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**AN EXAMINATION OF TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS DISPUTES IN  
THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA**

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**ABSTRACT**

Basically, geopolitical changes associated with Arabic revolutions and recent disputes in the Middle East and North Africa are happening while ideological and topics of value are linked with geographical issues, power balance, and regional role so that, these upheavals have led to a redefinition the role of regional and trans-regional actors. During these events, Turkey which's one of the regional actors, has tried to redefine its identity through geopolitical realities and Justice and Development Party (JDP) politicians awareness of those opportunities and constraints that are faced by them. Indeed, Turkish politicians perceive the recent revolutions as a good occasion to restore their past power and influence of the Ottoman Empire in the region, to promote the major objectives, and to become a main actor in the Middle East equations. Therefore, in this paper, an attempt has been made to investigate Turkey's approach and aims, challenges and opportunities against these developments within constructivism theory.

**Keywords: Foreign Policy, the Middle East, Political Challenges, North Africa**

**INTRODUCTION**

It seems that the recent upheavals in the Middle East especially in the North Africa are rooted in people's suppressed anger and

continuous oppression of authoritarian regimes of the region, which together with great economic and cultural problems have

finally resulted in extensive reforms in societies like Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. Popular uprisings in Arab world that are partly reflecting the political, economical and social frustrations in the countries and globalization of norms and values along with applying technologies by activists to share ideas and tactics have raised many important questions contained by studies of the Middle East and North of Africa (Anderson, 2011:4). With the start of these upheavals, a wave of theories was developed on nature, identity, regional and international consequences of the changes by experts involved in international relations. Some people, perceive the changes as Islamic, anti-western and anti-American ones in nature, and refer to different roots and causes involved in their formation, some others believe that anti-dictatorship and anti-absolutism nature are among the most important features of the movements and address the impact of culture and western democracy on the movements, while others argue a combination of several causes and factors are involved in these changes. On the same basis, various names are used to describe them such as *Political Tsunami*, *Arab Spring*, *Islamic Awakening* etc, but regardless of all these titles, the changes appear to be some revolutions that have yet reached a definite outcome. Concerning the

recent revolutions what they are, some have named them postmodern- dispersed revolutions with no leadership and certain ideology, and some others like republicans and Islamic Republic of Iran believe that the movements are Islamic revolutions and are influenced by the Islamic Revolution of Iran (Niaguei, 2012: 241).

The key elements forming any revolutionary movement are social dissatisfaction, mobilizing groups, inability of government to suppress and trying to create a new power structure (Bashiriyeh, 1996: 5). It can be observed some of the examples in Arab countries movements, but it should be noted that there is not a same result followed by all the recent developments in Arab nations. In this regard, *Goldstone* with a holistic view on how a revolution can achieve success says, a serious of factors must come together, at the first, a government should be irrecoverably unfair and incompetent, in the second place, the elite must be revolted by government and not willing to defend it, third, extensive groups of people including ethnicities and religious groups, and various socio-economic classes are mobilized against government and forth, the State under crisis not be supported from international powers or prevented it to apply maximum potency to self defense (Niaguei, 2012: 244). As a general, the

Arabic revolutions took place by reason of people's struggle against oppression and injustice and being a desire to establish a democratic political system based on popular sovereignty and to respect human rights have defined the role of regional and trans-regional actors once again (Bumanjil, 2012:5).

Turkey is also among the most important performer in the region because of its new approach to the Middle East where have recently turned into spotlight and an operational environment for Turkey's foreign policy as well as due to having a capacity for impressionability and relative effectiveness on these developments. Many analysts believe that Turkey knows the popular movements of Middle East and North Africa as an opportunity to retrieve its previous power and influence of the Ottoman Empire in the region and to advance its major strategy to grow to be a key player in the Middle East equations. Posturing actively by Turkey in proclaimed and practical levels toward revolutions in the region including developments in Egypt and Libya as well as effective entrance to the Syria's disturbances have actually turned the country into a key and influential actor in the rapidly changing area (Amiri, 2012:5).

The aim of the study is to articulate of Turkey's approach against revolutions in

the Middle East and North Africa in a scientific and objective manner based on a theoretical approach of constructivism. This paper is analytical-descriptive and library-documentary in terms of methodology and the collection of the required data respectively.

### **Theoretical approach: constructivism and foreign policy**

Totally, theories study the foreign policy from two aspects. One of them, consider the material and environmental role (domestic and abroad) as a main reason for the formation of foreign policy. The one who are known as rationalists in the history of international relations, in turn, are divided into two classes, but the second is spiritual theories that assume non-material and cultural factors as driving force of foreign policy. One of the most important examples of this category is known as reactionalists. The theory of constructivism reviews a government's behavior within its social context. (Omidi & Rezaei, 2012:5).

Constructivism as a way of discussion in the field of international and foreign policy is considered a fresh model which is based on philosophical issues within social sciences (Hadiyan, 2004: 900-943). The novelty of this model is associated with providing a logical framework to establish behavior analysis in accordance with the

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identity of actors (Mottaghi & Kazemi, 2012:1). Unlike positivism, the theory of constructivism enhances the level of discussion from epistemological to ontological. From an ontological perspective, social realities are seen as the mental affairs consist of a set of rules, prospects, images, etc, which have evolved in a specific geographic area through time, and also affected by different processes until their form and structure are converted into what they are now (Rashidi, 2011:3).

Constructivists assume all sciences and human phenomena as constructive affairs, that is somehow a social thing and in the course of action between minds (Salimi, 2008:116). Constructivists believe the social nature for the actors, means that, these interactions, processes, norms, culture and values, principal beliefs and institutionalized ideas are things that give consistency to their identity (Moshirzadeh, 5006:116). Furthermore, social structures are also produced by interaction; the Interaction produces transformation, alteration and reproduction for the various collective identities of different actors during mutual actions, reactions, and repeated responses. When an actor is pursuing his or her own interests, he or she is gradually forced to include some revisions in identity system of own so that can be better acquired his or her interests in

a new space (Vant, 2007: 227). Throughout interactions, an actor learns meanings and tackles systematizations, rules, standards and identities and then the factor will motivate his/ her subsequent actions in future interactions (Afzali & Mottaghi, 2012:5).

From a constructivism view, international actors will take action based on their interests, and if there is a problem in this way they attempts to redefine their identity matching it with their interests, so that they can gain interests upon an identity compatible with the environment where they are acting in (Kobalkova, 2001:210). In this approach, in the event of increased threats and challenges in the field of acting, actors will try to show a more adaptable identity of own with counterparts via redefining their identity and semantic system to avoid problems in pursuing their goals and interests (Afzali & Mottaghi, 2012:20). Therefore, since neighboring countries or countries in a same region (with shared geographical- interactive space) have the highest level of interaction and are able to identify the slightest changes of identity or behavior in other party as soon as possible, so they will take necessary actions in order to adapt themselves to the new conditions to achieve their goals (Bilis & Smith, 2005: 46-72).

On the other hand, constructivism analysis is responsible for shaping foreign policy. In this way; it believes that a government identity will be formed by valued referrals to past and future of a country. On the issue of broker structure, constructivists stress how a norm or (semantic) thought defines the identity of individual actors and determines the appropriate, economical, political, and cultural activity pattern used by the aforementioned actors (Afzali & Mottaghi, 2012: 179). In constructivism, structure and broker give consistency to each other mutually. Structures are created as relatively stable phenomena with interaction upon which actors characterize their identity and interests. No structure isolated from this process to be, or in other words from procedures of actors (Moshirzadeh, 2008: 33). In foreign policy and bilateral relations with other countries, actors adjust their own behavior pattern relying on the identity of the national geographic areas and also the identity of a space they get it through playing a role in regional and international spaces as well as opportunities and restrictions associated with geopolitical realities. According to the explanation, actors' behavior in international level and foreign policy is rooted in geopolitical facts (Rashidi, 2011: 3). Given the knowledge gained by Justice and Development Party politicians about

their historical and geopolitical situation together with opportunities and limitations in progress, they have tried and do to get maximum resources, increasing regional role than the past, along with recovery of power and influence of the Ottoman Empire via redefinition of their own identity (Ebrahimifar, 2013: 66-84). From this perspective, it should be noted that the Middle East region is a variable structure, so those governments and countries will be able to play a role in this framework who will adopt a set of procedures and tactics applicable to the frequently changing structure of this region (Hatami, 2012: 2). As a result, considering the elements and capabilities of constructivism approach, the article tries to examine Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East and North Africa developments within the specific theory. Because it appears the constructivism approach is a more comprehensive way to articulate and understand the special orientation of Turkey against the developments than other approaches and theories on international relations.

### **The position of Middle East in foreign policy of the JDP**

After successive defeats of the Ottoman Empire against the Europeans during 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Republic of Turkey was founded by Ataturk with the

abolition of caliphate and announcing the Republicanism in 1923. Due to a negative attitude of bureaucrats and intellectuals of that time of Turkey to Islamic identity and accused it of to collapse the Ottoman Empire, on the other hand, because of fascination of acceptance in European Union (EU), Turkey followed an European-oriented foreign policy until 1980, and its relations with the Middle East countries was gradually expanded from that time. With the victory of Necmettin Erbakan, the Prime Minister of *Welfare Party* (WP) and the government by him after election in 1955, the European-based attitude was challenged. But after a year, Erbakan government side stepped due to pressures from military and its coalition collapse with *True Path Party* led by Tansu Ciller. In elections at November 2002, *Justice & Development Party* that was a branch of the *Welfare Party* and *Virtue Party* came into power. By the rise of the JDP, social and political changes in the context of Turkey were strongly followed and a broader multidimensional foreign policy was established instead of the former which was only based on the Europe (Heydari & Rahnavard, 2013: 7). In this way, the Turkey's foreign policy can no longer be understood and interpreted by the principle of Atatürk known as "peace at home, peace abroad" which was leading to a self

imposed passivity (Ghahremanpour, 2006: 3). The JDP's overwhelming victory in parliamentary elections in November 2002 and forming a strong government with Prime minister of Recep Tayyip Erdogan opened a new space in foreign and domestic policy of Turkey. From view of constructivists, actors will act based on interests of their own in international arena and if there will be any problem in pursuing their interests, they will attempt to redefine their identity for matching it with their interests and get benefits based on an identity compatible with the area where they are acting in. Turkey is a neighbor of European Union, the Middle East, Caucasus, and the Balkans, but does not belong to any of these regions, at the same time, due to geopolitical location of Turkey; the country has no choice except to interact with neighbors. Being to a shared space with the west and Muslim world has a simultaneous impact, so the country has showed a composite character of the West and Islam geopolitics. Turkey geopolitical need to Western and Islamic Fronts has forced JDP leaders to redefine the identity of themselves in relation to the both sides in a balanced way. Prior to coming to power of Justice & Development Party, Turkey was less willing to expand relations with Middle Eastern countries especially the Arabs, because of being secular, a

specific notice to fall in the Europeans in terms of foreign policy, unpleasant memories from the Arabs who were responsible for downfall of the Ottoman Empire, the continuing turmoil in the Middle East and border dispute with Iraq and Syria (Ghahremanpour, 2006: 59). However, since the beginning of the third millennium, Ankara showed discomfort of its trimmed role in the region. In this regard, this country has tried to play a new and effective role through some actions such as playing a mediating role between Palestine and Israel, to become active in the Organization of Islamic Conference, to consider to Arab League, cooperation and participation in the international peacekeeping force in Lebanon, cooperation with NATO forces in Afghanistan, the establishment of D-8 Summit, a role in Iran's Nuclear Program, and recently by an active presence with a maximum look to the revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa. A brief look at Turkey's actions in the past year clearly shows that after several decades of one-sided orientation to the West, now Turkey's foreign policy has taken a more balanced and mild way towards its neighbors and the Middle East, and expands its ties with the Islamic countries according to its interests, while, it has diminished the level of interactions with Israel. So that, in last 10

years, especially after the introduction of "the strategy of zero problems with neighbors", the foreign policy of the United States (the West) and Turkey has not been in a strategic agreement and alignment on the important regional issues (Doss, 2010: p1). Totally, Turkey's foreign policy in recent years is indicating that the country wants to show a new figure of Turkey by applying a realistic approach and following more balanced and moderate stances which could be a bridge between the west and Muslim world (Moradian, 2007: 597). Turkish modern approach in foreign policy is so-called "Neo-Ottomanism". In short, Neo-Ottomanism can be assumed to revive the Ottoman Empire's authority by mixed Western and Islamic standards. This view has brought a certain pattern of Islamism to Erdogan government. This model is something other than religious democracy which is common in Iran, but it is another interpretation of Islamism in political structure (Omidi & Rezaei, 1390: 17). A major part of redefinition of Turkey's foreign policy for the Middle East region is subjected to thoughts and teachings by Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkey's foreign minister for the now. Davudoglu's doctrine known as *Strategic Depth* is released in a book with the same name. Geopolitics constitutes the core section of this doctrine and it is completed by other

components such as emphasis on soft power, trying to intermediacy and correcting regional and international problems as well as applying win-win strategy relative to others (Shohuhi, 2012). He believes Turkey has a strategic depth as its unique geographical and historical position and that's why he puts Turkey among small countries so-called central powers. He conceives Turkey should not limit itself to regional role in Balkans or the Middle East do, because it is a central country not a regional one. So, Turkey should play a strategic role at several areas, something that is of strategic importance for the country in international system (Shokuhi, 2012). By his opinion, in this direction, Turkey's success depends on two issues: (1) domestic problems; as long as the country is unable to handle peacefully the Kurdish issue and resolve disputes between Islamists and seculars, so it cannot achieve much success to its foreign policy. (2) Relations with neighbors; in order to be able to become a key player in the region and in international system, Turkey will need to keep peaceful relations with its neighbors and resolve its disputes with them. This is where there's an important dimension of the strategy of Davutoglu, known as "*zero problem with neighbors*" strategy. In his book, *strategic depth*, He argues that Turkish foreign policy has been

unbalanced in recent years with a great emphasis on relations to Western Europe and the United States, so that the process has caused a view neglectfully to interests in other countries particularly in the Middle East (Amiri, 2012: 5). In the same way, a doctrine named "*leading to zero problems with neighbors*" was proposed from Davutoglu for enabling the role and influence of the country in different domains of the Muslim world especially in the Middle East. In this context, improving relations with Cairo, Tehran, Baghdad, and Damascus were in the agenda, which is resulted in Ankara to be involved in the Middle East problems more than ever. In the theory of *zero problems with neighbors*, the power of diplomacy, bargaining power and persuasion are of importance, here there is no militarism and JDP diplomats and strategists will be at the head of affairs (Solat, 2012). One of the most striking developments appearing in Turkey's foreign policy remembered as "*Neo-Ottomanism*" has reflected in movements of Arab countries in 2011 (Heydari & Rahnavard, 2013: 7). After many years the lack of serious role in the Middle East, These movements have provided a suitable opportunity with Turkey to perform a new role through supporting them, taking part in NATO operations in Libya, to hold a meeting for Bashar al-Assad opposition in

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Ankara etc, in critical and strategic region, the Middle East, where is known as *New heartland*. However, holding the Ankara's meeting of Basher al-Assad opposition has been some new challenges for Turkey's foreign policy in particular against *zero problems with neighbor's* theory; but understanding these changes can capacitate the grounds for Turkey's successful and serious return to the Middle East as a major player after many years away (Martin & Keridis, 2004: 354).

### **Turkey's approach toward Middle East and North Africa developments**

Due to the activation of Turkey's foreign policy toward Middle East region and a change in its West-oriented tactic with moving toward multilateralism rather than unilateralism, it was predictable that an active stance would be adopted by Turkish government coincided with the rise of political and social developments in the region particularly followed by popular revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya as well as political changes and unrests in Syria, Bahrain and Yemen. Today, the role of Turkey has extended from northern Africa in the areas of Libya, Egypt and Tunisia to the east of the Arab world in Iraq, the Persian Gulf and to Syria. The way of Turkish government to deal with revolutionary developments in abovementioned countries and also how to

position and execute against these subjects have been done in line with a set of major considerations, which some of them are produced by a redefinition of the *Justice and Development Party* about Turkey's identity and place in international system, that are rated as basic preferences by the Turkish foreign policy since Erdogan government. It seems that Erdogan's government knows the region's array of developments as an opportunity to realize its strategic goals within international system. The exploitation of these events by Turkey has turned the country into a key and influential performers on processes related to popular uprisings in the region. Some informed observers believe that in modern times especially after the outbreak of popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, Turkey with logging into a new stage of foreign policy has tried to brave as a global player and in this regard, is planning to overtake its regional rivals and get to a leadership position in Muslim world against Iran, Egypt and Saudi Arabia by means of anti-Zionist role. Many scholars analyze the Turkish foreign policy within Neo-Ottomanism approach.

As noted before, the multilateral approach of the JDP's foreign policy is based on the theory's *strategic depth*. In this theory, in addition to geostrategic and geographical position of Turkey, the Ottoman Empire

background and historical and cultural ties with that time are important (Fallah, 1388: 13). The paradigmatic model adopted by Turkey against global issues, has increased Turkey's influence in different areas some of which have already been a part of the Ottoman Empire (Miltiases, 1993: 31). However, Neo-Ottomanism or modern Ottomanism is not seeking to incorporate the lands or revival of the Ottoman Empire, rather it is a paradigmatic school contained by a syncretism nature of geopolitical utilities with identity elements. Turkish diplomacy has attempted to expand its influence in those areas where have been once dominated by the Ottoman Empire and wants to determine a share for own therein. The modern Ottomanism is not the same Turkish Empire in the Middle East and Balkans, rather it has a centrist secularism inside the country with an active diplomacy in the foreign policy. In this approach, behavioral method is based on the power of political, economical, diplomatic, cultural norms together with influence in the territories of the Ottoman Empire (Brewda, 1996: 38). Neo-Ottomanism and Ottomanism are different, justly speaking, the policy of Erdogan's government cannot be interrupted to mean a revival of Caliphatism or Islamic elements simply for the restoration of the Ottoman Empire, but the JDP'S political

interest to the Ottoman Empire era should be defined according to the global context in which they see themselves in (Omid & Rezaei, 1390: 245). In fact, the leaders of JDP especially Davutoglu are somehow seeking to balance and in other words complete their relationships with UN and the United States via developing relations with the East (Taspinar, 2008: 14). While Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu calls the Neo-Ottomanism expression as an absurd claim, but also consciously supports it. The perception of Turkish Prime Minister is not that it is task of Turkey to establish security and developing territory at post-Ottoman era; while he believes that this is exactly expected (Zigel, 2012: 3). The same token, Turkish politicians adopted a policy intended to attain a superior power in the region by putting some topics such as "*the Turkish model*" and trying to mediate in international arena (Bahrami, 2012: 1). With the beginning of popular uprisings in the Muslim world, Turkey's foreign policy appears to shift to be from a détente to an interventional policy. However, Turkey have been faced some challenges and concerns by the Arabic revolutions such as, the loss of achievements and economic benefits of the past few years and the reduction of new political influence, in particular, "*no or zero problems with*

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*regional neighbors*" approach which was aimed at governments and had no associated with people of the region had been in danger (Heydarian, 2011).

### **Developments in the Middle East and North Africa (impact on relations between Iran and Turkey)**

Given that Turkey is in neighbor, and is competing in some area with Iran, so the policies took on by Turkey government have an impact on Iran's national interests, in this subsection therefore, it will be discussed the relationship and challenges between the two countries in the course of developments in the Middle East and North Africa. Many have compared the relations between Iran and Turkey in the Middle East to those relations that exist between Great Britain and France in the Europe. Iran and Turkey are two important regional actors, each have their own interests in the Middle East. In 1990s, Turkey has produced serious challenges for Iran's regional interests because of strategic communications with Israel plus coordination and cooperation with the West in the region. But in the past decade as shifting Turkey's foreign policy approaches in the region subsequent to JDP to come to power, the bilateral relations of two countries arrived at a new stage. A further independence from the West especially away from Israel was among the most

important political changes throughout 10 years ago by Turkey which caused a closer relationship between Iran and Turkey and bilateral political and economical relations to be developed (Barks, 2004). These two, are among the few regional players with no border disputes and also there has not been any problem between them over the last 100 years. With come into power the Islamic Justice and Development Party in Turkey, domestic changes as well as regional and international status, have led Iran's and Turkey's elites to conclude that they will be inevitable of cooperation in some areas particularly security and economical domains, so it is essential to avoid tension factors in their bilateral relations. Three elements of religion, economy and security are of the main importance to align of Turkish-Iranian relations and in fact, the basic platform to expand the mutual ties is exactly the same three aspects. In order to decrease tension and improve relations, in 2010, when Turkey was a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, despite US pressure for extensive international support to impose a new round of sanctions against Iran, Ankara declared the policies to be inefficient. Something that made American officials displeased; because Turkey as a NATO member had adopted an independent policy about this matter, which

manifested by refusing Turkey to vote positively on a new round of UN Security Council sanctions against Iran on June 9, 2010. The action was acclaimed by Iran for Turkey's cooperation to resolve Iran's nuclear issue and took a deep form followed by the presence of Turkish and Brazilian Presidents in trilateral talks in Tehran. In the following, Turkey got more prominent role by holding the P5+1 talks in this country (Hajimineh, 2012). Recent statements of Turkish President, Abdullah Gul, who said in an interview with the magazine Foreign Policy that, *I understand the development of Iran's nuclear program and disagree with military strikes against Iran*, still demonstrates a positive view of Turkey's approach to Iran's nuclear program. There are several reasons for developing cooperation between Iran and Turkey, some of them referred to the cooperation as mutual needs particularly on the areas of energy and economics at one hand, and because of Turks need for acting in the region with the aim of enhancing their strategic value on the other hand (Torabi, 2012). However, in spite of the cooperation between Iran and Turkey, the issue of establishment a *NATO missile defense shield* on Turkish territory in the last NATO summit in Lisbon, Portugal, which was accepted conditionally by Turkey, and also different views of the two

countries about some recent developments in the Middle East and North Africa has accompanied Turkish-Iranian relations with serious challenges. The events in the Arab world have brought extensive developments to the region and because of this; the space of cooperation and interaction as well as competitive environment where Iran and Turkey are involved in has been changed. At the same time, Arabic revolutions have created opportunities in Turkish-Iranian relations (Fuller & Desser, 2008). This opportunity is in the sense that, the establishment of Islamic-National governments with a unique perspective has caused Iran and Turkey to go out from individual geopolitics as two non-Arabic countries and has made new political alliances between them. Of course, the challenge in relations between Iran and Turkey is associated with playing a role to manage new developments of the region (Barzegar, 1390). Turkey's approach regarding developments in the Arab world has been closer to Iran's regional interests in some areas, but it has contradicted and even against Iran's interests in some other areas. For example, Turkish approach towards the North Africa for developments in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya has been closer to Iran's policies and interests.

#### **Final word**

Unprecedented political upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa are considered as a turning point for Turkey's new foreign policy. However, Ankara has been severely involved in and associated with developments in the region because of the Middle East position appearing in JDP's foreign policy within Neo-Ottomanism and in line with the country's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu teachings. Indeed, Turkey knows the upheavals as a factor to empower its role and influence to the region and to compensate for the lack of its presence of the Kemalist era in the Middle East and in this way, it's trying to increase its regional and international role and influence through maximum exploitation of these developments. The role that is supported by the United States of America and it can be apparently observed from common policies and actions of their both (Turkey & USA) against upheavals in just a few years ago. Americans perceive the spread of the Turkish model in the Middle East as an interaction between Islamists and democrats, which can eventually bind the Western values to the Middle East's. Overall, developments in the Arab world and Turkey's approach in this regard shows that Turkey's approach to any country under crisis has been according to its own interests in various spheres. From conflict between governments and people in many

countries of the Middle East, it seems that Turkey basically show itself along with the people unless Turkish politicians would believe that a particular nation is not strong enough to be able to overthrow the existing regime.

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