

Biden's Middle East policy – from Israel's perspective

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After US-Israeli relations have seen a flourishing development during Trump's presidency, Joe Biden's intention to rebalance US foreign policy could bring the era of neglect to the Middle East in which Israel may lose the most. On the one hand, support and attention from the White House for Israel's issues will certainly diminish while on the other hand, new regional dynamics triggered by the American retreat from the Middle East could push the Jewish state back into serious isolation. The question of how to handle Iran's nuclear aspirations seems to emerge as the core point of disagreements between Washington and Jerusalem. While Biden believes it could revive the JCPOA and agree with Iran on the limitation of its nuclear programme, Israel sees Tehran's growing nuclear activity as an existential threat to which only a military response can be given.

During the presidency of Donald Trump US-Israeli relations were in their prime. The former US President made historical gestures towards the Jewish state with decisions such as moving the US embassy to Jerusalem or recognising Israel's sovereignty over Golan. But the former President's foreign policy towards Iran was also redefined considering Israel's strategic interests and security. It was expected that the US' retreat from the region will vigorously continue under Joe Biden's presidency as the president intends to put more focus on American challengers such as Russia and especially China which probably will devalue the Middle East. Israel also knew its honeymoon with the US may come to its end with the leaving of Trump.

Biden's Middle East – new era of isolation for Israel?

On 17 February 2021 US President Joe Biden called Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu for the first time. Even if Netanyahu was the first Middle Eastern leader who received a call from the White House, it took four weeks for the new US President to call the most reliable US ally in the region.¹ Though some believed that the delayed call was addressed more to Netanyahu himself and they thought that relations between Washington and Jerusalem would become more seamless after that Benjamin Netanyahu would have left office, now they are surely disappointed as under the new Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett more and more disagreements arise between him and Biden leaving relations chilly between the two countries.²

But this episode could be interpreted more symbolically, signalling how the new US administration intends to look at the region in itself, as a whole, including Israel, putting the country to a low priority and seeking a new balance in the Israel-Palestine context as well. As a part of this “rebalancing” Biden restored USD 235 aid to the Palestinians³ and – despite the loud rejection from Israel – intended to reopen the US consulate for Palestine affairs in Jerusalem, shut down by Trump in 2019.⁴ But the first time in years, the US administration also criticised Israel for moving ahead in establishing settlements in the West Bank, as the move is seen by Washington to be damaging the prospects of a two-state solution.⁵

*“The administration needs to respect the government of Israel”*⁶ highlighted Israeli Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked, a prominent member of the country's right-wing political camp and the new coalition government to Politico. And this frustration is also expressed in the society. The public is disappointed in the Israel policy of the new US administration and 53% of the Israeli public believe that the Biden Administration is less beneficial for Israel, according to the MITVIM institute (see figure below). Public opinion on the state of US-Israel relations dropped from 8.5 to 6.46 on a scale of 10 between 2020 and 2021 and only 35% of the public rated relations between the two countries as good.⁷

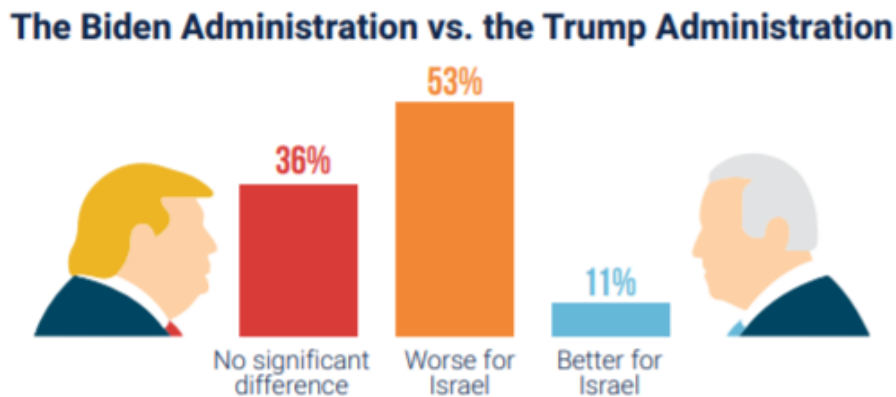


Figure 1: Israeli public opinion on the former and present US administration

Source: MITVIM⁸

Retreating US – new regional dynamics

What could be more alarming for Israel than the new dynamic in the Middle East after the US retreat from the region. The calamitous withdrawal from Afghanistan was just a vivid sign of the end of the “Pax-Americana” in the region where the US no longer intends to be a security provider and a custodian of stability the way it used to be. The war in Afghanistan costed trillions of dollars, thousands of American lives while only limited successes were achieved.⁹ Gradual retreat from the Middle East and continuous reduction of US forces in the region have been going on since the Obama administration and it could have been expected that Biden would want to speed up these processes. The hurried exit from Afghanistan just proves this and suggests that the Middle East could be neglected in the next decade(s) by the US as Biden would like to put more focus on domestic issues such as COVID-19 and the rebalancing of US foreign policy to fend off China. And this perception of the US neglect has already led to new dynamics in the Middle East as disillusioned countries pursue the strengthening of regional cooperation.

On 5 January, 2021 Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman met with Qatari Emir Tamim Al Thani and Emirati Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed for the first time for years on the side-lines of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit in Abu Dhabi. At the GCC Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Egypt agreed to end the dispute with Qatar which had been going on since 2017 over the latter's foreign policy.¹⁰ Furthermore, on 24 November, 2021 Mohammed bin Zayed, the Crown Prince of the UAE, met with Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Ankara. As a result

of the meeting the UAE decided to set up a USD 10 billion fund for investment in Turkey.

These meetings – that seemed impossible to happen before - signal the easing of tensions between countries of the Sunni Middle East. Mainly since the Arab Spring in 2011 Sunni countries have been divided into two groups - Qatar and Turkey on the one side; Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE on the other – on such issues as attitudes towards the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) or Iran. One of the camps led by Saudi Arabia consider the MB and Iran's assertive expansionism as a threat to domestic and regional security and stability. While the other camp supports the MB and has serious trade and economic relationship with Tehran.¹¹

But what is more surprising is that two major regional rivals, Saudi Arabia and Iran are also about to warm their decades-long frosty ties which opposition was fundamentally defining the Middle East for years (see map below). Backchannel talks are going on since April, 2021 between Tehran and Riyadh which could be interpreted as the first steps towards rapprochement since 2016, when Saudi Arabia broke relations with Iran. Iranian president-elect Ebrahim Raisi stated that there are no obstacles to mutually reopening the embassies and to normalise relations with the country's (predominantly) Sunni neighbour.¹² There are several factors which prompted Saudi Arabia to decide on de-escalation of tensions with Iran and with other countries formerly considered hostile. One factor is that President Joe Biden put pressure on Riyadh for the killing of the Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi and suspended arms sales to the country, but the withdrawal of US Patriot systems from King Salman military base also indicates Washington's intention to reshape its relationship with Riyadh, one of the major allies of the US in the region.¹³



Figure 2: Regional rivalry in the Middle-East

Source: *Reddit*¹⁴

There are some overlapping reasons too behind this reconciliation between countries of the Sunni Middle East and the fact that they noticed the low priority Washington is about to give to the region is just one of them. High number of covid casualties as well as the effects of global warming hit the region hard in the last years, which pushed these countries to seek regional cooperation. What is more, one of the main obstacles in the way of rapprochement, namely the Muslim Brotherhood is in retreat which removed some of the ideological intensity from the rivalry between the two Sunni camps. Despite that these prospects could lead to a more stable Middle East in the long run it could be bad news for Israel that believed to be able to further alleviate its isolation and expand the Abraham Accords with such members as Saudi Arabia of the broad anti-Iran coalition.

Iran – the deadliest point of disagreements

Different approaches

After the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 relations between Iran and the US rapidly became hostile as the former pro-American Shah was replaced by the anti-American Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. But the new theocratic government cut off every commercial and diplomatic tie with Israel too, denying its legitimacy as a state, although direct confrontations did not occur between the two states for more than a decade.¹⁵ And Iran's nuclear aspirations and nuclear programme – which was also redefined after the revolution – is one of the main flashpoints of this cold or even hostile relationship between the Islamic Republic, and the US and Israel.

However, Tehran claims its nuclear programme is only aimed at the peaceful usage of nuclear power, which met suspicion and concern from the part of the US and Israel, especially when since 2000s Iran has continuously been expanding its nuclear capacity and increasing the production of enriched uranium. After several failed negotiations world powers and Iran were able to settle on an agreement in 2015 to limit the Persian state's nuclear activity in exchange for the lifting of international sanctions and the provision of aid to Tehran. This agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or also known as the Iranian nuclear deal was signed between Iran and seven parties – the US, France, the United Kingdom, Russia, China, Germany (called the P5+1) and the EU.¹⁶ The treaty was abandoned by the US in 2018. Returning to this agreement seems like the core (or almost the only one) objective of Biden's foreign policy in the Middle East.

However, western countries have seen the JCPOA as a historical agreement highly contributing to the peace in the Middle East, countries from the region, that have long been experiencing the assertive expansion of Tehran were more sceptical. Especially Israel, that has been carrying out operations against Iran's nuclear programme since the 2000s, when it was revealed that Iran had built nuclear facilities secretly in Natanz and Arak and started uranium enrichment activities.¹⁷

This shows that from the beginning there are two major – sometimes opposite – ways and approaches to how Iran's nuclear aspirations should have been and should be handled. While the US believes that Iran could be held back by diplomacy and

multilateral agreements, Israel has always maintained the possibility of military intervention because of Iran's nuclear activity, which is seen as an existential threat to the country. And this difference in approaches between the US and Israel towards a nuclear Iran might further sharpen during the Biden administration.

Israel's shadow war against Iran

Israel's intention to halt the Persian state from obtaining nuclear weapons by any means can be positioned in the greater framework of the Iran-Israel proxy war. In this proxy war Iran supports terror groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza that direct their activities against the Jewish state, and provides them training, financial support and military equipment.¹⁸ The first theatres of these proxy wars were Lebanon (2006 Lebanon war) and Gaza where Israel fought against Iranian backed terror organisations but direct attacks were not carried out against Iranian targets or persons.

This was only true until 2010, when a wave of assassinations targeting Iranian nuclear scientists began, which was allegedly conducted by Israeli intelligence services (see timeline below).¹⁹ The same year, a sophisticated computer worm called "Stuxnet" infected the software used by Iran to control uranium enriching centrifuges at the Natanz plant. According to reports, about 1,000 centrifuges were damaged by the sabotage believed to have been a joint US-Israeli intelligence operation called "Operation Olympic Games"²⁰

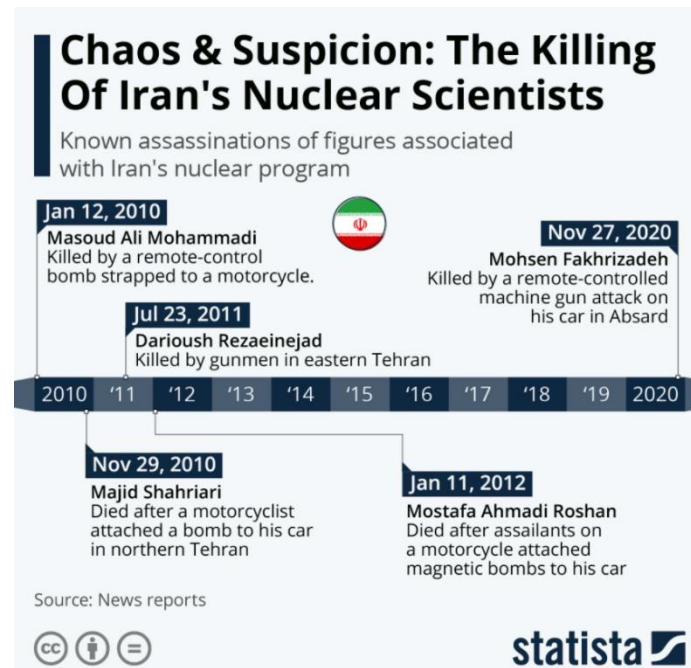


Figure 3: Eliminating Iran's nuclear scientists

Source: Statista²¹

Trump's helping hand

During Donald Trump's presidency, Israel was highly strengthened in its struggles against Iran by the United States as it announced the policy of "maximum pressure" against the regime. While imposing several sanctions on Iran that hit the country's economy hard, on 18 May 2018 Trump withdrew the US from the JCPOA. Trump saw the JCPOA as a flawed, one-sided deal which only focuses on limiting Iran's nuclear programme. But while the treaty tries to ensure that Tehran cannot produce nuclear weapons it failed at containing Iran's ballistic missile programme²², human rights violations²³ and other destabilising activities²⁴. Criticism related to these were articulated by other countries from the region as well. Abandoning JCPOA was applauded by Israel and especially by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who disapproved of the deal since it was signed in 2015.²⁵

"Maximum pressure" policy also included decisive actions against the expansionism and destabilising activity of Iran in the region. Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) - became the first national army to be designated a terror organisation. The foreign policy success of Trump of brokering the historical agreements between the Jewish state and two Arab countries (Bahrein and UAE, followed by Morocco months

later) in the Abraham Accords helped Israel to reduce its regional isolation, and was interpreted as an anti-Iran axis too.²⁶ “Maximum pressure” also included conducting covert or not so covert military actions below the threshold of war against Iran and its proxies. And in this, Israel has its own role (and experience) in Trump’s “maximum pressure” policy.

On 3 January 2020, the US killed Iranian General, Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds forces in a drone strike in Baghdad. Before the US air strike was launched on the convoy of the Iranian general, Israeli intelligence had helped the US to track the military officer by his phone. *“The Israelis, who had access to Soleimani’s numbers, passed them off to the Americans, who traced Soleimani and his current phone to Baghdad”*²⁷ The attack on, and the loss of Soleimani was certainly a huge setback for the Iranian expansion, as the general was a key player in the regime’s regional aspirations leading the Quds forces, which carries out the extraterritorial military operations of Iran. Soleimani was also known as the “hub” between the regime and the Iranian backed foreign militias and terror organisations in the whole region.²⁸

According to Jake Wallis Simons’ article on Spectator, in the past eighteen months Israel carried out three major operations to halt Iran’s nuclear activity. *“These attacks involved as many as a thousand Mossad personnel and were executed with ruthless precision using high-tech weaponry including drones and a quadcopter — and spies within Tehran’s holy of holies, its nuclear program.”*²⁹ On 2 July 2020 there was an explosion in the Iran Centre for Advanced Centrifuges (ICAC) facility at Natanz, which is one of the most important (and the most secure) Iranian nuclear sites. The explosives were built into the supplies that were used in the reconstruction of the building in 2019. These building supplies were sold to Iran by covert Israeli agents posed as construction merchants. The event only caused temporary disturbances. Mossad agents - pretending to be foreign dissidents - also approached ten Iranian nuclear scientists and bribed them to blow up the high security Natanz facility. The secure power system was annihilated by the blast causing a blackout. 90% of the centrifuges were destroyed, resulting in a shutdown for up to nine months. To disrupt the regime’s attempt to restore the Natanz facility, on 23 June, 2021 an explosion shook the Iran Centrifuge Technology Company (TESA), which is responsible for the production of the centrifuges. The explosion was carried out by a remote, armed quadcopter.³⁰

Future perspectives – JCPOA 2.0 and war against Iran

Biden's Iran policy – reviving JCPOA

The timing of these multiple covert attacks on Iranian nuclear capacities carried out by Israel is not a coincidence. When in November 2020 Donald Trump lost the US elections Israel lost a strong ally and supporter of its issues including its struggles against nuclear Iran. Joe Biden expressed already in his campaign, that he intended to use another, more diplomatic approach against Iran and that he is willing to return to the JCPOA. In this spirit Robert Malley – who had worked in the former Obama administration as a national security advisor and was involved in the JCPOA negotiations in 2015 - has been chosen as a special envoy to Iran while rhetoric messaging went back and forth between the two countries on returning to the JCPOA.³¹ After months of argument between Washington and Tehran over who should take the first step, on 9 December, 2021 talks finally resumed in Vienna between Iran and world powers to somehow save JCPOA.³² It is apparently not an easy task and Iran's new hardliner president, Ebrahim Raisi's conditions are still unclear. There are only guesses as to what he will demand in turn to limiting Iran's nuclear capacity which has been dramatically increasing during the last years.³³

Israel also knew Joe Biden's intentions to return to the agreement, which was always opposed by Jerusalem, they said that it should only be no more than a starting point for further negotiations on the containment of Iran's other minacious activities. That is why the number of Israel's covert operations have multiplied during the US presidential transition and before JCPOA negotiations resumed. But Iran's growing nuclear activity also gives reasons why these attacks were timed the way they were and multiplied in the past months.

Israel preparing for a war?

It is clear now that Trump's approach of putting maximum – mostly economic – pressure on Iran did not live up to expectations and brought only minor gains to the US and Israel. In spite of the fact that Iran's economy weakened a lot by US sanctions, they did not bring a regime change about, they did not even force the leaders of the Persian state to sit at the negotiation table to make a deal that is more advantageous

for the US and Israel.³⁴ “Maximum pressure” instead decreased the security and stability of the region and pushed Iran closer to a nuclear weapon than ever.³⁵

Iran - contrary to its previous promise – did not abide by its commitment in the JCPOA, it saw itself betrayed by the US, and expanded its nuclear capacity, infrastructure and uranium enrichment activity.³⁶ In early 2020 Iran increased the number and the capacity of its centrifuges and its nuclear fuel production, which effectively meant the end of the JCPOA.³⁷ In October 2020, Iran started to build an underground centrifuge assembly plant in Natanz – reported by a UN watchdog - after one of its sites was destroyed in a “sabotage” attack by Israel - according to Iranian assumption.³⁸ According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report, published in the end of 2020,³⁹ Iran has 2442.9 kg stockpile of low enriched uranium, 12 times beyond the 202.8 kg limit set by the JCPOA (see chart below). Iran’s “breakout-time” - the timeframe they need to make a nuclear weapon – is now believed to be less than a year.⁴⁰ In April 2021, the UN nuclear watchdog reported that Tehran had begun the process of enriching uranium to 60% fissile purity. (3.67% purity level is suitable for most civilian usage, 90% is needed for a nuclear weapon)⁴¹

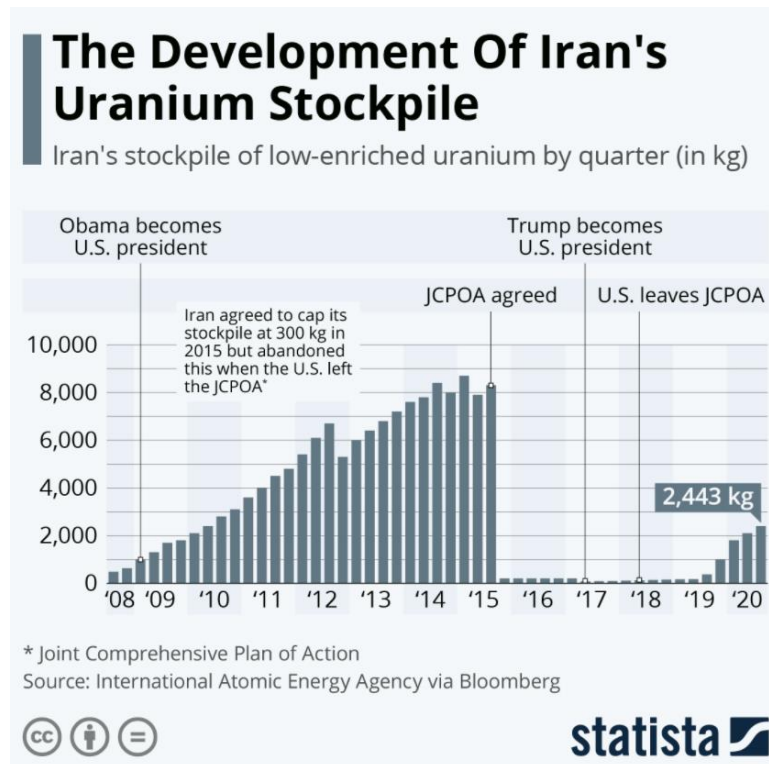


Figure 4: Iran's uranium stockpile before and after JCPOA

Source: Statista⁴²

Iran's expanding nuclear activity is seen in Israel as an existential threat to the country. According to the monthly Israeli Voice Index that was published by The Israel Democracy Institute in November⁴³ a large majority, 61% of the Israeli Jews think that Iran constitutes an existential danger to Israel. While the Israeli think-tank MITVIM asked in its annual foreign policy index what steps Israel should take against Iran and only a small minority, 18% of the Israeli public supports a new nuclear deal with Iran, while 31% would support military actions against Tehran even without international aid. (See chart below.) This poll was conducted in September 2021. If we take a look at The Israel Democracy Institute's index on the same question it shows even more alarming numbers. The institute asked: *“Do you agree or disagree with the view that Israel should militarily attack Iran's nuclear facilities even without American consent?”*⁴⁴ 51% of the entire sample agreed that Israel could attack Iran even without a “green light” from Washington and only less than a third, 31% thought the opposite.

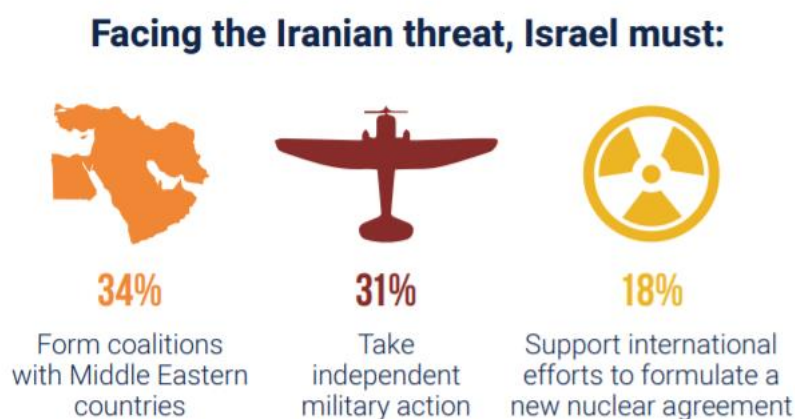


Figure 5: Israeli public opinion on what steps Israel should do against Iran

Source: MITVIM⁴⁵

The growing tensions are also reflected in the rhetoric between the two states. In November the commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Aerospace Force stated that Israel is *“doomed to termination”*⁴⁶ and that any move from Jerusalem against the Islamic Republic will expedite that demise. On 11 December Defence Minister Benny Gantz told a press conference at the Israeli American Council that he instructed the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to begin operational preparations for action against Iran,

as negotiations with Iran saw no progress in Vienna.⁴⁷ Tensions also went high after Reuters reported⁴⁸ that the US and Israel are preparing a joint military drill simulating the bombing of Iranian nuclear facilities as a worst-case scenario if the nuke talks in Vienna should fail. As a response Tehran warned of a “heavy price” for aggressors and Tehran Times published an Israeli map with targets within Iran’s reach with the headline *“Just one wrong step”*⁴⁹

Conclusion

Joe Biden’s Middle East policy and the US retreat from the region seemingly meant a setback in US-Israeli relations. While Israel hoped earlier that it could finally break out from regional isolation with the support of the US and expand the Abraham Accords, now the Jewish state may witness the reconciliation of regional rivals triggered by US’ neglect towards them. These regional dynamics also reduce Israel’s chance of forming a regional coalition against Iran.

As Iran expands its nuclear capacity and continuously increases its uranium enrichment activity Israel feels more and more concerned as they see Tehran’s nuclear aspirations as an existential threat to the country. But the question of who and by what means is going to halt Iran to become a nuclear power is still unanswered. The upcoming months will decide whether the US and other global powers are able to revive JCPOA and hold back Iran’s nuclear aspirations by diplomatic measures or Israel will turn its long on-going shadow war into overt military action against the Persian state which is definitely going to stumble the region into a widespread conflagration.

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