

# The Mediterranean Today. Stability, Instability, Orientations.

## A first rapid excursus

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### **Abstract**

A quick trip to some Mediterranean countries shows significant disparities, situations of inequality, different religious preferences, and struggling minority populations. The dream of a Mediterranean crossroads of cultures, which has taken up so much space in our past, seems today to retreat, leaving behind a sea that has become a kind of hard border, difficult to cross for many men, women, children, who too often have lost their lives. The European Union prefers to defend its own borders from migrants and also from possible asylum seekers. It defends itself, and the Mediterranean is an important pawn in these actions, from the flows of arrivals from Africa, viz. the role of Libya, from which people escape the Syrian tragedy. For this purpose, they use countries like Greece and Turkey. A notable reversal for Italy in particular, an Italy that experienced first-hand migratory phenomena.

**Keywords:** Mediterranean; religious beliefs; inequalities; asylum seekers and migrants; shipwrecks; refusals and denials of entry.

### **Premise**

After a relative silence, today many factors return our attention forcefully to the Mediterranean, though it is no longer a decisive, critical location for the post-industrialized universe, and though perhaps it seems China and Japan, along with other seas, are now commanding a greater attention.

### **In the distant past, mythical migrations**

Historically there has always been a relatively high level of attention paid to the Mediterranean, in the West in general, and also in Italy. Sea voyages departing from Greece, the foundation of Greek colonies in South Italy, are remembered in literature, scholarship, and in numerous commemorations. There are also the mythical journeys of Aeneas, whose trajectory, after leaving Asia, would have included lands of present-day Greece - including Zakynthos - and who arrived in Southern Italy after his long journey, where there are many Greek colonies. Determined to circumnavigate Sicily, but possibly avoiding Scylla and Charybdis (that is, the straight of Messina) he stops at Drepano, where Anchises, his old father, dies. He tries to continue his

journey, but soon he is overtaken by a storm, and cast off onto the Carthaginian coast. Only later will he arrive in Lazio, not before having first set foot on other lands. Other difficult journeys include those of Odysseus. Here it is interesting to recall that, after many adventures, he reaches the island of Calypso - perhaps the region of Ceuta, in present-day Morocco, facing Gibraltar - where he stays for a long time.<sup>1</sup> Then another departure. But also the wrath of Neptune, a shipwreck on the island of Feaci - perhaps Corfu.

Myths migrate to other shores; from cloud-framed Olympus, on whose slopes flowers and dances bloom in the spring, heroes and divinities take different journeys. Some, as we have seen, arrive in Greece from Asia, then head to the African coasts, as well as to Italy. Old divinities undergo new transformations and symbioses with the old local divinities. Even today in Morocco there is a cave in the northern part of the country, often visited, that remembers Hercules (Herakles) and his long, hard - Herculean - efforts.

Ceuta is now Spanish territory. The entry gate - a gate, clearly, well-sealed, with strong high protective nets, double controls with armed guards, very geared towards Europe. Towards a Spain who was already a key player with a common past. A Spain that sought in every way to present itself as a Catholic country par excellence, and has fought hard, long-standing, cruel wars. A Spain that historically expelled even the converted Jews - the Moriscos - and the Arabs. With serious consequences, among other things, for its own economy. A country characterized, still today, by vast traces of the Arab world - which in turn has profoundly influenced the culture, the arts of Morocco,<sup>2</sup> having in turn assimilated forms of Moroccan and, more generally, North African life.

The relationship between North Africa and the West is complex and various. Historical relationships are characterized mostly by clashes and wars. Just think of the crusades in this regard. But they are characterized also by inevitable contacts- I'm thinking of one of the most powerful books by the important Israeli writer of our day, Abraham B. Yehoshua, whom I know in the Italian translation whose title is: *Viaggio alla fine del millennio (A Journey to the End of the Millennium)*.<sup>3</sup> It tells the story of a merchant who, in the year 999, embarks and departs from the beautiful, industrious, civilized city of Tangier, in the direction of the heart of a wild Europe to find his nephew and partner. After forty days of sailing, the ship reaches a narrow stream: it is the Seine. Surrounded by trees and bush. Not a living soul to be seen. After another long navigation, finally,

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. my article entitled *Lettera dal Marocco (Letter from Morocco)* «La critica sociologica», XLIII, 169, Spring 2009, pp.101-111, on the subject of Ceuta.

<sup>2</sup> In one of my accounts published in «Dialoghi Mediterranei» issue no. 40, from November 2019, *Qualche giorno a Tétouan (A few days in Tétouan)* I recalled, for example, a holiday spent in Tétouan, in the North of Morocco, in the summer of the same year, in a house that recalled Andalusian culture. And in the past, every time I went, for example, to the University of Valencia, the city impressed me with its many artistic products that definitely recalled the culture of North Africa.

<sup>3</sup> A.B. Yehoshua, *Viaggio alla fine del millennio*, tr. It. Einaudi, Torino 1998 (1997).

a muddy Paris appears. Small irregular stones form a cobblestone path over which men and women jump, trying to avoid the excrement of the horses, pigs, and dogs, which are everywhere. Decrepit bridges, long dark alleys. And then, finally, the nephew's house. Not at all similar, in any case, to his civilized Tangier.

## **In the twentieth century**

### *- France and Algeria*

Of course, in the twentieth century everything is very different. France was a powerful country during the twentieth century, with colonies from the East to Africa. French was a widely used language, spoken in various countries, also ones distant from Europe, where it was studied in French schools. Algeria knows this well, an Algeria that, with pain and difficulty, managed to free itself from France, through a war that lasted from 1954 to 1962. It is a country that has paid a heavy price for this victory, with the exodus to France of over 300,000 Algerians. What's more, it experienced a period of religious and cultural nationalism, during which it proudly rediscovered its belonging to the Arab world, to the Muslim tradition. In the early 1990s, civil war, instability and violence are harsh trials for Algeria; Arab fundamentalism and a certain western relativism seem to be no longer able to find an accord, to create useful mediations.

On the other hand, France, already the key player in many colonial conquests in Africa and Asia, today sees its language much less used than in the past; it is a language that had to make great steps backward compared to English. France has discovered what two very challenging world wars have meant, in terms of loss of life and well-being; it discovered unemployment, dissent. It suffered heavy Islamic terrorist attacks - July 2016 in Nice, April 2007 in Paris, a kidnapping in Occitania in 2018, as well as a knife attack in Paris; December 11 in Strasbourg - which resulted in those dead and injured, and the spread of a strong sense of uncertainty.<sup>4</sup> This is a serious fact, the latter, since it risks affecting the country with regard to migration policies. It also casts into doubt one of the major sources of income - tourism - for which France now occupies first place in international rankings, with 82.6 millions of people.<sup>5</sup> Even Italy, which has always considered itself a privileged destination, has 52.4 million visitors, coming after France, the USA, Spain and China! The perception of serious problems with jihadist extremism concerns France today much more than other European nations, also according to the

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to recall that there is a certain French leadership at an international level, and that France is still active today, from a military point of view, in various parts of the world, viz. the conflict with IS in Syria and Iraq, but also in the Sahel - not to mention various international missions with the United Nations. Even today France has significant interests in Asia, and Macron plays an undoubtedly international role.

<sup>5</sup> UNWTO data, reported in Treccani, 2019.

number of people arrested for crimes related to this type of orientation: 373 in France, in 2017, compared to much smaller numbers from other European countries: Spain (78), Italy (26) and Greece (3) included.<sup>6</sup> Lately, then, France has seemed challenged by the appearance of the yellow vest diesel movement, which bring together students and workers. A protest movement that has been blocking France every weekend since November 2018, due to the failure to carry out some electoral proposals, but also the attempted increase in the price of fuel, motorway tolls, and fines.

- *Israel, present religious beliefs: a difficult coexistence*

The recollection of Yehoshua's book introduces us to an inevitable focus on Israel, the state where Jews live today- many of whom came in the early part of the 1900s, as is well known, fleeing the Hitler persecution, which was aimed at their genocide, at least after the early days in which expulsions were practiced. Jews with different orientations and degrees of belief, according to the data - which dates back to 2011 - from the Israeli Statistical Office and reported in Treccani's Geopolitical Atlas in 2019. At that time we have percentages of ultra-Orthodox that are not too high - 8% - those who identify as religious at 12%, in contrast to much more impressive percentages of religious traditionalists at 39%, and secular, at 41%.

But in Israel we also find Israeli Arabs. The very religious ones comprise 8%, an analogous percentage to that of ultra-Orthodox Jews. The percentage of those who identify as non-religious, however, is decidedly higher at 22%, which is almost double. Not very religious amounts to 27%, while religious is 43%: in this case as well there is a certain comparison with the Jewish world.

The situation seems more complex than one could hypothesize according to this first set of data.

As is well known, there are in fact further features of differentiation. In addition to that between Jews and Arabs, there are differences between Jews of European origin, or Ashkenazi Jews, who arrived as mentioned right before or immediately after the foundation of the state of Israel, and Sephardic Jews, who instead are of North African or Middle Eastern origin. There is also a third component, the Falasha, of Ethiopian origin. Still others come from Eastern Europe, i.e. from Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Romania- population flows occurring mostly after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Apparently today this latter category is the largest presence in the country, and has obvious differences in attitude compared to the Jews who came from Western Europe-and not just differences in geographical origins. Their difference in religious belief, the degree of intensity, by necessity must also reflect in politics. If the distance widens between non-believers and conservatives, it is actually ultra-orthodox Jewish minorities, or

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<sup>6</sup> Source: Europol

*haredim*, who are very present in public dialogue, that condition it beyond their small number and size, to influence the decisions.

What do they want, and who are these ultra-orthodox Jews, the *haredim*? They seem to be exponents of a decidedly militant and conservative religious Zionism. They generally have a higher birth rate than other Jews: a fact regarded with particular fear, in some circles.<sup>7</sup>

And what are the Arabic Israeli Christians of religious orientation? In reality it seems to be a multiplicity of orientations, since we are faced with Greek Orthodox, members of the Syriac church, Melkites, but also Latin Catholics and members of Protestant churches. The existence of an Armenian community should also be remembered; the Armenians, I would like to underscore, have and live their own religious beliefs of Christian origin, find themselves in the Armenian Church, a reality that has undergone a certain change of attitudes thanks to the commitment of Pope Francis and the repeated, reaffirmed recognition on his part - and therefore, of the Catholic church - of the Armenian genocide.<sup>8</sup>

If the picture is already complex, it should also be noted that many Eastern churches are present in Israel, with both an Orthodox and a Catholic church...

Additionally, we have a limited Druze presence, a presence that mainly concerns Mount Carmel. Very often the Druze manage the checkpoints through which the Palestinians must pass.

Theoretically, all Israeli citizens are equal with respect to the law, despite religious and other differences- but this is more theoretical than real. Arab communities, as is well known, receive both lower quality services and education. The Bedouins then - about ninety-thousand people in the Negev, the majority - in turn are discriminated against both in land possession and in the right to build; both Israeli and international human rights associations have intervened many times in this issue.

There's more. A nation-state law was passed in parliament, the enactment of which was approved by the Knesset in 2018, recognizes Israel as a Jewish state. This means, in other words, that Israel passes from theoretically being a multi-ethnic state to a declaredly mono-ethnic state. Will the situation of the Arabs, already forced for years to live mainly through international aid, worsen still? What will happen, given the strong tensions with some nearby populations? With Lebanon, for example, but also with Iran?

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<sup>7</sup> It is worth mentioning, by analogy, the fears expressed by various Serbs about a supposed higher birthrate on the Albanian side. In Serbian eyes this is the source of further problems in Kosovo, where Serbs are now a minority, and it is a fear that I was able to record several times during a trip I made in the Balkans around Easter 2019.

<sup>8</sup> What happened during a mass celebrated by Pope Francis in St. Peter's, in the presence of Armenians and non-Armenian guests, on the occasion of the centenary of the genocide: a sensational gesture, which had a great echo.

In any case this seems to be one of the most explosive situations, on the edges of the Mediterranean, on the African shores. Not the only one. In fact, there are others, for various reasons.

- *Libya and the containment of migrants*

Another certainly difficult situation is found in Libya. A Libya that experienced an Italian domination, after its Turkish one.<sup>9</sup> A Libya for which the discovery of oil radically changes its previous situation. I would like to remember, even if briefly, the Gaddafi period, with the call to Arab nationalism and the support given to terrorist organizations opposed to pro-Western countries such as Lebanon, Egypt and even Chad. Then, its growing isolation, its many changes in political orientations, up to the UN international sanctions against Libya, in 1992. And then, the collapse of the situation, in 2011, the NATO intervention, the death of Gaddafi, killed on October 20<sup>th</sup> that year. And, again, the presence of several armed militias loyal to a few local leaders, the clashes between supporters of political Islam - people in favor of Turkey and Qatar - or instead restorative forces such as those of the United Arab Emirates, but also of Saudi Arabia, as well as Egypt, after the fall of Mohammed Morsi.

Between the end of 2014 and the second half of 2016 there is a growing presence of radical forces, also linked to IS, in some parts of Libyan territory: viz. Sirte. The difficulty is such that in 2014 Parliament leaves Tripoli, takes refuge in the east of the country, and settles in Tobruk. A new government takes office in Tripoli, however, a government that emerges from the Parliament elected in 2012 - a situation that has arisen at high risk. Thus the intervention of the United Nations - in December 2015 an agreement is reached with some of the key players. They remain, however, two powers divided and opposed to each other; one in Cyrenaica, with General Khalifa Belqasim Haftar - who appears to be aided by Russia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt - and the other in Misurata, located in Tripoli and in northern areas. In these circumstances the UN peace attempts did not have favorable results, as it was with various attempts at peace talks, including one held by E. Macron in 2018. Nor did the international conference on Libya have a greater result - on the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> November 2018 - held in Palermo with Conte. While political attempts are being made to reconcile the country, control remains in the hands of the military, and with numerous armed gangs, despite the US air strikes, which have hit major centers in the Islamic State or IS.

Meanwhile, the presence of migrants continues: those bound for Europe from sub-Saharan Africa, ie from Sudan, as well as from Chad and Nigeria, pass through Libya. Hence the agreements entered into by Italy and the EU with Tripoli for patrolling the coasts. While these agreements have certainly protected Italy and the EU from migrant

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<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Federico Cresti, *Non desideriamo la terra d'altri. La colonizzazione italiana in Libia*, (We Don't Want Others' Land. Italian colonization in Libya), Carocci, Rome 2011.

arrivals, they come at the cost of many human lives scattered in the Mediterranean, as well as the imprisonment of many others in tragic conditions. Libya, on the one hand, has always had a relatively high level of human development, but on the other hand it has undergone and is undergoing a decidedly critical situation regarding its civil and political rights. Thus the dissent from international organizations and NGOs about the role transferred to Libya regarding the containment of migrants.

If from North Africa we continue east, we find another country, Lebanon, with high levels of education (82.2%) and literacy (91.2%, in 2009), also independent of France since 1943. It, too, is very challenged by the compresence of various denominations, and by the interference of external powers. Since 1948 it has hosted Palestinian refugees. Here many Armenians were trained for terrorist acts against Turkey, attacks intent on recognition of the genocide that occurred during the First World War. In brief, we can say that the country experienced a difficult interreligious coexistence until it arrived at civil war, in 1975. Only around 1990 did Lebanon find its stability, after many exodus. To reflect the balances reached, an attempt was made to divide parliamentary seats between Christian and Muslim communities, dropping a previous proportional division favorable to Christians. In addition: if the president is a Maronite Christian, the premier will be a Sunni Muslim, and the president of the National Assembly will be a Shiite. Historically, Lebanon has felt the impact of Syrian events, and has endured a long civil war (1975-90), an institutional paralysis from 2014 until 2017, from which the legislative elections of May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018 resulted. Their migration rate is relatively high, at 49.1 per thousand inhabitants; there are 1,468,137 refugees in the country- a very high number for the country, which has about 4.4 million people. The highest number of refugees per capita. There are 5,297 refugees abroad.

What are the main problems of the country? According to the 2019 Treccani, the older age of parliamentarians, a difficult generational change. The high number of refugees in the country, with a difficult religious composition, about which there are no reliable data, since the last census dates back to 1932. Certainly the main presences consist of Sunnis and Shiites, Christians and Druze. One can hypothesize, however, that the number of Muslims has grown, since Christians also emigrate in greater numbers. If, as it seems, Muslims are at 60%, this could lead to a forced revision of the internal policy agreements (Taif Agreements, 1989). Another reason for tension concerns the Shiite presence, which currently has the right to 21% of parliamentary seats, a lower percentage, it seems, compared to their demographics. The demo-denomination scheme that underlies the political structure is increasingly debated, and has heavy influence on the credibility of politicians, on the data of low transparency and perceived corruption (28, 143 ° out of 180). Geopolitical problems have also had a negative impact on the country's economy, now the most indebted in the region (and ranking third highest in the world, after Japan and Greece, for public debt). Again,

it's important to remember the presence of a UNIFOL mission involving France, Italy, Indonesia and Spain; a mission already hypothesized due to the Lebanese civil war, today UNIFOL is responsible for avoiding clashes on the Israeli border, the most problematic border in Lebanon.

In short, we have found several problematic situations, with inevitable repercussions for the Mediterranean, to the present day, exploring, even if briefly, the North African coast, touching on the Middle East. We have met mainly Catholics and Muslims, especially Sunnis, as well as Israelis and minorities such as the Druze. We have encountered problematic situations, harbingers of not just local tensions. What would happen if we moved to the Balkans?

- *Balkans and the Mediterranean*

The background picture would not be much calmer if one wanted to examine the Balkan countries facing the eastern coast. Among the problems of the Balkans today we have the decidedly urgent one of people who seek possible countries of refuge, abandoning with the Syrian situation great difficulty. I focused on this situation in an account of a trip I made in those areas, around the time of this past Easter.<sup>10</sup> The Syrians forced to flee, and therefore out of the country today, would amount to somewhere between 5 and 6 million people. It is difficult to predict their return, since their country is destroyed; the return would require a long, difficult prior reconstruction, and imply a path of reconciliation that is expected to be fraught with challenges. Thousands of people who aspire to reach the EU are blocked, we learn from Danijel Kovačević,<sup>11</sup> at the border with Croatia. For months. They are located in the northwest part of the country, where the passage to Croatia and Europe would seem relatively easier. Even though there is news, disturbing rumors- talk of 5,000 people stopped in Bihać (canton of Una-Sana). Another 700 people are in the tent city of Vučjak, in a forest, without electricity, running water or toilets. Another 2,000 in immigration centers in Bira and Miral, or nearby, sleeping on the ground waiting for a spot. Bira and Miral are settlements in the hands of private individuals and there is strong controversy surrounding this fact; there is talk of two former military structures being put into use instead. However, the Serbian Republic refuses to accommodate immigration centers. According to some rumors, 43,000 migrants have passed through here since the beginning of 2019. It is difficult to contain the flows that intend to go to Europe - perhaps, preferably, to France.

In Greece as well it seems that there is talk of closing the existing migrant camps in Lesbos, Chios and Samos. According to some, these should be replaced with closed

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Maria I. Maciotti, *Viaggio nei Balcani, (Trip to the Balkans)* «La critica sociologica» n. 211, Autunno 2019, pp. 49-67.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr, his piece in «Balkan Insight», Serbia; *In Bosnia i migranti continuano ad aspettare*, (In Bosnia the migrants continue to wait) «Internazionale» 1335, 29 novembre 2019, p.32.

detention centers. There are those who see asylum seekers as invaders. A very different approach than that of Alexis Tsipras, more similar if anything to Salvini's wishes for Italy - a model based on deterrence and isolation would prevail, and on detention.<sup>12</sup>

Nor does it seem necessary to speak of Turkey in detail.

What seems to me to be necessary is to emphasize that the picture is significantly complicated once faced with other problems, other flows, different causes, different countries and obstacles to overcome. Different realities also on a cultural, political and religious level; ex-communist countries, which have undergone different experiences, from Enver Hoxha's Albania, which had determined a certain isolation, to the countries that had lived under the control of Josip Broz, known as Tito.<sup>13</sup> Here we still find Muslims but also Orthodox Christians and Catholics, in addition to minorities of different orientations. With Serbia, where many migrants remain blocked, it is important to keep Russia in mind, since it is interested in having and maintaining a certain influence, in being an important political partner. It is a role that China is also aspiring to today.

The whole Balkan area, of great beauty, nonetheless presents tangled and complex stories, border disputes - viz. Croatia and Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia, Croatia and Montenegro, in addition to the problems of borders between Serbia and Bosnia Herzegovina - political, inter-ethnic disputes, not to mention the different behaviors and attitudes deriving from the recent historical past. What is generally shared among these countries, on the other hand, is their attitudes towards migrants and asylum seekers, towards whom they retain a closed attitude. According to UNHCR estimates, Croatia alone, which has far more important maritime borders than land borders (2237 km, land borders; 5,835 km, sea borders) has rejected over 3,000 people in 2017, and around 2,500 from January to September 2018. Of these, 1500 were denied the possibility of applying for asylum.

According to Treccani's Geopolitical Atlas 2019, there are 448 refugees in the country, and 24,859 abroad.

In summary, I would like to say that even though a Mediterranean crossroads of cultures has been rightly spoken of, it seems that the sea that Fernand Braudel and, in Italy, Franco Cassano and Franco Ferrarotti have spoken about has now become increasingly a hard border. A liquid border, apparently simple to evade, to traverse. But the reality is different. Countries facing the Mediterranean have different situations,

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<sup>12</sup> «Internazionale» 1335, year 27, November 2019, p. 33 *Mitsotakis getta la maschera*, (Mitsotakis takes off the mask) « Efimerida ton Syntakton », Grecia.

<sup>13</sup> Josip Broz Tito (May 25, 1892 - May 4, 1980), a well-known prime minister and then president of Yugoslavia, led guerrilla actions against the occupation troops after the German invasion, against the *Ustasha* collaborators and the monarchical Chetniks. In 1948, the break with the Soviet Union increased his popularity. He was of Slovenian-Croatian origin, and lived in a country dominated by Serbs. Many have noted his strong understanding of ethnic issues.

attitudes, and expectations. Sometimes they block migratory flows in agreement with the EU. Sometimes they do this even on their own. Greece, Turkey, and Libya have been included in a politics of refusal and removals by European countries who believe they must defend themselves from migratory flows, regardless of their causes. By doing so they largely neglect their own past as migrant peoples; this is, it seems to me, the case of Italy.

Meanwhile, in the Mediterranean turned fearsome border, people die. The ideals of the interchange between cultures, of mutual enrichment through hybridization, grow distant.

Ferrarotti loves to remember that the ancient empires had no actual, true borders but rather outposts. Today, natural borders are not enough for those who talk about the need to defend their territory, their nation, their European essence. Physical barriers are erected, the Mediterranean is used as a terrible barrier. Possibly, sea rescue and subsequent landings are lessened, made difficult. In Italy, Minister Salvini has specialized in this.

Not only that: the basically impassable borders, the borders guarded with armed guards, the barbed wires, the walls of various types seem to have multiplied, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, which many viewed - erroneously, it seems - as a sign of great hope.

Around 25,000 have been killed or have gone missing at sea, in the Mediterranean, since 2000. They make up more than half of the total of those who have died on sea routes worldwide. A frightening change, which accompanies, in European countries, a growth in hate speech as well as hate-based actions, as documented by the International Report "Words are Stones: Hate speech analysis in public debate in six European countries" from 2019, edited by Lunaria and others. It urges, it seems to me, a conscious, desired orientation towards a mutual dialogue. *Dialogue or perish*, Franco Ferrarotti wrote long ago. I believe that the Mediterranean is today immersed in these issues, having before it these two pathways forward: one, the crossroads of cultures and religious beliefs; the other, a rigid, repelling frontier, a hard border. The first perspective, a harbinger of life— the other an impoverishment and degradation, ever greater irrelevance.

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