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Item Type	Article
Authors	Ahmad, Mahmood
Publisher	Qurtuba University, Pakistan.
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Download date	2026-11-15 13:09:14
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/187771

U.S. INFLUENCE IN POST-SADDAM MIDDLE EAST: A Study into Consistency, Change and its Impact

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Abstract:

The advent of Modern Middle East marked by Napoleon's arrival in Egypt just two centuries ago – some 80 years after the demise of the Ottoman Empire, 50 years after the end of the colonialism, and less than 20 years after the end of the Cold War – the American era in the Middle East, has ended and a new era in the modern history of the region has started to evolve. New actors and forces competing for influence will shape it, and will try to master it.

Middle East: A Historical Background

> *"It is one of history's ironies that the first war in Iraq, a war of necessity (Gulf war of 1991), marked the beginning of the American era in the Middle East and the second war, war of choice (i.e., March 2003) has precipitated its end."*
>
> *(Richard N. Haass)*

The advent of the Modern Middle East can be traced back to Napoleon's arrival in Egypt just over two centuries ago. Though for some historians, the single event was the 1774 signing of the treaty that ended the war between the Ottoman Empire & Russia. But the importance of Napoleon's relatively easy entry into Egypt cannot be overlooked. This victory paved the way for other European countries to penetrate into the region and go for an all-out victory. The decline of Ottoman Empire, coupled with European penetration into the region, finally gave rise to a

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new era that began after World War I, the rise of Turkish Republic and the division of the spoils of war among the European victors. It ensued an age of colonial rules, dominated by France & United Kingdom. This second era ended some four decades after the Second World War, which had drained of much of the Europeans of their imperial ambitions. In the succeeding era of the region, Arab nationalism had risen, and the two super-powers (U.S. & USSR) had begun their quest to control the region. As the historian Albert Hourani wrote "[He] who rules the Near East rules the world; and he who has interests in the world is bound to concern himself with the Near East",[1] Albert Hourani saw the 1966 Suez crisis as the end of the colonial era and the beginning of the new Cold War era between the two super-powers in the region. [2]

During the Cold War era, outside forces dominated the Middle East and supported their local allies in fighting their war of ideologies (of Communism & Capitalism). But the very nature of U.S.-Soviet competition gave local states considerable room to maneuver. And the Cold War's balancing act created a context in which local forces in the Middle East has significant autonomy to pursue even their own agendas. For example, the Iranian Revolution, which brought down one of the pillars of U.S. policy in the region, proved that outsiders could not control local events completely.

The Shrinking Influence of U.S. in the Middle East

The demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War brought about the fourth era in the region's history. In this era U.S. enjoyed unparalleled influence and inimitable freedom of actions. The overriding features of this American period were the U.S. led first Gulf War, the

long-term deployment of U.S. forces on the Arabian Peninsula, active diplomatic interests in trying to solve the Arab-Israel conflict (though on Israeli terms).

But with the Iraq war the American supremacy in the Middle East has finally come to an end. George W. Bush will go down in history as the president who swindled while America lost its superpower status. Bush used deceit and hysteria to lead America into an unnecessary war that is hurting the U.S. economically, militarily, and diplomatically. The war is being fought with hundreds of billions of dollars borrowed from foreigners. [3] It has ended the US claim to moral leadership and exposed the US as a reckless, aggressive and arrogant power—hell-bent to use force as an instrument of political change.

The Iraq war and its after-effects has finally brought American era in the Middle East to an end after less than just two decades. There are some structural and some self-created factors that can be attributed to U.S decline in the region. The most important has been its abstract 'War on Terror' and the decision of the current Administration to attack Iraq in 2003 and its conduct of the operations that resulted in occupation of Iraq. There are number of casualties for the U.S. that has been brought to the surface because of the Iraq crisis and caused great damage to the public image of U.S. conduct not only inside the country but also in Iraq, Middle East, Muslim and Arab world in particular; and the rest of world community in general.

- First, causality of the war has been a Sunni-dominated Iraq, which has balanced the Shiite Iran for many decades. But because of this war Sunni-Shiite tensions, have come to the surface in Iraq and are likely to be stretched out to the whole region in the coming years.

- Second, adversity of the Iraq war for U.S. has been the spread of Jihadist forces in the region. They have gained a very strong base in Iraq and have developed a new modus operandi that can be exported to the rest of the world and will cause more damage to the U.S. interests in the Middle East and beyond.
- Third, the Anti-American sentiments in the region, already considerable, have been reinforced and will continue to rise for the foreseeable future.
- Fourth, American unilateral support to Israel in her brutal aggression against Lebanon and Hezbollah has exposed its long-standing hypocrisy against the Arab world. And by the same token, Israel's defeat against Hezbollah proved to the Arabs the vulnerability of Israel's strength and that may embolden them to take future offensive steps that might have been unthinkable before Lebanon War.
- Fifth, the failure of traditional Arab regimes (mostly dictators sponsored by the U.S.) to counter the appeal for Jihad. Many of Arabs when faced with a choice between distant and corrupt political leaders and vibrant religious ones, have opted for the latter.
- Another factor that has helped bring down the end of the American era has been the globalization that has changed the region enormously. Acquiring funds, arms, ideas and recruits has never been that easy for Jihadists as of now due to the globalization.

The State of Iraq

President George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq in 2003 ultimately may come to be seen as one of the most profligate actions in the history of American foreign policy.

> *"The consequences of his choice won't be clear for decades, but it already is abundantly apparent in mid-2006 that the U.S. government went to war in Iraq with scant solid international support and on the basis of incorrect information — about weapons of mass destruction and a supposed nexus between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda's terrorism — and then occupied the country negligently. Thousands of U.S. troops and an untold number of Iraqis have died. Hundreds of billions of dollars have been spent, many of them squandered. Democracy may yet come to Iraq and the region, but so too may civil war or a regional conflagration, which in turn could lead to spiraling oil prices and a global economic shock."*[4]

With more than 150,000 U.S. troops still on the ground, Insurgents, Militias and Jihadists are more active than ever in Iraq. Casualties and deaths of innocent civilians are higher than by the standard of other countries suffering from civil conflicts. Oil and electricity remain stuck at below prewar level (see table 1.1). Making things more miserable are the volunteers crossing from Iran into Iraq to assist Shia majority whereas Saudi Arabia and other Sunni majority states are flocking to help the embattled Sunni minority.[5]

While the American and Iraqi troops for the so-called surge are nearly all in place, it's far too early to judge the effect. Still, given America's waning patience with the war and the bad circumstances that prevailed in Iraq when the surge began, optimism is hard to come by.

The latest chart of leading indicators, based on American and Iraqi government data and news reports, doesn't brighten the picture either.[6]

Table 1.1

Category	May 2003	May 2004	May 2005	May 2006	May 2007
U.S. Troops in Iraq (in thousands)	150	138	138	132	150
Other Foreign Troops (in thousands)	23	24	23	20	12
U.S. Troop Deaths	37	80	79	69	123
U.S. Troop Deaths From Homemade Bombs (percent)	0	26	41	52	65
Iraqi Security Forces (in thousands)	0	136	168	266	349
Iraqi Security Force Fatalities	50	100	259	150	198
Monthly Attacks Against Coalition and Civilians	150	1,700	1,900	3,500	4,200
Iraqi Civilian Deaths	500	1,025	1,000	2,670	2,750
New Iraqi Civilian Displaced by Violence (in thousands)	10	20	30	100	80
Multiple Fatality Bombings	0	9	36	56	42
Oil Production (in millions of barrels per day; prewar: up to 2.5)	0.3	1.9	2.1	2.1	2.0
Household Fuel Supply (as percentage of estimated need)	10	73	93	82	56
Electricity Production (average megawatts; prewar: 4,000)	500	3,900	3,700	3,900	3,700

The problems in Iraq are now so deep, complex, and intractable that they cannot be solved by surges or new tactics. Iraqi political leadership and Iraqi political processes can only solve them. As Rory Stewart, puts it:

> *"We [U.S.] can provide diplomatic and economic support. We can continue to protect ourselves against terrorist attacks on our home soil through intelligence and Special Forces operations in Iraq. But we cannot win through an indefinite blanket occupation because we*

> *lack the will, the resources, the legitimacy, and also the consent necessary to play such a role. My instinct is that Iraqis can overcome their problems and create a functioning nation. But even if I'm wrong, I believe that what good we can do we have done. We should leave now."*[7]

Iran: An Emerging Regional Power

There is hardly any doubt in anyone's mind that the chief beneficiary of the U.S. 'war on terror' has been a Shiite-dominated Iran. By toppling Saddam Hussein, the Bush administration has liberated and empowered Iraq's Shiite majority and has helped launch a broad Shiite revival that will upset the sectarian balance in Iraq and the Middle East for years to come.[8] According to a report, released by the non-government Royal Institute of International Affairs (also known as Chatham House) in Britain, that Iran, despite being a part of US President Bush's 'axis of evil', has been the 'chief beneficiary of the war on terror in the Middle East'.

> *"The United States, with Coalition support, has eliminated two of Iran's regional rival governments — the Taliban in Afghanistan in November 2001 and Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in April 2003 — but has failed to replace either with coherent and stable political structures. The outbreak of conflict on two fronts in June –July 2006 between Israel and the Palestinians in Gaza, and Israel and Hizbullah in Lebanon has added to the regional dimensions of this instability. Consequently, Iran has moved to fill the regional void with an apparent ease that*

> *has disturbed both regional players and the United States and its European allies. Iran is one of the most significant and powerful states in the region and its influence spreads well beyond its critical location at the nexus of the Middle East, Turkey, the Caucasus, Central Asia and South Asia."*[9]

This report further argued, that, "the great problem facing the US is that Iran has superseded it as the most influential power in Iraq".[10] However, according to the members of the US House Intelligence Committee America's weak position with Iran stems from poor intelligence from the CIA and other agencies. [11]

Iran's aspirations to dominate the region have put America in a complicated, and challenging state of mind. Even though, Iran has benefited greatly from U.S.-led regime changes in Afghanistan and Iraq; But still United States could hamper the consolidation of Iran's influence in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and the U.S. military's presence in the region threatens the Islamic Republic. In Iraq especially, the two governments' short-term goals seem to be at odds whereas U.S. wants out of the mess, Iran is not unhappy with the presence of U.S. forces out there. And yet, in the longer term, U.S. and Iranian interests in Iraq may well converge. Both United States and Iran want lasting stability there: United States, because it wants a reason to bail out; Iran, because stability in its backyard would secure its position at home and its influence throughout the region.[12] As former Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Maleki has put it, chaos in Iraq "does not help Iranian national interest. If your neighbor's house is on fire, it means your home is also in danger." [13]

After four years of trading accusation about who was the bigger destabilizing force in Iraq both United States and Iran have come to realize that none of them can succeed in Iraq on its own. On May 28, 2007 they held their first high-level direct talks in Baghdad to negotiate a plan on how to stabilize Iraq. However, the prospect of United States and Iran warming up to each other, and of the United States potentially regaining its military bandwidth in the not-too-distant future, is enough to put a number of serious actors into a frenzy. With the exemption of the Jihadists, most of the actors are predicting an Iranian-U.S. accommodation over Iraq, and have little choice but to strive for as many gains as they could – this leaves substantial room for error in these negotiations. The Iraqi Sunnis and Arab states, in particular, may not necessarily sabotage these negotiations, but rather they will be working to secure Sunni interests and contain the extent to which Iran emerges as the dominant regional power and primary beneficiary as a result of any future deal it works out with the United States over Iraq.[14]

The Dilemma of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's position on the Iraq crisis, and on the potential deal between Iran and United States to end the crisis in Iraq, is driven primarily by regional balance of power concerns. The crucial Saudi fear is that Iran will use its influence in Iraq to consolidate its position of regional dominance, which is already considerable and would be reinforced, in case of an American withdrawal. Therefore they urged the United States not to leave Iraq in its current situation, expressing full support for the Bush Administration's "surge" option.[15]

Saudi Arabia was barely keen on the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, though it cooperated in a modest way with United States to

facilitate military endeavors. Since then, Saudi policy makers have expressed their growing concerns at the course of events in Iraq, but surprisingly they have taken passive stance toward events there which can be attributed to a number of factors, the most important is the Saudi desire to avoid any complications in its relations with the United States. As long as the United States is occupying Iraq, any Saudi effort to play an independent course toward the country would run the risk of American discontent. Most importantly, any Saudi attempt to establish direct patron-client relations with Arab Sunni groups or factions in Iraq might place them in the very fringy position to support people who are killing Americans.[16] Thus, while Saudi Arabia has certainly maintained lines of communication with all sorts of Iraqi parties and personalities—Arab and Kurd, Sunni and Shi'i, tribal and urban—it has not cherished the kind of relations that Iran has with a number of Iraqi groups.

Anthony Cordesman and Nawaf Obaid of Center for Strategic and International Studies CSIS) concluded in September 2005 that, based on information provided to them from Saudi and American security sources, Saudis made up only about 12 percent of the foreign fighters in Iraq, which were themselves only about 10 percent of the Sunni Arab insurgents.[17] However, it is regularly asserted that private Saudi financial support helps to sustain the Sunni insurgency.[18]

Nevertheless, of greater concern to the Saudis are the ambitions of Iran, Turkey, and Syria in the region. Iran, of course, is a particular concern, and the announcement on July 2005, of a military agreement between Iran and Iraq undoubtedly raised some concerns in the House of Saud.[19] The Saudi authorities are clearly concerned about what they perceive as an ongoing Iranian attempts to infiltrate Iraqi society through the Shia community and build long-term influence in the country. The

clearest evidence of this concern can be found in Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal's remarks at the Council on Foreign Relations in September 2005:

> *"The Iranians now go in this pacified area that the American forces have pacified, and they go into every government of Iraq, pay money, install their own people, put their own—even establish police forces for them, arms militias that are there and reinforce their presence in these areas. And they are being protected in doing this by the British and the American forces in the area…. [To] us it seems out of this world that you do this. We fought a war together to keep Iran from occupying Iraq after Iraq was driven out of Kuwait. Now we are handing the whole country over to Iran without reason."*[20]

The real issue, for the Saudis, (and other Sunni States in the region) is the demonstration effect that the achievement of even moderate Shiite majority rule in Iraq turns out to have on other Shiite Arabs in the Gulf. The tension between Sunni and Shiite will grow throughout the Middle East and will cause grave problems in states with divided societies, like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Lebanon.

Israel: The Contender for Regional Power

Israel was the only country in the region that openly supported a U.S. war in Iraq. As it was likely to benefit from a U.S. war in the form of increased financial support (The U.S. provides $4 billion or so each year in military and economic aid to Israel, as well as the consistent use of it's veto in the UN Security Council to prevent international criticism of the Israeli atrocities in Palestine on regular basis), but would also likely pay in other ways for their closeness with the United States. Israel wanted to

see a broader war to drastically reshape the political map of the Middle East. But prior to Iraq War the Israeli security establishment was somewhat ambivalent about the extent of the Iraqi threat. As Former UNSCOM executive-chairman Richard Butler disclosed that, while the Iraqi design for producing nuclear weapons was advanced, Iraq did not possess the necessary enriched uranium or plutonium for producing an atomic weapon.[21] For Israel there was one state that threatened their existence and about which Israeli statements were unmistakably clear: Iran. Israel used language with respect to Iran that it never used regarding Iraq. Thus, in 2004 Prime Minister Ariel Sharon would call Iran "the main existential threat to Israel.[22] Just a few weeks after the September 11, 2001, attack. Former Deputy Defense Minister Ephraim Sneh was quoted that "Iran stands in first place as a sponsor of terrorism."[23] Clearly, if Israel wanted to get into the business of prodding the U.S. to go to war on its behalf, it would have chosen Iran and not Iraq.

In November 2001, Seymour Hersh reported Israel's concern that the post-9/11 ‘war on terror’ had diverted U.S. attention from Iran, even as Iran accelerated its nuclear program. The Bush Administration continues to concentrate on the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

> *“It's more important to deal with Iraq than with Iran, because there's nothing going on in Iraq that's going to get better, In Iran, the people are openly defying the government. There's some hope that Iran will get better. But there's nothing in Iraq that gives you any hope, because Saddam rules so ruthlessly. What will we do if he provides anthrax to four guys in Al Qaeda?…If Iraq is out of the*

picture, we will concentrate on Iran in an entirely different way."[24]

While Israel has for years viewed Iran as more threatening force to Israeli security than Iraq, the Bush administration's obsession with Iraq has led Israel to support the Iraq War in hopes of a follow-up war against Iran. Hersh wrote, that, even Israel's most skeptical critics in the American intelligence community now acknowledge that there is a serious problem. [25] But the Bush administration put Israel off with assurances that it would get to Iran later. Many Bush administration hawks have crafted strategies outlining a vision of a remapped U.S.-dominated Middle East with Israel as its strategic junior partner.[26]

Israel's Assault on Lebanon that began in July 2006 turned Lebanon, a country that was still rebuilding from past Israeli invasions, into a place of desolation and death. And it did so with wholehearted help from the United States. Seymour Hersh reported in the *New Yorker* that Israeli officials visited the White House to get a 'green light' for an attack on Lebanon. The Bush administration approved in part to remove Hezbollah as a deterrent to a potential US bombing of Iran.[27] But even with the full-fledge support of United States Israel couldn't achieve its objectives and so did the United State. The Israel's defeat against Hezbollah had two far-reaching and serious consequences.

First, that Arab states now doubt Israel's strength, and may take future offensive steps that would have been unthinkable before Lebanon War.

Second, Israel's disappointment to the U.S. and other western countries in light of the war's embarrassing achievements, which could possibly affect future discussions connected with Israel's offensive aspects.

Already anxious of Iranian ambitions, in the post-war era, Israel will feel much more insecure and will face multifront, multidimensional security challenges. Furthermore its situation will further deteriorate along with the United State if Iran develops nuclear weapon.

The Outsiders: Russia, China and India

China, Russia and India account for 40 per cent of the world's total manpower, a one fifth of its economy and more than half of its nuclear warheads. They now appear to be forming a partnership to fill the power-vacuum that has been created after the demise of U.S. supremacy in the Middle East that has prevailed since the end of Cold War. However, the relations of Russia and China with the Middle East during the Cold War were mainly focused & limited to the socialist and nationalist regimes, but with the collapse of Communism & disintegration of USSR its influence became ever more restricted. Now a coherent Russian Federation, a rising Socialist China and emerging Nuclear India has diligently re-built its influence in the region (and is well galvanized by the follies of the Bush Administration), broad banding relations from Egypt to Saudi Arabia.

Russia appears keener than China or India to challenge American hegemony. But still there has been a convergence of interests as each struggle to make a transition from a command economy to free markets. Since 2003 they have found further common ground in opposing the US-led invasion of Iraq. Other areas of agreement among these three emerging giants include, the opposition to outside interference in separatist conflict (in Chechnya, the northeast of India and the northwestern Chinese region of Xinjiang), and also the agreement on 'Energy'. India and China are desperate for Russian oil and

gas resourses, while Russia is worried about its dependence on Western markets.

> *"In the long term, they feel that the whole structure of international relations has to shift in their direction… what has happened is that quite independently they've reacted very similarly to recent international events."*[28]

The formal agenda of the meeting of Foregin ministers from these three states in Dehli on 14th Febuaray 2007, covered issues ranging from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Middle East and North Korea to energy security, nuclear non-proliferation and trade. The subtext, however, was clear: how to use their growing economic and political muscle to prevent United States from tackling such issues alone. But their most significant common ground is opposition to US military intervention in Iran. The joint statement of the foreign ministers did not mention Iran specifically, but all of these three states have taken a common stance in calling for a negotiated solution through the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).[29] Though it is clear that none of them wants a nuclear-armed Iran, but Russia sells Iran nuclear technology and India and China need Iranian gas.

Non-State Actors: Al-Qaeda and the Jihadists

The second beneficiary of the Iraq War has been a non-state actor—mainly Al-Qaeda and other like-minded Jihadists groups. According to the annual report (2003-2004) of British-based think-tank, International Institute for Strategic Studies, "War in Iraq has swollen the ranks of al Qaeda and galvanized the Islamic militant group's will".[30] The report further says that, "18,000 veterans of al Qaeda's Afghan training camps

were still probably operating worldwide with recruitment continuing and probably increasing following the war in Iraq".[31]

Yet a study conducted by *The Associated Press* reveals that George W. Bush was warned about the possible gains of Al-Qaeda from the Iraq War, in 2003, which was amazingly accurate, but he simply ignored it. Among other conclusions, the report found that: "Al-Qaida would see the invasion as a chance to accelerate its attacks, and the lines between al-Qaida and other terrorist groups could become blurred".[32]

Moreover, acoording to a U.N. report released on 19th July, 2006, said the Iraq war provided Al Qaeda with recruits and a training center, reinforcing a U.S. intelligence study blaming the conflict for a surge in Islamic extremism. Report said:

> *"New explosive devices are now used in Afghanistan within a month of their first appearing in Iraq…And while the Taliban have not been found fighting outside Afghanistan/Pakistan, there have been reports of them training in both Iraq and Somalia."*[33]

Even though the Bush Administration, has significantly transformed its strategy in the Middle East as the situation in Iraq has deteriorated in the past few months. This new strategy, has brought the United States closer to an open confrontation with Iran and, in parts of the region, propelled it into a widening sectarian conflict between Shiite and Sunni Muslims. A by-product of these activities has only contributed to bolstering of Sunni extremist groups that espouse a militant vision of Islam and are hostile to America and sympathetic to Al Qaeda.[34]

Instead of finishing off the hunt for Osama bin Laden and its Al Qaeda, United States rushed to Iraq and has inadvertently boosted the cause of its enemies: al Qaeda has more bases, more partners, more

followers and thus have become much more powerful today than it was prior to 9/11. Now they are planning to set up its networks in the region and even beyond. Decisively defeating al Qaeda is much more difficult if not impossible now than it would have been a few years ago. [35] In the near future, the growing influence of Al Qaeda and other Jihadists groups will certainly challenge the United States in the region and beyond and will be one of the prime actors among those who will try to fill the power vacuum created with the demise of U.S. supremacy in the region.

Conclusion

The time is running out for the United States and Bush Administration to escape from the distraction of a pointless war. The repercussions of Iraq War are grave and much deeper than they have been anticipated. Even though the geopolitical environment is still taking shape in the New Middle East but it will eventually follow the end of the American era. The likely feature of the new Middle East will be as follows:

1. Though the United State will not be as influential as it was before the Iraq crisis but still it will enjoy more influence than any other state in the region. In the new Middle East, new actors and new forces will compete for influence and will thus challenge & limit the U.S. supremacy in the region.
2. Iraq will remain chaotic for the coming many years, with a fragile central government, fragmented society, and sectarian violence on the regular basis. There is every possibility that it may become a failed state wracked by civil war that can spread to the whole region.
3. Iran will emerge as a new power-center in the region. It has the great potential and all the necessary ingredients to be the most

powerful state of the region. They have great wealth, the most powerful external influence over Iraq's Shiite community, and have considerable hold over Hamas and Hezbollah.

4. Sunni states and Saudi Arabia, in particular, will be working to secure Sunni interests and contain the extent to which Iran emerges as the dominant regional power and primary beneficiary in the result of any future deal it works out with the United States over Iraq.
5. Israel, the only state in the region with nuclear arsenal is certainly in a weaker position especially after the Lebanon crisis. But still it will share the status of being the second most powerful state in the region, along with Iran. Though its situation will further deteriorate along with the United State if Iran develops nuclear weapon.
6. A strong demand by China and India will result in high prices of oil. And due to increase in oil prices oil producing states (Iran and Saudi Arabia in particular) will benefit enormously. Russia will veto any military action against Iran in the U.N. Security Council.
7. Islam will come to the center-stage to fill the political and intellectual vacuum in the Arab world. Though tension between Sunni and Shiite will grow throughout the Middle East and will cause grave problems in states with divided societies.
8. Arab regimes are likely to remain authoritarian and will become more religiously dogmatic and anti-American. The tension between Iran and most Arab states will also aggravate and will thus impede the emergence of regionalism.

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