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Reports

The Syrian Revolution and the Palestinian Refugees in Syria: Realities and risks



Al Jazeera Centre for Studies
Tel: +974-44663454
jcforstudies@aljazeera.net
<http://studies.aljazeera.net>

Magda Qandil*

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Introduction

This paper examines the impact of the on-going revolution in Syria on the local Palestinian refugee population. It presents the positioning of a growing segment of the Palestinian youth on the side of the revolution and contrasts it with that of the Palestinian factions on the side of the regime. It investigates the ways in which Palestinians came to be perceived by both the Syrian opposition and the regime. Eventually the paper sheds some light on possible future developments and proposes risk scenarios.

The examined developments are on-going and dynamic, which has posed a great challenge in obtaining a clear understanding of the situation and the direction it is heading in. Further challenge has been posed by limited access to sources of information due to the situation in Syria, as well as difficulty in verifying the information obtained. The majority of the accounts were gathered through interviews with Palestinians from Syria and Syrians conducted on two separate visits to Syria (August 2011, November 2011) and two separate visits to Lebanon (August 2011 and February-March 2012), and supplemented later through constant contact with both Palestinian and Syrian activists. The names of most of the interviewees were withheld on their request for protection reasons. Available (scarce) media reports on the topic were accessed, and academic literature was looked at in relation to the historical background of Syria-Palestinian relations.

Background

The Palestinian refugee population, constituting just over two per cent of the whole population of Syria, has enjoyed close-to-equal rights with Syrian nationals. Syria has been believed to exercise the best approach among Arab countries towards its Palestinian refugee population by neither naturalizing it (Jordan), nor depriving it of basic social and civil rights (Lebanon). From the very beginning Syria offered them material and moral support. In terms of legal status, ownership of property, travel, and pension rights of Palestinian refugees, practically the same procedures as for nationals usually applied. "Various laws (...) effectively placed the refugees on equal footing with Syrian nationals with respect to civil service employment and the practice of certain professions such as notaries, doctors, and lawyers"¹. This equal footing does not extend, however, to political rights as Palestinians have been effectively excluded from the Syrian political sphere. For over 60 years, services to the refugee population has been provided by both the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the Syrian government through its General Administration for Palestine Arab Refugees (GAPAR), established in 1950 as part of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

Most of the 85,000-100,000 Palestine refugees who fled to Syria in 1948 came from the north of Palestine. In 1967, when Israel occupied the Golan Heights, a further displacement of Palestinian refugees took place in other parts of Syria. In the 1980s a few thousand refugees fleeing Lebanon, during the country's civil war, also took refuge in Syria. Currently, there are about 500,000 Palestinians in Syria (495,970 in 2010, according to UNRWA's latest statistics) living in ten official camps (Daraa; Hama; Homs; Damascus: Jaramana, Qabr Essit, Sbeineh, Khan Dunoun and Khan Eshieh; Aleppo: Neirab; Hasakeh) and four unofficial camps (Damascus: Yarmouk and Huseyniye; Aleppo: Ein el-Tal/Handarat; Latakia). The Al-Hol camp, situated outside Hasakeh in north-eastern Syria, was the only place that Palestinians from Iraq were allowed access in Syria after being refused regular entry at the border.

The relatively fair treatment of Palestinian refugees inside Syria did not hinder the country's previous long-term president Hafez al-Asad from systematically using the Palestinian resistance as a political tool and ensuring that no independent Palestinian power centre emerged in the region, as it could have challenged his hegemonic position. The Syrian leader, in his attempts to control the Palestinian political leadership, instigated divisions and created its own Palestinian proxies, as well as backed assaults on

¹ Sayigh, Y. (1997) 'Armed Struggle and the Search for State. The Palestinian National Movement, 1949-1993', p. 39

Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon during the country's civil war (Tel al-Zatar massacre 1976, PLO Tripoli defeat 1983, War of the Camps 1985-89). His ambition of being the regional preeminent figure was not to be reconciled with the PLO's strive for independence of Palestinian decision-making from external influence (*al-qarar al-philastini al-mustaqil*)². In recent years, Palestinian parties and factions' presence in Syria has been based on the condition of their loyalty and de facto dependence from the Syrian regime.

During the one-year old Syrian revolution the Palestinian camps were never directly attacked, however they suffered as part of broader invasions on the cities in which they are situated. When the Syrian regime was shelling the Ramel district of Latakia, in August 2011, the local camp Al-Ramel Al-Philistini was hit. Dozens of Palestinians were killed, while thousands became displaced. Similarly, inhabitants of the A'ideen camp in Homs suffered in February 2012, when the city was under severe invasion. Several camp inhabitants were killed (seven men from two families are reported to be killed in a massacre), while many were displaced³. The reported overall number of Palestinians killed in the Syrian revolution was 61 at the end of March⁴.

In the last weeks and days, further dangerous developments occurred. The reportedly 4,500-soldiers strong⁵ Palestinian Liberation Army - first established as the armed wing of the PLO, but later integrated under Syrian military command and in which Palestinian recruits serve - is being hit by a wave of assassinations of its top personnel⁶. The official PLA's statement blames "armed groups", using the same rhetoric as the Syrian regime does toward its opponents, while the rebel armed groups, so called Free Syrian Army, distanced themselves in a statement from these assassinations⁷.

Palestinians vis-à-vis the Syrian revolution

From its very start, the year-old revolution in Syria drew in young Palestinians, who joined the demonstrations in Syrian cities, supporting it through documentation and media work, as well as by organising aid delivery. Before the revolution, Palestinian political and civil activism in Syria was usually limited to affairs of direct relation to Palestine's liberation and preservation of their right of return. They would get mobilised around events taking place in Palestine - e.g. Israel's invasion on Gaza 2008-2009, Palestinian prisoners exchange, Yasser Arafat's death anniversaries. These events - distant and with almost no influence on their daily realities - would make them rally around the flag and awake them politically. They would not be moved to the streets by the internal situation in Syria, ruled for over 40 years by Al-Asad family, and neither would Syrians themselves.

All this changed in March 2011, when new developments in the country started turning some of the Palestinian youth into activists for the Syrian cause that they now identified with. They would join the demonstrations outside the camps, provide relief services to wounded Syrians and in some cases organize secret field hospitals and "safe houses" in the camps - at this stage still free from regime policing. This work would be done in secret and without publicity, while keeping a neutral face, as the regime has always requested that Palestinians as a "guest population" do not interfere in the Syrian affairs. However, as reported by a number of Palestinian activists⁸, the intention to stay officially neutral changed, particularly in the aftermath of the 5-6 June 2011 events in Yarmouk camp.

5-6 June events: Neutrality no longer an option

² Khalidi, R. (1984) "The Assad Regime and the Palestinian Resistance" *Arab Quarterly*, Vol. 6, no 4

³ Article by Kamal Husein as published on "Al-Hayat" Facebook on 26 March 2012
https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=324727504258310

⁴ <http://syriansshuhada.com/default.asp?a=st&st=12>

⁵ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/pla.htm>

⁶ Two high-ranking officers, Abdel Naser al-Maqari and Rida Khadra, from PLA were targeted on the 1st March and died in result, while another assassination attempt took place on 13 March.

⁷ Article by Kamal Husein as published on "Al-Hayat" Facebook on 26 March 2012
https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=324727504258310

⁸ Interviews on 14 August, 15 November, 21 February, 23 February, 8 March

In the run-up to 5 June Al-Naksa anniversary, a public campaign encouraging young Palestinians to take part in a march to Palestine took place; this campaign was echoing the developments of 15 May Nakba march, when a few young Palestinians crossed into the Israeli occupied Golan Heights. The 5 June initiative, according to a number of Palestinians activists, was promoted by supporters of the Syrian regime the PFLP-GC (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command) and a self-proclaimed "Palestinian youth leader", Yasser Qashlaq. In response, Palestinian anti-regime activists took a counter-initiative. They set up a tent next to Al-Wasim mosque, a central point in Yarmouk camp, and gathered the camp community to discuss the 5 June initiative. Many reportedly did not trust the 5 June project especially since, after their experience on 15 May, they had come to realize that the Golan border area was accessible, contrary to what they have been told for years. "In the military college, we were taught that there were ten lines of different land mines and fortifications [between the Syrian and Israeli controlled parts of Golan]. It was also part of popular belief that no one can step there, and now all of the sudden the regime allows us to march there, and indeed the famous ten lines do not exist. It makes you realize that you were fed lies for all these years, and that there are many other lies that you need to deconstruct", a young Palestinian camp inhabitant explained⁹.

Reportedly, a consensus was reached by most of the parties and camp inhabitants that the 5 June initiative should be abolished, and that the real aim was different from the stated one. Nonetheless, the tent-forum was removed by the PFLP-GC and its organizers were persecuted, with many arrested. On 5 June "buses destined for Golan were brought to Yarmouk and youth encouraged to go". The outcome was truly tragic: Palestinian youth, told to march towards Palestine, were met by Israeli gunfire. Thirty-two, including a Syrian girl, were killed. The following day, 6 June, the bodies were returned and buried in Yarmouk in the new Martyrs Cemetery. From the funerals, angry camp inhabitants went to the PFLP-GC's office – Khalsa. The crowd blamed the regime and its Palestinian proxy for trading their children's blood cheap. They set fire to the building. The PFLP-GC responded by shooting, and at least another ten were killed, while dozens were wounded. The fighting at Khalsa lasted for several hours, and even though the PFLP-GC had from the very start asked for Syrian reinforcements, they were only sent after three hours. "People were totally mad. They were not armed, but neither afraid of dying. The only thing that mattered was to punish those who abused them and their children. I took part in many demonstrations across Syria, but I have never seen such a thing", reported a Syrian activist¹⁰, who was present there.

"After, what happened those days, I understood that it was no longer possible to stay neutral on the surface and try to help the Syrians quietly", one of the Palestinian activists recounted¹¹. "It became clear to me that we are being used and played with, so we could no longer stay neutral. I became involved in the Syrian uprising", said another Palestinian activist¹², now in exile.

The forms of participation

Those Palestinians who wanted to take part in Syrian demonstrations against the regime would do so by joining them in the areas outside the camps. It was only recently, in February this year, that regular demonstrations started in Yarmouk camp. They are usually short lived, lasting from 10 to a maximum of 30 minutes. According to some accounts, they mainly express support and solidarity with the besieged Syrian cities, and call for Palestinian-Syrian unity ("*Wahad wahad wahad, Philistini Suri wahad*"), but they steer away from openly opposing the Syrian regime. The most famous Arab Spring chant "People want to topple the regime" is usually addressed at the PFLP-GC and other pro-regime factions.

There are a number of Palestinian activists, almost all exiled now, who have been involved in documenting Syrian regime atrocities and in media work. They reportedly filmed videos during demonstrations, recorded interviews with ex-prisoners and families

⁹ Interview on 25 August 2011

¹⁰ Interview on 4 March 2012

¹¹ Interview on 14 August 2011

¹² Interview on 23 February 2012

of martyrs and documented human rights violations. They delivered the gathered material - in person or via the internet - to international human rights organizations, mainly those present in Lebanon, as well as to international media.

From the beginning of the Syrian revolution, Palestinian camps served at times as safe havens for the wounded and displaced. According to one account¹³ Palestinians from Daraa camp provided relief to wounded Syrians when the city was under invasion. Similar, unconfirmed accounts came out of Homs, where Palestinians were apparently organizing relief and hideouts for wounded Syrians in the A'ideen Camp, situated just next to the Baba Amro district of Homs. Currently, according to a local relief activist account¹⁴, there are approximately 200 displaced families from Homs, both Syrian and Palestinian, who took refuge in Yarmouk. According to the same account, they receive no aid from international bodies. The same source claims that the only support is delivered by a relief committee set up by local Palestinians, who are providing the displaced with free housing, food and even petty cash from their own means. Reportedly two persons from the committee were arrested by Syrian security for their relief activity.

New identity

Many of the young Palestinian activists reported that for the first time in their life they felt not only Palestinian, but also strongly Syrian. Before their involvement in the Syrian revolution, their Palestinian identity was often constructed in opposition to the Syrian identity. For example, the Yarmouk youth would make comparisons between themselves *shabab al-mukhayyam* (the guys of the camp) and *shwam* (the original Damascene population), contrasting the latter's perceived softness with toughness of someone who grew up in the rough conditions of a camp. "This is the first time we feel Syrian," explained one of the activists,¹⁵ in stark contradiction to what many of his peers used to say only a year earlier. "This intifada is about the whole of Syria, as this country is holding Syrians and Palestinians". The word intifada is usually associated with the Palestinian struggle, but it has now gained new currency, in reference to the Syrian revolution. "It is our duty to return something to this country".

Palestinian factions vis-à-vis the regime

The anti-regime, pro-revolution stance of Palestinian activists was met with pro-regime Palestinian factions attempting to crush them. The Palestinian camps in Syria are now reportedly under the control of the Syrian regime's main Palestinian proxy, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC). It polices the camps and suppresses anti-regime protests and any expression of dissent. Other Palestinian factions strive not to take any position. The only party to partially break up with the regime has been Hamas, whose political leadership left Syria.

PFLP-GC, Fatah al-Intifada, Sa'iqa

The PFLP-GC (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command), the organization, which came into being in 1968 as a Syrian-backed splinter group from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) of George Habash, is now acting as an extension of the Syrian regime inside the Palestinian camps. "The PFLP-GC remains at the head of the pro-regime forces. [It] has deployed all of its available capacities in support of the regime. (...) [It] holds night patrols usually between 11pm and 4am, which are intended to thwart any peaceful Palestinian movement in support of the Syrian rebels"¹⁶. The PFLP-GC, **as claimed by interviewees**, is being supported by other regime's creations under its command: Fatah al-Intifada – born, in 1983 with Syrian support, of defectors from Yasser Arafat's Fatah, and Sa'iqa – the Palestinian branch of the Ba'ath Party. These three factions, as well as - **according to some of the accounts**

¹³ Interview on 29 February 2012

¹⁴ Interview on 8 March 2012; Also: article by Kamal Husein as published on "Al-Hayat" Facebook on 26 March 2012 https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=324727504258310

¹⁵ Interview on 14 August 2011 and 15 November 2011

¹⁶ Article by Nabil Kassir published in "Al-Hayat" on 14 February 2012

<http://www.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/362065>

<http://www.al-monitor.com/cms/contents/articles/politics/2012/02/palestinian-refugees-in-syrian-c.html>

- the recently created Palestinian *shabbiha* (thugs) recruited from within the camp population; suppress demonstrations and other forms of dissent mainly in Yarmouk, but also in other camps.

PFLP, DFLP, Fatah

According to some of the accounts, which cannot be independently verified, other Palestinian parties of importance among the Palestinian population in Syria, i.e. Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) are said by the Palestinian anti-regime activists to be subordinate to the regime and to cooperate with it, though not to the same degree as the PFLP-GC. None of them was granted power in the camps by the regime, but it is implicit that they might take orders from the regime, as they would otherwise not be able to operate on Syrian territory. According to one account¹⁷, the head of PFLP in Syria, Maher Taher, expressed support for the Syrian regime on Syrian national media on several occasions in the last year. According to another account¹⁸, both PFLP and DFLP cooperation with the regime includes providing information to the regime upon its request. According to the same account, also Fatah (Abu Ammar), which has a very small and suppressed but somehow tolerated presence in Syria, is now being pushed into cooperation with the regime in terms of providing information. There is no possibility to independently verify these claims, but the current conditions in Syria seem to indicate that these accounts could be feasible.

There is also an important distinction to be made between individual members and parties' leaderships. Many members, mainly from Fatah, PFLP and DFLP, participate in the Syrian intifada as they have come to call it, in opposition to their parties' leadership's stance, but without leaving the party ranks. The parties are reported not to be able to control them. It has been said that the individual members' revolutionary activity has now been picked up on by the Syrian security, and that this has been the reason behind the arrest campaign that occurred this month (March 2012) in the camps. The arrest campaign has been testified of by some Palestinian media outside of Syria¹⁹: "Syrian security forces have detained a number of Fatah members (...)", reported Bethlehem-based Ma'an News Agency. The same wire adds: "Sources in Damascus say Syrian security forces threatened to raid the Yarmouk refugee camp due to Fatah's alleged support of demonstrations against Syrian leader Bashar Assad".

Hamas

The only party to partially break up with the regime has been Hamas. The Islamic Resistance Movement's political leadership headed by Khaled Misha'l left Syria at the end of January. Those who left include top and mid-rank leaders originally not from Syria. Those who stayed are Hamas members and leaders born in Syria. Hamas reportedly pays their salaries, which is of importance in the current situation characterised by the lack of work and rising life costs in Syria.

According to a statement of the Deputy Head of Hamas' Political Bureau, Musa Abu Marzuq, from 27 February²⁰, the leadership of the movement had left Syria as it rejects "the security solution" (referring to the methods employed by the Syrian regime toward the uprising) and "respects the will of the people". The statement indicates as well that Hamas might have lost much of the support of its main financial backer and the key ally of Syrian regime – Iran. Earlier, on 24 February, Hamas prime minister in Gaza, Ismail Haniya, had thrown its support behind the Syrian people in a public speech. At the same time, somewhat paradoxically, efforts are made to present the movement as neutral. According to Yasser Azzam, Head of Refugee Affairs Bureau of Hamas in Beirut²¹: "Hamas is not against, neither with [the Syrian regime], as it cannot take any position on the Syrian affairs. It is the movement's policy not to [officially] oppose any

¹⁷ Interview on 11 February 2012

¹⁸ Interview on 23 February 2012

¹⁹ "Syrian security forces 'warn Palestinian camp'" newswire published on 15 March 2012 by Ma'an News Agency
<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=468354>

²⁰ <http://www.assafir.com/Article.aspx?EditionId=2086&ArticleId=2721&ChannelId=49674>

²¹ Interview on 29 February 2012

government, neither to interfere in its affairs (...) Any position taken by Hamas would harm the Palestinians in Syria. Thus, the movement's neutrality is the best protection for them”.

Nonetheless, it was not possible for Hamas to stay in Syria without de facto taking sides. According to a Palestinian activist, who spoke to local Hamas members and political leaders, they all support the revolution, but are not able to do it openly. In the early days of the uprising, the movement was reportedly²² requested by the regime to take a public stance against sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a controversial Sunni cleric, close to the Muslim Brotherhood, who openly criticises the regime in Damascus. Hamas, according to the same account, refused and was punished in return – some of its offices were closed and property confiscated. Hamas has thus found itself in between joining the rest of the Muslim Brotherhood in supporting a popular struggle in Syria, and trying to guarantee its financial resources. So far, it quietly opposed the regime's apparent pressure, and instead of submitting into publicly expressing support for the regime, it left Syria. The movement - very pragmatically - did not go for overt criticism of the regime either, as it could put in danger its members and their families, if not the wider Palestinian population, left behind in Syria.

Palestinians as perceived by Syrian opposition and the regime

The general Palestinian refugee population in Syria is trying to officially stay neutral, even if it is providing relief to conflict stricken, fleeing Syrians. This is overwhelmingly due to Palestinians vulnerable position as a “guest population”. Nonetheless, Palestinians are perceived as “too silent” by some elements of the wider Syrian opposition on the one hand, and blamed for their support and participation in the revolution by elements of the Syrian regime on the other hand.

Syrian opposition

Syrian activists are usually aware and appreciative of Palestinians being engaged in the revolution. A Syrian activist reported²³ that in secret online-discussion groups the topics of “Palestinians not doing enough, not having a clear position” have been brought up, but was quickly tackled by those with more insight and understanding of the Palestinian situation. “Palestinians are trying not to interfere, as long as the regime is there, even if their sympathies are with us. However, once the regime is falling, they are ready to take up arms against the PFLP-GC inside the camps”, another Syrian activist with connections to the Free Syrian Army explained²⁴. It is so far unheard of Palestinians as a group being blamed for the stance and actions of the PFLP-GC and other pro-regime factions. Simultaneously, there are claims²⁵ that both Hamas' and Fatah's top leaderships are in contact with the Syrian opposition, which should have protective influence for the Palestinian population.

Syrian regime

The regime members have made several remarks suggesting Palestinians' support and participation in the rebellion. At the very start of the uprising, as reported by a Syrian activist²⁶, it was Buthaina Shaaban, the Syrian President's Media Advisor and Spokesperson, accusing Palestinians of delivering weapons to the rebels. Recently, there were reports of Syrian security threatening Yarmouk camp due to Fatah's alleged support of anti-regime demonstrations²⁷. “Yarmouk is not more precious than [Homs neighbourhood] Baba Amro, and it will be raided if the demonstrations which Fatah movement organizes continue, a security agent was quoted as saying”.

²² Interview on 14 August 2011

²³ Interview on 13 February 2012

²⁴ Interview on 17 February 2012

²⁵ Conversation with Haitham al-Maleh, a member of the Syrian exiled opposition, on 22 March 2012

²⁶ Interview on 17 February 2012

²⁷ “Syrian security forces 'warn Palestinian camp' ” newswire published on 15 March 2012 by Ma'an News Agency

<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=468354>

Risk scenarios

Having taken into account the above, the future of the Palestinian refugee population in Syria very much depends on the evolution of the situation in the country. There are at least two risk scenarios that need considering: first, a direct attack by the regime on the camps and, second, a situation of generalised violence that reaches Palestinian camps. The third imaginable scenario, that of an armed opposition's attack on pro-regime Palestinian factions and thus on the wider camp population, does not seem feasible enough at this point to be examined.

The risk scenario of Palestinian camps coming under direct regime attack was perceived as highly unlikely by the majority of the interviewees, including very recently. However, some of them admitted that such an attack may take place if there was Syrian, armed or unarmed, opposition members or activists hiding in the camps, or if the demonstrations inside the camps intensified. None of this has been reported as taking place currently, however there is a possibility that Syrian rebels seeking hide-outs will move to the camps, as they are seen as relatively safe and have already played the role of safe havens for wounded and internally displaced people. Further, some of observers of and participants in the events in Syria see a threat in the possibility of the regime using the Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA) to suppress the rebellion. It has not been the case so far, but many camp inhabitants reportedly read the recent wave of assassinations of PLA's officers as an attempt by the regime at targeting those opposed to PLA's involvement in the suppression of Syrians. The fact that Palestinian army men were targeted makes the camps population feel more exposed and vulnerable.

In a situation of generalised violence in the whole of Syria, Palestinian refugees – as well as Syrians – may be easily pushed into trying to flee either internally or externally. In the latter case, there are very limited chances that Syria's neighbouring countries would accept Palestinians inside their territory, as was the case in the aftermath of 2003 US invasion on Iraq. It saw the Palestinians become victims of targeted killings in Iraq while not being able to enter any other country, eventually leading to them being trapped in a no-man's-land between the Syrian and Iraqi borders - Al-Tanf camp – and in next-to-border camps. The possibility of a reiteration of an 'Al-Tanf scenario' is looming. It may not necessarily mean the exact repetition of a no-man's-land situation, but rather a situation of deepened vulnerability and lack of protection, as has already been the case both with those Palestinians who recently tried to flee Syria and those who left the country in search of safety. For those who tried to flee, many report that they have been rejected by the countries they were heading to. As for those who managed to leave, many reportedly found themselves in a legal limbo, so-called "protection gap", in the neighbouring countries they reached. These remain individual cases, as there has not been a mass flight of Palestinians from Syria so far. They are nonetheless instructive, and indicative of the sort of difficulties and hardship Syrian Palestinians might face if fleeing became the only feasible option in their view.

Nonetheless, there is an urgent and growing need for further study of the situation of Palestinians in Syria and of possibilities for improved protection of this group both within and outside Syria. Indeed, although the situation of generalised violence does not discriminate between Syrians and Palestinians, the latter are in an incomparably weaker position when searching for protection outside Syria. (30 March 2012)

**Magda Qandil is a Freelance Journalist who specialises in Palestinian affairs.*

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