



Insights 003

# **The United States and Political Islam: The Dialectic of Hegemony and Resistance**

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## About the Author

Mohammed Ayoob is University Distinguished Professor of International Relations at the Michigan State University and also the Coordinator of its Muslim Studies Program. A specialist on conflict and security in the Third World, his publications on the subject have included conceptual essays as well as case studies dealing with South Asia, the Middle East, the Arabian Gulf, and Southeast Asia. He has also researched, taught and published on the intersection of religion and politics in the Muslim world. He has been awarded fellowships and research grants from the Ford, Rockefeller, MacArthur, and MSU Foundations, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, and the East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii. He has acted as a consultant to the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change appointed by the UN Secretary General, and the Ford Foundation. He has held faculty appointments at the Australian National University and Jawaharlal Nehru University in India, and visiting appointments at Columbia, Sydney, Princeton, Oxford, and Brown Universities and at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey. He has authored, co-authored, or edited 13 books and published approximately 90 research papers and scholarly articles in leading journals such as *World Politics*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *International Studies Review*, *Foreign Policy*, *International Affairs*, *International Journal*, *Survival*, *Orbis*, *Asian Survey*, *World Policy Journal*, *Global Governance*, *Alternatives*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Washington Quarterly*, *Middle East Policy*, *International Journal of Human Rights*, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, and chapters in edited volumes. His books include *The Third World Security Predicament: State Making, Regional Conflict, and the International System* (Lynne Rienner, 1995), *India and Southeast Asia: Indian Perceptions and Policies* (Routledge, 1990) and *The Politics of Islamic Reassertion* (St. Martins, 1981). His latest books *The Many Faces of Political Islam* (University of Michigan Press and National University of Singapore Press, 2008) and *Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia: Wahhabism and the State* (Lynne Rienner, 2009).

This paper summarizes the major arguments of his current project that is likely to form his next book.

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# THE UNITED STATES AND POLITICAL ISLAM: THE DIALECTIC OF HEGEMONY AND RESISTANCE

MOHAMMED AYOOB\*

In his speech to the Muslim world from Cairo on 4 June 2009, President Obama declared ‘We meet at a time of tension between the United States and the Muslims around the world – tension rooted in historical forces that go beyond any current policy debate.’<sup>1</sup> This statement while true is only partially so. There are obviously historical forces that affect many Muslims’ perception of the West and, therefore, of the United States and vice-versa. Some of them will be referred to later in the paper. But it is equally if not more true that the structures of power in the international system as well as specific American policies contribute enormously to this tension.

The current distribution of power, which I have described elsewhere as the ‘unipolar concert,’ is heavily skewed in favor of the group of industrialized Western countries led by the United States.<sup>2</sup> This produces a dialectical relationship between hegemony and resistance that is most salient in the relationship between the United States and the Muslim world. American policies toward issues considered important by most politically conscious Muslims are a function to a substantial extent of the current distribution of power that encourages a degree of insensitivity on Washington’s part toward the Muslim world’s concerns. Political Islam, namely, political activity that draws upon Islamic precepts, Islamic history, Islamic vocabulary, and presumed Islamic models of governance currently embodies the idea of resistance to hegemony far more than any other ideology in the Muslim world and even beyond.<sup>3</sup>

I introduced the term concert in conjunction with unipolar to make the point that American hegemony is based on a consensus arrived at by most of the powerful actors in the international system that see great advantages in the United States playing a hegemonic role. It indicates that the United States sits atop a concert consisting largely of Western industrialized nations that share with it the fundamental objective of preserving northern hegemony, in all its multiple dimensions, within the international system. The concert is termed unipolar because American capabilities, especially in the military sphere, far surpass those of the other members of the concert. This means that the security agenda of the concert is largely determined by the United States since it provides most of the muscle power that can be used to achieve the concert’s objectives.

The operation of the unipolar concert demonstrates not only the basic unity of objectives of the industrialized countries of the North but also that the North-South divide is very much alive and kicking and no amount of journalistic and pseudo-academic concentration on issues that divide the US from Europe à la Robert Kagan (“Europeans are from Venice, Americans from Mars”) can detract from the importance of that rift, which is determined by the structure of power in the international system.<sup>4</sup> Intra-concert differences on matters of strategy and tactics pale into insignificance in the face of the North-South divide.

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The dismemberment of the Soviet Union and the consequent discrediting of the socialist ideology have provided a free run for the unipolar concert both in terms of ideological hegemony and its ability to intervene in less powerful states without fear of negative consequences. As it happens, currently the only ideology capable of mobilizing substantial segments of the South's population to resist this material and ideological hegemony is political Islam. This does not mean that political Islam is a monolith. I have published an entire book refuting this charge and demonstrating that diverse manifestations of political activities in the name of Islam are primarily determined by context-specific variables despite the similarities they may possess in terms of the vocabulary they use and the common pool of ideas they draw from.<sup>5</sup>

However, there is an anti-hegemonic aspect of political Islam that runs through many of its diverse manifestations. This dimension also explains the role of several mainstream Islamist movements and groups as the primary opponents in their countries of authoritarian regimes, several of whom are clients or allies of the global concert and/or of the hegemon. There are multiple factors that help explain why political Islam is especially prone to taking anti-hegemonic positions and resisting Western domination. These range from the historical antecedents of Islamist movements that have shaped their worldviews, the nature of regimes in several Muslim countries and their dependent relationship with global centers of power, and trajectories of American policy toward the Muslim world in general and the Middle East in particular. The complex interplay among these variables tends to strengthen the anti-hegemonic strand in Islamist political activity as well as adds to its standing and popularity among diverse Muslim populations.

The antecedents of what we call political Islam today can be traced to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Muslim world began to feel the full weight of the European onslaught. Islamist political activity in the form we know it today is, therefore, a modern phenomenon. It is as much a creation of modernity as it is a reaction to it. In the thousand years of Muslim history before the advent of European colonial power when Muslims ruled over Muslims it was rarely that Islam was used as a political tool to challenge temporal authority.<sup>6</sup> The ulama were generally politically quietist as long as temporal rulers met the minimum standards of successfully defending the lands of Islam and non-interference in the practice of religion by their subjects. The state was minimalist in character and largely left civil society alone as long as subjects paid their taxes and did not threaten rebellion. There was basically a policy of live and let live between temporal and religious authorities and when wars occurred they were primarily among princes and warlords engaged in expanding their territories at the expense of their neighbors. Political mobilization at the popular level, which was inherent in the message that the Prophet preached during his lifetime, became very much the exception under dynastic rule.

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European colonialism drastically changed the nature of political authority in the Muslim world by putting non-Muslims in control of Muslim lands either directly or indirectly. Simultaneously, increasing mass literacy and the introduction of the printing press provided lay Muslim scholars and activists with instruments capable of challenging the religious authority of the ulama (the religious scholars) thus leading to a proto-reformation that introduced scriptural literalism and the priesthood of the individual – essential components of the Reformation in Europe – into the Islamic world.<sup>7</sup> It also meant that lay Muslim activists could now interpret Islamic scriptures and use Quranic vocabulary to mobilize populations for political ends. As a result of these simultaneous transformations, resistance to colonial domination took on the form of ‘jihad’ or war in defense of Islam.<sup>8</sup> Calls for proto-nationalist resistance were often couched in Islamic terminology. The faithful were called to resist colonial encroachment and to overthrow European domination as part of their individual and collective Islamic duty to prevent Islamic lands and Muslim peoples from falling under the rule of the infidel. Consequently, anti-colonial resistance became the quintessential jihad in modern times. This notion of jihad has been carried over into the 21<sup>st</sup> century now redefined as resistance to the hegemony of, and domination by, non-Muslim great powers –the ‘taghut’ (arrogant ones rebelling against God) to use the terminology of the Iranian revolution.

Even the militantly secular Ataturk led a ‘jihad’ against the carving up of Anatolia by European powers at the end of World War I. At Mustafa Kemal’s behest, the mufti of Ankara issued a fatwa endorsed by 152 other muftis in Anatolia that Kemal’s decision to resist the vivisection of Anatolia in defiance of the wishes of the Caliph (who had signed the treaty with the Allies ceding large parts of what later became Turkey to Greeks, Armenians, Italians, and French) was legitimate in Islamic terms because the Caliph himself was under foreign duress. In 1921 the Grand National Assembly honored Mustafa Kemal with the title of ‘ghazi’ (victorious warrior in the way of God) years before he was proclaimed Ataturk (father of the Turks).<sup>9</sup> The Turkish war, or should I say jihad, for independence, belonged to a long line of such jihads in diverse parts of the Muslim world that had preceded it – in Algeria, Libya, Sudan, Somalia, India, and the Dutch East Indies among other places. Unfortunately, unlike in Anatolia most of them failed in their objective to drive out the invader from Muslim soil.

Political Islam, as an ideology of popular mobilization, is the heir to these proto-nationalist resistance movements and to its ideologues, Jamal Al-din Al-Afghani the most prominent amongst them. Al-Afghani was a pioneer in terms of using the vocabulary of Islam in order to mobilize Muslim populations against colonial domination. He found no contradiction between the twin forces of nationalism and pan-Islam in Muslim countries colonized by European powers. He saw them as two sides of the same coin that could be employed simultaneously as tools of resistance against European domination demonstrating the paradoxical compatibility of nationalism and pan-Islam in the Muslim world.<sup>10</sup>

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Contemporary manifestations of political Islam are heirs to this tradition of combining nationalist agendas with Islamic ones, or rather presenting national goals as Islamic, in their attempt to mobilize Muslim populations to resist both domestic autocracies and global hegemony. The Muslim Brotherhood founded in 1928 successfully combined nationalist and Islamic appeals to become a major political force in Egypt.<sup>11</sup> Currently, Hamas, an offshoot of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, has achieved similar success in occupied Palestine.<sup>12</sup> However, it was the Iranian revolution – a classic case of people going out into the streets and overthrowing an unpopular regime – that provided the prime example of the successful combination of Islam and nationalism for popular mobilization.<sup>13</sup>

A second variable that has strengthened and continues to strengthen the anti-hegemonic strand in political Islam is the nature of several Muslim regimes and their past and present links with the global centers of power, especially the United States. While several major Muslim countries, such as Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Bangladesh, have adopted, and in the case of Turkey consolidated, democratic systems to various degrees, several others, notably those in the Arab world and Central Asia, continue to suffer from huge democratic deficits.<sup>14</sup> The authoritarian nature of many Muslim regimes, especially in the broader Middle East, provides crucial political space for the expansion of Islamist political activity. Closed political systems and authoritarian regimes are standing invitations to the growth in the popularity of Islamist political formations. They do so because they stifle political debate and effectively suppress all secular opposition.

However, even the most efficient and repressive regimes are unable to fully suppress opposition expressed through the religious idiom because of the vocabulary it uses and the institutions it can utilize. Publishing houses that print religious literature, mosques and affiliated institutions that subtly disseminate Islamist propaganda, and religiously endowed charitable organizations sympathetic to Islamist causes can be used to send out political messages dressed up in religious garb and to build support for Islamist political activity.<sup>15</sup>

The close relationship between several authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world, such as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, now increasingly Libya, the Gulf sheikhdoms, several of the ‘stans’ and many others, with the United States and its allies helps create the popular impression that Islamist groupings are the principal if not the only viable opponents both of domestic authoritarianism and American hegemony thus adding to their public standing. The latter variable, namely, American hegemony, creates dynamics of its own. It is related not only to the historical memories of past European domination (the ‘resurrection of empire’ to use Rashid Khalidi’s terminology)<sup>16</sup> but also the current distribution of power in the international system. Above all it is related to the content of American policies that create and augment negative Muslim perceptions of the United States.<sup>17</sup>

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The general trajectory of American policies often augments the anti-hegemonic trend in the Muslim world and adds to the popularity of Islamist forces. Above all, it is the unqualified and unquestioning American support to Israel, especially to its policy of continued occupation and colonization of Palestinian lands conquered in 1967, which demonstrates to politically conscious Muslims that the United States is committed to treating Muslims and Arabs not only with insensitivity but with utter contempt. The American policy of vetoing or threatening to veto UN Security Council resolutions condemning Israeli policies provides proof beyond doubt to most Muslims of American-Israeli collusion to dominate the Muslim Middle East politically and militarily. The American stance in the UN on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006 and the disproportionate casualties and destruction it caused in that country as well as the massive collective punishment inflicted on the population of Gaza by Israel in 2008 has further augmented the negative American perception in the Muslim world.<sup>18</sup>

The United States has insisted that Middle Eastern countries, including Iraq, Iran, Sudan and Lebanon, abide by UN Security Council resolutions. Simultaneously, it has supported repeated Israeli defiance and violation of a much larger number of resolutions passed by the same body and blocked the passage of an equal or larger number of resolutions condemning Israeli actions, including violations of the Fourth Geneva Convention on the treatment of occupied populations and territories. This disjunction in the American approach to the sanctity of Security Council resolutions strengthens the feeling in the Muslim world that the United States unabashedly uses double standards when it comes to Israeli defiance of international opinion and persistent violation of international law. American insistence that Iran stop its uranium enrichment program while condoning, in fact conniving at, Israeli possession of nuclear weapons and sophisticated delivery systems augments the feeling among most Muslims and others that American policy in the Middle East is largely driven by Israeli concerns.<sup>19</sup>

The American occupation of Iraq further fuelled Muslim anger against the United States since it was widely seen as a ploy to fragment a major Muslim country, to control the oil wealth of the Middle East, and to consolidate Israeli hegemony in the region. It was perceived by many Muslims as a deliberate Western ploy to dismember and debilitate one of the major Arab powers potentially capable of acting as a balancer to Israel in the Middle East.<sup>20</sup> The post-Iraq war rhetoric in the United States and Israel targeting Syria and more particularly Iran is seen as the continuation of this policy of eliminating all Muslim countries capable of standing up to Israel and challenging its American-supported military hegemony in the Middle East.

The high level of popular resentment against the United States in Muslim countries redounds to the benefit of Islamist political formations. This is the case because several of the authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world, including those ruling Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and several others are allies or clients of the United States, which guarantees their security. They, therefore, dare not oppose except very feebly American policies in the Muslim world in general and the Middle East in particular for fear that the United States may withdraw its support to them with consequences likely to be deleterious for such regimes.

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Islamists, on the other hand, have no compunction in most cases in opposing American policies vocally and virulently and in rebuking Muslim regimes for collaborating with the United States to promote the latter's designs seen as anti-Muslim by large segments of populations in many Muslim countries. This strengthens the Islamists' political appeal because they articulate opinions widely held by Muslim populations around the world. They, therefore, come to be seen as the primary vehicle for the expression of most Muslims' genuine grievances both domestically and internationally. It gives the appearance of Islamists being larger than life size within Muslim societies because, in stark contrast to Muslim regimes, they speak to the concerns of large numbers of Muslims, Islamists and non-Islamists alike.<sup>21</sup>

This dialectic between American hegemony as represented by American policies toward the Muslim world, especially the Middle East, and political Islam as represented by movements and political formations opposing both American hegemony and its local clients is likely to have major impact on the future political trajectory of the Muslim world, particularly the Middle East. As I have stated earlier, in a number of Muslim majority countries Islamist movements and parties are principal opponents of oppressive and authoritarian regimes, several of whom are allied with the United States. Consequently, they appear as the main alternatives to unpopular governments if and when regime change occurs in these countries. They have increasingly become the leading resistance movements as well in Palestine and Lebanon in particular. In many instances they have either engaged in open rebellion or been pushed underground by regime repression. This is especially the case in Central and Southwest Asia. In Afghanistan, once again in the guise of the Taliban, they have become the leading movement resisting the country being drawn into America's orbit. In Pakistan the extremists among them pose a challenge to the integrity of the state as well as a major threat to the American-supported regime.<sup>22</sup> The dialectics of hegemony and resistance thus go on in crucial parts of the Muslim world.

Given the widely perceived zero-sum nature of the relationship between the West in general and America in particular on the one hand and political Islam on the other, stability in the Muslim world cannot be attained until the relationship between the two is altered from one of hostility to one of co-existence if not cooperation. However, in order for this to happen major and fundamental changes in American policy are required. It is not just a question of reassessment but also of reformulation of America's policies toward the Muslim world. The most important reformulations will have to come in the arenas of relations with authoritarian regimes, the attitude toward Iran, and, above all, the approach to the Palestinian issue – the three issues that affect Muslim perceptions of the United States most and help Islamist organizations gain greater popularity. While President Obama's Cairo speech of 4 June 2009, gives some hope that American policy may undergo a certain amount of reformulation, this process must move beyond rhetoric and into the sphere of action if it is to carry credibility among Muslim populations.

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The first concrete change will require Washington not merely to distance itself from authoritarian and unpopular regimes ranging from Egypt to Uzbekistan but also to put visible pressure on them to reform and liberalize. The second reformulation will require acknowledgment of Iran's pivotal role in the Gulf and the Middle East and recognition of the fact that its nuclear aspirations must be addressed as a part of the process of denuclearization of the entire region. Singling out Iran for chastisement and punishment because of its presumed attempts to acquire nuclear weapons capability is unlikely to work and will turn out to be counterproductive.

The third major change in American policy will require above all the repudiation of the dominant narrative in the United States regarding the Palestine-Israel conflict. This will have to go beyond the mere acknowledgement that the Palestinians' plight was 'intolerable' as President Obama did in his Cairo speech coupling this with Israel's need for security to advocate a two-state solution.<sup>23</sup> The reformulation of American policy toward the Palestine-Israel conflict must entail two fundamental changes in American formulations if it is to cut ice with Muslim public opinion. First, there is need for recognition of the historic wrong inflicted on the Palestinian people as a result of the demographic transformation of Palestine under British rule, the subsequent creation of Israel, and the expulsion of more than half of the Palestinian population from their homes in 1948. The establishment and expansion of Jewish settlements on the West Bank is merely the latest scene in the same play that began with the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the installation of British rule in Palestine after the Ottoman defeat in World War I. The current dominant narrative in the United States about Palestine-Israel either deliberately or unwittingly totally disregards this history. It, therefore, defines aggression and victimhood in a particularly distorted fashion. This is in need of urgent correction by putting the historical record straight.

Secondly, a fundamental perceptual change is required in policy-making circles in the United States that characterizes the conflict not as the Palestinian problem but the problem of Israel in the heart of the Muslim and Arab Middle East. This will put the issue in proper perspective and allow policy makers to fashion policies toward the Middle East in keeping with broader American strategic interests in the region. No amount of Presidential rhetoric, such as that in Cairo in June 2009, about a two-state solution will be able to bring about a just solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict in the absence of these two fundamental changes in the world view of American policy makers engaged in dealing with that conflict and in shaping America's relations with the Muslim world.

These are three issues that give Islamists a great deal of momentum in the Muslim world because their stance on these issues coincides with sentiment at the popular level. The United States can achieve two things by visibly changing its stance on these issues. First, it can take some of the wind out of Islamist sails by removing the major sources of grievance in the Muslim world that give them traction. Second, it can at the same time send the message to Islamist movements and parties that there is no fundamental contradiction between American interests and those of the Muslim world and that the United States' unparalleled power will not necessarily be used in ways detrimental to Muslim interests. This is likely to considerably mellow many devotees of political Islam and make them rethink their own attitude toward the United States and possibly move away from the current confrontational model that informs many of their actions. Absent such reformulation of American policy, the current dialectic between hegemony and resistance is likely to continue in many parts of the Muslim world.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> 'Text: Obama's Speech in Cairo', *New York Times*, 4 June 2009, Retrieved on 8 June 2009 from <[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html?\\_r=1&scp=1&sq=obama%27s%20speech%20in%20cairo&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=obama%27s%20speech%20in%20cairo&st=cse)>.
- <sup>2</sup> Ayoob, M and Zierler, M., 'The Unipolar Concert: The North-South Divide Trumps Transatlantic Differences', *World Policy Journal*, Volume 22 No. 1, 2005, pp. 31-42.
- <sup>3</sup> Ayoob, M., 'Challenging Hegemony: Political Islam and the North-South Divide', *International Studies Review*, Volume 9 No. 4, 2007, pp. 629-643.
- <sup>4</sup> Kagan, R., *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order*, New York, NY, Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.
- <sup>5</sup> Ayoob, M., *The Many Faces of Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Muslim World*, Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan Press, 2008.
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- <sup>12</sup> Gunning, J., *Hamas in Politics: Democracy, Religion, Violence*, New York, NY, Columbia University Press, 2008.
- <sup>13</sup> Keddie, N., *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2003.
- <sup>14</sup> Ottaway, M. and Choucair-Vizoso, J., (eds.), *Beyond the Façade: Political Reform in the Arab World*, Washington, DC, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008.
- <sup>15</sup> Ayoob, M., 'Political Islam: Image and Reality', *World Policy Journal*, Volume 21 No. 3, 2004, pp. 1-14.
- <sup>16</sup> Khalidi, R., *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America's Perilous Path in the Middle East*, Boston, MA, Beacon Press, 2004.
- <sup>17</sup> The low popularity enjoyed by the United States in Muslim countries is demonstrated in public opinion polls such as the *2008 Annual Arab Public Opinion Poll* accessed on the web at <<http://sadat.umd.edu/surveys/index.htm>> on 13 February 2009.
- <sup>18</sup> The latest example of Washington's attempt to diminish the impact of a UN Security Council resolution opposed by Israel was the last minute abstention under Israeli pressure in January 2009 on a resolution calling for an end to the fighting in Gaza. What made this appear particularly egregious was the fact that US Secretary of State Rice had participated in the drafting of the resolution that was deemed acceptable to the United States until a call from the Israeli Prime Minister to President George W. Bush forced Rice to change her vote. For details, see Borger, J. and Black, I., 'US Abstention Stuns Security Council', *Guardian*, 10 January 2009, Retrieved on 8 June 2009 from the web at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jan/10/un-gaza-resolution-us-abstention>>.
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- <sup>21</sup> Ayoob, M. 'The Future of Political Islam: The Importance of External Variables', *International Affairs*, Volume 81 No. 5, 2005, pp. 951-961.
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- <sup>23</sup> 'Text: Obama's Speech in Cairo', *New York Times*, 4 June 2009, Retrieved on 8 June 2009 from <[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html?\\_r=1&scp=1&sq=obama%27s%20speech%20in%20cairo&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=obama%27s%20speech%20in%20cairo&st=cse)>.



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