

A decorative background consisting of a grid of grey dots of varying sizes, with several dots highlighted in red. The dots are arranged in a pattern that roughly outlines the shape of the Middle East.

A National or Religious Conflict?

The Dispute over the Temple Mount/ Al-Haram Al-Sharif in Jerusalem

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- There is a danger that Arabs and Jews, the children of Abraham, are becoming increasingly engaged in a religious conflict. The major focus of this conflict is the Temple Mount/Al-Haram Al-Sharif and East Jerusalem/Al-Quds Al-Sharif. Amalgamated with nationalist and political components of the Arab-Israeli dispute, this conflict also derives from two opposed processes: growing Islamic Judeophobia in the Arab and Muslim world, on the one hand; and accelerated Jewish Islamophobia in Israel and the diaspora, on the other.
- Top Israeli and Palestinian leaders, eager to score political gains, have not put an end to these dangerous phenomena. Mahmud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, is not in a position to curb his people's anger and frustration regarding alleged Jewish intentions to destroy the Al-Aqsa mosque. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other right-wing Israeli leaders continue to use the Jewish sanctity of the Temple Mount to garner public support.
- Given this situation, the new Israeli government must negotiate with the Palestinian Authority and the Arab League, and arrive at an agreed solution. The United States and the European Union should induce the relevant parties to settle their differences, particularly over the issue of the Temple Mount/Al-Haram Al-Sharif. Otherwise, a bloody Muslim-Jewish conflict may spread globally, especially in European countries. Thus, these countries have a special interest in promoting peaceful dialogues among their Muslim and Jewish citizens.

At A Glance

Arabs and Jews, the children of Abraham, are becoming increasingly engaged in a religious war. The major focus of this conflict is the Temple Mount/Al-Haram Al-Sharif and East Jerusalem/Al-Quds Al-Sharif. Amalgamated with nationalist and political components of the Arab-Israeli dispute, this religious war also derives from two opposed processes: growing Islamic Judeophobia in the Arab and Muslim world, on the one hand; and accelerated Jewish Islamophobia in Israel and the diaspora, on the other. Some recent manifestations of these destructive trends, which feed off each other, are on one side: Muslim religious leaders calling for *Jihad* (holy war) against Jews and Israel (by Hamas and Iran, for example); killing of Jews in synagogues (Har-Nof suburb in Jerusalem, 18 November 2014); an attempt on the life of Yehuda Glick, a Jewish Temple Mount activist (24 October 2014); and desecration of Jewish cemeteries (in Jerusalem and the Negev, 16 and 29 November 2014). On the other side: occasional calls by Jewish religious leaders to kill Arabs (Muslims) and destroy the Al-Aqsa mosque on the Temple Mount; periodic burnings of mosques and *Qur'ans* by Jews in the West Bank and Israel; and killings of innocent Arabs (e. g., Muhammad Abu Khdeir in Jerusalem, 2 July 2014). In addition, the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza (July–August 2014), with its heavy death toll and destruction—particularly among Gaza inhabitants—consequently increased the rate of Palestinian Judeophobia to 93 per cent.¹

Moderate Israeli and Palestinian personalities—religious and secular—have been warning for years that the Jewish-Muslim conflict over the Temple Mount could trigger a devastating worldwide religious war. For example, two former Israeli heads of Shabak (general security service), have both cautioned against Jewish extremism. Yakov Peri, former cabinet minister of the Yesh Atid Party, stated in the documentary *Gatekeepers* (2012): »If Jewish militants sabotaged the [Al-Aqsa] mosque it would mean the end of the world (...) the eruption of a world war between us and the Muslim world.« Similarly, Carmi Gilon, former vice president of Hebrew University, asserted in late November 2014: »(...) the continuation of the extreme [Jewish] messianic activity on the Temple Mt. will lead to Armageddon, a war of the entire Muslim nation against the entire Jewish people.«²

1. Uriel Heilman (2014): ADL Survey, More than a quarter of a million of the world is anti-Semitic, in: *Jewish Exponent* (13.5.2014).

2. *Haaretz* (1.12.2014).

On the Palestinian side, Munib Al-Masri, a prominent businessman from Nablus, wrote: »(...) the Israeli government, which operates in a cool and calculated manner, is taking actions that are likely to bring about Armageddon (...); the expansion of [Jewish] settlements in Jerusalem, the shootings in the Haram Al-Sharif [by Israeli soldiers], and the »nationality law«,³ which can be understood to mean that East Jerusalem is the »eternal capital« of Israel and fundamentally Jewish—all of these actions, whereby religion sanctifies the policy of power, arouse Arab-Islamic reactions. There is a concrete danger that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will turn into a religious war.«

Despite these warnings, top Israeli and Palestinian leaders, eager to score political gains, have not stopped these dangerous phenomena. Mahmud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, represents an occupied and victimized population, and is not in a position to curb his people's anger and frustration regarding alleged Jewish intentions to destroy the Al-Aqsa mosque. Calling it a »religious war« by Israel, he has urged his people to defend the mosque and Al-Quds—the »Eternal Capital of the Palestinian People«.

Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, has also done very little to change the desire of Jewish citizens to rebuild the third Temple (approx. 40 per cent), control and pray on the Temple Mount (approx. 65 per cent), and keep a united Jerusalem under eternal Israeli sovereignty (80 per cent).⁴ On the contrary, on »Jerusalem Day«, May 2014, he proclaimed: »Jerusalem was unified 47 years ago. It will never be redivided; we will never divide our heart—the heart of the Nation. Jerusalem is also Mt. Zion and Mt. Moriah (the Temple Mt.), the Western Wall—Israel's eternal.«⁵

Netanyahu and other right-wing leaders continue to use the Jewish sanctity of the Temple Mount to garner public support, particularly during the most recent Israeli election campaign (since December 2014). Earlier, in September 2014, Uri Ariel, a minister from the HaBayit HaYehudi party, defiantly visited the Temple Mount, calling for Jewish sovereignty over it, and for the rebuilding

3. *Haaretz* (30.12.2014).

4. *Haaretz* (12.07.2013). Yitzhak Reiter, ed., *Sovereignty of God and Man. The Sanctity and Political Centrality of the Temple Mount*, (Hebrew), The Jerusalem Institute of Israel Studies, 2001, p. 135.

5. *Haaretz* (29.5.2014).

of the third Jewish temple. He and other senior officials, political activists, and rabbis, simultaneously launched a public campaign to change the status quo of the Mount, to permit Jewish prayers there.

The Role of the Temple Mount/Al-Haram Al-Sharif in the Deterioration of Muslim-Jewish Relations

On 5 June for the last 47 years, many Jews in Israel and abroad have celebrated the military victory known as the Six-Day War (1967) and the »liberation« of East Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. For Jews, this euphoric event meant the return to the Temple Mount (Hebrew: *Har HaBayit*) after more than 1,900 years of exile.

In contrast, millions of Muslims around the world, and especially in Palestine, mourn this event as a historical trauma and an immense *Naksa* (defeat). For them, the Jewish conquest of East Jerusalem (Al-Quds Al-Sharif) and the Haram Al-Sharif occurred after more than 1,400 years of Muslim rule (except for the Crusaders' occupation during 1099–1187 and 1229–1244).

Indeed, for both Jews and Muslims, the Temple Mount and the Old City of Jerusalem are hugely important religious, cultural, political, and national sites. For centuries, Jews in the diaspora prayed towards Jerusalem, vowed never to forget it (»If I forget thee O Jerusalem, may my right arm wither«), and blessed one another with »Next year in Jerusalem«. Although predominantly secular, the Zionist-Jewish movement has considered Jerusalem (Zion) the political and cultural center of the Jewish people since the 1880s.

By comparison, the Palestinian-Arab national movement established its national political-cultural center in East Jerusalem in the 1920s, while Al-Haram Al-Sharif—particularly the Al-Aqsa mosque—has continued to be a foremost religious shrine for Muslims. They called it *Awla Al-Qiblatayn* (the first prayer direction before Mecca), *Thani Al-Masjidayn* (the second mosque after Mecca), and *Isra'* and *Mi'raj* (the place from where Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven).

Failing to acknowledge the particular sanctity of this shrine for Islam and overwhelmed by its spectacular military victory and the historic magnitude of this event, the Israeli government decided in June 1967 to annex

East Jerusalem to West Jerusalem; and in July 1980, the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) passed a law to this effect. However, Israel also granted control of the Temple Mount to the Jordanian Waqf, a religious trust. Since then, many Israeli governments have rejected requests by Muslim leaders, largely Palestinians, for sovereignty over East Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, declaring them to be »disputed« places.

Furiously reacting to the Israeli occupation of the *Haram*, East Jerusalem, and other Arab territories, many Muslim political and religious leaders called for Jihad to »liberate« these sites. Periodically, Muslims used violence against Israeli and Jewish targets, causing severe bloodshed and destruction. These leaders employed not only anti-Zionist, but also anti-Semitic language in their campaign against Israel.

At the same time, a growing number of Jews, particularly in Israel, have developed Islamophobic attitudes, partly in reaction to Muslim Judeophobia and partly in rejection of the Muslim claim to the Temple Mount. This hostility has persisted with the backing of Jewish rabbis and little interference by Israeli authorities. All of this transpired despite the gradual development of pragmatic conciliatory approaches by Arab and Muslim leaders since the late 1970s (except for revolutionary Iran and militant Muslim groups).

Changes in Muslim-Jewish Relations and the Issue of Jerusalem

For centuries, with a few exceptions, Jews in Muslim lands did not experience anti-Semitism. As Bernard Lewis, the noted scholar of Islam, wrote in 1984: »One important point should be made right away. There is little sign of any deep-rooted emotional hostility directed against Jews (...) [in Muslim lands...] such as the anti-Semitism of the Christian world. There were, however, unambiguously negative attitudes. These were in part the »normal« feelings of a dominant group towards a subject group, with parallels in virtually any society.«⁶

Indeed, Jews in Muslim countries occasionally praised Muslim rulers for their benevolent treatment, while aspiring to the destruction of »evil« Christianity. Yet, one

6. Lewis, Bernard (1984): *The Jews of Islam*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p. 32.

significant but rare exception to this Jewish Islamophilic attitude was articulated by the great Jewish Rabbi and scholar Maimonides (d. 1204), who labeled the Kingdom of Ishmael »the most hateful nation towards Jews«⁷. Apparently, he referred to the *Al-Mohads* rulers who harshly persecuted Jews in the mid-12th century and possibly forced Maimonides to temporarily convert to Islam.

Jews were highly grateful to the Ottoman Muslim state (1453–1918) for absorbing hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees fleeing from the Spanish-Christian inquisition in the late 15th century, as well as for permitting them to settle in Palestine, notably in Jerusalem. The Ottoman authorities allowed Jews to pray at the Western Wall, but not on the Temple Mount. During the 19th century, the Ottoman authorities protected Jews against a newly emerging form of anti-Jewish sentiment by local Christians, namely anti-Semitism »imported« from Europe. This new phenomenon was manifested by a series of »blood libels« against Jews in the region, particularly in Damascus in 1840. Muslims in the region were influenced by this new trend, and from time to time used the »blood libel« as a weapon against Jews.

The Impact of the Arab-Zionist Conflict

A turning point occurred with the advent of the Zionist-Jewish movement and its enterprise in Palestine, which began in the late 19th century and included purchasing Arab lands and, indirectly, evicting Arab peasants. Gradually, more and more Christians and Muslims developed not only an anti-Zionist attitude, but also anti-Semitic sentiments (although some did distinguish between Zionists and Jews). Some Christian Arabs expressed these hostile positions in order to forge a common Arab nationalist stance with Muslim Arabs. Jerusalem constituted a major venue for such cooperation, with Muslims and Christians in Jerusalem even signing an anti-Semitic petition. With the appearance of the Palestinian-Arab national movement, Muslims assumed a major role in the anti-Zionist, anti-Semitic current. Indeed, the grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin Al-Husayni, was the major leader of this current

during the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the head of the Palestinian National Movement. He used the Temple Mount/Al-Haram Al-Sharif issue as a vehicle for his pan-Islamic and pan-Arab campaign against Jews and Zionists. Fermenting anti-Jewish riots, he demanded that the British Mandatory authorities prohibit Jewish prayers at the Western Wall (Al-Buraq), which Muslims considered part of the Al-Aqsa Mosque. He and other Muslim leaders also alleged that Jews were conspiring to destroy the Temple Mount mosques and rebuild their ancient temple. These allegations and other Muslim actions, together with Jewish reactions, led to the bloody 1929 riots, which started at the Western Wall and spread throughout Palestine.

The Mufti was also imbued with Nazi anti-Semitism and expressed his adoration of Hitler. During World War II, he cooperated with the Nazis and found refuge in Berlin during the period 1941–45. He coordinated campaigns with Hitler and other Nazi leaders against the British »oppressors« in Palestine, as well as against the Jews. Upon his request, Nazi leaders »promised to destroy the Jewish national home in Palestine and engage in the battle against world Jewry«.⁸

The Mufti endeavored to spread his anti-Semitic views among Palestinian Arabs, particularly the youth (the »Nazi Scouts«). Nonetheless, a sizable Palestinian opposition, led mainly by the notable Nashashibi family, did not share the Mufti's views. Many of them opted to coexist and to cooperate with the Jewish Zionist movement, particularly in Jerusalem.

Indeed, the mainstream of the Zionist (secular) movement also sought coexistence and cooperation with the Arabs. It did not aspire to dominate the Temple Mount and rebuild the Jewish Temple, but only to control the Western Wall as a historical national symbol. Significantly, in 1937 and 1947 the Zionist movement accepted (albeit reluctantly) two plans for the partition of Palestine, whereby Jerusalem would not be under its control at all. The first was the British Peel Commission Report (1937), suggesting that Jerusalem should be under British control; the second was the Partition Resolution of the United Nations (Resolution 181 (II), 1947), which assigned »a special international regime for the city of Jerusalem (including the holy places)«.

7. Maimonides (1952): *Igeret Teyman* (Yemenite Letter), Halkin Edition, New York, pp. 98–99; Stillman, Norman (1979): *The Jews of the Arab Lands*, Philadelphia, p. 241.

8. Philip Mattar (1998): *The Mufti of Jerusalem*, New York, Columbia University Press, pp. 99f.

On the other hand, Jewish radical leaders—religious and secular alike—not only wished to dominate the Western Wall, but also to rebuild the ancient temple. Public photos were displayed of Jews holding Zionist flags with the Star of David next to the Dome of the Rock Mosque. Militant Jews also demonstrated in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, chanting anti-Arab and anti-Muslim slogans, calling for the return of the Western Wall to Jewish hands. Furthermore, radical right-wing secular Jews even plotted to »liberate« the Wall by military force and to blow up the mosques. Among them was the Revisionist movement Beitar (and later in 1947, the Stern Gang).

During the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the Temple Mount did not play a major role in the Palestinian-Zionist conflict. Only King Abdallah of Jordan made great efforts to protect the Al-Haram Al-Sharif and the Old City of Jerusalem against potential Israeli attacks. Israel's Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion did not initiate any military moves to conquer East Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, and Jerusalem was not mentioned at all in Israel's Independence Declaration in May 1948. In 1949, West Jerusalem was proclaimed as Israel's capital and until the 1967 war, Israel avoided any steps to occupy East Jerusalem and the Temple Mount.

1967: The Turning Point

As indicated above, the Muslim-Jewish conflict over the Temple Mount/Al-Haram Al-Sharif was revived in the aftermath of the Six-Day War, greatly enhancing the manifestation of Muslim Judeophobia and Jewish Islamophobia in the region. Thus, the critical historical change in the status of the Temple Mount, East Jerusalem, and other occupied territories ignited among Muslims feelings of despair, revenge, and religious solidarity. In particular, conservative and zealous Muslims deepened their ideological religious attachment to Al-Haram Al-Sharif, elevating its importance and vowing to liberate it by Jihad against their Jewish enemies. Similarly, many Jews in Israel and abroad were deeply moved by the redemption of the Western Wall, the symbol of their historical national ethos. But among zealous Jews, the Messianic longing to rebuild the Temple was empowered by the intention to blow up the mosques—the symbols of Islam—that had »desecrated« the Temple Mount. These mutually hostile attitudes have been accompanied by denial of each side's attachment to their respective holy shrines.

Vis-à-vis this militant Jewish-Muslim symmetry, the political and religious leaders of both sides have mostly adopted asymmetric and/or ambivalent positions regarding these critical issues—partly to advance political and national objectives, and partly to please their militant groups. Simultaneously, attempts have been made by the relevant governments, as well as by various global organizations, to settle this dispute, but to no avail.

Ambivalent and Changing Attitudes in Israel: Manifestations of Islamophobia

The ambivalent positions in Israel regarding the Temple Mount in East Jerusalem emerged immediately after the 1967 war. However, by order of Moshe Dayan, Israel's then Defense Minister, no Israeli flags were hoisted on the Temple Mount, and the Jordanian Waqf authorities were allowed to administer the site. Jews were permitted to visit this site, but not to pray there. Israel's chief Rabbinate had prohibited Jews to visit the Temple Mount, owing to theological *Halachic* (Jewish law) injunctions. Other notable rabbis stated that such visits and prayers by Jews could cause a religious war, and a Muslim Jihad that would result in the bloodshed and death of many Jews.

Other rabbis and a growing number of militant Jews—religious and secular alike—have pressured Israeli governments to permit prayers on the Mount, while several of them, including members of the Knesset and a government minister, ignored the prohibitions imposed by the government and the Chief Rabbinate. Furthermore, growing groups of fanatical Jews, such as »the Faithful of the Temple Mount«, and more than a dozen Temple Mount organizations have preached on destroying the mosques and rebuilding the Temple. For this very purpose, they prepared designs of the Temple and its altar as well as garments for the priests.

These zealous groups have been inspired by senior Orthodox rabbis, including the Western Wall rabbi. Probably under the influence of these messianic groups, 30 per cent of Israeli Jews and 45 per cent of national religious Jews in Israel currently support the rebuilding of the Third Temple, while the great majority of Israeli Jews wish to maintain Israeli control over the Temple Mount. Furthermore, various youth groups have periodically

demonstrated at the site, attacking Muslim passers-by. These anti-Muslim and racist anti-Arab manifestations have constituted a major part of the Islamophobic trend that has increased since 1967.

Influenced also by Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian terrorism, this trend has been significantly expressed by word and deed. In March 1994, Dr. Baruch Goldstein (an American-Israeli Jewish fanatic) murdered 29 Muslim worshippers in the main mosque of Hebron. Other Jewish fanatics have occasionally killed Arabs, damaged mosques, and burned *Qur'ans* in the West Bank and Israel. In 1984 a Jewish zealot, Yehuda Etzion, and his comrades attempted to blow up the Mosques on the Temple Mount.

To be sure, Israeli political and religious leaders have strongly denounced these and other Islamophobic crimes, while Israeli courts have sentenced several of these Jewish terrorists to prison. Senior rabbis have argued that these acts do not represent authentic Judaism. Moreover, a large group of Jewish rabbis and Muslim imams issued a warning in 2012 that the manifestation of »anti-Semitism and Islamophobia is likely to destroy the entire humanity«⁹.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has on occasion denounced Jewish atrocities against Muslims. He also prevented Jewish militants from praying on the Temple Mount, reneging on his previous promises to them. But in September 1996, he ordered the opening of an ancient tunnel adjacent to the Temple Mount, thus provoking Muslim riots and Israeli retaliations. This event claimed the lives of many Muslim youth and Israeli soldiers.

Even more critical was the visit by General (ret.) Ariel Sharon—then leader of the Likud opposition—accompanied by hundreds of policemen at the Temple Mount on 28 September 2000, with the permission of Ehud Barak, then PM (Labor-Party). This visit provoked a long series of violent Muslim riots known as the *Al-Aqsa Intifada*, which caused the death of hundreds of Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews. Millions of Muslims all over the world protested, calling for the liberation of Al-Aqsa and the Al-Haram al-Sharif. Several militant Muslim organizations assumed the name Al-Aqsa in their struggle

against Israel. This also includes the recent war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza (July-August 2014). Hamas flags carry a picture of Al-Aqsa, and Palestinian children chant »we shall return to Al-Aqsa«. Many Palestinians protested at Al-Aqsa Mosque against Israeli attacks in Gaza.

Although cautious to avoid any further provocation on the Temple Mount, most Israeli governments failed to achieve a political settlement regarding the problems of the Temple Mount and East Jerusalem, as well as other Palestinian territories. In fact, the opposite: most Israeli governments since 1967 have endeavored to Judaize East Jerusalem, including the Old City. They built new Jewish neighborhoods, thus extending greater Jerusalem into the West Bank, evicting Palestinian residents, destroying Arab buildings, and allocating only a small fraction of the city budget to East Jerusalem. Most Israeli governments have proclaimed that Jerusalem will remain »united forever«, reflecting the views of most Israeli Jews (80 per cent) and of the majority of the Knesset members.

Common and Diverse Muslim Attitudes: The Growth of Muslim Judeophobia

As indicated above, millions of Muslims around the world reacted furiously to the 1967 Israeli occupation of the Al-Haram Al-Sharif, including Al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock mosques, as well as East Jerusalem and other Palestinian and Arab territories. Political (secular) and religious leaders and groups called for Jihad to liberate these sites. They expressed not only anti-Zionist but also anti-Semitic positions, in the media and textbooks as well.

Radical Muslim and Arab groups launched numerous attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets in various parts of the world (Munich 1972, Buenos Aires 1994, Haifa 2003, and many other places). Several of these radical groups carry names relating to Jerusalem or the Al-Aqsa mosque, such as Iran's Al-Quds (Jerusalem) force, Egyptian Ansar Bayt Al-Maqdis (supporters of Jerusalem), Fatah's Shuhada Al-Aqsa (Martyrs of Al-Aqsa). In addition, Hamas' TV channel is called *Al-Aqsa*; and the Islamic movement in (northern) Israel, led by Shaykh Raad Salah, has used the title Al-Aqsa for most of its anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish activities and organizations.

9. *Haaretz* (9.9.2011).

On the other hand, although condemning the continued Israeli occupation of Al-Haram Al-Sharif and East Jerusalem, a growing number of Muslim leaders and governments have maintained either open or secret relations with Israel. Several of them have also suggested a peaceful settlement to the Jerusalem issue.

Significantly, in March 2002 the Arab League (22 Arab states), backed by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC, 57 members including the Arab countries) issued an unprecedented peace plan. For the first time, it offered Israel peace, security, and normal relations, provided Israel agrees to the creation of a Palestinian State along the 1967 lines, with East Jerusalem as its capital. This peace initiative, originated by Saudi Arabia, has been reconfirmed by the Arab League several times since, including in 2014, but with no official response from Israel. Ehud Olmert was the only Israeli prime minister who *de facto* accepted this peace initiative. During his negotiations with Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas (2008) he agreed—without his cabinet's approval—to the creation of a Palestinian State more or less along the 1967 lines. East Jerusalem would be the capital of this state, while the holy shrines of the

three religions would be without sovereignty and administered by representatives of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Palestine, Israel and the United States. Abbas did not accept this Israeli offer, and asked for further considerations. This offer was far-reaching by Israeli standards, but apparently not far-reaching enough by Palestinian standards.

Undoubtedly, this extraordinary suggestion by an Israeli PM—like the Clinton parameters of 2000 and the Saudi-Arab peace initiative of 2002—can serve as a basis for settling the Arab-Israeli conflict, and prevent a Muslim-Jewish global war.

On this basis, the new Israeli government must negotiate with the Palestinian Authority and the Arab League, and arrive at an agreed solution. The US and the EU should induce the relevant parties to settle their differences, particularly over the issue of the Temple Mount/Al-Haram Al-Sharif. Otherwise, a bloody Muslim-Jewish conflict could spread globally, especially in European countries. Thus, these countries in particular have a special task to promote peaceful dialogues among their Muslim and Jewish citizens.



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