 'military unity' *should* look like overlaps with the way unity is experienced everyday, 'military unity' (and arguably a sustainable form of it) is established.

There is no doubt that this last finding constitutes both the biggest weakness and the biggest strength of this dissertation. This simple conceptualisation is based primarily on theoretical reasoning (albeit being inspired by the unique case study of UPF as well as the empirical data gathered in this context). Therefore it is open to challenge and questioning. At the same time, what is reasoning and theorising for if not to present one argumentatively conclusive idea which, by its very presentation, opens up a new line of questioning, testing and evaluation? I find the value of this attempt to theorise 'military unity' to be exactly that. This conception of military unity as a social construct allows for many future enquiries. Even potential usage for business-management literature can be envisioned. With this thesis being more concerned with *military* mergers though, I focus the outlook on future research on this field of study.

Future research can be imagined along a myriad of questions. I only present a selection: In what way can the conceptualisation of 'military unity' as a construct rather than an achievable stage or 'state of being' support the manner in which post-(civil)-war military unifications are approached? Can a correlation between the size of the ideal/daily-experience gap and the sustainability of military merger and integration be empirically supported? How wide is the gap between the idea(l) and the daily experience of 'unity' in institutionalised armed forces, such as the United Kingdom, Germany or the United States? Beyond these concrete questions, future research is invited to apply and test this concept on other case studies, to develop a more precise measurement for an ideal/daily-experience gap and to challenge the correlation between a gap and the sustainability of mergers. Also, I hope that this theorisation of military

unity as well as the PMI processes, factors of organisational culture and the culture map will be applied to practice, in order to see whether it makes a difference in how problems are conceived and/or solved. Overall, for military merging (including SSR and post-civil-war reconciliation) this thesis may provide a new perspective on the conception of goals and challenges of merger together with a theoretical and methodological approach for unifying formerly hostile armed forces.

In conclusion, this research started out by wondering how to unify formerly hostile armed forces and has ended with questioning what military unity is in the first place. Based on the observations of a unique case study - the Kurdistan region of Iraq in its three attempts to merge KDP/80 and PUK/70 - this bottom-up, in-depth study has focused on how to sustainably integrate the already structurally unified peshmerga forces. Thereby, the underlying social constructivist paradigm and the empirical findings of my fieldwork have led me to a theorisation of the social construction of military unity. By viewing 'military unity' not as a fixed state or a tangible template, which can be reached at one point, a more process-oriented perspective, which includes 'human factors' (such as organisational cultures and the difference between what people say and what they do) into the processes of military merger and integration, is developed. I conclude that (military) unity is what people make of it - between the poles of ideal vision and daily experience. As in Lessing's ring parable, only continuous work, bringing the ideal and the daily experience as close as possible (here demonstrated in changing prevalent organisational culture and integrating 'academics' and 'non-academics'), can create (sustainable) military unity.

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N.B.: Whenever a website offered no page reference, I have not entered a reference to page numbers in direct quotations.

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Please note that all personal interviews conducted during fieldwork are kept anonymous to secure the safety of the research subjects.

Appendix I: The interview guide for unified peshmerga

Prelude:

- purpose and topic of research

- deny answers

- stop interview

- anonymous

- allowance to record?

Topics of the interviews

Check-in question: Background story

- When, how and why did you join UPF?

- How did you get to your current rank?

- (if applicable: Did you have to take a test upon joining?)

- Where were you deployed during the war with ISIS?

Working together

- compare UPF to your previous work (Do you feel any difference?)

- How is it to work in UPF?

- What works? What does not work?

- Do you know who is 70/UP, who is 80/UP in your unit?

- Do you feel influences in UPF? (e.g. from parties, third states, tribes, divided territories, language)

Characteristics

- soldier

- commander

- military / armed force

Definitions

- professionalism
- discipline
- unity

Levels

- professionalism
- discipline
- unity
- trust

Future

- What is necessary to get to 100% unity?
- Why should the forces be unified?
- Is no unity an option?
- What should be the roles of UPF?
- What do you think about the plans of the reform directory?

16 October 2017

- What happened in October 2017?
- Where were you on 16 October 2017?
- How did you experience 16 October 2017?
- Where you surprised about what happened?
- Where you surprised when unified brigades separated?

Check-out question:

- Is there anything I have not asked yet that I should know or include?

Appendix II: The interview guide for international advisors

Prelude:

- mutual introductions
- purpose, intentions and topic of the research project

Guideline for the conversations

Impressions of UPF

- What is your impression of the peshmerga?
- What is your impression of UPF?
- How do you view UPF discipline and professionalism?
- How do you judge the level of unity?

Progress

- Did you observe progress since you started working with UPF?
- What are the potentials and hurdles for progress?

Future

- What is the ultimate goal?
- How do you see the role and capabilities of UPF in the future?

Biggest hurdles

- What are the biggest hurdles in achieving unification?
- What are the biggest hurdles in achieving reform?
- What are the biggest hurdles for UPF in future?

The role of the international advisors

- What do you do? (What is your mandate?)
- How do you do it? (on internal processes; i.e., job rotation, coordination with KRG, MoP, UPF and other international advisors)

The 35 points of the reform programme

- How do you judge the potential of the 35 points in the roadmap for reform?

- What is your impression of the 10 year plan?

Culture and other 'soft' factors

- What do you currently do for 'soft' factors - organisational culture, post-merger integration?

- Are you aware of the factor 'culture'?

Appendix III: Pictures

Picture 1: Main Square, Erbil, Recruitment has started / 21 June 2014

Picture 2: Mullah Abdullah, south-west of Kirkuk; 40 meters from ISIS / 19 September 2014

Picture 3: Zummar, three days after it was liberated from ISIS / 22 July 2015