

Defying Gravity: Working Toward a Regional Strategy for a Stable Middle East

Ross Harrison



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About the Author

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Harrison authored *Strategic Thinking in 3D: A Guide for National Security, Foreign Policy and Business Professionals* (Potomac Books, 2013), which currently is a required strategy text at the U.S. National War College. Related to the book release, he has lectured at the U.S. Department of State, the National War College and National Defense University, Georgetown University, and the Matthew B. Ridgway Center for International Security Studies. He has also been published in policy-related outlets such as *The National Interest*, *Al Monitor*, *The Middle East Journal*, and *Parameters* (the U.S. Army War College Journal). Harrison lives in Washington, D.C. with his wife, Mahnaz.

Introduction

A French philosopher once said that “no problem can withstand the assault of sustained thinking.”¹ This bold claim might never have been made had he encountered the challenges of the modern Middle East, where solutions to problems have stumped some of the best strategic minds.

Finding opportunities to solve the problems of the Middle East and eventually transition from chaos to stability requires looking in the right places. Currently the right place to find robust opportunities is not at the ground level, where the civil wars in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen are raging, but rather at the regional level, where a new order is emerging out of these conflicts. The pillars of this regional order are Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and Egypt. Whether the future of the Middle East will be a continuation of the current chaos and destruction or a more positive transition toward stability and prosperity will heavily depend on the relationships among these four regional titans. The United States and other global powers, namely Russia, China, and the European Union (EU), should concentrate their strategic efforts on creating conditions conducive to cooperation among these regional powers. Enhancing their cooperation is necessary, not just to help this troubled region but also to protect the global system from the destabilizing effects of a continued downward spiral in the Middle East.

There is a reason why raising our gaze to the regional level reveals opportunities, while the ground level conflicts appear impervious to strategy. Two essential preconditions for strategy are absent in the ground level conflicts of the Middle East. One is leaders’ ability to see the strategic environment clearly enough to calculate whether the actions they are considering taking have a reasonable probability of producing their desired effects. Amidst the chaos in the region today, it is almost impossible to get the relationship between cause and effect right. The second missing element is actors’ ability to accurately assess how their interests are affected by events. In an environment so dynamic and unstable, it is easy for parties involved in the conflicts to lose their strategic compass and resort to groping in the dark.

But this chaos that makes strategic opportunities so scarce at the ground level is already creating a new order at the regional level, where the necessary preconditions for strategy are more abundant. While at this level there is still uncertainty, peering beyond the fog of the current chaos and focusing on the four relatively stable regional powers yields a clearer picture of the strategic environment. This clearer perspective reveals more precisely where the interests of the various parties conflict and overlap within the evolving regional structure, and thus highlights strategic opportunities for solving some of the region's most vexing problems through cooperation.

How is the suggestion that the regional level is the right place to look for strategic opportunities realistic, given the immediacy of crises faced by policymakers? No doubt fighting gravity in the political world is just as difficult as it is in the physical world. The gravitational tug of day-to-day crises might make chasing a regional approach seem quixotic and naive. However, the response to those who dismiss a longer-term regional approach is that without one, any gains made in managing conflicts on the ground today are likely to be fleeting. In the absence of a healthier regional context, policymakers will likely continue playing a game of whack-a-mole in which just as traction is created in addressing one problem, new crises emerge that erase previous gains.

Thinking in Regional Terms

Hasn't any notion of a regional system been destroyed with the implosion of the Arab world and the proliferation of political vacuums in the Middle East? The answer is both yes and no. Yes, the old Arab state system has been hollowed out by the civil wars and the inroads made by ISIS.² But no, the notion of a regional system itself has not been destroyed. Out of these deadly conflicts a new regional order is emerging, dominated by Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Egypt, all of which are relatively stable states that retain the capacity to withstand challenges from insurgency movements like ISIS. Think of these four states as pillars of a structure that remain after a building has burned to the ground. Any strategy aimed at creating a better future for the Middle East must be built atop these pillars.

Why these four powers? First, they are already projecting significant influence into the region through their involvement in the conflicts in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. While up to this point the interactions among them have created a dysfunctional regional system, it is these same four powers that have the potential to form a more positive system that takes on the region's most pressing problems. Second, collectively these four countries have the greatest capacity to impact the economic health of the region, since together they represent more than 70 percent of its GDP.

Identifying these four powers as the regional pillars is not meant to minimize the influence other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries or Israel can have on the health of the region. Any initiatives by Saudi Arabia and Egypt to create a new Arab political order that becomes part of a larger Arab-Turkish-Iranian regional system will certainly include the other GCC countries. Israel's impact on the current negotiations with Iran, plus the recent convergence of Israeli geopolitical interests with those of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, will be critical variables in the region's stability equation. And whether future Israeli governments commit to a peaceful process that resolves the dispute with the beleaguered Palestinians will also be a significant factor affecting stability. But given the nature of the threats to the regional order today, the most influential states in shaping the future will be Iran, Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

Gravitational Pull: Obstacles to Cooperation

With Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt engaged in yet another proxy war against Iran in Yemen, and Turkey and Iran having recently traded barbs, it is hard to fathom regional cooperation. But the fact that these countries jockey for influence in—and even inflame—the region's conflicts should not cause us to lose sight of their significant common interests.

The principal common interest is the need for a more stable and cooperative regional context, without which none of these countries will be able to reach their

full potential in the coming decades.³ The economic vibrancy of each country depends on increased levels of intraregional trade and the peace dividend that would accrue should the region stabilize (estimated at 2.4 percent of the combined GDP of the four countries).⁴ Another common political and security interest is the defeat of groups like ISIS, al-Qa'ida, and their affiliates, which unless checked could challenge the sovereignty of more states in the region. Pursuing these common interests does not just have long-term payoffs but also produces immediate economic security benefits for all four countries.

The four regional powers' significant common interests notwithstanding, there are several factors that could reinforce the current pattern of rivalry and pose obstacles to any significant regional cooperation. First, old animosities and distrust die hard, particularly with regimes that have made rivalries with other states central themes of their political narratives and legitimacy formulas. Historically this has been particularly true in the case of Saudi Arabia and Iran, and a similar dynamic is increasingly evident today between Egypt and Turkey. Modern Turkish, Iranian, and Arab nationalisms, strains of wistfulness for former Persian and Ottoman empires, as well as Sunni-Shi'i sectarian identities tend to affirm these narratives and perpetuate rivalries.

Second, the acceleration of events in the conflict zones of the Arab world makes deliberative calculations of interests difficult for leaders. This increases the likelihood of reflexive reactions rather than careful consideration of the available options. While Saudi Arabia and Iran have fueled the civil wars in Syria, Iraq, and now in Yemen, the spiraling nature of these proxy conflicts makes it politically difficult for leaders in Riyadh and Tehran to escape them, even if the benefits of continuing these battles become less clear over time.

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A third factor that could undermine cooperation arises from the likely effects of social and economic megatrends. The real story, however, is not the individual trends themselves but rather how they are converging to create an even more powerfully disruptive trend, namely a rapid acceleration in the rate of political and economic change that is likely to stress the capacity of regimes in the future. This can be conceptualized as a “speeding up” of history, with leaders challenged by potentially disruptive changes occurring at a faster clip than will be their ability to cope.⁵

Social megatrends such as the empowerment of individuals, particularly women and minority groups—fueled to a large degree by technological innovations, and political trends such as a diffusion of power away from traditional sources of authority and toward networks and non-state actors—will challenge leaders in all four countries. Simultaneously, leaders will have to contend with the demographic trend of an expanding youth bulge. This will challenge governments unable to create economic opportunities for the deluge of youth rushing toward job markets.

Adequate responses to these social, political, and demographic trends will be made more difficult by environmental trends like climate change, desertification, and water and food shortages.⁶ The combined effect of these trends will be faster social change, greater difficulty in creating economic traction, and more challenges to governments by citizens. The risk is that these trends create legitimacy issues for governments that draw them inward toward shoring up their power base rather than propelling them outward toward regional cooperation efforts. Or, if they do project outward, the risk is that they will use hostility toward their neighbors to cover up their domestic legitimacy issues.

Of course, these risks will be different for each of the four countries. Egypt, which suffers from both severe economic problems and deep political divisions, is the most vulnerable in this regard. Water shortages, desertification, the effects of the youth bulge, and rising inequality will hit Egypt hard in the years to come. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s current social contract, which imposes a strong security crackdown and restrictions on human rights in exchange for

the promise of greater economic growth and neutralization of terrorist threats, will be particularly fragile because of these trends. One thing seems certain. Given the accelerating pace of change in the post-Arab Spring era, Sisi and his successors will have a limited time frame for showing results. This is in contrast to former President Mubarak, who ruled for 30 years before societal pressures boiled over. This means that if the Sisi administration is unable to deliver on the economic part of its social contract, it will likely further emphasize terrorism threats and continue using the Muslim Brotherhood as a scapegoat. This could push Egypt away from cooperation and toward a more confrontational posture vis-à-vis Turkey. And should the Egyptian government expand its crackdown to other Islamic groups, this could trouble the country's currently warm relations with Saudi Arabia.

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Iran's leaders in the years ahead will also be under great internal pressure to deliver economically and politically. Up until now the regime has had the luxury of pointing to international sanctions as the source of economic hardship. Should the nuclear negotiations with the P5+1 culminate in a deal, and sanctions gradually be lifted, pressure will likely be on the regime to improve its economic performance. The youth bulge trend is one of Iran's biggest time bombs, causing a rise in the number of unemployed and underemployed college graduates clamoring for economic opportunities. Moreover, if oil prices remain low for several more years and water shortage problems become more acute, the combination of these trends could cause a rapid downturn in the economy.⁷ Thus even with a nuclear deal in 2015, Iran could use a more adversarial foreign policy as a distraction from economic issues, despite the fact that most Iranian youth yearn for improvement in the country's international standing.

Both Saudi Arabia and Turkey have stronger economic capabilities today than either Iran or Egypt, giving them greater shock absorbers for coping with these megatrends and therefore posing fewer roadblocks to regional cooperation. Largely fueled by the relatively high oil prices, Saudi Arabia's economy grew more than 5 percent annually over the past decade, which has led to large account surpluses.⁸ Moreover, the Saudi leadership is already responding to water issues by building desalination plants. But on the other side of the ledger, economic diversification is not happening fast enough to absorb the high levels of unemployment, particularly among the country's increasingly restive youth.⁹

Also, if the recent oil price collapse lasts for more than a couple of years, this will introduce major downside risks to the Saudi social welfare system, with possible destabilizing effects. Turkey has the most diversified and advanced economy of the four powers, but it is currently undergoing deceleration in its GDP growth, having slowed from 9.2 percent in 2010 to 4.1 percent in 2013 and 3.1 percent in 2014.¹⁰ If this continues, its government will also be under pressure to reform, which could lead to internal political dislocations.¹¹ This, combined with how the individual empowerment trend could raise the temperature of Turkey's Kurdish issue, might work against regional cooperation.

Defying Gravity: Toward a Regional Strategy

If these impediments to regional cooperation among Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey are not dealt with, the probability that the Middle East will remain one of the most unstable, least integrated, and most economically underperforming regions of the world for decades to come is high. Of course, the ultimate burden for dealing with these issues and for building regional cooperation rests with the four regional powers themselves. They have the most at stake in a more stable and prosperous region, and collectively they have the capability, if not currently the will, to jointly pursue shared objectives. But the international community can play a role in helping to remove some of the impediments to cooperation these countries will face. That role consists of working toward a regional strategy in the following three ways:

1) *Do No Harm: Abandon the “Great Game”*

The future role of the international community in the Middle East cannot be accurately discussed without acknowledgement of an unpleasant reality. International powers, including the United States, bear some responsibility for the rivalry among states in the region. The Middle East has long been one of the regions of the world most heavily penetrated by outside powers. The Sykes-Picot Agreement between the French and British initially set the boundaries of several states in the region. And since then the politics of the Middle East have to a large degree reflected the divisions in the international system. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union foisted their superpower conflict onto the Middle East, polarizing the region. After the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the United States backed Iraq in its war against Iran and encouraged its regional allies to deepen their hostility toward Iran.

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Later, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to new regional power imbalances. The toppling of Saddam Hussein and the collapse of the Iraqi state as a counterweight to Iran gave Iran opportunities to project its power into the Arab world. Facing this unintended consequence of the invasion, the United States began encouraging Saudi Arabia (along with other GCC countries) to act as the main bulwark against Iran, further exacerbating historical tensions and suspicions between these two powers. The United States certainly is not alone in this regard. Russia’s role in the Middle East has to a certain degree been that of spoiler, motivated by its own interest in undermining U.S. influence rather than by any concern for regional cooperation and stability.

If the international powers are going to play a constructive role in this critical region, they need to send signals that this “great game” is over.¹² The P5+1 negotiations with Iran reflect an acknowledgement among the major powers that a zero-sum game approach produces no long-term winners, and that cooperation can yield significant mutual benefits. There seems to be recognition that without a stable and prosperous Middle East, the entire international system is likely to be fraught with economic and political risk. No longer is the Middle East only on the receiving end of international politics. Shocks and risks in the region can be globalized very quickly, as we have seen with recent terrorist attacks in Ottawa, Sydney, and Paris. If the objective is for Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey to shed old patterns of behavior, the international powers need to do the same.

But it is naive to think that an end of “great game” behavior on the part of the international powers would alone translate into cooperation among the regional powers. The power dynamics in the region need to be such that leaders conclude that confrontation is not winnable, and that the best option to avoid losing is negotiation and cooperation. This is most likely to come about in a balance-of-power system in which the only pathway to gaining security and winning is not one-upmanship, but cooperation.¹³

The international powers will inevitably play a role in the balance-of-power equation in the Middle East. The presence of the U.S. military in the Gulf alone can play a balancing role by reassuring the Saudis and other GCC countries that Washington will not abandon them or disregard their security concerns in the event of a nuclear deal with Iran. Coupled with effective diplomacy, this military presence can help compensate for real or perceived power imbalances. But in the spirit of “do no harm,” the United States must do this subtly, refraining from active involvement in the conflicts among the big four regional powers. Trying to correct a power imbalance through direct involvement runs the risk of overcompensating and inadvertently tipping the balance, possibly triggering unwanted aggression instead of cooperation. Active U.S. backing for the Saudi campaign in Yemen, which could be justified by the need to allay Saudi concerns that the power balance has tipped toward Iran, runs the risk of making matters

worse by reinforcing Iran's fears that a nuclear deal with the United States is just the first step in an attempt to subjugate it. Given the unstable power dynamics in this proxy war in Yemen, U.S. intervention could inadvertently contribute to a power imbalance, precipitating more aggression by either Iran or Saudi Arabia, thereby pushing any prospects for regional cooperation further down the road. The recent Saudi- and Egyptian-led initiative to create a new Arab League Defense Force is a more constructive mechanism for correcting a perceived regional power imbalance.¹⁴ The international community needs to recognize the current volatility in the relationship between the regional powers and refrain from actions that could jeopardize ultimate cooperation.

2) Help the Big Four Powers Build a Regional Security and Economic Framework

Advocating restraint among the international powers in the Middle East does not mean disengagement, but rather a new form of engagement. The United States and others need to shift the emphasis from on-the-ground involvement to working at the regional level with Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Egypt to develop a new security and economic framework for the Middle East. While the international community cannot own the process, it can provide good offices by helping the regional powers come up with the right institutional mechanisms for cooperation. The P5+1 arrangement for dealing with the Iranian nuclear issue could be something of a model, provided that the regional powers assume the primary roles while the international powers limit themselves to providing needed support.

The regional powers are not neophytes when it comes to cooperation within the context of institutional frameworks. Iran and Saudi Arabia are members of OPEC, while Turkey and Saudi Arabia are part of the G20. And each of the four powers is party to one or more existing regional frameworks (such as the Arab League, the GCC, the Arab Maghreb Union, or non-Arab organizations like the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), to which Iran and Turkey belong). A new regional security and economic framework would not replace any of these existing institutional arrangements. The idea instead would be for the regional powers to tap into the capacity of these existing organizations,

“The assumption is not that a regional framework will eliminate conflicts, only that it will build on common interests and provide mechanisms for more peaceful dispute resolution.”

coordinate their efforts, and perhaps reenergize older, creakier institutions to better serve the purpose of regional cooperation.

While a new overarching regional security arrangement would ultimately need to be open to all states in the region and embody norms like the sanctity of borders, given the current turmoil the big four countries would lead the process at the onset.¹⁵ The security framework's mandate should have two tracks. The first would deal with common issues related to the megatrends, such as trade, water, energy, food, climate, and counterterrorism. It would also address economic issues, such as the facilitation of intraregional trade. The second track would create working

groups for grappling with the more difficult issues tied to conflict resolution in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya. Syria would be the first priority given the scale of its humanitarian disaster. While all of the major regional powers will need to cooperate through the framework to tamp down these conflicts and push back ISIS, when it comes to post-conflict reconstruction efforts in the Arab world, Saudi Arabia (with the other GCC countries) will likely play the lead role, with help from the international community and multilateral institutions like the World Bank.

Such arrangements have worked for other regions. In fact, the Middle East is late to the regionalism game. Other regions where erstwhile adversaries have transitioned into healthy competitors through stronger regional institutions could serve as models. In Latin America (through the Rio Pact and Mercosur) and Asia (through ASEAN), region-wide economic and political integration

has occurred over the past decades, despite tensions among the member states of these organizations. Parts of Africa have become more integrated under the African Union (AU) and the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA).¹⁶ And of course in Europe former blood enemies came together after World War II under new institutional arrangements such as NATO and the European Union.

The assumption is not that a regional framework will eliminate conflicts between states, only that it will recognize and build on common interests and provide mechanisms for more peaceful dispute resolution.¹⁷ Unlike earlier regional efforts like the Baghdad Pact (later CENTO) of the 1950s, which included Great Britain and was oriented toward confronting what was perceived to be an external Communist threat, this framework would include only members from the region and be oriented more toward mitigating intraregional conflicts. The biggest security and economic challenges for the Middle East now and in the future will likely come from within the region, not from without.

Skeptics will likely assert that this kind of a broad regional framework is pie-in-the-sky. But there are several reasons why the timing is right for this to happen. First, there are few good alternatives to cooperation given the dystopian state of the Middle East today. In order to battle common foes like ISIS and find a way out of the current civil wars, the only real option is for cooperation among the four regional powers. While the obstacles may appear insuperable and should not be underestimated, it must be kept in mind that these civil wars and the rise of ISIS are as much a symptom of a toxic regional climate as they are a cause of it. While creating a healthier regional context would not be a panacea for these conflicts, it could go a long way in helping to defuse them.

Second, times of crisis can be the most opportune moments for introducing new institutional structures because at these moments awareness of the need for change is often the greatest. Out of the crucible of the current crises new arrangements have already started to emerge. A baby step in this regard was the Egypt Economic Development Conference convened in Sharm el-Sheikh in March 2015. The conference yielded \$12-15 billion in pledges from regional and

international donors, providing President Sisi the support he needs to attempt a serious development surge.¹⁸ There have been other efforts, mostly ad hoc, to cooperate in fortifying the region against ISIS. Iran nudged former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki out of power in 2014, an outcome the Saudis lauded, and both countries welcomed incoming President Haider al-Abadi.¹⁹ Also, both Iran and Saudi Arabia offered subsidies to the Lebanese Army in order to strengthen the country's defenses against ISIS. While the Lebanese declined the Iranian offer, the convergence of the two feuding powers' interests was nonetheless significant.²⁰ A broader security pact would formalize cooperation, minimizing reliance on only ad hoc measures.

Third, the prospects for an agreement between Iran and the P5+1 on the nuclear issue make this kind of arrangement more viable. While Arab angst that Iran will use its rehabilitation in the international system to more aggressively pursue regional ambitions may increase tensions in the near term, effective bilateral diplomacy coupled with reassurances from the international community should allay some of these fears and shift the attention to other pressing regional issues.

3) Role for the United States: Lead Diplomat

Any transition from chaos to stability in the Middle East will require involvement from a number of international powers and institutions. But the U.S. role in helping to create a new security framework will be pivotal due to its strong diplomatic capabilities and its power to convene. The United States will also need to take a lead role in coordinating efforts between the EU countries, Russia, China, and the four regional titans, much like it has done in the P5+1 negotiations with Iran. In playing this role, the United States needs to be careful that regional stability efforts do not lead to a new Pax Americana, but instead transition to a new "Pax Regionis," in which regional powers contribute constructively to their own security concerns and economic future.

Aside from assisting in the establishment of a regional security and economic framework, the United States should also help the four regional titans deal with their most vexing internal issues. The purpose would be to address the most

challenging effects of the megatrends that could impede cooperation. The priority should be Egypt, since among the four countries it is the most economically and politically vulnerable. While the GCC countries have thrown Egypt an economic lifeline, long-term stability will require more sustainable measures. The United States can help Egypt in its private sector development and foreign direct investment initiatives. These need to be fundamental elements of Egypt's strategy for absorbing the droves of educated youth into the workforce and creating sustainable economic growth.

“The United States needs to be careful that regional stability efforts do not lead to a new Pax Americana, but instead transition to a new ‘Pax Regionis.’”

Also, the United States should not underestimate its diplomatic capacity to foster intraregional cooperation. The United States continues to exert a strong influence on the behavior of the regional powers, as evidenced by the fact that U.S. decisions to abstain from action on critical issues rattle the region as much as U.S. decisions to intervene. For example, Saudi Arabia threatened a policy shift in 2013 due to what was perceived by Riyadh to be a U.S. failure to act on Syria.²¹ The United States' formidable diplomatic capability was also on display as it assembled a coalition of international and regional powers to fight ISIS. In the future, this diplomatic power can be repurposed to nudge the regional powers toward cooperation on issues of common interest.

The United States has much to gain by embracing a regional approach, aside from the obvious benefits that derive from a more stable Middle East. One upside to such an approach is that it provides a narrative for the Obama administration's pivot to Asia that sounds like a new form of engagement, not disengagement. Additionally, it is consistent with Obama's national security strategy of 2015, which specifies that cooperating with regional actors, rather than intervening in the region directly, is the best way to work toward long-term stability in the Middle East.²²

Conclusion

The multiple crises afflicting the Middle East have now reached a critical inflection point. The region is undergoing the proverbial perfect storm, with more states descending into civil war and a proliferation of failed states now being exploited by ISIS.

Regional cooperation led by Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey represents the best means for resolving these problems and avoiding catastrophic scenarios for the Middle East in the decades ahead.²³ But the risk that the four powers will just muddle through and not cooperate is high given the “speeding train” effects of the megatrends and the momentum of the current conflicts.²⁴

Assuming the international community, especially the United States, can rise to the occasion, it can help manage some of these risks. But this requires having a strategic vision at the level of the region and avoiding the gravitational tug of crisis politics. This will not be easy for either the international or the regional powers, but it is not an impossible feat. The current crises represent a potential opportunity to shape a better future for the region and avoid the global instability that could result from a continuation of the status quo. The possibility of a P5+1 deal with Iran creates an additional opportunity for eventual regional cooperation. If this moment is to be seized, the international community—along with Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey—needs to start laying the foundation for a better future. As crises multiply in the Middle East, time is working against the region; thus it is critical that efforts toward a regional strategy begin now.

Endnotes

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5 I thank my friend and colleague, Chester Crocker, James R. Schlesinger Professor of Strategic Studies at Georgetown University and former assistant secretary of state for African affairs. This language of “history speeding up” was a metaphor he used in our discussions.

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