

## Report

### Trump's Death Kiss on the Middle East Peace Process

*Dr. Mohammed Cherkaoui\**

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**Palestinians burn an Israeli and a U.S. flag while protesting Trump's decision in Gaza City on Dec. 6, 2017 [Reuters]**

To help capture the nuances of U.S. President Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and to move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, one needs to consider politics is not only domestic, but also personal. One overall development that emerged from the emergency meeting of the Security Council was the deepening divergence between the U.S. and European member states. The question remains: who will fill in the shoes of the U.S. as an alternative peace broker in the Middle East.

### **Anatomy of Trump's Jerusalem Policy**

Donald Trump's Jerusalem decision implies certain latent precursors of an alarming shift in the U.S. foreign policy toward the most protracted conflict in the Middle East. In his short address at the White House, Trump eagerly asserted that "while previous Presidents have made this a major campaign promise, they failed to deliver. Today, I am delivering,"<sup>(1)</sup> in reference to the Jerusalem Embassy Act, which had been passed by the 104th Congress on October 23, 1995.

In its policy statement of the United States, the law stated that a) Jerusalem should remain an undivided city in which the rights of every ethnic and religious group are protected; b) Jerusalem should be recognized as the capital of the State of Israel; and c) the United States Embassy in Israel should be established in Jerusalem no later than May 31, 1999. However, Presidents Bill Clinton, George Bush Jr., and Barack Obama signed periodic waivers every six months to delay the implementation of the law. Back in June 2017, Trump grudgingly signed his first six-month waiver taking into consideration the counsel of his son-in-law and would-be architect of a new peace initiative, Jared

Kushner, who “argued that to move the embassy then might strangle the effort before the administration had established relationships in the region.”(2)

Trump’s narrative of achievement and self-praise also entails several political and security dilemmas beneath his declared commitment to fulfilling his electoral pledges, catering to his extreme right and evangelical base, and solidifying his drive for political isolationism under the banner of serving “America first”. Still, his tunnel-vision allegiance to his right wing and evangelical supporters raises serious questions: to what extent did Trump really take the U.S. strategic interests to heart by honoring Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s wish or securing the Israeli interests? Most Arab governments are deeply consumed by civil wars in Yemen, Syria, and Libya and other domestic challenges of the premise of the 2011 social uprisings.

Was Trump’s decision a diplomatic imperative or a timely correction of America’s strategy in the Middle East when risk current management indicators usher to more alarming crises vis-à-vis ISIL’s power in Syria, growing Iranian influence in Yemen, Iraq, and Lebanon, violent infighting and return of slavery and human trafficking in Libya, or the open-ended nuclear threats of North Korea? Trump’s simplistic philosophy: “old challenges demand new approaches” seems to be overshadowed by the urge of being in command even with a miscalculated undiplomatic formula for the Israeli-Palestinian intractable conflict. With his egocentrism and showmanship tendencies, he has displayed “the ethos of a confident dealmaker who’s willing to gamble to mix things up.”(3)

With the fading credibility of the Trump Administration in the eyes of most Arab, Muslim, Christian, and even European leaders, elites, and ordinary individuals, one wonders whether there is a silver lining in his decision to help stimulate a Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim counter strategy. With the fading hope of a two-state solution to the conflict, the question remains: who would fill in the shoes of the United States in future peace efforts. Russia has a full plate of challenges after its involvement in the Syrian conflict. By defending the regime of Bashar Assad, it has weakened its credibility to have a role in the region. China is interested in developing more trade links than shaping a political intervention in the Middle East.

### **What is behind Trump’s Undiplomatic Political Campaign Promise?**

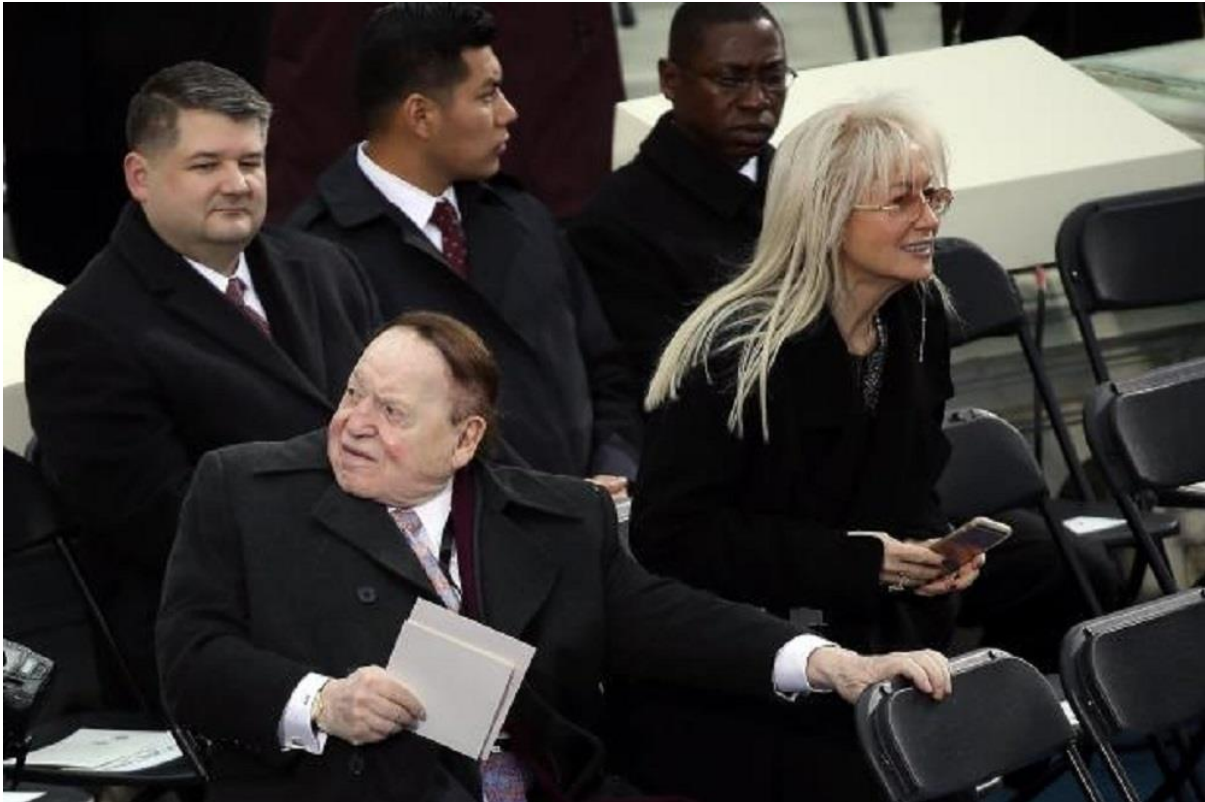
“President Trump, You Promised. You Delivered. Thank you for courageously recognizing Jerusalem as Israel’s Eternal Capital.” This was the slogan of a full-page ad, depicting Mr. Trump praying at the Western Wall, published by the Republican Jewish Committee in the New York Times one day after Donald Trump’s address. Ironically out of the 282 promises he made during his presidential campaign, Trump chose probably the most controversial and volatile issue in Middle Eastern turmoil, and turned a naked flame on the single most combustible issue in the conflict.(4)

The paradox here is that most of his electoral pledges, including the ObamaCare and the U.S. withdrawal from the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), are on a shaky ground due to his contentious relationship with Congress and leaders of the Republican Party. Furthermore, Trump decided to go forward with his Jerusalem announcement against the recommendations of his policy officials at the State Department and Pentagon, let alone the disagreement of most world leaders in the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. For instance, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis had advised him not to address the issue of Jerusalem. Now, they remain alarmed with the potential anti-American blowback not least to diplomats and troops serving overseas.(5)

Similarly, the UN special coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Nickolay Mladenov, told the Security Council that Jerusalem "is perhaps the most emotionally charged and difficult subject" among the final status issues in the conflict. Other observers notice that "Trump is now set to apply his strategy of international vandalism to perhaps the most sensitive geopolitical hotspot in the world.(6)

To help capture the nuances of Trump's Jerusalem decision, one needs to consider politics is not only domestic, but also personal. Ten days before the presidential inauguration in January, casino billionaire and Republican donor Sheldon G. Adelson attended a private meeting with President-elect Trump in his Trump Tower in New York. He briefed the president of the Zionist Organization of America, Morton A. Klein, about Trump's determination to move the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem since it was to him "a major priority", and "something that's in his heart and soul."(7)

In his detailed article, Mark Landler explains how a pro-Trump candidacy political action committee benefited from a \$20 million donation by the Adelsons who also gave another \$1.5 million to the committee that organized the Republican convention in the summer of 2016. Subsequently for Candidate and President Trump, the status of Jerusalem was always "more a political imperative than a diplomatic dilemma. Faced with disappointing evangelical and pro-Israel backers like Mr. Adelson, or alarming allies and Arab leaders while jeopardizing his own peace initiative, the President sided with his key supporters."(8)



**Miriam and Sheldon Adelson attending Donald Trump's inauguration ceremony January 20, 2017**  
[Getty Images]

Another contributing factor was Trump's reoccurring meetings with the representatives of the various evangelical Christian groups who urged him to take action about the status of the U.S. embassy in Israel. For instance, President of the Family Research Council, Tony Perkins, recalls that during the meetings he attended "it was clearly communicated that evangelicals and Bible-believing Christians see a special relationship with Israel."<sup>(9)</sup>

Ten days before his Jerusalem announcement, Trump walked into a meeting of his National Security Council's team who were studying possible options for the Jerusalem Act question, and requested "more creative solutions". His advisers offered him two alternatives: "Sign the waiver again, or sign it but recognize Jerusalem as the capital and set in motion a plan to move the embassy."<sup>(10)</sup>

In line with Trump's preferred style of grandiose announcements, the White House initiated two conference calls on Tuesday and Wednesday, the eve of Trump's announcement, with evangelical Christian and Jewish leaders including Ralph Reed, the founder of the Faith and Freedom Coalition; and Robert Jeffress, a Dallas pastor who spoke at Mr. Trump's private inaugural prayer service. At the end of the call, a pastor and a rabbi closed with prayers; "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem," the pastor said. "And thank God we have a President who would take this step."<sup>(11)</sup> However, this evangelical pursuit of a Jewish Jerusalem capital seems to differ from the view of mainstream Christianity and contradicts international law. Pope Francis expressed "deep concern"

and “appealed strongly for all to respect the city's status quo, in accordance with the relevant UN resolutions.”

Most observers remain skeptical about the utility as well as the trajectory of shifting the American position on Jerusalem. Some of them have questioned the political ‘wisdom’ of the original Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995. As one commentator put it, “such logic begins to collapse in the morass that is the Middle East. It falls apart because of centuries of complicated history, of bloodshed over spiritual and physical property, and of seven decades of American leadership that's considered the case of modern Israel as the complex theological and geopolitical thicket that it is.”(12)

### **Trump versus the World**

During his electoral campaign, Trump vowed to be a “true friend to Israel,” and the United States would “be working with Israel very closely, very, very closely.”(13) This commitment to Jewish-American organizations and support for Israeli strategic interests have helped him construct a dogmatic conviction of an occasionally-principled President, whereas he acts as a realist flirting with neo-Machiavellism in other less complex issues. Christopher Ruddy, conservative news media executive, praises what he perceives as Trump’s straight-shooting drive of pragmatism; “People are waking up to the fact that the President doesn’t see grays and doesn’t like pastels. He is very proud that he’s fulfilled so many campaign promises, and the embassy decision is another notch on his belt.”(14)

On the diplomatic front, Trump and Netanyahu spoke three times before the Jerusalem address. The Israeli and American UN delegations also coordinated their efforts to thwart any significant statement or decision by the Security Council.(15) However, Trump’s decision triggered official and popular condemnation worldwide, from Ankara to London, and from Amman to New York. Eight states of the 15-member Security Council requested an emergency meeting, including the UK, Italy, and France, amid claims from Palestine and Turkey that recognition by Trump is in breach of both international law and UN resolutions.(16)





**Emergency session of the Security Council in New York Dec. 8, 2017 [AP]**

The somber debate at the Council showcased clear division between two camps: the United States and Israel versus the international community with divergent outlooks of the future of the peace process. U.S. ambassador Nikki Haley approached the diplomatic battle with the notion that the best strategy of defense is attack, and criticized the United Nations saying "it has done much more to damage the prospects for Middle East peace than to advance them." She also charged the world organization of being "one of the world's foremost centers of hostility towards Israel".

[video: Nicki Haley at the Security Council](#)

Still, the majority of the Security Council maintains that East Jerusalem, which was captured by Israel in the 1967 war, is "occupied territory", and that its status should be resolved in negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. In her attempt to avoid the question of illegality and immorality of Trump's decision, Haley implied a sense of victimhood, "Israel will never be, and should never be, bullied into an agreement by the United Nations, or by any collection of countries that have proven their disregard for Israel's security." Israel's ambassador to the UN Danny Danon sought to position Trump's decision as "a milestone for Israel, for peace and for the world".

On the other side of the spectrum, there was a consensus among the permanent and non-permanent members about the hastiness nature of Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Swedish ambassador Olof Skoog articulated his opposition and underscored that the U.S. action "contradicts international law and

Security Council resolutions." He also emphasized that Jerusalem's status is to be decided in direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, and reminded the White House that Trump's decision "goes against the plea of many friends of the United States and Israel". The most robust opposition to Trump's decision was articulated by Bolivia's ambassador Sacha Sergio Llorenty Solíz. He expressed his concern that "the Security Council will become an occupied territory." After the emergency meeting, ambassadors of the United Kingdom, France, Sweden, Germany, and Italy issued a joint statement outside the Council's chambers condemning the American position, saying it was "not in line with Security Council resolutions and was unhelpful in terms of prospects for peace in the region."<sup>(17)</sup> For the same reason, United Nations Secretary General António Guterres made it clear that "in this moment of great anxiety, there is no alternative to the two-state solution. There is no Plan B."



**European Union foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini meets Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the European Council in Brussels [Reuters]**

### **Jerusalem: Splinter of the Trans-Atlantic Alliance**

One overall development that emerged from the emergency meeting was the deepening divergence between the U.S. and European member states. UK, Sweden, and France were loud and clear in their condemnation of Trump's decision. Europe's opposition to his plan was unprecedented either in tone of rejection or commitment to the two-state solution; and, subsequently, deepened the rift within the US-EU coalition. Since Trump took office January 20, 2017, Germany and France have been very critical of his policies, and pushed for less involvement with his unpredictable approach to international politics.



Now, Chancellor Angela Merkel said that the German government “does not agree” either, and will stand by existing U.N. resolutions, which “make clear that the status of Jerusalem must be negotiated as part of negotiations on a two-state solution, and that is why we want this process to be revived.”(18) The eye opening dynamic in the UK-US relations was the reaction of British Prime Minister Theresa May. She called Trump’s decision “unhelpful in terms of prospects for peace in the region”; and stated, “The British embassy to Israel is based in Tel Aviv and we have no plans to move it”.

From a wider continental perspective, European Union foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini announced her disagreement with Trump’s decision. She underscored “It is a very fragile context and the announcement has the potential to send us backwards to even darker times than the ones we are already living in...This difficult moment called for an even stronger engagement for peace.”(19) She also stated that her position was backed by “all the foreign ministers of the 28 member states of the European Union.”(20)

Mogherini had told Secretary of State Rex Tillerson during their meeting in Brussels on the eve of Trump’s decision, “We believe that the only realistic solution to the conflict between Israel and Palestine is based on two states and with Jerusalem as the capital of both the state of Israel and the state of Palestine.”(21) She also cautioned against the probability of “an escalation of tensions around the holy places and in the region, because what happens in Jerusalem matters to the whole region and the entire world.”(22)

### **U.S. and Israel: Whose Interest Comes First?**

Trump’s gratification of Netanyahu’s aspirations has hindered the promise of United States’ legitimacy, as a peace broker, with no apparent political dividend in return for Washington. Despite the prominence of cost-and-benefit in a deal maker’s mindset, Trump has bypassed the basic tenets of his political realism and self-interest that are deeply construed in the philosophy of the Republican Party. His new position on Jerusalem can be seen as a unilateral proposition with no particular strategic value for the United States. He has voluntarily relinquished his drive for winning, a central point in his art-of-the-deal paradigm. As he wrote in his Think Big book, “I love to make the big score and to make the big deal. I love to crush the other side and take the benefits. Why? Because there is nothing greater.”(23)

In contrast, Trump’s winning spirit has waned, which makes many analysts in the United States and elsewhere wonder about the lack of return in the Jerusalem deal for a President who has preached for transactionalism and secured nearly half-a-trillion-dollar investments from the Gulf States during his attendance of Riyadh Summit back in May. Trump has apparently shifted from his tough bargaining art of the deal to a rather

generous art of giveaways. Thomas Friedman, veteran observer of the United States foreign policy for nearly 30 years, explains that "Trump is susceptible to such giveaways, not only because he is ignorant, but because he does not see himself as the President of the United States. He sees himself as the President of his base. And because that's the only support he has left, he feels the need to keep feeding his base by fulfilling crude, ill-conceived promises he threw out to them during the campaign... I've never seen a President give up so much to so many for so little, starting with China and Israel.(24)

Trump's decision has also reverberated the projection of two critical political scientists, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, who argue that although "the boundaries of the Israel lobby cannot be identified precisely", it "has a core consisting of organizations whose declared purpose is to encourage the U.S. government and the American public to provide material aid to Israel and to support its government's policies, as well as influential individuals for whom these goals are also a top priority".(25)

In their "Israeli Lobby and U.S. foreign Policy" book published ten years ago, Mearsheimer and Walt studied the lobby as a "loose coalition of individuals and organizations who actively work to steer U.S. foreign policy in a pro-Israel direction".(26) The Adelsons and other Jewish-American financiers have succeeded effectively in convincing Trump to move in that direction. They are among a wider group of pro-Israel lobbyists including Jewish Americans, Christian Zionists, and groups from the political right with an overlap with neoconservatives.(27)

The Adelson-Netanyahu-Trump personal and political connection has gone beyond the checks-and-balances mechanism in American politics. Mearsheimer and Walt cautioned against this negative effect of the Israeli lobby. They showcased how the Israeli lobby has a negative effect not only on American interests, but its impact has also been unintentionally harmful to Israel as well".(28)

### **From Peace Broker into Conflict Contender**

The temporality of Trump's decision raises new concerns about the seriousness of his intent to reach an 'ultimate deal' between Israelis and Palestinians within the growing rapprochement between Israel and Gulf States, namely Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. As he ironed down what he considered "nothing more nor less than a recognition of reality", he made an odd claim "we are not taking a position on any final status issues, including the specific boundaries of the Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem or the resolution of contested borders. Those questions are up to the parties involved." Paradoxically, the two-state solution and the entire Oslo process are now the first collateral damage of his forced entry into the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Palestinian veteran interlocutor Hanan Ashrawi underscored "the peace process is finished. They have already pre-empted the outcome."(29) By the same token, the Palestinian

Authority President Mahmoud Abbas said the decision was "tantamount to the U.S. abdicating its role as a peace mediator".(30)

[video: Hanan Ashrawi](#)

Trump's decision represents a zero-sum proposition in favor of the Israelis who will invest further in the U.S. shift for widening the normalization of their ties with other states in the region. Subsequently, the U.S. political capital has weakened in the Middle East and beyond, and confirmed two common negative perceptions: a) the U.S. has not been an honest broker of the peace process; and b) the fallacy of the Oslo Accord by avoiding the final status of Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees' right of return, and the unfeasibility of the two-state solution. As one commentator put it, "If there is a silver lining to Trump's announcement, it's that it provides clarity and a unifying objective for Palestinians."(31)

For U.S. officials and diplomats working in the region, a new dilemma has emerged in terms of reconstructing a less antagonizing American political discourse vis-à-vis the Palestinians and world public opinion. Saeb Erakat, PLO chief negotiator, has cautioned that the U.S. would "disqualify itself to play any role in any initiative towards achieving a just and lasting peace". In Gaza, Hamas leader Ismail Haniya considered the U.S. policy shift on Jerusalem to be "an aggression against our people. It's a declaration of war against our Palestinian people," and called for a new intifada [uprising].

In Jerusalem's Old City which embodies the political pulse of ordinary Palestinians, there has been deepening feelings of frustration and despair. One local resident Salah Zuhikeh summarized the shrinking posture of the United States, "By this decision, America became a very small country, like any small country in the world, like Micronesia. America was a great country for us and everyone."(32)

### **Conclusion: Beyond Trump's Decision**

By ignoring the ramifications of his recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, Trump has contradicted his pledge that "a Trump administration will never ever put the interest of a foreign country before the interest of our country. From now on, it's going to be America first."(33) However, there is common belief that his decision will benefit Israel diplomatically. The political left in the U.S., including liberal Jews, are not pleased with a more right wing Likudian less nationalist American Trump. The political establishment will challenge him to prove the kind of return he has secured for the United States. His Jerusalem decision has undermined his credibility in the eyes of more a billion of Muslims Christians, and Arabs as well as Europeans, and will deepen the anti-Americanism sentiment in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and even in Europe. Accordingly, Trump has laid the foundation for several upcoming shifts:

- The Jerusalem decision has buried the last hope in the peace talks and the Oslo accord. It has also liberated the Palestinians from the unfulfilled promise of an impartial peace broker. The Palestinian leadership may reposition its strategy from a reactive mode to a pro-active and independent pursuit of their national objectives with the help of some regional and world powers.
- The Palestinians decided to halt their communications with the Trump administration and declined to meet with vice President Mike Pence during his visit to the region. They have turned the page on the U.S. role in any peace process. Instead, as they have indicated they would "seek a new mediator from our Arab brothers and the international community, a mediator who can help with reaching a two-state solution."<sup>(34)</sup>
- The fading credibility of the U.S. role in peace negotiations has brought the whole conflict into a decisive intersection. The Swedish, British, and French ambassadors to the United Nations maintained the international commitment to the two-state solution with east Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state and west Jerusalem as the capital of the state of Israel. Since Trump has yielded to Israel, there is strong likelihood the Palestinian will be leaning towards the Europeans to assume leadership in future peace talks.
- Trump's keen interest in supporting the Israelis has ignored the future upsurge in anti-Americanism which remains challenging since the Bush-Cheney administration decided to invade Iraq in 2003 with no strategy of nation building after the fall of Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein. Once again, Iran, Hezbollah, as well as various militant Sunni groups will find it easier to spread an anti-America, anti-Israel, and anti-peace process discourse with unforeseen consequences of new robust pan-Arabism and new extreme pan-Islamism.
- The Jerusalem question is most likely to shape a new inclusive front including Arabs, Persians, Muslims, Christians, Sunnis, Shiites, Islamists, modernists, moderates, and nationalists. The no-to-a-Jewish Jerusalem-capital narratives echoing in various protests in Middle Eastern cities and beyond could turn into an appealing discourse that inspires a robust movement of resistance and defiance. The symbolism of Jerusalem cannot be minimized in its political, psychological, religious, and cultural dimensions.
- Trump's decision has escalated the conflict and accentuated the religious dimension between Muslim/Christian Palestinians and Israeli Jews. The next flare of violence will derive from the religiosity of politics and the martyrdom of defending the religious sites on both sides. Trump will go into history books as

the persistent president who energized the Clash-of-Civilizations hypothesis and made Samuel Huntington smile in his graveyard.

Above all these dynamics and gloomy future scenarios, the deal-maker president swiftly moved in his address from recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel to foresee the potential of reaching an upcoming 'deal of the century'. However, Palestinians have simply said to him "you are fired!"

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**\*Dr. Mohammed Cherkaoui is professor of Conflict Resolution at George Mason University in Washington D.C. and former member of the United Nations Panel of Experts.**

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