

WHY SYRIA MATTERS

The Moral Imperative of Bringing Down the House of Al-Assad

By Nader Hashemi

On March 15, 2011, the Arab Spring came to Syria. Like the other Arab revolts, it occurred spontaneously and proceeded nonviolently. The core political grievances and aspirations were the same as elsewhere: *karama* (dignity), *hurriya* (freedom) and *adala ijtimaiyya* (social justice). The House of Al-Assad, in power forty-one years at the time and arguably the most repressive regime in the Arab world, faced a legitimacy crisis of unprecedented scale and proportion.

What is interesting about this particular revolt is that at the time many experts predicted that the Arab Spring would stop at Syria's borders. Ammar Abdulhamid, a Syrian dissident and former fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, argued that "Syria is not ready for an uprising" because the preparatory organizing at the grassroots that led to the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt was absent in the Syrian case.¹ Similarly, Joshua Landis of the University of Oklahoma suggested an "important factor is that [Al-Assad] is popular among young people." He explained: "I'm always astounded how the average guy in the street, the taxi driver, the person you talk to in a restaurant or wherever, they don't talk about democracy. They complain about corruption, they want justice and equality, but they'll look at elections in Lebanon and laugh, saying, 'who needs that kind of democracy?'"²

Unsurprisingly, Bashar Al-Assad, Syria's president since 2000, held the same view. As the Arab Spring unfolded, he gave an interview to the *Wall Street Journal* in which he rejected the idea that Syria was ripe for revolution. Criticizing his fellow Arab rulers, he observed that if "you didn't see the need for reform before what happened in Egypt and Tunisia, it's too late to do any reform." He assured his interviewer, however, that "Syria is stable. Why? Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people. This is the core issue. When

▷ A Syrian man holds his fatally wounded son, Aleppo, Oct. 3, 2012.
Manu Brabo/Associated Press



there is divergence between your policy and the people's beliefs and interests, you will have this vacuum that creates disturbance."³ But six weeks later, a revolution did begin in Syria, and three years on—notwithstanding its attempted eradication by the Al-Assad regime, its abandonment by the international community and its predictable militarization and radicalization—it staggers on, and resistance to the House of Al-Assad continues.

Hoping that the conflict in Syria will simply go away seems to have been the unstated policy of the Obama administration for much of the last three years. This view is widely shared by the American public. Tired of a decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, this sentiment is certainly understandable. The United States has effectively lost these wars and the cost to America's self-image and its economy has been enormous. Yet the conflict nonetheless continues to haunt our collective consciousness and to hold our attention. For three distinct but interrelated reasons—rooted in basic ethics, global security and normative political values—the conflict in Syria profoundly matters for our world today. In the absence of global leadership that prioritizes this crisis, the conflict will continue to destabilize the broader Middle East and its ramifications will be felt far and wide for years to come.

Crimes Against Humanity

The ethical case for why Syria matters is straightforward. The facts and figures speak for themselves. The killing fields of Syria have now surpassed those of Bosnia. According to a March 2014 report by the United Nations Secretary-General, two hundred people on average are dying every day in Syria.⁴ The UN has announced that due to a lack of access it has stopped counting Syria's dead. The last time figures were reported, in July 2013, the UN Secretary-General declared that more than 100,000 people had been killed. In April 2014, the Violations Documentation Center in Syria, a respected human rights group, put the approximate death count at more than 150,000, mostly civilians (about 100,000 who have been killed by regime forces).⁵ In comparison, it appears that as many people have been killed in Syria in the past three years as in Iraq in the past eleven years (since the 2003 American invasion).⁶

Syria has even been compared to Rwanda. Speaking last summer before the UN Security Council, António Guterres, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, reported that we “have not seen a refugee outflow escalate at such a frightening rate since the Rwandan genocide almost twenty years ago.”⁷ As of April 2014, almost half of Syria's 23 million people were either refugees or internally displaced. Syria now has the distinction of producing more refugees than any other current conflict in the world.⁸ UN estimates suggest that as a result of this forced displacement, three-quarters of Syria's population are now in need of food aid to survive.⁹

According to the UN World Food Programme, at least 800,000 civilians remained under siege in Syria as of January 2014.¹⁰ In areas around Homs, Aleppo, Deir Ezzor and greater Damascus, no food, medical supplies or humanitarian aid can get in, and people can't get out. Many have already died under these "starvation sieges" and many hundreds of thousands teeter on the brink of death.¹¹ This is not a famine. Food is in abundant supply just a few miles away from these besieged areas. Military forces—mainly Al-Assad's army, but in some cases extremist militias—are preventing food and medicine from getting in. In addition to starving, many civilians cannot obtain medical treatment because doctors can't get through, and the Al-Assad regime has made it next to impossible to practice medicine in Syria today.¹² Navi Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, has called this deliberate obstruction of aid—the regime's kneel or starve policy—a war crime.¹³

Diseases, including those easily preventable by basic hygiene and vaccination, are spreading at an alarming rate. In late 2013 there were reports of a major polio outbreak in Syria. Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid wrote that it is a "frightening indictment of the civilized world's utter failure at peacemaking in Syria that a disease that the World Health Organization and organizations such as the Bill Gates Foundation have, in a global campaign, been so close to eliminating, has returned with a vengeance."¹⁴

Around this same time, the Oxford Research Group released a report revealing that more than 11,000 children have been killed in Syria, including young boys and girls who were tortured and executed. "What is most disturbing about the findings of this report is not only the sheer numbers of children killed in this conflict, but the way they are being killed," co-author Hana Salama stated.¹⁵ More than one thousand children were either summarily executed or killed by snipers, the report found. Some 112 children, even infants, were tortured before being killed. In December 2013, it was reported that more than 38,000 people appealed to the United Nations for help after facing sexual assault or other gender-based violence in Syria that year, a figure that the UN says may represent "the tip of the iceberg" after nearly three years of conflict.¹⁶

The colossal suffering and the human rights nightmare that have enveloped Syria over the past three years comprise a unique set of horrors when compared to other human rights catastrophes. A shortlist would include the premeditated use of sarin gas, the bombing of breadlines, the dropping of barrel bombs on civilian populations, and extensive use of torture and killings within Syria's prison system, as revealed in January 2014 in 55,000 photographs of 11,000 separate detainees documenting killings and torture on an "industrial-scale."¹⁷

Summarizing the moral challenge that Syria has become, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon released the following statement on the third anniversary of the Syrian conflict:

Hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost or destroyed, with hundreds of people more killed every day; cities and villages have been reduced to rubble; extremists are imposing their radical ideologies; communities are threatened and attacked; millions have been forced to flee violence and deprivation; weapons are flowing in, adding fuel to the fire, and they are being used indiscriminately; acts of terrorism are a daily reality; grave crimes remain unpunished and thousands remain in captivity without due process; and the world's cultural heritage is under grave threat. Over the past year, this conflict also saw the worst use of weapons of mass destruction in the twenty-first century.

The stark conclusion that he reached was that “Syria is now the biggest humanitarian and peace and security crisis facing the world.”¹⁸

This rising tide of death and destruction has also been copiously documented by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic. Collectively, they have issued approximately thirty detailed reports.¹⁹ All have charged the Al-Assad regime with a policy of state-sanctioned war crimes and crimes against humanity. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has repeatedly called on the UN Security Council to refer the Syrian government to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

In December 2013, Navi Pillay issued a statement that directly pointed the finger at Al-Assad and his inner circle. According to her, “massive evidence” exists of “very serious crimes, war crimes, crimes against humanity” and that this “evidence indicates responsibility at the highest level of [the Syrian] government, including the head of state.” Responding to her statement, Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad retorted: “She has been talking nonsense for a long time and we don’t listen to her.”²⁰

Elements within the Syrian rebel movement, mostly among the Al-Qaeda-affiliated militias, have also committed gross human rights violations. This fact is often picked up by certain left-wing groups and intellectuals in Europe and North America to suggest moral parity between all sides and thus deflect any calls for external intervention. A cursory reading of the human rights documentation, however, reveals the absurdity of this argument. In this context, Pillay recently confirmed that “clearly the actions of the forces of the [Syrian] government far outweigh” those of the rebels. “The violations, killings, cruelty, persons in detention, disappearances far outweigh, so you cannot compare the situation. It’s the [Syrian] government that’s mostly responsible for the violations.” Syria’s UN Ambassador Bashar Al-Jaafari responded to this statement by calling Pillay a “lunatic” and accusing her of “acting irresponsibly.”²¹

Radicals Resurgent

From the outset of the conflict in Syria a set of prominent foreign policy voices have argued against Western intervention. Reflecting a widely held view, the influential international relations theorist John Mearsheimer has consistently maintained that what happens in Syria “is of little importance for American security” and there is no “compelling moral case for intervening.”²² Edward Luttwak of the Center for Strategic and International Studies has gone a step further by arguing that a “victory by either side would be equally undesirable for the United States” and that “a prolonged stalemate is the only outcome that would not be damaging to American interests.”²³ Since these arguments were advanced, a new dimension to the Syrian conflict has emerged. Syria has gradually but steadily morphed into a global security problem; ignoring it, pretending that it doesn’t matter or hoping that it will simply disappear only makes the problem worse.

On a regional level, the Syrian conflict is now destabilizing the Middle East. Lebanon has been deeply convulsing with violence and sectarian tensions that flow directly from Syria. More than a million Syrian refugees have moved across the border into Lebanon. According to one report, 12,000 refugees are arriving every week.²⁴ Iraq’s fragile stability has been further compromised by the conflict on its western border. Jordan’s fourth largest city today is Zaatari, a Syrian refugee camp. Turkey has also been adversely affected, albeit to a lesser extent. More than 600,000 refugees are currently living on the Turkish-Syrian border and Turkey’s role in the Syrian conflict has become a major bone of contention in domestic Turkish politics.

Moreover, the Syrian conflict has heightened sectarian tensions across the Arab-Islamic world. This has added to political instability across the region. These religious tensions are fueled in part by the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and its allies, and Iran and its allies. Both are fighting to expand their regional influence and Syria today is the key battleground in this contest.

Al-Qaeda has re-emerged amidst the Syrian conflict. A decade after the September 11 attacks, this terrorist network has been given a new lease on life. According to journalist Peter Bergen, author of several books on the organization and its leadership, radical Islamist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda are now stronger and more influential in the politics of the Middle East than at any time since September 11. Al-Qaeda, he writes, “now controls territory that stretches more than four hundred miles across the heart of the Middle East.”²⁵ This is a direct result of the ongoing conflict in Syria. This deeply troubling development has obvious implications for global security, especially for Europe and the United States.

According to the European Union, approximately two thousand young Muslim men from various European countries have travelled to Syria. “Major events like the

use of chemical gases have inspired many people” to join radical Islamist groups, according to Marc Trévidic, a French judge and specialist in Islamist radicalization.²⁶ What will happen when they return home? This development has potential consequences for European security and internal debates related to multiculturalism, immigration and the integration of immigrant Muslim communities. It also fuels the fires of right-wing political parties in Europe and their nativist, anti-Muslim agendas. In his annual report for 2013, Charles Farr, Britain’s chief anti-terrorism official, confirmed this concern by noting that Syria is now the main challenge facing the United Kingdom’s security services.²⁷

The leaders of the U.S. intelligence and security communities are also sounding the alarm. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper told Congress that roughly seven thousand foreign fighters from fifty countries are in Syria today, most of them linked with extremist militias, and that Al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria “have aspirations for attacks on the homeland.”²⁸ Jeh Johnson, the secretary for Homeland Security, has reached a similar conclusion: “Syria has become a matter of homeland security.”²⁹ In other words, Syria is becoming the new Afghanistan.

The ripple effects of the Syrian conflict are now being felt as far away as Southeast Asia. According to a recent report by the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict in Jakarta, Syria has “captured the imagination of Indonesian extremists in a way no foreign war has before,” fueling the revival of a weakened jihadi movement at home. Approximately fifty Indonesians have travelled to Syria and more are believed to be en route.³⁰

These trends undermine a key assumption in the U.S. debate about Syria. Many in the foreign policy establishment argue that the conflict in Syria can be “contained” within its borders, or at least within the region, and while the conflict is tragic from a moral perspective, realpolitik calculations suggest that it does not threaten vital U.S. national security interests.

This argument is no longer sustainable. Perhaps President Barack Obama has arrived at this conclusion himself. Speaking at a news conference in February 2014 with the president of France, he stated that Syria is now “one of our highest national security priorities.”³¹ He has instructed his foreign policy team to undertake a comprehensive review of American policy toward Syria.

Dignity and Self-Determination

There is a further reason why Syria matters. This conflict involves a set of normative political values that have largely been ignored in the global debate on Syria. These universal principles are essential ingredients for the development of a stable and just world order; they are deeply connected to the roots of the conflict that emerged out

of the Arab Spring protests. The theme of human dignity is a useful point of departure to appreciate this argument.

The theme of dignity, or its converse, indignity, and its relationship to modern Arab politics is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. It exists at both the individual and the collective levels. This is a difficult point to appreciate in Western intellectual circles because dignity is rarely a point of contention in European or North American politics.

The Arab Spring began with the self-immolation of a twenty-six-year-old Tunisian street vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi. Syrians immediately identified with his martyrdom. His economic plight was theirs; his frustration, humiliation and anger under the crushing weight of dictatorship and poverty resonated and struck a deep personal chord with millions of people across the Arab-Islamic world, Syria included. But the theme of “Arab indignity” also exists on a collective level, and it is associated with a set of common historical and political experiences, which partly explains why it is such a potent force in the politics of the Arab-Islamic world today.

For the Arab-Islamic world, in which Syria figures centrally, the twentieth century was an extremely bitter one. European colonialism and imperialism thwarted the aspirations for self-determination of millions of Arabs and Muslims. The desire to create one pan-Arab state from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire’s Arabic-speaking provinces was sacrificed at the altar of British and French ambitions. The state system that emerged after the First World War reflected the economic and geostrategic interests of London and Paris more than it did popular preferences on the streets of Cairo or Damascus. The birth of the modern Arab world thus engendered bitter memories and poisoned relations between Muslim societies and Western ones. This was compounded by Western support for the national rights of Jewish settlers in Palestine over those of the indigenous Palestinian population—the legacy of which continues to afflict the region, and indeed the world, to this day.

The aftermath of the Second World War saw the gradual loosening of European control of the Arab world and the emergence of a brief moment of optimism. Many thought that an opportunity had finally arrived for the realization of meaningful self-determination. But this opening did not last very long. The region soon found itself awash in military coups and single-party states. Syria got the Baath Party. Within the span of a couple of decades, a new postcolonial elite came to power and a familiar political landscape took shape. Yes, the new rulers were native to the soil and had Muslim names, but they behaved in ways that were eerily familiar. A new chasm between state and society replicated the old colonial one, only this time the ruling elites were Arabs rather than Europeans.

The term “neocolonialism” is an apt description for this state of affairs. The Syrian writer Rana Kabbani has used the phrase “internal colonialism” to describe the

authoritarian rule of postcolonial elites in the Arab world. She explains that the years-long one-family rule in Syria is “much like the external colonialism of the past, [it] has robbed [the people of Syria] and bombed them and impeded them from joining the free peoples of the world.”³² The Syrian human rights activist and opposition leader Radwan Ziadeh has similarly argued that we “need a second independence in Syria. The first was from the French and the second will be from the Al-Assad dynasty.”³³ Commenting on this core feature of Arab political life, the historian Ilan Pappé has referred to the Arab Spring as the “second phase of decolonization.” What recent events have demonstrated, he notes, is the collective “assertion of self-dignity in the Arab world” after decades of humiliation, despotism and despair.³⁴

The Syrian intellectual Burhan Ghalioun picks up on this point in arguing that negotiations with Damascus are futile. He says that the “existence of the [Al-Assad] regime is like an invasion of the state, a colonization of society” where “hundreds of intellectuals are forbidden to travel, 150,000 have gone into exile and 17,000 have either disappeared or been imprisoned for expressing their opinion... It is impossible (for Bashar Al-Assad) to say (like Mubarak and Ben Ali) ‘I will not prolong or renew my mandate’ like other presidents have pretended to do. Because Syria is, for Al-Assad, his private family property.”³⁵

These are issues that should be kept in mind when thinking about the conflict in Syria and how to resolve it. The world is dealing with a fascist regime in Damascus embodied in slogans such as: “God, Bashar, Syria and Nothing Else” and “Al-Assad or we burn down the country.” In the lead-up to the January 2014 Geneva peace conference, this fact was made clear by the Syrian government. “Don’t expect anything from Geneva II,” affirmed Syria’s national reconciliation minister Ali Haidar. “Neither Geneva II nor Geneva III nor Geneva X will solve the Syrian crisis. The solution has begun and will continue through the military triumph of the state... and through the staying power and resilience of the state and all its institutions in the face of its enemies who were betting on its collapse.”³⁶

This statement reveals that the regime in Damascus is not amenable to power-sharing, compromise or political negotiation. For Al-Assad and his network of supporters, it is a zero-sum game, and a fight to the finish. The regime cynically manipulates sectarian identity and anti-imperialism to maintain its criminal enterprise. Military intervention, as regrettable and complicated as it may be, is the only way to stop Al-Assad’s killing machine. By doing so, this intervention may also open the door for the people of Syria to exercise, arguably for the first time in their modern history, their right to self-determination.

There is a further compelling reason why intervention in Syria is required: this is what a majority of Syrians are demanding from the international community. The

most inclusive and representative body of Syrians is the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces. While far from being a perfect group, it constitutes the best prospect for leading Syria to a democratic future. It includes Syrians both inside and outside the country and spans the religious-secular divide. More than 110 countries have officially recognized it as “the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.”³⁷

The Syrian Coalition has been pleading for a Libya-style intervention (no troops on the ground, a no-fly/no-kill zone and arming the moderate elements of the Syrian rebels). On April 24, 2013, it issued the following clarion call to the world:

The Syrian Coalition finds it tragic that NATO has the power to stop further loss of life in Syria but chooses not to take that course of action.... The international community must rise to its great moral and ethical responsibilities and put an end to this bloodshed. History will not only condemn the murderous criminals, but also those who had the power to intervene but chose to [remain] idle.³⁸

These views are widely shared among Syrian refugees. When the journalist Max Blumenthal travelled to the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan in 2013, he reported universal support for military strikes after Al-Assad’s use of chemical weapons. He wrote that one man told him “the whole camp’s opinion is in favor of a strike” though nobody “wants the country to be hit. I swear we don’t like it. But with the kind of injustice we have seen, we just wish for the hit to put an end to the massacres. We feel strange because we’re wishing for something that we have never wished for before. But it’s the lesser of two evils.” An elderly woman living in a tent told Blumenthal: “Just do it, Obama! What are you waiting for? Hit him today and bring down the whole country—we have no problem with that. We just want to go back. Besides, the country is so destroyed, even if Obama’s strike destroys houses, we can rebuild them again.”³⁹

Today, Syria is a moral litmus test for the international community, especially those on the political Left, who have for years rhetorically championed the rights of oppressed peoples in the developing world. If they truly believe in the right to self-determination for these people—the Syrian people included—then they are morally obligated to listen to them. Moral consistency demands that the Left follow the lead of the Syrian people when it comes to deeply divisive issues such as military intervention. In the end, it is the needs of the Syrian people—at this critical moment in *their* history—that are far more important than the political preferences and biases of those on the Left.

Toward a New Approach

How should the international community respond to the crisis in Syria? What is the best way to end the conflict? These questions have generated a wide variety of responses. In May 2013, when the death toll stood at 60,000 and Al-Assad's atrocities had been condemned by the entire human rights community as borderline genocidal, the anti-war activist Stephen Zunes wrote an opinion essay in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* arguing that "it is critical to not allow the understandably strong emotional reaction to the ongoing carnage to lead to policies that could end up making things worse." In response to the question—what should be done?—he suggested that the "short answer, unfortunately, is not much."⁴⁰

Nine months later, when the death toll in Syria had doubled and hundreds of thousands of Syrians were suffering under "starvation sieges," he refused to budge from his strict anti-intervention position. At the time, I co-authored an essay published in the *New York Times* that argued for the use of force based on the UN principle of the Responsibility to Protect to save starving civilians in Syria.⁴¹ Zunes' response articulated a position that amounted to – let them starve.

Just as militarists who used the crimes of Saddam as an excuse to push the West into a disastrous Middle East war, militarists now are using the crimes of Al-Assad to do so yet again. As Iraq and countless other examples have demonstrated, however, such intervention leads to more violence, not less. The Syrian people have suffered enough already!⁴²

True to his realist convictions, Stephen Walt of Harvard University has argued that the quickest way of ending the conflict would be for the Syrian people to surrender to the Al-Assad regime. "What may be best for the Syrian people in terms of ending human suffering is to say we are not going to drive him from power... but that ultimately if what you want is fewer people dying... you might have to acknowledge that he will remain in power.... This is at least a possibility we will have to begin to reconcile ourselves to."⁴³ Walt is correct only in the same sense that political conflict and human suffering could have also been reduced in the short-term in Rwanda, Bosnia and South Africa had opposition forces surrendered in a similar fashion; but Syrians would continue to suffer the same daily violence perpetrated by the regime for decades prior to the Arab Spring, and an opposition surrender now may lead to an even bloodier uprising later.

It is wishful thinking to believe that after three years of state-sanctioned war crimes and crimes against humanity that Al-Assad can be a stabilizing force in Syria. The clock cannot be turned back. The continued existence of his regime will generate resistance and more violence as long as he is in power.⁴⁴

A new approach to Syria is needed. Former President Jimmy Carter's peace plan for Syria, based on three core principles, offers a thoughtful framework for the international community to follow. Anyone who commits to them should be invited to peace talks where the focus of the conversation should be on the implementation of these principles:

1. Self-determination: The Syrian people should decide on the country's future government in a free election process under the unrestricted supervision of the international community and responsible nongovernmental organizations, with the results accepted if the elections are judged free and fair;
2. Respect: The victors should assure and guarantee respect for all sectarian and minority groups and;
3. Peacekeepers: To ensure that the first two goals are achieved, the international community must guarantee a robust peacekeeping force.⁴⁵

One could also add another item to this agenda. The international community should commit itself to a plan for economic reconstruction and transitional justice in Syria. But in order to get to a point where this peace plan can be implemented, the battlefield conditions will have to change.

This must involve a serious program to arm and support the moderate Syrian rebels. While doing so by itself will not topple the Al-Assad regime, it might, as the *Economist* has argued, turn "the tide of the fighting [and it] might shift the negotiations... If the regime is under pressure on the battlefield, it may be more willing to negotiate a proper ceasefire, or even, if people are tired of war, Mr. Al-Assad's departure."⁴⁶

Challenging the Russian position on Syria is also critical. Given the crisis in Ukraine and the Crimea this might be easier now given the deep chasm that now separates the West from Russia. To date, the Russians have blocked three UN Security Council resolutions. They reluctantly signed onto a February 22, 2014, resolution that demanded humanitarian access to besieged communities in Syria (after watering it down to prevent coercive measures).

Reporting to the UN Security Council on the progress of implementing the terms of this resolution six weeks later, Valerie Amos, the UN's emergency relief coordinator, stated that only 6 percent of the population living in besieged areas had received assistance. Moreover, she reported that there had been more than three hundred cases of sexual violence in the Damascus area alone and massive refugee flows were continuing.⁴⁷ This is a familiar pattern of events. When the international community meets to respond to the crisis in Syria, Al-Assad steps up his repression and emerges stronger as a result.

Recall that the only time Al-Assad has ever made a serious concession was in the context of his use of sarin gas. The threat of force produced the September 2013 chemical weapons agreement. There are lessons here for those who want to heed them.

Notwithstanding the wishes of many people in the West for Syria to disappear from our headlines, this conflict is not going away. Nor will it resolve itself. Global leadership and an intervention that is part military, part political and part humanitarian is long overdue. Due to a set of arguments rooted in basic ethics, global security and a set of normative political principles, the conflict in Syria deeply matters for our world. We ignore it at our collective peril.

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