

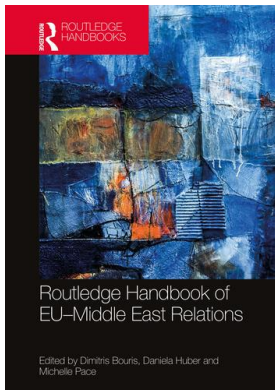
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Dimitris Bouris, Daniela Huber, Michelle Pace

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Filippo Dionigi

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9

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY AND EU–MIDDLE EAST RELATIONS

Filippo Dionigi

Introduction

Given the geographical proximity, its global political and economic relevance and the millennia of history of close interactions, it should not come as a surprise that the Middle East has become an area of central concern for the EU's foreign policy. Consequently, EU–Middle East relations have been at the centre of a growing body of IR literature at least since the end of the Cold War.

Without the ambition of proposing an exhaustive review of all theoretical perspectives, or a complete review of the vast literature on the subject, the following pages illustrate some of the most common modes of IR theory's enquiry into the EU's external action towards the Middle East.¹ This overview of the debate confirms that IR theory offers a wide array of conceptual and analytical instruments that allows for an innovative understanding of the EU's role in this region by questioning the presumed exceptionalism of Brussels, interrogating its identity and enquiring into the nature of its power.²

The assessment of this field of study undertaken here concludes that IR theory sheds light on the dynamics that motivate the EU's action and what factors make such action effective or ineffective. Furthermore, it critically interrogates the construction of the EU's external action discourse and narrative. Yet, much of this debate seems to be limited to an operationalisation of broader IR theory discussions to the specific field of EU studies. Thus, whereas IR theory has served the purpose of advancing EU studies, the same cannot be said of EU studies' contribution to IR theory, perhaps with the exception of the debate on the EU as a civilian or normative power.

The same applies with regard to Middle East area studies because EU studies' scholars often adopt the Middle East instrumentally as a testing ground for hypotheses, thus serving the purpose of their analysis of the EU's external actions. This approach does not contribute in a comparable measure to the study of the Middle East, which, especially in certain realist accounts or in security studies, is often represented as an area mainly dominated by security concerns, endemic instability and anti-liberal forces such as authoritarianisms and Islamism.

To be sure, this is not only the responsibility of EU studies' scholars and, indeed, the Middle East has also been characterised for a long time by region-wide persistent conflicts, while the Arab uprisings of 2011 have highlighted a complex interlocking of democratic, liberal and security demands which both Islamism and authoritarian rule have competed to address or repress.

Yet, ideally, the study of the EU's policy towards the Middle East should advance our understanding of the EU as well as that of the region through greater scholarly inclusion and by referring to the Middle East not only as an object but also as a subject of enquiry.

The EU and the Middle East: antithetical exceptionalisms?

At the core of the debate on EU–Middle Eastern relations lies an examination of the nature of the EU as an international actor, as well as the sources and forms of its power. Scholarly work has constructed the EU as an exceptional entity by referring to its supranational character which questions conventional assumptions of statehood. Similarly, the modes in which the EU exercises its power within and without its borders has been considered exceptional given the lack of an institutionalised monopoly of force and its foundations upon avowedly peaceful and liberal premises.

François Duchêne has opened the way to a conceptualisation of the EU as an actor endowed with a unique civilian power needed “for the diffusion of civilian and democratic standards” (Duchêne, 1973: 20). Hedley Bull responded arguing that European states would have instead benefitted from greater military power in the form of a regional alliance (Bull, 1982). An influential article by Ian Manners (2002) brought forward the idea of the EU as an exceptional entity referring primarily to the notion of “normative power”. According to this account, EU power rests in its capacity to establish “what passes as normal in world politics” (Manners, 2002: 253). It is on the basis of this normative power that states targeted by the EU's foreign policy are then pressed to recognise the universal legitimacy of its constitutive principles, including peace, liberty, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

With the end of the bipolar era, the EU has increasingly devoted its attention to the development of external actions towards the Middle East. Several policy frameworks (such as the Barcelona Process, the European–Mediterranean Partnership and the European Neighbourhood Policy, the Union for the Mediterranean, etc.) have targeted this region, intending to increase the EU's relevance in a neighbouring area that is the fulcrum of global geopolitical, strategic and economic interests. Yet, implementing policies towards this part of the world was bound to become a tough test.

Indeed, the Middle East has also been interpreted, rightly or wrongly, as an exceptional region. But, if the EU has been portrayed as exceptional for its embodiment of liberal principles, for its supra-nationality, and for not having a significant military status, the Middle East stands out as a region that is antithetical to these values given the persistence of war and conflicts, systematic human rights abuses, diffused authoritarianism, weak rule of law, state-led economies, widespread inequality and poverty, and the proliferation of areas of limited statehood. The EU and the Middle East both have a reputation for being exceptional contexts in IR but for opposite reasons, thus making their relations a case of special interest because it juxtaposes two opposite entities that inevitably need to find a *modus vivendi* given their proximity.

The IR theory debate on EU–Middle Eastern relations, as a result, enquires into these opposite exceptionalisms to shed light on the dynamics that animate their relations and what these tell us about the actors involved.

Realism and the EU's foreign policy towards the Middle East: debunking EU exceptionalism

As Fred Halliday noted (Halliday, 2005: 25), IR theorists tend to consider the Middle East as a context that naturally conforms to *realpolitik* whereby the pursuit of power and the concern for

security regularly frustrate normative commitments. This makes realism a privileged perspective to enquire into Middle Eastern politics and to interrogate the nature of the EU's intervention in this part of the world.

On the other hand, realism does not appear an ideal candidate for the analysis of the EU, because the state-centric and anarchical assumptions upon which it relies hardly fit the nature of the EU as a multi-state supranational organisation which embodies one of the most institutionalised forms of inter-state cooperation.

Yet, realist and, more often, neorealist accounts of the EU's foreign policy offer refreshing views on how Brussels acts towards this part of the world that cannot be provided by other interpretative frameworks. Fulvio Attinà (2003), for example, provided an overview of how a realist interpretation of EU Mediterranean policy looks like compared to a liberal perspective. Realism highlights elements of inconsistency between what the European Mediterranean Partnership intended to achieve and what it turned out to be in practice (Attinà, 2003: 184–187).

Hyde-Price (2006) proposed a structural realist interpretation of the ways in which the EU navigated through different historical phases from bipolarism to the unipolar moment following the end of the Cold War. The result of this process was the ESDP. In his view, the ESDP is an indicator of the failure of EU civilian power which became evident in situations like the Balkan wars. This led EU Member States to form a coordinated security and defence effort that responded to the US-led unipolarity at the time and to address the internal multipolarity of the EU (Hyde-Price, 2006: 231).

The EU's democracy promotion policy is also not spared a sneering realist look. Cavatorta et al. (Cavatorta et al., 2008), for example, debated cases such as that of Morocco and criticised the interpretation of the EU's action in this context as a manifestation of normative power. Instead, the EU turns out to be a rationalist utility-maximiser rather than a normative principled actor, because it favours the maintenance of the status quo over the implementation of genuinely democratic reform.

A key explanatory factor is the Middle Eastern context, where the influence of Islamist political actors makes the current ruling elite a preferable partner to opposition movements.³ The EU then turns into a nominal promoter of liberal values, which lends its support to autocratic regimes and local elites in the name of security and stability. In the words of Cavatorta et al. "As stability is the name of the game, this demonstrates that the EU is acting rationally rather than normatively. Otherwise, democracy would be promoted irrespective of the consequences for the EU's interests" (Cavatorta et al., 2008: 15).

Interestingly, the issue of a lack of consistency between declared objectives and implemented policies is also reiterated in contexts where authoritarianism is not as prominent. Peter Seeberg (2009) reviewed the role of the EU's democracy promotion in Lebanon. If authoritarianism was the real impediment to the implementation of democratic reforms, then Lebanon should have been the ground for successful reform given its weak statehood. Yet, Seeberg observed that EU democratisation policies have demonstrated only a tepid commitment to reform. The perception of Islamism as a threat to stability and security is, also in this case, a factor explaining the EU's reluctance to the implementation of its reformist commitments. Furthermore, geopolitical structures play an important role. Lebanon is at the centre of contrasting forces like Iranian-Saudi tensions and is fully involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Similar considerations apply to the case of the Arab-Israeli conflict (see for example Tocci, 2009). The EU is described as an actor that adapts to regional and global structural constraints either by balancing, bandwagoning or prioritising relations with Israel over Palestine, or aligning with the US leadership. This leads to the conclusion that the EU in this case also seems to favour the status quo over change (Tocci, 2009: 397–398).

The Arab uprisings of 2011 appeared to open a window of opportunity for the EU to rethink its approach to the region and, indeed, changes have been recorded at least to a limited extent (Dandashly, 2018). But, the ensuing outbreak of war in contexts like Libya, Syria and Yemen, or the restoration of authoritarian rule in Egypt have, once again, become useful illustrations for scholars to highlight the limits of the EU in acting consistently with its constitutive principles as a unified force. Issues like security, conflicting economic interests and migration, among others, have a highly divisive impact on its members and Middle Eastern political actors capitalise on these to weaken the EU and undermine its capacity to project normative influence (Menon, 2011; Bicchi, 2014; Noutcheva, 2015).

Realist perspectives on the EU's foreign policy towards the region confirm how the Middle East lends itself to interpretations that debunk the idea of normative power and the EU's presumed exceptionalism. No starry-eyed account of the EU as a benevolent promoter of liberal democratic principles finds place in a realist perspective, whereby the EU is portrayed as a conventional security-maximiser, ready to sacrifice liberal values on the altar of stability and security. In this sense, realism has the merit of providing a critical angle on the EU's action towards the Middle East but in doing so, it often relies on an analysis of this region that is oversecured and tends to overstate its presumably exceptional nature. As we shall see, other theoretical perspectives offer interpretations of the EU's action in the Mediterranean neighbourhood that provide a more nuanced and less exceptional representation of this part of the world.

Liberalism: silence speaks volumes?

One aspect that further corroborates the conformity of the Middle East to a realist reading of the EU's external action is the paucity of examples of liberal IR theory applied to the EU's external action towards this part of the world.

International Relations liberal theory highlights the dynamics of interstate cooperation and shows how there are patterns of international institutionalism that can be explained in rational and functional terms, notwithstanding the challenging nature of international politics (Beach, 2015). Yet, the operationalisation of this theory in EU–Middle Eastern relations seems unlikely given the fact that there seems to be little convergence of interests and that there are no shared institutional structures bringing together the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean. The comparison with Eastern Europe clarifies this aspect. In the Eastern neighbourhood, the EU used instruments like prospective membership to facilitate reform and socialisation, and a clear push to democratisation and liberalism was present in the aftermath of the Cold War. Furthermore, the interests of political elites respectively in the East and the West of Europe have relied on substantial areas of overlap, as concerns containing Russia's influence for example. These conditions made liberal theories in the form of concepts like Europeanisation and socialisation flourish when applied to the Eastern neighbourhood, but their application to the Middle East is not as common because such conditions are significantly less consolidated (Kelley, 2006).⁴

Not only has EU membership (except for Turkey) never been an option in the Middle East but a convergence of shared interests across the shores of the Mediterranean is also perceived as minimal by the respective political elites when compared to the situation that led to EU enlargement eastward. Besides, foreign policymaking towards the Middle East has a highly divisive impact among EU Member States, which in this region have competing economic interests (for example energy markets), and raises thorny historical questions such as relations with Israel, and memories of the colonial past (Pace and Roccu, 2020).

A partial exception has been Turkey, which, with much hesitation from EU states, has been prospected the possibility of membership in exchange for reform. In this case, there are

instances of liberal interpretations of Turkish/EU relations, but with the rise to power of the Islamist AKP Party and other conflicting issues like Cyprus, the Kurdish question, the Syrian war and migration management, the situation has muted towards a far less cooperative relationship (Cengiz and Hoffmann, 2013; Noutcheva and Aydin-Düzgit, 2012; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2020).

The fact that liberal theory has not fully engaged with the analysis of EU foreign policy towards the Middle East, as much as it does for example in the EU's external action towards eastern Europe, corroborates the perception that the Middle East is not a case that conforms well to its assumptions. In a sense, if Middle Eastern exceptionalism seems to invite realist engagement it equally deters a liberal perspective on the subject.

Constructivism: is the EU's external action what the Middle East makes of it?

The gap left by liberal IR theory has been filled by an extensive constructivist literature focusing on the dynamics of EU–Middle Eastern interactions with regards to policies like democracy promotion, human rights, economic cooperation and conflict management. Especially if we consider conventional forms of constructivism (Checkel, 2007), drawing a sharp distinction between this approach and a liberal perspective can sometimes be difficult (Beach, 2015: 23) because these enquiries focus on practices and norms that embody core liberal values. Yet, this constructivist literature stands out for its reliance on explanatory apparatuses, such as norms diffusion processes, or the logic of appropriateness and persuasion (Börzel and Risse, 2012; Checkel, 2007).

Furthermore, what sets apart this literature is its attention not only to inter-institutional dynamics between the EU and Middle Eastern states but also its focus on domestic and inter-societal interactions. For example, a constructivist account pays greater attention to civil society actors within the context of Middle Eastern states, and the analysis takes into account how the reception of norms promoted by the EU is made possible or obstructed by domestic forces like political elites. The outcome of these enquiries reflects the broader trend of constructivism in IR as seizing the middle ground (Adler, 2016) between rationalist theories (such as liberalism and realism) and interpretivist approaches (on which more follows).

From the constructivist angle, the EU's impact is not solely dependent on its capacity to influence the Mediterranean neighbourhood, but also depends on how this influence is received and processed by local socio-political structures. It is not a coincidence that these accounts can occasionally converge with realist perspectives because they both illustrate the challenges of reconciling diverging interests and identities between actors. The difference between the two, however, is on the epistemological and ontological premises of each respective theory. Constructivism conceptualises the EU and all other international actors as constituting their respective identities through interactions. Identity and interests in this account are highly inter-dependent, but in the case of realism, interests are often understood as simply resulting from a rationalist calculation of material benefits following a certain course of action.

Some studies observe that the EU's democracy and human rights promotion, as well as economic partnerships, end up being co-opted in the survival strategies of existing regimes (Van Hüllen, 2012): Thus, converging with the realist conceptualisation of an EU that prioritises the status quo over reform to maintain stability and achieve security. Others highlight that the credibility of the EU as a genuine liberal norms' entrepreneur has been compromised by internal contradictions and hesitations that weakened its impact on the promotion of liberal principles and reforms. This is particularly persuasive in the case of Turkey's membership, for example

(Noutcheva and Aydin-Düzgit, 2012; Rumelili, 2011), or in the case of elections and the participation in democratic processes of Islamist parties (Ziadeh, 2018; Voltolini and Colombo, 2018), where the EU has been exposed to criticism due to decisions that question its normative status and identity.

The Arab uprisings of 2011 and the subsequent revision of engagement dynamics with local political groups (Roccu and Voltolini, 2018b) have opened new scenarios for EU–Mediterranean relations and potential opportunities for transformative engagements in the region. Authors like Voltolini and Colombo (2018) for example register a more committed, yet selective, dialogical approach of the EU towards Islamist actors in states such as Tunisia. Nevertheless, the sudden turn of events towards war or the restoration of authoritarian rule has reshaped the priorities of the EU's foreign policy agenda towards the region.

The Arab–Israeli conflict is another important focus of enquiry. Towards the Arab–Israeli conflict converge a number of challenges for the EU such as the question of EU–US relations, the history of the EU Member States' relations with Israel (Pace and Bilgic, 2018), the question of the EU's approach to Islamist movements (Pace and Pallister-Wilkins, 2018) and the diverse policies of EU Member States towards the conflict (Pardo and Gordon, 2018). These issues make the case a difficult test for EU foreign policy and therefore attracts academic interest.

One example is the debate on the EU's normative power applied to the Arab–Israeli conflict. Persson (2017) claims that in the difficult context of this conflict, the EU's normative power does have a significant influence. Pace (2007) and Gordon and Pardo (2015), however, disagree and see the Arab–Israeli conflict as the context in which the idea of normative power reveals its limitations, highlighting the dominance of the EU's economic interests over political principles and the role of normative identity as internal to the EU, but not significant in its foreign policy. The Arab–Israeli conflict then turns into a testing case for constructivist accounts to assess the validity of the EU's normative power thesis, but unlike a realist perspective, it offers greater nuance by giving more credit to the role of local dynamics at the receiving end of the EU's external action.

In sum, a constructivist perspective, in its conventional and liberal-oriented form, offers an interpretation of the EU's foreign policy towards the Middle East that relies on greater analytical depth with regard to the dynamics that unfold, also within the domestic and regional sphere in response to the EU's action. With their assumptions of the mutual constitution of identity through interaction, constructivist approaches do not necessarily contrapose the image of a pragmatic and security-oriented EU to a principles-driven EU. Instead, they offer an interpretation of the EU's foreign policy that is both constitutive of and constituted by its Middle Eastern interlocutors (Roccu and Voltolini, 2018a). These interactions, in turn, end up constituting an actor that adapts to local dynamics and responds to its internal tensions in an attempt at balancing its identity with the exigencies of the circumstances. Paraphrasing a classic constructivist statement, the EU's external action towards the Middle East turns out to be what Middle Eastern “states make of it” (Wendt, 1992), rather than vice versa.

Critical approaches: questioning discourse and constitution of the EU as a regional actor

The IR theory debate on the EU's foreign policy towards the Middle East also features contributions that go beyond epistemological mind–world dualism (Jackson, 2011: 37) by analysing how IR as a discipline represents and reproduces the EU as an actor. These reflectivist approaches may originate from different theoretical frameworks such as Gramscian hegemony theory (Diez, 2013), Foucauldian poststructuralism (Malmvig, 2014), postcolonial theory (Pace,

2002) or critical constructivist perspectives (Del Sarto, 2016). Each of these maintains its specificity, but they all share the intent of undertaking the study of the EU's external actions towards the Middle East by critically questioning the very conceptualisation of the EU as an actor operating in this region.

Unsurprisingly, the representation of the EU as a normative power has been a central subject of scrutiny. This time the critical emphasis is not on the heuristic value of the concept, its explanatory value or its effective operationalisation in the analysis of the EU's external action in the region. Instead, the analysis centres on how this representation of the EU's power as normative shapes our understanding of this actor in both scholarship and politics. In other words, a critical theory approach to this subject questions whether speaking of the EU as a normative power is solely a way to tell "what the EU is about" or whether it is also a way to portray its image so that it reflects its interests and, thus, power. IR theory representations of the EU do not enjoy a privileged epistemological status that rises above the world of EU politics in the Middle East but is part of it, because subject and object in critical theory epistemology are not disconnected from each other. Hence, IR theory not only explains what the EU is about but through its discourse also contributes to its constitution as a normative actor and therefore perpetuates its power (Cebeci, 2012).

According to Thomas Diez, the problem with the idea of EU normative power is neither related to the fact that its empirical record in the Middle East unmasks a discrepancy between principles and actions, nor that interests and EU values may be in contradiction. The problem is the very idea of constructing the EU's power as normative because this discursive artifice contributes to the production of a dichotomy and hierarchy between a presumably benevolent and rightful EU and an "other" that is regularly represented as a security threat, or an inferior entity according to civilisational standards, or a rogue state in breach of international and EU norms. Phenomena such as the negotiations for Turkish membership or the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership epitomise this phenomenon (Diez, 2005: 633).

Pace (2007) develops Diez's argument further, observing that the EU's normative power is not only a discursive construction but should also provoke rethinking upon its effectiveness among policymakers. For example, the objective of progressively socialising the Palestinian and Israeli conflictual parts into the normative structure of the EU as a conflict resolution strategy does not bear fruit. Conceptualising the EU as a normative power obscures the reasons for its ineffectiveness, such as competition and divergence between its members, and a widening gap between rhetoric and action. The EU's presumed normative power, therefore, fails to effectively materialise on the ground in this context and turns out to be a way of conceptualising the EU and its power that highlights its inconsequentiality rather than its effectiveness.

Critical constructivist perspectives also weigh in the debate. For example, in Raffaella Del Sarto's analysis of the EU as a normative empire, the conventional dichotomies between interest and identity or rationality vs. values to be found commonly in realist and liberal accounts are reconsidered and their apparent tension is solved through a representation of the EU as empire. According to Del Sarto, the fact that the EU projects its power to the region on the basis of normative principles and not through brute force is not because of its history and presumed identity as a benevolent peace-loving institution, but because this *modus operandi* is consistent with rational calculation and security maximisation. Here, similarly to the other approaches, the critical engagement with the EU's external action towards the region entails its reconceptualisation, this time as an imperial entity whereby the "export of rules" is part of a strategy that reflects both the EU's interests and the constitution of the EU as a normative actor.

Critical reflexivist approaches to the subject, then, have the merit of advancing the scholarly debate on the EU's external action by questioning the terms and conceptual assumptions upon which it relies. This is a useful endeavour because much of EU studies risk revolving around a set of issues and several conceptual instruments (e.g. normative power or the dichotomy between interest and identity) taken for granted due to the familiarity they offer to scholars in thinking about the EU and its action/inaction in the Middle East. Yet, this can potentially lead to scholarly groupthink and self-referentiality, whereby consensus is found by an insufficiently critical engagement with the underlying assumptions of the dominant scholarly discourse. A reflectivist approach, instead, is a useful way to stick the neck out of conventional perspectives and advance the debate.

Conclusions

There is no question that IR theory's enquiry into the EU's foreign policy towards the Middle East offers many angles to critically reconsider the impact of the EU on this region. This is because the different ontological and epistemological assumptions of each of these theories, whether realist, constructivist or poststructuralist, question conceptualisations of the EU's external action that would otherwise appear regularly in our scholarly, political and everyday discourse without undergoing adequate critical scrutiny.

Across the different theoretical approaches analysed earlier, the Middle East regularly recurs as a "least likely" (George and Bennett, 2005: 170) testing case for the confutation, validation or development of theoretical hypotheses. The perception, accurate or not, of this region as an exceptionally challenging context makes it suitable for this purpose. The outcome of each test varies from one assessment to the other and from one theory to the other.

What, however, may be problematic is that this use of the Middle East as a "laboratory" for theory testing is seldom concerned with decentring the perspective of the analysis to look into the internal dynamics of those states and non-state actors that are at the receiving end of the EU's external action. While there are exceptions (see for example Bilgin, 2005; Teti et al., 2020; Huber, 2020), the voice and views of scholars and societal actors from within the region deserve greater inclusion in the debate because they contribute to a problematisation of the presumed exceptionality of the region.

Another consideration relates to the degree to which the EU's foreign policy debate has served the broader objective of advancing the IR theory discipline at large. Given the innovative and peculiar nature of the EU as an international actor, one would expect the study of this subject to break new ground. But, at least as far as external action towards the Middle East is concerned, the disciplinary analysis resonates closely with broader IR theory trends rather than generating new ones and ends up being a self-serving exercise instead of enlightening new policymaking. This is a missed opportunity. Rarely elsewhere in the world have there been cases of a supranational entity like the EU engaging institutionally and systematically with a regional context like the Middle East. This means that the potential for innovative theory and innovative action is there, but scholarly enquiry on this subject is often satisfied with a mere operationalisation of pre-existing theoretical frameworks adjusted for the specifics of this context.

Each in its own way, all IR theories have the potential of contributing to greater and better understanding of the EU's action towards the Middle East. However, their reliance on conceptions of the Middle East as an instrumental theory-testing case, as certain EU-centric perspectives, and subordination to broader IR theoretical trends are aspects that need to be taken into account to improve the research agenda of a crucial field of scholarly research.

Notes

- 1 The Middle East here is understood in a loose sense as the geographical area comprising the North of Africa and West Asia. The region is also referred to occasionally as the Mediterranean region, to avoid repetition, although not entirely geographically accurate.
- 2 An important note for the reader is that while the present discussion may associate the work of a scholar to a certain IR theory, this does not entail that it is always possible or appropriate to consider this or that author as solely wedded to this theory or another. Often scholars tend not to simply subscribe to a unique theory, and they may change their stance over time or from case to case. The reconstruction offered in this text relies on broad IR theory categories as ideal types which are adopted instrumentally mainly for the purpose of structuring the analysis.
- 3 It should be noted however, that, in some cases, Islamist parties have also been integrated in the governing coalition thus moving away from their opposition role.
- 4 See below for the case of Turkey.

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