

**U.S. INFLUENCE IN POST-SADDAM MIDDLE EAST:  
A study into Consistency, Change and Impact**  
Mahmood Ahmad\*

**Abstract:**

*The Modern Middle East emerged as a result of Napoleon's entry intervention in Egypt two hundred years ago – the demise of the Ottoman Empire about 8 decade ago, about half century after the colonialism ended, and less than 2 decades of the end of the Cold War – the US dominance of the region, has come to an end and a new wave of the history of the modern Middle East has just been started to evolve. This new era will be shape by new actors while competing for power in the region.*

**Keywords:** Middle East, United States, Iraq war, Hegemony

*“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)

**Middle East: A Historical Background**

The advent of the Modern Middle East can be traced back to Napoleon's entry in the Egypt just over two hundred years ago. Though for some historian, it was the event that was when the treaty between the Ottoman Empire & Russia was signed in 1774 that ended the war. But there is real significance of the relatively easy entry into Egypt by the Napoleon. 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 incursion in the region had given rise to a new era that begun soon after World War I, the emergence of Turkish Republic and the distribution war booty among the European victors. It

resulted in an era that was dictated by colonial rules and dominated by United Kingdom & France. This era was ended some 40 years after the Second World War, which had exhausted most of the Europeans from pursuing their imperial agenda. In the succeeding era of the region, Arab nationalism had raised, and the rivalry of super-powers (U.S. & USSR) had begun for quest to control the region. The historian Albert Hourani contend that “[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”,<sup>1</sup> Albert Hourani saw the 1966 Suez crisis as an end of the colonial legacy and the emergence of new rivalry between the two super-powers in the region.<sup>2</sup>

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). However, the nature of U.S.-Soviet cold war provided regional states a room to maneuver. Whereas, the balancing act of Cold War created a situation wherein regional forces in the Middle East had a considerable independence for pursuing their own national agendas. For example, the Iranian Revolution, which toppled the US sponsored Shah Regime demonstrated the fact that foreign powers could only control local events with certain limits.

### **The Shrinking influence of U.S. in the Middle East**

The disintegration of the Soviet Republic and the end of the Cold War marked the fourth era of history in the region. In this epoch the United States enjoyed unmatched influence and inimitable freedom of actions. The overriding characteristics of this period had been the U.S. sponsored

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first Gulf War, the long-term deploying of U.S. armed forces in the region and the dynamic diplomatic ties in the resolution of Arab-Israel conflict (though on Israeli terms).

However, with the Iraq war the US supremacy in the region has finally come to an end. The legacy of George W. Bush as the president in history will be remembered as loser of America's superpower status. He misled America into an unnecessary war that has been hurting the U.S. on economic, military and diplomatic fronts. This war is being fought at the expense of hundreds of billions of dollars taken from foreign powers.<sup>3</sup> It has greatly damaged the US claim as a champion of morality and presented it as a irresponsible and belligerent power – hell-bent to use force as an instrument of political change.

The Iraq war and its after-effects has finally brought U.S dominance of the region to halt in 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' in general; and the decision of the current regime to go to Iraq war in 2003 and its misconduct of the operations that resulted in occupation, in particular. 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 an Iraq dominated by Sunni, which has balanced the Shiite Iran for many decades. But As a result of this war Sunni-Shiite tensions, have been brought to forefront 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. Their base in Iraq has become stronger as they 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 military strength and as a result they may take offensive steps in future that might have been unimaginable before Lebanon War.
- Fifth, the failure of traditional Arab regimes (mostly dictators and well supported by the U.S.) to counter the appeal for Jihad. Many of Arabs when faced with a choice between disloyal and corrupt political leadership and responsive religious ones, have opted for the latter.
- Sixth, the factor that caused to end of the US dominance has been the globalization that has changed the region enormously. Acquiring funds, arms, ideas and recruits has never been that easy for Jihadist as of now due to the globalization.

### **The State of Iraq**

The decision to invade Iraq by President George W. Bush's in 2003 may ultimately be looked as the most decadent act of US foreign policy in the history.

*“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.”<sup>4</sup>*

Today, in spite of more than 150,000 U.S. troops are 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. 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.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas the US and Iraqi troops for the so-called surge are nearly all stationed, it is way too early to evaluate the result. However, optimism is hard to come by especially with the declining patience of the United States with the war and the unfavorable circumstances that existed in Iraq at the time of surge. The latest figures based on American and Iraqi official data and the news reports, indicates, that the picture isn't bright either.<sup>6</sup>

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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
Unemployment Rate (percent)	60	38	34	33	33
Telephone Subscribers (in millions; prewar: 0.8)	0.3	1.2	3.5	7.5	10.0
Annual Gross Domestic Product	0	40	4	4	4

*Source: Jason Campbell and Michael E. O'Hanlon, "The State of Iraq: An Update", The Brookings Institution, June 10, 2007*

The complex and intractable that exist in Iraq now cannot be solved by surges sort tactics. Iraq's own political leadership and 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."*<sup>7</sup>

### **Iran: An Emerging Regional Power**

There is hardly any doubt in anyone's mind that the main beneficiary of the U.S. 'war on terror' has been a Shiite-dominated Iran. The toppling of Saddam regime has not only liberated and given power to Shiite majority in Iraq but has also helped in the broad revival of Shiite in the region that will disturb the sectarian balance within Iraq and the broader region in the time ahead.<sup>8</sup> According to a report, Iran despite being included in of Bush's 'axis of evil' emerged as 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."*<sup>9</sup>

The same report further contends, that "the great problem facing the US is that Iran has superseded it as the most influential power in Iraq".<sup>10</sup>

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”.<sup>11</sup>

Iran's aspirations to dominate the region have put America in a complicated and challenging state of mind. Even though, Iran benefited greatly from U.S.-led wars both in Afghanistan to the east and Iraq to west. However, the U.S. forces in the region itself intimidate the Iranian government. Particularly in Iraq, the short-term goals of both Iran and the United States seem to be at odds, whereas U.S. is trying to get out of the mess, Iran, on the other hand is unhappy with the presence of U.S. forces in Iraq. However, the possibility of the convergence of U.S. and Iranian interests in the longer term cannot be ignored on the ground that both players have the interest in the lasting stability of the Iraq and the broader region. Because United States wants a reason to bailout whereas Iran want to see stability in its neighborhood, that would in turn, help them secure its position not only at home and but to extend its influence in the broader Middle East.<sup>12</sup> As one of the former Iranian official has rightly observed the chaotic situation in Iraq “does not help Iranian national interest. If your neighbor's house is on fire, it means your home is also in danger.”<sup>13</sup>

After trading considerable accusations of who is the main culprit in destabilizing Iraq, both Iran and the United States have now realized that none of them can succeed in Iraq on its own. As a result, 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 has put a number of other actors of the region into a uncomfortable position. Most of the actors fear the Iranian-U.S. accommodation over Iraq, and are striving hard for as many gains



as they could. On the other hand, this situation also left considerable space for miscalculation and manipulation in these negotiations. The Sunnis in Iraq and Arab states will be making every effort to secure their interests and more importantly will strive to contain Iran to emerge as the dominant regional power as a result of any potential deal with the Americans over Iraqi state.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Dilemma of Saudi Arabia**

The stance of Saudi Arabia on the crisis in Iraq, and on the potential deal between Iran and United States to end the crisis, is based on regional potential disturbance of the balance of power in the region. Saudi fears that Iran might manipulate its influence in Iraq to strengthen its position aimed at regional dominance, which is already considerable and would be reinforced, in case of an US withdrawal from Iraq. It is because of this reason they are urging the Americans to keep their presence in Iraq while backing their full support to them in their “surge” policy.<sup>15</sup>

Initially Saudi Arabia was not very keen of Iraqi invasion by the U.S. in 2003, and cooperated only modestly to the United States in its military endeavors. However, since then, Saudi Arabia expressed deep concerns at the situation that developed in Iraq but have taken passive stance possibly due to several reasons; the most significant has been the intention to keep its friendly relations with the United States. Any effort by the Saudis to play an independent course of action toward Iraq in the presence of US forces would risk of American displeasure. “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.”<sup>16</sup> Hence, Saudi Arabia has maintained only limited connections with Arab and

Kurd in Iraq but certainly it is far behind the kind of relations that Iran has been able to cherish with a most of Iraqi parties. According to Anthony Cordesman and Nawaf Obaid 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.”<sup>17</sup>*

Although, it has been reported that private financial support provided by Saudi is helping to sustain the Sunni insurgency.<sup>18</sup> Regardless to say, the most grave concern to the Saudi Arabia is the ambitions of three regional powers that includes Iran, Turkey, and Syria where Iran, among all three is of a particular concern, which was supplemented by and the announcement on July 2005 of Iran and Iraq military agreement.<sup>19</sup> The House of Saud is undoubtedly concerned about Iranian infiltration of Iraqi society that it perceives as an attempt to influence the country through its Shia community. This concern is most evident in Saud al-Faisal’s (Saudi Foreign Minister) remarks:

*“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 and 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.”<sup>20</sup>*

The real issue, for the Saudis, (and other Sunni States in the region) is the fear of demonstration effect that the successes of a modest Shia rule in Iraq will have on other Shia Arabs in the region. The tension between Sunni and Shiite will escalate all over the Middle Eastern region and will cause grave concerns for states with sectarian splits, like Saudi Arabia Lebanon, and Bahrain.

### **Israel: The Contender for Regional Power**

Israel has been the only country in the region that openly supported U.S. policies in the region due to a yearly \$4 billion military and economic support to Israel by the United States. Moreover, The US has consistently vetoed UN Security Council resolutions on Israeli atrocities in Palestine). Due to these factors Israel has openly supported the US invasion of Iraq. However, Israel was more interested to see an even wider war that would reshape the political map of the region. Although, the Israelis miscalculated the extent and nature of the threat arises in the post-Iraq war. Richard Butler revealed that, although the Iraqi nuclear arsenal program was advanced, but it lacks the required enriched uranium to produce nuclear bomb.<sup>21</sup> For Israelis the one state that could threaten their very existence was Iran. Their statements were distinctly clear with regard to Iran that they never used for Iraq. This was the same reason which let the Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to dub Iran as "the main threat exists to the survival of Israel".<sup>22</sup> Ephraim Sneh, Former Deputy Defense Minister soon after 9/11 attacks occurred, was quoted saying this, "Iran stands in first place as a sponsor of terrorism."<sup>23</sup> It was distantly clearly, that Israel wanted the U.S., to go to war with Iran instead of Iraq.

In November 2001, Seymour Hersh reported that Israel is very much concerned with the post-9/11 development, where the U.S. focus on Iran is diverted to 'war on terror', in spite of the fact that Iran has accelerated its nuclear program. However, The Bush Administration was more concerned with the threat raised from 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."*<sup>24</sup>

While Israel viewed Iran more than Iraq as a threat to Israel security, the obsession of US administration's to go to war with Iraq has left no option with Israel but to support American keeping hopes that US will follow-up a war against Iran. Hersh contend, that, "even Israel's most skeptical critics in the American intelligence community now acknowledge that there is a serious problem."<sup>25</sup> The US put Israel off with the assurances to attack Iran afterward. "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."<sup>26</sup>

In July 2007, Israel's Attack on Lebanon with full support of United States completely devastated Lebanon. Seymour Hersh reported 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."<sup>27</sup> 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 grave and long-term repercussions.

First, image of invincible Israel is shaken in the minds of Arab states, which was unimaginable before Lebanon War, as a result of this they might take future offensive measures to counter the Israel threat to their security. Secondly, the poor performance of Israeli security forces has clearly disappointed U.S. and its western allies that might affect their future support to Israel's offensive steps against Palestine and Arab states. 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 combined, have world's 40 per cent manpower, one fifth of its economy and more than half of its nuclear warheads. Today they are uniting 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 become 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 seems to be more eager than that of China or India for that matter to actually challenge US hegemony. However, as there still has been a convergence of interests as each one of them is trying to make a smooth transition from that of a controlled to free market economy. Ever since 2003 all of them have found mutual interest in at least opposing the US-led invasion of Iraq. Moreover, there are other areas of agreement among these three contending powers that include, the opposition to the outside actors to interference in separatist movements in their homeland (from Chechnya, to the northeast India to the northwestern Chinese region of Xinjiang), and their mutual agreement on the issue of 'Energy' where both China and India economies are dependent on Russian oil and gas recourses, and where Russia is more concerned on 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.”<sup>28</sup>*

The formal agenda of the meeting in Delhi took place on 14<sup>th</sup> February 2007 wherein the Foreign ministers of these three states, discussed issues that range from Iraq, Iran, the broader Middle East, Afghanistan, and also North Korea to nuclear non-proliferation, energy security, as well trade related issues. The intention was to use their growing political and economic power to contain the US from taking unilateral action on matters of great importance to them. Their most significant and single most common ground was to oppose the American military intervention in Iran. The declaration of meeting however, did not mention Iran specifically, but all of them called for a settling the issue through the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).<sup>29</sup> Even though all of them didn't want the Iran to have nuclear weapons, however, Russia intends to sell nuclear technology to Iran whereas China and India need the Iranian natural gas to fuel the economy.

#### **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”.<sup>30</sup> 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”.<sup>31</sup>

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 findings, it contend 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".<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, according to a U.N. report released in 2006, the Iraq war has helped Al Qaeda to have new recruits and training bases. 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."*<sup>33</sup>

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. However, this new strategy has brought United States not only at odd with Iran but has also the larger region, into an ever widening Shiite and Sunni sectarianism. This in turn has only strengthened the Sunni extremist groups who are more hostile to United States and are more sympathetic to Al Qaeda.<sup>34</sup>

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 al Qaeda which has gain more appeal to the masses 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.<sup>35</sup> 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 advantage of the power vacuum created as a result of 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:

- 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. However, in the new Middle East, new actors will compete for power and influence and will thus challenge & limit the U.S. supremacy in the region.
- Iraq will remain chaotic for the coming many years, with a fragile government, disjointed society, and will go through sectarian violence on the regular basis. There is every possibility that it may become a failed state with erupting civil war that can spread to the whole region.
- 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 that include oil wealth, influential Shiite community, and have considerable control over Hezbollah and Hamas.
- Sunni states and Saudi Arabia, in particular, will be amking every effort to secure their interests and contain to the extent possible the influence of Iran as the dominant regional power



and primary beneficiary as a result of any future arrangement it might work out with the American over the state of Iraq.

- Israel, with its nuclear arsenal is certainly in a weak position especially after the Lebanon crisis. But still it will share the status of being the second influential player of the region, along with Iran. Though if Iran develops its own nuclear weapon the situation may further be complicated.
- 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.
- Islam will come to the center-stage to fill the political vacuum in the region. Though tension between Sunni and Shiite will grow throughout the Middle East and will cause grave problems in states with divided societies.
- Arab states will remain authoritarian in nature and would increasingly be more anti-American and religiously bigoted. The tension between Iran and other Sunni states in the region will also aggravate and will thus impede the emergence of regionalism.

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