The course of co-option: Co-option of local power-holders as a tool for obtaining control over the population in counterinsurgency campaigns in weblike societies. With case studies on Dutch experiences during the Aceh War (1873-c. 1912) and the Uruzgan campaign (2006-2010)
Kitzen, M.W.M.

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Introduction
Introduction

While history never repeats itself, recurring patterns can be discerned when studying the past. One such pattern observed throughout military history concerns the rise and demise of counterinsurgency as a military strategy. Western military forces are optimized for the fight against similar adversaries, and therefore have to reorient themselves whenever confronted with elusive insurgent opponents. This adaptation process, however, is hampered by the dominant Western military culture that emphasizes the defeat of an enemy through a decisive battle in which massive firepower, technology, and maneuvering by large formations are key to victory. Only when soldiers gradually start to realize that this ‘conventional’, enemy-centric approach is insufficient for fighting an opponent hiding among the population and cunningly combining messy ‘irregular’ tactics such as guerilla, terrorism, and political subversion in order to fight on its own terms, the adaptation to counterinsurgency gains momentum. At the peak of the campaign this leads to the implementation of a so-called population-centric approach that essentially seeks to defeat the insurgency through a combination of military, political, and socio-economic means designed to deprive the insurgency of popular support while simultaneously bolstering collaboration with the counterinsurgents’ side. Upon completion of such a campaign, however, -and regardless its outcome- armed forces quickly return to business as usual and thereby lessons from the counterinsurgency experience are often forgotten before they are properly captured and understood.

The most well-known example of this recurring cycle is provided by the United States (US) armed forces’ troublesome adaptation to counterinsurgency during the Vietnam War and the neglect of those experiences in its aftermath, which left the US military ill prepared to counter the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet, the pattern itself is much older and can even be observed during the heydays of the European colonial empires in the

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1 The term strategy as used throughout this book refers to military strategy, an operational approach for achieving a higher-level political-strategic goal. Consequently both terms strategy and operational approach are used interchangeably.


nineteenth century to which modern counterinsurgency harks back. 4 Despite the fact that colonial armies spent most of their time fighting irregular opponents among indigenous populations, their doctrine, training, and organization was designed for defending overseas territories against the armed forces of other nations. In the Dutch East Indies, for example, a remarkable pattern of colonial campaigning evolved, as the Dutch colonial army would typically first launch conventional operations in order to (conquer and) pacify an area and it would only adopt a more tailored approach if an escalating series of these large-scale operations failed to deliver a result. 5 A contemporary observer strikingly commented that during the first phase of the almost forty-year Aceh War (1873-c.1912) ‘without reckoning the fact that the outcomes of European [conventional] warfare cannot be directly transferred to the fight against the indigenous enemy with his very specific character, great credit was given to the use of massive fire’. 6 Ultimately, it took the Dutch some 25 years to adopt an effective population-centric strategy for pacifying Aceh and even then they suffered many difficulties in implementing this approach. In spite of years of valuable experience the Dutch colonial army had remained predominantly faithful to the principles of conventional warfare. 7 Thus, it seems that Western military forces seemingly are destined to reinvent the wheel every time they are confronted with insurgencies even when they hold an extensive historical track record of operations against such ‘irregular’ enemies.

Currently, the latest counterinsurgency era has ended and Western militaries again are heading towards the downward side of the cycle. In the wake of the troubled campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan the political will to deploy boots on the ground in order to confront insurgencies in far away countries has severely diminished, whilst armed forces are refocusing on conventional warfare. Of course the re-emergence of the Russian threat to some extent justifies this reorientation, yet the contemporary security situation is much more complicated and urges for a broader approach than mimicking Cold War strategy. In modern warfare the lines between ‘regular’, conventional and ‘irregular’ warfare are increasingly blurred. 8 This so-called hybrid warfare is embraced by states and non-state actors alike as we have, for instance, witnessed Russia’s use of irregular tactics for destabilizing neighboring countries, while non-state actors such as the Islamic State (IS) have demonstrated their

7 See also Martijn Kitzen, ‘Between treaty and treason’, 95-96.
capability to launch conventional operations. The non-linear character of modern wars is further explained by Rupert Smith’s concept of ‘war amongst the people’ which not only emphasizes that ‘there is no secluded battlefield upon which armies engage, nor are there necessarily armies’, but also clarifies the ramifications of this situation as in modern warfare ‘civilians are the targets, objectives to be won, as much as an opposing force’. A farewell to counterinsurgency -even temporarily-, therefore, is far from appropriate in this security environment characterized by hybrid (non-)state threats and in which engagement of involved populations is key to success.

The nature of war, however, is not the only determinant of military thought. Other factors such as the specific strategic circumstances in relevant countries, individual experiences, and the intellectual and cultural climate of the period in question, the Zeitgeist, also play a huge role. As aforementioned, current strategic thinking tends to disregard the counterinsurgency experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan. The political will to re-embark on such a costly and uncertain adventure is absent in the Western world and today’s senior military commanders, whose formative years as young officers were typically spent during the latter period of the Cold War, are increasingly looking back at the recent counterinsurgency era as a ‘wrong turn’, a period in which the armed forces wrongly deviated from the core business of high-end conventional warfare. Furthermore, the 2008 economic crisis has severely affected military spending in the United States and European countries, with especially the forces of the latter suffering from austerity policies. This has functioned as a catalyst since in a time of decreasing military resources preserving as much conventional strength as possible often has been the most important rationale behind budget cuts. Thus, despite the non-linear nature of modern warfare, the neglect of recent counterinsurgency knowledge seems imminent as a consequence of other factors that influence military thinking in the Western world.

Yet, the hybrid character of modern war urges to row against this tide. Military thinkers like David Kilcullen and David Ucko have repeatedly warned that counterinsurgency might not be preferred in the current strategic climate, but that this kind of warfare will be necessary

13 These words are borrowed from the title of a book by Gian P. Gentile, a retired US Army cavalry colonel and one of the most avid critics of modern counterinsurgency. See Gian P. Gentile, Wrong Turn, America’s Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency (New York: The New Press, 2013).
in the future as ‘any sensible enemy will choose to fight us in this manner’. Moreover, as expeditionary land forces will inevitably be deployed among the people in foreign countries (for instance the current stabilization campaign in Mali), the broader relevance of interacting with the local population in culturally different, non-Western societies is also evident. Therefore, the lessons of the recent counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan should be properly captured, understood, and learned in order to optimize Western militaries for countering the hybrid threats that dominate the contemporary international security environment.

This book aims to contribute to the breaking of the cycle that leads to the neglect of counterinsurgency knowledge in Western armed forces. More specifically, it seeks to enhance the understanding of population-centric counterinsurgency in highly fragmented indigenous societies dominated by local power-holders, as was the case in Iraq and Afghanistan. As we have seen in the prologue, these societal circumstances render the seemingly straightforward fight between insurgents and government rather diffuse as the reality of the conflict at the grassroots level is shaped by shady power plays that put up a smoke screen, which sometimes makes it nearly impossible to tell who is exactly on which side. While intervening Western forces might gradually learn to understand the local dynamics of the conflict and develop an appropriate situational awareness, this provides only a first step towards a solution. The campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have revealed that co-option of local power-holders is instrumental in stepping up the collaboration between the local population and the counterinsurgents while simultaneously diminishing support for the insurgency. Consequently, this study will focus on obtaining a profound understanding of co-option as a tool for counterinsurgency in highly fragmented indigenous societies. Before unfolding the path towards this understanding, we will now first clarify our central concept and discuss the salient issues surrounding it.

**Counterinsurgency in weblike societies: the course of co-option**

Counterinsurgency is generally understood as a battle between insurgents and a state’s government for control over (segments of) the population. The concept reflects the indirect approach to military strategy by outmanoeuvring the insurgent through denial of his most vital support and sanctuary: the local population. Therefore ‘the *sine qua non* of victory in

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modern warfare is the unconditional support of a population'.\textsuperscript{17} In contemporary Western warfare this understanding has materialized as population-centric counterinsurgency, a doctrine that considers population control a matter of collaboration between the government and the local population. As Kilcullen puts it: ‘“control” does not mean imposing order through unquestioned dominance, so much as achieving collaboration towards a set of shared objectives’.\textsuperscript{18} By creating such a set of shared objectives that addresses both the interests of the government and those of the local population, counterinsurgency seeks to enhance the latter’s collaboration with the government. The more the government succeeds to effectuate collaboration, the stronger its control over the population, and, consequently, the weaker the insurgent’s position.

In Iraq and Afghanistan Western counterinsurgents found themselves operating as foreign interveners in highly politically fragmented indigenous societies in which local authorities like tribal elders, religious leaders, and warlords controlled the population at the grassroots level. Such a society that is characterized by a high degree of decentralization and a predominant position of the locale is commonly observed in developing countries around the world. Political scientist Joel Migdal has labelled this type of society a ‘weblike society’, as it is best described as a loosely knit ‘web’ of different local segments in which local strongmen play a dominant role.\textsuperscript{19} Since this book aims to enhance our understanding of co-option as a tool for counterinsurgency in exactly such a highly fragmented societal landscape, it has adopted Migdal’s term and we will delve deeper into it in Chapter Two. What matters here are the ramifications for conducting counterinsurgency amidst this type of society; how to effectuate the population’s collaboration in order to augment governmental control over a weblike society?

As previously mentioned, during the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan co-option has evolved into a pivotal tool for obtaining the collaboration of the local populace. Western counterinsurgents established co-optive relationships with local leaders, dominating the high ground of the human terrain at the grassroots level and fostered the connection between those co-optees and the host-nation’s government. The emergence of this approach is epitomized by the so-called ‘Anbar awakening’ of 2006 in which US forces succeeded to establish control over the insurgent-infested population of Iraq’s infamous Anbar province.

\textsuperscript{17} Roger Trinquier, Modern Warfare, A French View of Counterinsurgency (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, 2006), 6, italics in original. It should be noted that the original work was published in 1964, so modern warfare does not refer to 21st century warfare, but to counterinsurgency in the 1960s.


The engagement of local tribal leaders was key to this success as the Sunni tribes they were representing started to collaborate with the US soldiers against AQI and even a link with the Shi’a-dominated central government in Bagdad was established. It was the synergy between the awakening and ‘the Surge’ that saw an influx of additional (counterinsurgency-trained) US troops that led to a nation-wide application of this approach which had resulted in a vast decline of violence throughout Iraq by the end of 2007. Thus, the situation in Iraq improved significantly as US counterinsurgents found common ground with local leaders at the grassroots level and established relationships between those agents and the Iraqi government. This illustrates that in a weblke society with numerous locales dominated by local power-holders co-option of these agents provides a potential path to enhanced governmental control over the population in order to end an insurgency.

Seemingly, the course of co-option offers the most straightforward approach for countering insurgencies in weblike societies. Yet, if we take a closer look a number of fundamental and practical complications come to light. To start with the most fundamental matter, co-option is a collaboration strategy adapted for establishing control over the population in a weblke society. Recently, however, the logic of control through collaboration has become subject of an academic debate as critics like Stathis Kalyvas have not only contested this logic, but also have argued that control spawns collaboration and not the other way around. This controversy has huge consequences as in the context of counterinsurgency warfare it questions the essential mechanism of Western population-centric counterinsurgency and urges for a strategy in which control is established first. Thus, while co-option has been adopted as an appropriate antidote for insurgencies in a weblike society because it offers an approach for winning the competition for control in such a society, the very logic underlying this approach is disputed.

Another fundamental issue concerns the use of local power-holders in order to gain control over societal segments. If collaboration spawns control, then does co-option of individual agents suffice for yielding control over larger groups within the population and even the target population as a whole? Of course this depends heavily on the societal landscape in which a counterinsurgency campaign takes place. Since co-option in modern counterinsurgency warfare emerged as a tailored strategy for establishing control over highly fragmented weblke societies, an exploration of this type of society is necessary in order to understand the role and position of local power-holders as well as the way such...
agents might be exploited to the counterinsurgents’ advantage. Currently, it seems unclear who exactly should be co-opted in order to establish control over weblike societies with their numerous locales and scores of tribal chiefs, religious leaders, predatory warlords and other sorts of strongmen, who are often competing for power at the grassroots level. The practical ramifications of this lack of clarity came to light most prominently in Iraq where readiness to reconcile and willingness to support a peaceful settlement of the conflict became the most important criteria for co-option.\textsuperscript{23} Of course, co-optees should preferably be selected as a result of their authority over (parts of) the local population. This logic, however, also betrays a fundamental ambiguity in the concept as counterinsurgents seek to enhance governmental control through local power-holders who remain in control at the grassroots level. Consequently, the government depends on these agents for exerting its authority, which could give local power-holders a strong position vis-à-vis the government. Whereas this dependency is a common feature of states with weblike societies, it is even more important in a counterinsurgency setting in which the government seeks to (re-)establish its authority over the population.\textsuperscript{24} In Iraq as well as Afghanistan locally operating counterinsurgents were successful in forging ties with local power-holders as they shared a common interest in fighting the insurgency at the grassroots level. Yet, it often proved troublesome to convert this success in enhanced governmental control and sometimes empowered local agents even openly opposed the idea of a stronger central government.\textsuperscript{25} This demonstrates that counterinsurgents not only should be able to establish co-optive relationships with local power-holders, but also that they should have a capability to dominate such relationships; the agents of control need to be properly controlled. Yet, the counterinsurgency should not be too dominant as it heavily depends on local power-holders and an insurgency might exploit discontent to offer co-optees a more attractive alternative for collaboration. In the end, thus, the fundamental matter of the use of local power-holders in order to gain control over (segments of) the population also reveals practical complications as counterinsurgency in a weblike society requires an arduous vetting process in order to select whom actually to co-opt and the adoption of an approach that prescribes how to co-opt these agents in such a way that they are dominated by the counterinsurgents, while preventing alienation.

The final set of complications surrounding the use of co-option for quelling insurgencies relates to the nature of contemporary counterinsurgency itself. As aforementioned, Western armed forces are optimized for conventional warfare against similar opponents and therefore

\textsuperscript{23} David Kilcullen, ‘Counterinsurgency: the state of a controversial art’, 141. It should be mentioned that there is also an ethical aspect to this, as for instance collaboration with warlord-like strongmen might be deemed unacceptable. This will be illustrated in Part Three.

\textsuperscript{24} For a discussion of the relation between state and weblike society see Chapter Two, section 2.3.1.

typically need to go through a troublesome adaptation process when confronted with an insurgency. While this switch to population-centric warfare is hard enough in itself, it is even more challenging if a campaign takes place in a foreign society. Niccolò Machiavelli already noted that interventions in ‘a country that differs in language, customs and institutions’ are more difficult and require ‘great good luck and great ability’. Since soldiers should never rely on good luck, and certainly not on ‘great good luck’, they have to obtain this ‘great ability’ in order to operate successfully in an unfamiliar environment. Intervening Western forces, consequently, not only need to adapt to population-centric counterinsurgency, but also to the specific societal circumstances in which they have to fulfill their mission. This is far off from the pitched battles such armies are organized and trained for, and which, for example-and to mention the influence of personal experience-, dominated the curriculum of my education as an officer cadet at the Royal Netherlands Military Academy during the latter part of the 1990’s.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, the adaptation process was further hampered as newly emerging counterinsurgency doctrine was ill-suited for application in these highly fragmented, weblike societies. While the 2006 US Field Manual FM 3-24, which was internationally the most widely disseminated doctrine and informed the campaigns in Iraq as well as Afghanistan, is an outstanding population-centric counterinsurgency guide, it is a poor roadmap for fighting an insurgency in a weblke society as it heavily promotes Western-oriented ideas such as modernization and liberal democracy in order to enhance governmental authority. Although the importance of local culture is acknowledged in the manual, these underlying concepts hugely contrast the reality on the ground in countries with weblke societies where strong central governments (that characterize modern states) are absent and non-elected strongmen dominate the scene. Even worse, whereas (as aforementioned) enhanced governmental control of course is also the objective of counterinsurgency in a weblke society, too much emphasis on centralization as part of modernization will alienate local power-holders from the government’s cause. Similarly, the enforced introduction of Western-style democracy might actually trigger a loss of popular consent, as elections will inevitably come under influence of local strongmen as they provide a new tool for augmenting their position and thwarting rival factions. This is illustrated by the incident described in the prologue, which actually contributed to a very low voter turnout in Uruzgan in 2009 with especially the previously marginalized Ghilzai doubting the free and fair character of the elections. All in all Western troops fighting insurgencies in countries with weblke societies not only face the challenge of adapting to population-centric counterinsurgency, but also have to adapt to

28 The Liaison Office, The Dutch engagement in Uruzgan: 2006-2010 (Kabul: TLO, 2010), viii. See also Chapter Ten, section 10.3.1.
foreign societal circumstances for which counterinsurgency doctrine offers little guidance. But how then does co-option as a tool for controlling the population in weblike societies fit in with modern counterinsurgency warfare?

Emile Simpson has argued that for counterinsurgency to be used as an effective operational approach ‘its doctrine must be interpreted pragmatically’. It was exactly this pragmatism that fueled a series of field innovations and adaptations, which allowed for the application of counterinsurgency in the challenging operational environments of Iraq and Afghanistan. It has to be mentioned that while such adaption traditionally is driven by pressure from operations on the ground, contemporary constraints with regard to resources and time as a consequence of domestic politics have been hugely influential shaping factors in the emergence of a pragmatic counterinsurgency approach. The denominations ‘accelerated counterinsurgency’ and ‘counterinsurgency lite’ by which the field innovations and adaptations of modern counterinsurgency are often referred to clearly indicate the influence of limited timelines and resource constraints. Consequently, a modern counterinsurgency approach has emerged that seeks to apply the essence of counterinsurgency doctrine; namely, obtaining control over the population through collaboration, in weblike societies with use of limited resources and within a limited amount of time. In addition to targeting of insurgent networks and other measures aimed at securing the population, reconciliation (including amnesty), and political reintegration through co-option of local power-holders is this approach’s most important tool for augmenting the people’s collaboration at the grassroots level. Thus, while counterinsurgency doctrine is permeated by Western-oriented concepts, the pragmatic interpretation of this doctrine as a consequence of the specific conditions in weblike societies and restraints with regard to resources and time have led to a prominent role of co-option of local power-holders in contemporary counterinsurgency campaigns.

A last complication concerning the nature of contemporary counterinsurgency relates to the self-imposed limited timeline and constraints on resources. As these factors can be directly linked to domestic politics, they reveal a lack of political will to fully commit to the counterinsurgency effort. Whereas this influence of domestic politics is inherently connected to the conduct of expeditionary counterinsurgency warfare by Western democracies, it is further augmented by the fact that such interventions in far away countries are not perceived necessary for the intervening state’s survival. The campaigns in Iraq and

29 Emile Simpson, War From The Ground Up, 147.
Afghanistan have demonstrated that this deficient political will does not obstruct success on the short term as with use of the field innovations and adaptations an acceptable result might be obtained within a limited timeline and with limited resources only. However, due to a lack of commitment it has proved particularly hard to preserve this result and transform it into durable success. Iraq provides the strongest case in point as after the withdrawal of US troops (completed in December 2011) Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s Shi’a dominated administration adopted a policy that increasingly alienated large (especially Sunni) societal segments of the population and which consequently -yet again- brought the country on the brink of civil war by 2013. This facilitated the 2014 advance of IS in the Sunni-dominated parts of the country. It is most telling that Anbar province, the source of the 2006 awakening that still epitomizes the utility of co-option in modern counterinsurgency warfare, has been one of the most heavily affected areas ever since. A substantial level of US diplomatic involvement and development aid could have prevented this all as it would have brought the US leverage over the central government in Bagdad. Yet, due to a lack of commitment this did not happen and consequently the results of the US counterinsurgency campaign were largely squandered. Therefore, co-option as a tool for counterinsurgency might contribute to temporarily success on the short term, but not necessarily guarantees a consolidation of this success for the long term as a sufficient level of commitment is necessary to employ follow-up measures.

To conclude this section, co-option has recently emerged as a predominant tool for counterinsurgency in weblike societies as it seeks the target population’s collaboration through the local power-holders that dominate the various locales of such a society. While the concept was successfully implemented in both Iraq and Afghanistan and seemingly offers an obvious approach for obtaining control over such highly fragmented, weblike societies, it is surrounded by a number of fundamental and practical complications. All together these issues reveal that co-option as a tool for counterinsurgency in weblike societies is not as straightforward as it seems; at worst the concept might be fundamentally flawed and incapable of delivering long-term success, while at best it appears rather complicated to practice and only effective for obtaining an acceptable result on the short term. This controversy urges for more clarity, and therefore a profound understanding of the course of co-option in counterinsurgency warfare is necessary.

Towards an understanding of the course of co-option

Understanding the course of co-option requires us to study the challenge of co-opting local power-holders in both the theory and reality of counterinsurgency warfare in weblike societies. The former serves to provide an insight in the dynamics of control and collaboration in the specific setting of a weblike society, as well as the exact way in which

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these dynamics have been addressed in the conceptual framework of Western population-centric counterinsurgency campaigns. Obviously this involves scrutinizing and combining knowledge from relevant academic fields that have studied these different facets of our main subject. Therefore, this book borrows from a wide body of scholarly work representing a mix of disciplines among which political science, sociology, anthropology, and history are most prominent. Even more important, however, is that a profound understanding of co-option as a tool for counterinsurgency in weblike societies necessitates a robust analysis of the reality in the field in which Western militaries need to overcome huge adaptation challenges (with regard to both mission and societal environment) with limited resources and within a limited amount of time in order to implement co-option properly. Since this comes down to studying ‘the reactions of real people to real events in the context of real pressures that policy making and war making inevitably impose’, this book most heavily relies on historical analysis of empirical evidence for understanding the challenge of co-opting local power-holders in the reality of counterinsurgency warfare in highly fragmented, weblike societies.  

33 As this work aims to enhance our understanding of a specific strategic phenomenon in its full context rather than proving or rejecting a hypothesis, it adheres to the ‘traditional’ multi-disciplinary approach of strategic studies, which strongly emphasizes historical analysis.  

34 By unfolding this study’s path towards an understanding of the course of co-option we will now explain how this approach materializes in this book so that we can obtain a profound understanding of both the theory and reality of co-option as a tool for counterinsurgency in weblike societies.  

At the heart of this book is the question of how counterinsurgents have co-opted local power-holders in order to attain control over the population in a weblike society. In the existing academic literature on counterinsurgency experiences in fragmented societies, the prevailing premise is that a strategy of collaborative relationships with local power-holders is instrumental in attaining control over the population.  

35 This provides initial guidance to our quest for a profound understanding, as the theoretical validity of this logic first needs to be assessed. Moreover, a theoretical exploration of the logic of control through collaboration and the dynamics of co-option in the specific setting of a weblike society allows us to sketch an analytical framework for understanding co-option as a tool for counterinsurgency in such a highly fragmented societal landscape. Such a framework provides further guidance to our investigation as it provides a map for exploring co-option in the grim reality of counterinsurgency warfare in the field. Thus, understanding the
theoretical issues of co-option essentially encompasses unravelling its underpinning as well as constructing a framework that enables us to analyse the application of co-option in the reality of counterinsurgency campaigns.

The next challenge concerns bridging the gap between theory and reality. This requires us to scrutinize the way co-option has been incorporated in the conceptual dimension of Western population-centric counterinsurgency campaigns. Such an analysis allows us to identify relevant experiences that can firmly contribute to our understanding of the actual application of co-option. At this point the importance of history becomes evident since there is a vast amount of counterinsurgency cases to select from and here we need to determine which are most promising -we have already seen that not all counterinsurgency ideas are necessary applicable to weblike societies. As previously mentioned Western population-centric counterinsurgency harkens back to nineteenth century colonial warfare. Although the purpose and environment of colonial pacification campaigns differs tremendously from modern counterinsurgency campaigns, they share the principle of control over the population as key to success. Even more important, colonial states faced the very same challenge of establishing control over highly fragmented societies for which they relied on co-option of local power-holders. Co-option, consequently, was an essential tool of colonial warfare and its emergence in modern counterinsurgency campaigns, thus, can be labelled an unwitting re-invention. This brings us an important opportunity to link theory and reality by studying the way co-option has been incorporated in different concepts throughout the evolution of Western population-centric counterinsurgency. A conceptual exploration in historiographical perspective through an analysis of historical literature, therefore, serves to clarify how co-option has been embedded in different counterinsurgency concepts. Subsequently, the historical variations found in this historiographical analysis can be compared with this study’s theoretical findings by use of the analytical framework for understanding co-option as a tool for counterinsurgency in weblike societies. This comparison reveals that colonial warfare and modern counterinsurgency (which has conceptually incorporated co-option as a consequence of the experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan) are best suited for practicing co-option in weblike societies; both concepts rely on the collaboration of local power-holders for establishing control over highly fragmented societies with limited resources only. Yet, there are also important differences. For example, in colonial warfare more importance was given to coercive measures and the use of force. Consequently, a profound understanding of the course of co-option requires an insight in the reality of both colonial pacification and modern counterinsurgency campaigns.

In this research two Dutch cases will be scrutinized in detailed historical narratives to fully understand the application of co-option in the specific context of each respective case. The nearly forty-year war in the northern Sumatran Sultanate of Aceh (1873-c. 1912) and the recent four-year campaign in Afghanistan’s Uruzgan province (2006-2010) have been selected for this purpose as they illustrate the utility of co-option as a tool for establishing control over a highly fragmented, weblike society in colonial warfare and modern counterinsurgency.
While the decision to focus on Dutch experiences was primarily a ramification of pragmatism, these experiences offer sufficient opportunities for studying the salient features of the topic. Moreover, they offer little-known and relatively understudied alternatives to paradigmatic case studies centering on US, British, or French experiences, which renders this work of additional value for the knowledge field. The Uruzgan case has been selected, as it represents the only modern counterinsurgency campaign conducted by Dutch forces thus far.36 The Aceh case, on the other hand, stands out from an abundance of colonial pacification campaigns in the Dutch East Indies due to its vastness and the protracted period of time. This latter element contradicts the limited timelines that characterize modern counterinsurgency campaigns, and to which the Uruzgan campaign has been no exception. While colonial warfare and modern counterinsurgency share constraints on resources, they differ in timelines -colonial powers were there to stay-, which enables us to study effects of co-option on the long run in order to understand how this tool can contribute to long-term stability. The two cases also properly capture the need and struggle to adapt to a new approach in an alien societal environment, and therefore they aptly illustrate all the significant elements of the subject under investigation. Generalization, however, poses a genuine challenge as this book not only focuses on Dutch experiences, but also is limited to two cases for reasons of feasibility. We address this by discussing the empirical findings of each case study in the light of the broader theoretical and historiographical conclusions of the first part as well as merging the insights from these discussions in this book’s final chapter.

In both case studies an extensive sketch of the local society and the background of the war provides a robust basis for understanding the dynamics of the conflict at the local level. Thus we circumvent the trap of ‘military orientalism’, a failure to fully comprehend the societal dynamics of the conflict caused by an inability to look beyond exotic cultural stereotypes of warfare.37 The Aceh case relies on conventional historical analysis of empirical evidence provided by archival material, other primary sources such as the preserved advisory work of Snouck Hurgronje (who was briefly introduced in the prologue), as well as a wide range of secondary literature on the war, Aceh itself, and the Acehnese. The Uruzgan case adopts a different approach as it could not yet benefit from complete and unclassified archival sources or an extensive body of academic work for meticulously describing the application of co-option in the Uruzgan campaign. This approach most closely resembles what Kilcullen has labeled ‘conflict ethnography’, a methodology that exploits a researcher’s access to his research object in order to gather as much empirical evidence as possible.38 Aspects that were successfully incorporated in this case study are field research, including a period (September-November 2008) as a staff officer with the TFU, which allowed for participant

36 Of course The Netherlands have contributed to other counterinsurgency campaigns or to related stabilization efforts, which are mentioned in Part III if relevant. Yet, the Uruzgan case has been the only campaign in which the Dutch held full authority and also adopted counterinsurgency as their main campaign theme.


38 David Kilcullen, The Accidental Guerrilla, 304-305.
observation and the keeping of detailed field notes. Additionally, open interviews with key TFU officials have been conducted and such officials have also provided much highly relevant material, including personal documents. Of course no classified files have been used in this study and therefore the dots are largely connected by use of open source material available on the Internet and in, for example, papers. It should be mentioned here that whereas this book contains the first extensive narrative of the TFU campaign reconstructed by use of the empirical data gathered through this approach, preliminary findings have been published in several publications.39 Both case studies conclude with a discussion of the findings of their detailed historical narratives in the light of the historiographical analysis’ conclusions on colonial warfare and modern counterinsurgency respectively. This provides a first step towards broader insights on recurring patterns, and towards the merging of the findings from both cases and the theoretical exploration in this book’s conclusion. Ultimately, this synthesis will allow us to formulate a final answer to our main question of how counterinsurgents have co-opted local power-holders in order to attain control over the population in a weblike society.

The structure of this work is as follows: the first part, consisting of chapters one to three, deals with the theoretical issues and the historiographical analysis that bridges the gap between theory and reality. Chapter One deals with the most fundamental issue as it addresses the logic of control through collaboration. Chapter Two expands this towards weblike societies as it discusses the assumption that local power-holders should be the centre of gravity of a collaboration strategy in such a society, and consecutively addresses the more practical issues of whom exactly to co-opt and how agents that dominate the population at the grassroots level can be co-opted by (representatives of) central state powers. The resulting analytical framework for understanding co-option as a tool for counterinsurgency in weblike society is used in Chapter Three to assess the suitability of various historical Western population-centric counterinsurgency concepts for establishing control over weblike societies.

Part Two is made up of chapters four to seven and concerns the Aceh War as a case study of co-option of local power-holders in colonial warfare. Chapter Four provides the background sketch as well as an oversight of the first twenty years of the war, while Chapter Five covers the subsequent rather turbulent period in which the Dutch depended on a single warlord-like co-optee, Teuku Uma, for establishing control over Acehnese society as a whole. It should be mentioned that the key findings of this chapter have already been published as a journal

article. Chapter Six deals with the strategy that ultimately brought the Dutch success and provides an insight in the utility of co-option in this approach. As Acehnese society is particularly well covered in anthropological publications, we also trace the long-term effects of this co-option policy far beyond Dutch colonial rule. Chapter Seven, finally discusses the findings of this detailed historical analysis of co-option in the Aceh War in relation to the wider findings on co-option in colonial warfare.

Part Three, which consists of chapters eight to eleven, deals with the Uruzgan campaign as a case study of co-option of local power-holders in modern counterinsurgency warfare. Chapter Eight provides a basis for understanding the dynamics of the local conflict by analyzing the local society and the course of the war before the arrival of the Dutch task force. Chapter Nine covers the deployment of the TFU and its first two years of operations in which a foothold among Uruzgan’s populace was established by reaching out through previously marginalized or sidelined local power-holders. Chapter Ten deals with the way the Dutch sought to expand and preserve this foothold in the last two years of the campaign in order to establish an underpinning for long-term stability. Of course, this reconstruction also contains an analysis of the sustainability of the TFU campaign’s results after the withdrawal of Dutch troops. Chapter Eleven concludes this case study by analyzing its insights in the light of our broader findings on co-option in modern counterinsurgency.

In this book’s conclusion the key insights from all three parts are discussed separately before being merged for formulating a final answer to our central question of how counterinsurgents have co-opted local power-holders in order to attain control over the population in a weblike society. This answer, of course, encompasses both the theory and reality of co-option as a tool for counterinsurgency in such a highly fragmented societal environment and also addresses the complications that have triggered this book’s quest for understanding this particular phenomenon. Thus, the path towards a profound understanding of the course of co-option winds through various academic fields as well as the complicated war-torn societal landscapes of Aceh and Uruzgan and ends by combining the various insights resulting from this itinerary.

40 Martijn Kitzen, ‘Between treaty and treason: Dutch collaboration with warlord Teuku Uma during the Aceh War, a case study on the collaboration with indigenous power-holders in colonial warfare’, Small Wars & Insurgencies 23:1 (March 2012).