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Trump's First 100 Days and Syria

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The Middle East that President Trump inherited, observed the veteran commentator Hisham Melham in November 2016, was “figuratively and in some places literally unraveling.” Melham noted that alienated officials throughout the Middle East had blamed the Obama administration for not confronting Iran on its military interventions in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen; the explosive rise of the Islamic State; and especially for its failure to uphold its red line and punish the Asad regime for using chemical weapons against civilians in 2013. As a result, President Trump was cautiously welcomed by these officials as the embodiment of “anybody but Obama.”¹

Yet during his first four months in office, many in the American media, academy, and former officials have argued that there has been more continuity than change in Trump’s Middle East policies.² In February, *The New York Times* reported that Trump was “embracing some key pillars of the former administration’s strategy,”³ while another observer described Trump’s foreign policy as “Obama Lite – the exact same policies, implemented by the exact same people.”⁴ Nonetheless, in almost every Trump declaration one can see the new

¹ Hisham Melham, “[What does a Trump presidency mean for the Middle East?](#),” *al-Arabiya*, November 26, 2016.

² Daniel Benaim; “[Trump’s First 100 Days in the Middle East](#),” Center for American Progress (CAP), April 26, 2017; [Richard Burt, “A Grand Strategy for Trump,”](#) NationalInterest.org, April 13, 2017; Marc Lynch, “[Trump’s Middle East Policies Are Boorish and Belligerent, But Surprisingly Normal](#),” Warontherocks.com, April 3, 2017; Ronald R. Krebs, “[Is Foreign Policy Leadership a Fool’s Errand?](#),” NationalInterest.org, February 12, 2017.

³ Mark Landler, Peter Baker, and David E. Sanger, “[Trump Embraces Pillars of Obama’s Foreign Policy](#),” *The New York Times*, February 2, 2017.

⁴ Lee Smith, “[Will Obama’s Foreign Policy Wizards Save Trump?](#),” *Tablet*, March 15, 2017.

president shadow boxing with the Obama legacy; if there is one “overarching theme” to Trump’s foreign policies, it is a rejection of Obama’s approach.⁵

First, and most broadly, Trump does not appear committed to retrenchment.⁶ Trump is not trying to reduce American commitments abroad in the name of strengthening the U.S. at home. Trump appears to want the “brilliant incoherence” of foreign-policy activism without assuming the costs of his predecessors.⁷

In terms of the Middle East, perhaps the most visible practical change in the Trump approach has been its coordination with Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. While Obama kept those states at arm’s length, Trump’s team appears to be closely coordinating its regional policy with King Abdullah II of Jordan, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt, and King Salman (and his son, Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman) in Saudi Arabia.⁸ Trump wants to work through these regimes to achieve its three Middle East priorities: defeating the Islamic State (IS); implementing a ceasefire and a plan for political transition in Syria; and, a regional agreement on Israeli-Palestinian peace.⁹

The second clear break from the Obama approach in Trump’s Middle East policy is its approach to Iran. *The Economist* referred to the Trump posture on Iran as “A new confrontation.”¹⁰ Indeed, on April 19, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson issued a confrontational five-minute public statement on Iran saying, “Today I’d like to address Iran’s alarming and ongoing provocations that export terror and violence destabilizing more than one country at a time...Iran spends its treasure and time disrupting peace.”¹¹ Moreover, he explicitly rejected Obama’s biggest foreign policy legacy, the nuclear deal with Iran, claiming that the JCPOA “only

⁵ Jonathan S. Tobin, “[Trump Isn’t Repeating Obama’s Middle East Mistakes](#),” *National Review*, February 3, 2017.

⁶ James Jay Carafano, “[Trump Has a Foreign Policy Strategy](#),” NationalInterest.org, April 20, 2017; Josh Rogin “[There is no Trump foreign policy doctrine, but there is a structure](#),” *Washington Post*, April 27, 2017. For the U.S. Secretary of State’s detailed statement of how Trump’s “America First” translates into U.S. foreign policy, see: Rex W. Tillerson, “[Remarks to U.S. Department of State Employees](#),” May 3, 2017.

⁷ Stephan Sestanovich, “[The Brilliant Incoherence of Trump’s Foreign Policy](#),” *The Atlantic*, May 2017.

⁸ “[Trump Hosts Sisi in Washington, Moves to Reset Bilateral Relations With Egypt](#),” *as-Sharq al-Awsat*, April 3, 2017; Osama al-Sharif, “[Why king’s visit to Washington was essential for Jordan](#),” *al-Monitor*, February 7, 2017; Emily Whalen, “[Did Trump get played by the king of Jordan like someone new to the region?](#),” *ForeignPolicy.com*, April 10, 2017; Bernard Haykel, “[The resetting of U.S.-Saudi relations](#),” *Washington Times*, March 17, 2017; Josh Rogin, “[Trump resets U.S.-Saudi relations - in Saudi Arabia’s favor](#),” *Washington Post*, March 16, 2017; Hussein Ibish, “[Riyadh and Washington are growing ever closer](#),” *The National*, April 22, 2017.

⁹ Uri Savir, “[Trump’s Mideast plan starts taking shape](#),” *al-Monitor*, April 30, 2017.

¹⁰ “[A new confrontation](#),” *The Economist*, February 25, 2017.

¹¹ “[Secretary Tillerson Makes a Statement on Iran](#),” U.S. Department of State, April 19, 2017.

delays [Iran's] goal of becoming a nuclear state." Again sharply breaking with the Obama policy, Tillerson said, "This deal represents the same failed approach of the past that brought us to the current imminent threat we face with North Korea," adding that "the Trump administration has no intention of passing the buck to a future administration on Iran."

Beyond defeating the Islamic State by seizing its putative Syrian capital, Raqqa,¹² a clear picture of the broad U.S. policy for Syria has yet to emerge.¹³ This has led some critics to argue that Trump is simply continuing Obama's policy there.¹⁴ *The Economist* labeled Trump's policy "confused," arguing "any lingering notion that Mr. Trump might strike a grand bargain with Russia over Syria is dead."¹⁵ In any case, those who still entertain the notion of a US-Russian "grand bargain"¹⁶ that would concede Russia's position in Ukraine and the Crimea, in exchange for Russian compromise in Syria minimize the changing context in Syria, which has presented Russia with diminishing returns on its military intervention since early 2016.¹⁷ Such a situation provides strong incentives, independent of the logic of a grand bargain, for Russia to seek a new arrangement in Syria, one that would allow it to lock-in its strategic gains, while transferring responsibility for the conflict to others.¹⁸

On May 1, just prior to a multilateral diplomatic conference on Syria in Astana, Kazakhstan, Putin and Trump discussed achieving a cease-fire in Syria. During a press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Sochi before the call

¹² "[Fighting ISIS: The Road to and Beyond Raqqa](#)," Middle East Briefing No. 53, International Crisis Group, April 28, 2017; Paul McLeary and Dan De Luce, "[Trump to Tell Turkey: We're Going to Take Raqqa With the Kurds](#)," *ForeignPolicy.com*, May 5, 2017.

¹³ Barbara Slavin, "[Trump's generals wonder: what comes after Raqqa?](#)," *al-Monitor*, April 27, 2017.

¹⁴ Jennifer Rubin, "[The Syrian genocide is now Trump's problem](#)," *Washington Post*, April 5, 2017; Derek Chollet, "[As Trump's Foreign Policy Emerges, Watch His Temperament in Washington](#)," *Defense One*, January 4, 2017; Amir Tibon, "[Indifferent to Assad, Anti-Iran: Trump's Syria Policy Baffles Experts](#)," *Haaretz.com*, April 4, 2017.

¹⁵ "[Donald Trump's Syria strategy is confused](#)," *The Economist*, April 12, 2017; see, also: Peter Baker and Neil Macfarquhar, "[Trump and Putin Agree to Seek Syria Cease-Fire](#)," *The New York Times*, May 2, 2017.

¹⁶ "[Trump to meet Russian foreign minister Lavrov on Wednesday: U.S. senior official](#)," *Reuters*, May 9, 2017; Vladimir Frolov, "[Why Russia Won't Cave to Western Demands](#)," *Moscow Times*, May 3, 2017; "Donald Trump seeks a grand bargain with Vladimir Putin: It is a terrible idea," *The Economist*, February 11, 2017; Maxim Trudolyubov, "[What Russia? What Grand Bargain?](#)" *Russia File*, Kennan Institute – Wilson Center, March 10, 2017.

¹⁷ See: Brandon Friedman, "[Russia, Turkey, and Iran: Cooperation and Competition in Syria](#)," *Tel Aviv Notes* 11: 2, January 30, 2017.

¹⁸ Dimitar Bechev, "[Russia in Syria: What Next?](#)" *The American Interest*, April 10, 2017; Alexander Bratersky, "[Russian Public Perception Pressuring Putin to Wrap Up Syrian Operation](#)," *Syria Deeply*, March 21, 2017.

with Trump, Putin dismissed an opportunity to critique the U.S.'s April 7 airstrikes on the Assad regime and went out of his way to say that "Certainly, without involvement of such a country as the U.S., these problems [in Syria] cannot be solved efficiently."¹⁹ Kremlin officials have said that Putin will be trying to sell the U.S. the idea of creating four security zones in Syria to enforce a national cease-fire.²⁰

In doing so, Russia is essentially embracing an idea that Trump himself floated in late January 2017.²¹ Indeed, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov pointed out that the "de-escalation zones," which were formally agreed to by Russia, Turkey, and Iran at the Astana gathering²² and that went into effect on May 6 — were an American idea.²³ Setting aside the enormously complex mechanics of successfully implementing the Astana agreement,²⁴ one must ask why Russia is going out of its way to publicize its coordination with the Trump administration on the Syria diplomatic process.

It is important to point out that the newly declared de-escalation zones do not include almost all of northeast and eastern Syria (see map, below), which are the areas predominantly controlled by the Islamic State and the Syrian Kurds. These are also the areas where U.S. military forces, in coordination with the Kurdish-

¹⁹ David Filipov and Ashley Parker, "[Trump and Putin discuss cease-fire in Syria in first conversation since U.S. air strikes](#)," *Washington Post*, May 2, 2017.

²⁰ Henry Meyer and Ilya Arkhipov, "[Putin Pushes Syria Peacekeeper Plan With Trump to Save Truce](#)," *Bloomberg.com*, May 2, 2017.

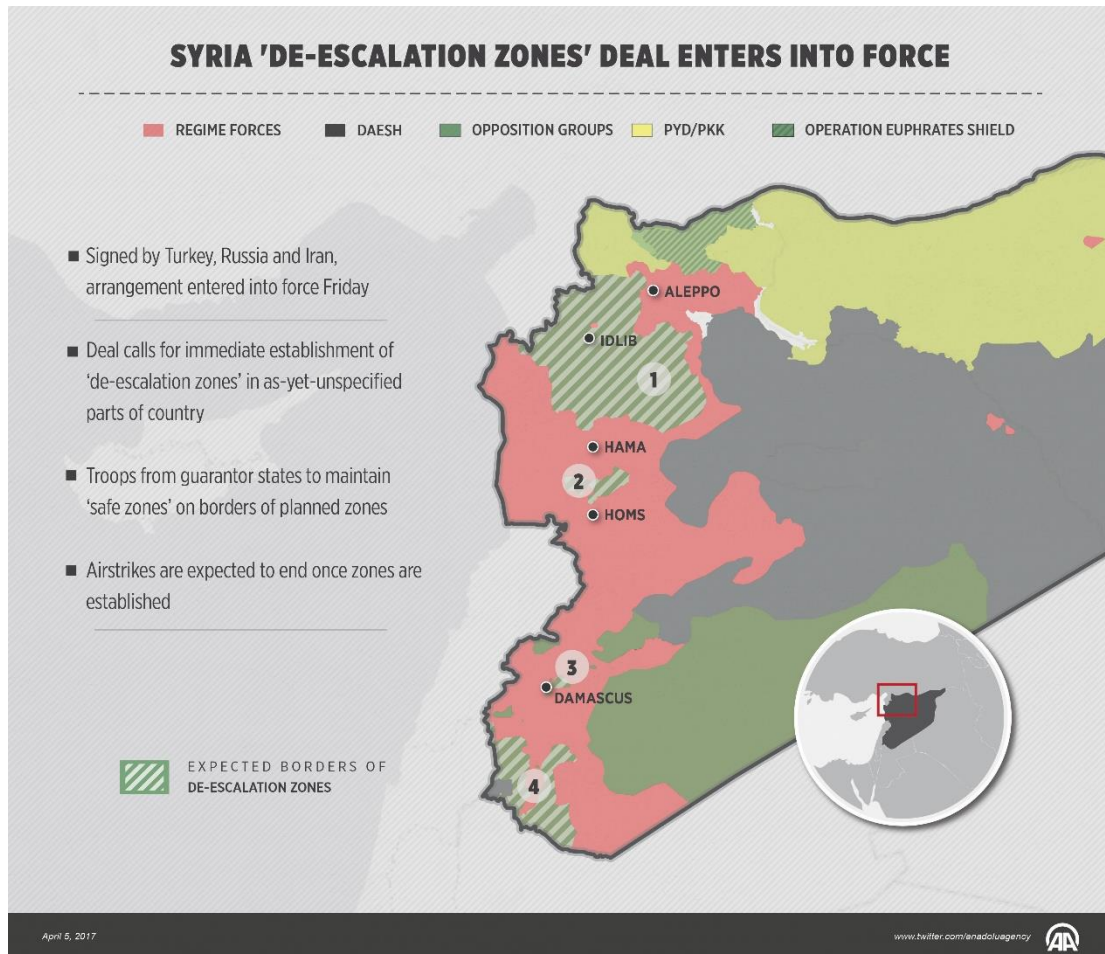
²¹ Phil Stewart, "[Trump's hopes for Syria safe zones may force decision on Assad](#)," *Reuters*, January 27, 2017; John Hudson and Paul Mcleary, "[Tillerson's Push For Safe Zones in Iraq, Syria Faces Questions, Obstacles](#)," *ForeignPolicy.com*, March 22, 2017. Safe zones also served as yet another way for Trump to distinguish his approach from Obama's, in as much as Obama repeatedly rejected the idea of creating safe zones in Syria. See: Greg Jaffe, "[Washington's foreign policy elite breaks with Obama over Syrian bloodshed](#)," *Washington Post*, October 20, 2016; Peter Baker, "[Syria Exposes Split Between Obama and Clinton](#)," *The New York Times*, October 3, 2015. The argument for safe zones in Syria began gathering steam when it was made by former senior U.S. diplomats Nicholas Burns and James Jeffrey in February 2016, see: Nicholas Burns and James Jeffrey, "[The diplomatic case for America to create a safe zone in Syria](#)," *Washington Post*, February 4, 2016.

²² It is beyond the scope of this piece to fully analyze the agreement signed in Astana. For detailed accounts of the Astana talks, see: Aron Lund, "[Can a deal in Astana wind down the six-year Syrian war?](#)" *irinnews.org*, May 5, 2017; and, Maxim A. Suchkov, "[Syria to get civilian safe zones](#)," *al-Monitor*, May 5, 2017.

²³ "[Lavrov: decisions on Syria de-escalation zones related to US initiatives](#)," *TASS: Russian News Agency*, May 6, 2017.

²⁴ Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, "[Principles of implementation of the Memorandum on Syria de-escalation zones signed in Astana](#)," May 5, 2017; Taha Abed AlWahed, "[Implementation of 'Safe Zones'...Russia excludes Qabun](#)," *as-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 6, 2017; Josh Wood, "[Fatal flaws in latest plan for safe zones in Syria](#)," *The National*, May 6, 2017; Daniel R. DePetris, "[Coming soon to Syria: Peace?](#)" *NationalInterest.org*, May 7, 2017.

led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF),²⁵ are preparing for the operation to retake the IS stronghold in Raqqa.²⁶



Source: [Anadolu Agency, Turkey](http://www.twitter.com/anadoluagency)

Therefore, there may be a broader understanding evolving between the U.S. and Russia to divide Syria into zones of influence.²⁷ Based on their respective military deployments, it appears that Russia would be responsible for the areas broadly defined as west of the north-south axis that includes Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Homs, and Damascus (covered by the Astana agreement), while the U.S. would be responsible for the territories east of the same axis.²⁸ *If this is what is happening,*

²⁵ The SDF are a multi-ethnic, multi-religious military force supported by the U.S. and led predominantly by the Kurdish YPG (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel; "People's Protection Units") based in northern Syria.

²⁶ Anton Mardasov, "[Are the US, Russia staking out territorial clout in Syria?](http://www.al-monitor.com/story/id/2017/04/are-the-us-russia-staking-out-territorial-clout-in-syria/)" *al-Monitor*, April 28, 2017.

²⁷ Anton Mardasov, "[Are the US, Russia staking out territorial clout in Syria?](http://www.al-monitor.com/story/id/2017/04/are-the-us-russia-staking-out-territorial-clout-in-syria/)" *al-Monitor*, April 28, 2017.

²⁸ This is an approximate description, which obviously contains important exceptions. Russia and its partners will hold meetings in Syria in two weeks to iron out the details of the safe zones.

then in the best-case these zones of influence would be laying the groundwork for some kind of de-facto decentralization or federalism in Syria.²⁹ This depends on whether the new Astana agreement can wind down the fighting between the regime and rebels in the Russian zone (a big "if" indeed³⁰) on the one hand; and, on the other hand, whether the U.S. and its Kurdish and Sunni allies can decisively defeat the IS in Raqqa and Deir az-Zour,³¹ and "go the extra mile of translating its presence into leverage to end the cycle of violence" in eastern Syria.³²

Russia, however, may also be considering another scenario. The de-escalation zones provide it with a framework with which to coordinate (and regulate) the conduct of its partners (Asad, Turkey, Iran) and eliminate jihadi rebels in the territory it considers "useful Syria."³³ Nevertheless, by ceding responsibility for the east to the U.S., Russia would be leaving it to adjudicate unresolved disputes over the territory in northeastern and eastern Syria. Russia may be anticipating that the U.S. will find itself enmeshed in a new phase of conflict as a result.³⁴ In a post-IS Syria, Turkey will be seeking to prevent Kurdish autonomy in northeast Syria along the Turkish border,³⁵ and Iran will be seeking to secure at least one

See: Sevil Erkuş, "[Guarantor powers to 'de-escalation zone' maps in Syria by June 4](#)," *Hurriyet Daily News*, May 6, 2017.

²⁹ Jihad Yazighi, "[No going back: Why decentralization is the future for Syria](#)," European Council for Foreign Relations (ECFR), September 6, 2016; Samer Araabi, "[Syria's Decentralization Roadmap](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 23, 2017. For an argument against partition or decentralization, see: Maher Mas'ud, "[Is Dividing Syria the Problem or the Solution?](#)," translated by Maya Milani, SyriaUntold.com, September 21, 2016.

³⁰ "[Syria safe zones hit by clashes on first day](#)," *The Guardian*, May 6, 2017; "[Syria army advances despite deal to reduce fighting](#)," *The National*, May 7, 2017.

³¹ "[Fighting ISIS: The Road to and Beyond Raqqa](#)," Middle East Briefing No. 53, International Crisis Group, April 28, 2017.

³² Hassan Hassan, "[There is a way out of Syria's vicious circle](#)," *The National*, May 2, 2017.

³³ As an aside, it is unclear how important Dar'ā and Quneitra provinces are to Russia's strategic interests; it may be their inclusion was a sop to Iran. Relatedly, it is not clear how Russia's declaration to limit air traffic in these provinces will affect Israel's ability to enforce its red line of preventing arms transfers from Iran to Hizballah through Syria. In early April, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was reported to have also discussed the notion of security or buffer zones in Syria during his talks with President Putin; see: Barak Ravid, "[Netanyahu Seeks Buffer Zones Against Iran and Hezbollah on Syria's Borders with Israel and Jordan](#)," *Haaretz.com*, April 7, 2017. Also, see: Thomas Grove and Felicia Schwartz, "[US Dismisses Russia's Ban on Aircraft Over Syrian Safe Zones](#)," *Wall Street Journal*, May 5, 2017.

³⁴ Raymond Tanter and Edward Stafford, "[America, Turkey and Iran Could Be Headed Toward a Showdown](#)," *NationalInterest.org*, May 6, 2017.

³⁵ Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "[Trump to Arm Syrian Kurds. Even as Turkey Strongly Objects](#)," *The New York Times*, May 9, 2017; Martin Chulov and Fazel Hawramy, "[Ever-closer ties between US and Kurds stoke Turkish border tensions](#)," *The Guardian*, May 1, 2017; Amberin Zaman, "[Kurds call on US to set up no-fly zone after Turkish attacks](#)," *al-Monitor*,

overland corridor from Iran and Iraq through Syria to the Mediterranean.³⁶ Further, jihadis may seek to regroup in the frontier zone of southern and eastern Syria if and when they are defeated in Raqqa. Any or all of these challenges could turn into a new and prolonged phase of conflict for U.S. For Russia, the zones of influence arrangement would allow it to better limit the Asad regime's freedom of action, leaving the door open to a negotiated settlement to the war.³⁷ At the same time, it would allow Russia to preserve its partnerships with Turkey and Iran, without assuming the responsibility for confronting them in the contested areas of eastern Syria. In other words, Russia may be trying to establish an arrangement with the U.S. based on the principle that each side will accept what the other is doing in the area it controls, the area most vital to its interests. The rub here is that in the Russian zone of influence the plan is for the fighting to wind down, while in the U.S. zone of influence it appears there may be a new post-IS phase of conflict.

The Syrian challenge confronting the Trump administration is almost identical to the one that faced Obama: how can the U.S. play a more decisive role in Syria without assuming an open-ended military and financial burden that it promised it would avoid. Consistent with its policy of tacking in the opposite direction of Obama's policies, Trump's national security team appears to be preparing a strategy for leaning in rather than staying out of the Syrian war.³⁸ While one former Obama administration official has warned Trump against "the strategic suicide" of pursuing an alignment with Russia in Syria,³⁹ it now appears that it is Russia that is modestly courting a skeptical Trump administration.⁴⁰

April 25, 2017; James Jeffrey, "[Trump's plan to arm Kurds Lays Bare the Strategic Vacuum in Syria](#)," *ForeignPolicy.com*, May 9, 2017.

³⁶ Ehud Yaari, "[Iran's Ambitions in the Levant](#)," *ForeignAffairs.com*, May 1, 2017; Martin Chulov, "[Amid Syrian chaos Iran's game plan emerges: a path to the Mediterranean](#)," *The Guardian*, October 8, 2016.

³⁷ Dmitri Trenin, "[Russia Needs American Help to Seal the Deal in Syria](#)," *Financial Times*, April 10, 2017. The Asad regime has pledged to abide by the Astana agreement, but it is already testing the boundaries of the new arrangement, see: Sarah El Deeb, "[Syrian troops shift focus to IS-held east](#)," *Associated Press (AP)*, May 10, 2017; Angus Mcdowall, "[Syria's al-Moualeem says government will abide by 'de-escalation' plan](#)," *Reuters*, May 8, 2017.

³⁸ Eli Lake, "[Trump Said No to Troops in Syria. His Aides Aren't So Sure.](#)" *Bloomberg.com*, April 13, 2017.

³⁹ Hal Brands and Colin Kahl, "[The Strategic Suicide of Aligning With Russia in Syria](#)," *ForeignPolicy.com*, February 7, 2017.

⁴⁰ Patrick Wintour, "[Syria safe zones on hold amid concern over how deal will be enforced](#)," *The Guardian*, May 9, 2017; Neil Macfarquhar, "[Russia, Feeling Slighted by Trump Seeks a Reset](#)," *The New York Times*, May 3, 2017; Heather Nauert, "[Statement on Russia, Turkey, and Iran's De-Escalation Zones Plan for Syria](#)," U.S. Department of State, May 4, 2017; David Ignatius, "[Putin requested his call with Trump to outline a plan for Syrian safe zones. Why Now?](#)" *Washington Post*, May 3, 2017; Stephen Blank, "[The US-Russia-China Triangle: The Negative Scenario I](#)," *The Asan Forum* 5: 2 (March-April 2017), April 17, 2017.

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