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History, Culture and Politics of the Kurds: A Short Overview

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Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive overview of the Kurds, the world's largest people without a state of their own, and explores their complex and often tragic history. This brief overview challenges the notion that the Kurds are a people without a history and highlights their active role in shaping their social and political reality. The author discusses the existence of a Kurdish literate civilization with a rich literary tradition going back centuries, debunking the perception of the Kurds as rural, tribal and illiterate. The article also examines the impact of various historical events, such as the collapse of empires, the rise of nationalism and the Cold War, on Kurdish aspirations for self-determination. It examines Kurdish struggles with nationalist states, the influence of the Soviet Union and the United States, and the emergence of Kurdish liberation movements. By shedding light on Kurdish history, culture and political challenges, this survey aims to provide a deeper understanding of this vibrant and resilient people.

Keywords

Kurds, history, culture, politics, literate civilization, nationalism, self-determination, liberation movements, Cold War, nationalism, Middle East

Introduction

“The Kurds are the largest people in the world without a state of their own.”⁶⁵ Hidden behind this oft-repeated judgment is a long, complex and often tragic history, in which Kurds are not merely passive victims of forces beyond their control, but have also actively been involved in the creation of their complex and often contradictory social and political realities.⁶⁶ In this

⁶⁵ CHALIAND, Gerard (ed.). *People Without A Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*. Zed Press 1980.

⁶⁶ MCDOWALL, David. *A modern history of the Kurds*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.

short overview, I hope to give an idea of this history, with an eye to the highly unstable present.

The Kurds: A ‘People Without History’?

To some, the very idea that the Kurds have a history at all is almost preposterous. Among friends and foes alike, one may still find traces of a romantic, and/or modernist, image of the Kurds as essentially a people without a history, that is, as a rural, nomadic and tribally organized ethnic group, or set of ethnic groups, living in the remote mountainous areas straddling Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria; accordingly, they allegedly have no literate civilization, and no written history of their own. Instead, this view implies, their history has been written – and, perhaps, should be written – by others. The very same image, however, underlies the Turkish nationalist claim that the Kurds are not a proper people, and that theirs is not a proper language (i.e., a unified language with a written standard) but a set of dialects, if not a mere mixture of other languages; or, as one prominent Turkish politician once put it, “Kurdish is a language without a civilization.”⁶⁷ Because of this, the tacit or overt conclusion in Turkish nationalist circles is that the Kurds have no claim to nationhood, nor can they even claim the right to have elementary school education in their native vernacular.

In fact, however, this ideological image of the Kurds as rural, tribal, and illiterate (in short, as non-modern) is incorrect: already in early modern times, the Kurds did in fact have a literate civilization, a history written by Kurdish authors, and a linguistic standardization of sorts.⁶⁸ For centuries, poetry and learning in Kurdish were cultivated both at Kurdish courts and in rural Quranic schools or medreses. Although classical Arabic was the main language of learning, and classical Persian dominated in *belles lettres*; but in the seventeenth century if not earlier, a vernacular Kurdish tradition of poetry and learning developed, primarily in the Northern Kurdish or Kurmanji dialect, yielding poets like Melayê Cezîrî (c.1570-c.1640CE) and Ehmedê Xanî (1650-1707), historians like Sheref Khan Bidlîsî (1543-1603CE), and vernacular scholars like Elî Teremaxî and Mela Yunus Khalqatîni (both probably 18th century CE). The main local work of history from this period is Bidlîsî’s *Sherefname*, written in Persian; and the most famous learned poem in Kurdish is Xanî’s romance *Mem and Zîn*, a tragic Romeo and Juliet-like story of two lovers who are not allowed to marry and die a

⁶⁷ Turkish speaker of parliament Bülent Arınç, Spring 2012. When called to account by local Kurds, he denied having made that point.

⁶⁸ LEEZENBERG, Michiel. Eli Teremaxi and the Vernacularization of Medrese Learning in Kurdistan. *Iranian Studies* 47 (2014): 713-734.

martyr's death. Since the late nineteenth century, this poem has been consecrated as the Kurdish national epic, and read as an allegory of the different parts of Kurdistan ruled by different states, and of the Kurds' inability to join forces and liberate themselves.⁶⁹ As this poem originated in a pre-nationalist setting of medreses (Quranic schools) and mystical Sufi orders, however, it can also be given a mystical reading: the lovers' inability to marry transforms or transmutes their love from a profane into a sacred one, or from a human into a divine one. But whatever its interpretation, the very existence of this poem, and of a substantial body of other premodern learned writings in Kurdish, proves that the Kurds not only have a literature of their own, but also a literate civilization that goes back centuries.⁷⁰

The Long Nineteenth century

This classical civilization of local courts, urban and rural medreses and Persian-oriented Sufi orders, however, started transforming in the nineteenth century. Attempting to create a more centralized state, the authorities of the Ottoman empire abolished the Kurdish emirates; as a result of the disappearance of local court patronage, the Kurdish literate tradition declined, tribal social organization was strengthened, and new Sufi groups, in particular the Khalidiyya branch of the Naqshbandi order, gained strength.⁷¹ These developments were not unique to the Kurds, but also reflect wider developments and challenges, like, most importantly, the development of separatist movements in the Ottoman Balkans and the rise of the Wahhabi movement in the Arabian peninsula, representatives of which became active also in the regions further North early in the nineteenth century. Simultaneously, the empire came under increasing pressure from neighbors like the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires, but also from more distant imperialist forces like France and England.

Much attention has been paid to the new, and powerful, political ideology of nationalism, which defines peoples in terms of their native tongue and culture, and as having a right to a state of their own. Nationalism, however, was far from the only new societal force in the reforming Ottoman empire. There was also an influential movement for constitutionalism, in which Ottoman subjects were to be redefined as rights-bearing citizens; and later in the century, one also witnesses the rise of pan-Islam, or the idea that all Muslims should form one community with the Ottoman sultan as their legitimate caliph, and of pan-

⁶⁹ LEEZENBERG, Michiel. Ehmedê Xanî's Mem û Zîn: The Consecration of a Kurdish national epic. In M. M. Gunter (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook on the Kurds* (Routledge 2019) 79-89.

⁷⁰ VALI, Abbas (ed.) *Essays on the Origin of Kurdish Nationalism*. Mazda Press, 2003.

⁷¹ Van BRUINESSEN, Martin. *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*. Zed Press 1992, chapter 4.

Turkism, the ideology that all Turkic-speaking peoples living in the area spreading from the Balkans to Central Asia should be united in a vast single state, or empire.⁷² Both pan-Islam and pan-Turkism were in part triggered by the Ottoman confrontation with the Russian empire; arguably, pan-Turkism in particular was modeled on the non-liberal pan-Slavism that developed in the second half of the nineteenth century. Unlike the earlier ‘liberal’ pan-Slavism pioneered by authors like Jernej Kopitar, the later Russian-based pan-Slavism saw the tsar as the political and spiritual leader of all Slavic-speaking peoples.

This new dynamic, the new ideologies, and the military confrontations between, in particular, the Ottomans and the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires, also affected the Kurds and Armenians living in the Easternmost provinces of the Ottoman empire. Pan-Islam saw no legitimate political role for non-Muslim population groups, like Armenians in the East, and Greeks and Slavic-speaking Orthodox Christians further Westward; pan-Turkism also saw no legitimate place for non-Turkic Muslim peoples in the empire. Antagonisms between the empire’s population groups were further exacerbated by the 1877-1878 Russo-Turkish war. Reports about massacres and mass expulsions in the wake of this war created new rivalries and new mutual fears between the Muslims and Christians (and, to a lesser extent, Jews) living in different parts of the empire. It was also in this period that new, and rivaling, territorial national movements gained in strength.

Conventional wisdom has it that the Kurds have been ‘too late’ in demanding a state of their own; and hence, unlike the Greeks, Arabs, or different Slavic peoples living in the empire, and unlike even the Armenians, who almost vanished entirely as a nation in the 1915 genocide, to gain independence. This was not simply a question of an unprepared national leadership, however. The Albanians, for example, were hardly more (and in a number of respects, even less) prepared for national self-identification let alone national liberation than the Kurds, divided as they were among two empires, into three antagonistic religions, and into countless mutually feuding tribes. The first Albanian national movement, the Prizren League, was created only in 1878; but due to a combination of contingent factors, Albania became an independent state barely thirty years later, in the wake of the 1912 Balkan war. The Kurds, who had tended to remain loyal subjects of the Ottoman and Qajar empires, had no such luck.⁷³

⁷² LANDAU, Jacob. *The Politics of Pan-Islam: Ideology and Organization*. Clarendon Press 1990. LANDAU, Jacob. *Pan-Turkism in Turkey: A Study of Irredentism*. Hurst 1981.

⁷³ MCDOWALL, David. *A modern history of the Kurds*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.

After World War I: the creation of nation states

The end of World War I marked the end of the great Central and Eastern European empires. Both the Ottoman and the Habsburg empires split up, or were carved up, into a number of national, and nationalist, successor states. Especially in the Ottoman case, this breakup is often depicted as an inevitable outcome; but it should be kept in mind that the neighboring Russian empire did in a sense live on, or reincarnated, in the Soviet Union. I will leave aside the question of whether the breakup of these empires may be fruitfully analyzed as forms of decolonization, and whether the Soviet Union may in its turn be seen as a colonial state with a distinct form of ‘internal colonialism’ of its own; but, as will become clear below, the Soviet Union would provide an important model for the modern Kurdish experience.

After the war, the new states of Iraq and Syria were created, and became British and French mandates, respectively. In these mandate states, Kurdish aspirations were tolerated if not encouraged, partly as a divide-and-rule strategy, and partly (in Iraq) as a way of countering Turkish claims on oil-rich Mosul province. In the Turkish republic established in 1923, by contrast, the new Kemalist elites created, and forcibly imposed, a radically modern and secular Turkish identity, with especially serious consequences for the Kurds. Not only was the use of Kurdish in speaking as well as writing, and in private as well as in public, banned in 1925; but also the medreses and the Sufi orders, where much of Kurdish culture had been cultivated, were abolished as part of the effort to create a centralized and unitary state with a unified language, culture and educational system. The new Pahlavi monarchy that was established in Iran in 1925 was consciously modeled on Kemalist Turkey, but was less successful in implementing its centralizing and secularizing policies. Both Kemalist Turkey and Pahlavi Iran, it should be added, were following non-liberal models, with the Kemalists effectively creating a one-party state that organizationally though hardly ideologically resembled the Leninist Soviet Union. In particular, the Leninist model of the one-party state where a centrally organized vanguard imposes a modern identity and consciousness on the population at large, would prove to be enduring in the Middle East, and fateful for the Kurds.

The Cold War: Kurds between American-led capitalism and Soviet-led socialism

World War II had been rather less murderous for the peoples of the Middle East than its predecessor; but the Cold War that developed in its wake created the arena within which the

regional states had to act. In one way or another, all states in the region took sides in the confrontation between the liberal (or capitalist) West and the communist (or socialist) East Bloc. This was to have fateful consequences for the Kurds in the region.

Turkey joined NATO in 1952; as a corollary, and due primarily to US pressure, a multiparty democracy was created out of what had until then been a Leninist one-party state. In the first postwar elections, the hitherto powerful CHP was swept away in a landslide victory for the opposition Democrat Party; but the army retained its prominent position, and in 1960, in 1971, and in 1980 it would carry out coups to replace the then civilian governments (not to mention the failed coup attempt of 2016). The very existence of the Kurds, however, continued to be denied by the successive governments.

Quite different was the political trajectory of Iraq and Syria. In the late 1950s, military coups ended the Western European hegemony in both countries, which effectively shifted towards the Soviet bloc (even if they formally remained nonaligned countries). From the 1960s on, under rival branches of the Arab nationalist Baath party, ultimately led by Hafez al-Assad in Syria, and by Saddam Husayn in Iraq, two one-party states were created that were socialist in their economic policies and secular Arab nationalist in ideology; both states also developed Stalinist cults of the leader, and equally Stalinist rule by omnipresent and all-powerful intelligence services. In Iran, finally, the new postwar ruler, Reza Shah Pahlavi, created an authoritarian and highly centralized, and Iranian nationalist, but pro-American, state, which left little room for Kurdish aspirations, or for any kind of political opposition.

Kurdish struggles with these nationalist, and generally authoritarian, states were increasingly shaped by Cold War conditions and conflicts.⁷⁴ Thus, in 1946, a short-lived independent Kurdish republic was established around the city of Mahabad in Iran. It was crucially dependent on Soviet support, however. It was crushed by the Iranian military within a year, and its leaders were executed; but it would remain a powerful symbol for later Kurdish attempts at national liberation and self-rule. In Iran, however, few if any opportunities would arise until the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Postwar Turkey saw a dramatic economic and social development involving a rapid urbanization in the 1960s and 1970s. Kurds from the Southeast of the country East migrated within the country, settling the urban slums (the so-called *gecekondus*) in the West of Turkey; but also, many emigrated abroad, in particular to Northwestern Europe. As a result of these migrations, a labor movement emerged that focused on the plight of urban workers, rural

⁷⁴ MCDOWALL, David. *A modern history of the Kurds*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021.

peasants, and, increasingly, Kurds. Although for much of the 1970s, few if any dared to mention the Kurds or their situation by name, gradually an idea developed that the Kurds were not just oppressed as workers, but also as Kurds, as a result of an ‘internal colonisation,’ that exploited the Kurdish-inhabited region and its inhabitants as a source of raw materials and cheap labor. This internal colonization, it was argued, justified a specifically Kurdish liberation struggle instead of an internationalist solidarity between all workers. The most important party to emerge from this constellation was the PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, or ‘Kurdistan Workers Party’), which in 1978 launched a campaign of revolutionary violence aimed at provoking increased oppression by the Turkish state, and thus heightening revolutionary consciousness among the population, of being oppressed both as workers or peasants and as Kurds. The guerrilla warfare initiated by the PKK escalated in the 1980s and early 1990s, leading to thousands of civilians being killed, primarily by the indiscriminate violence of state forces, and to many more villagers being forced to abandon their villages. To the extent that this campaign did increase Kurdish revolutionary consciousness, it did so at a very high price indeed.⁷⁵

In Syria, no such guerrilla warfare was feasible, as the Syrian Kurds lived primarily on the plains of the Jezirah region and had no inaccessible mountainous hinterland as in Iraq or Turkey. In the early 1960s, tens of thousands of Kurds had been deprived of Syrian citizenship and rendered ‘aliens’ (*ajânib*) by an arbitrary state measure, and continued to be deprived of basic rights. The Syrian regime did support, however, the PKK as well as different Iraq Kurdish parties.⁷⁶

During the same period, the Kurds in Iraq alternated between accommodation with successive civilian governments and military confrontation. In 1961, a guerrilla war had broken out. In March 1970, Kurdish leader Barzani and Iraqi strongman Saddam Husayn signed an autonomy agreement; but this settlement did not mark an end to armed conflict, primarily because the Iraqi regime continued the Arabization of oil-rich Kirkuk province. In 1974 open warfare broke out again, but came to an unexpected end in 1974, when the Shah of Iran, in return for territorial concessions by Iraq, suddenly withdrew his support for the Kurdish insurgents, leading to the immediate and virtually complete collapse of the Kurdish front. Kurdish guerrilla warfare revived in the 1980s, against the background of the Iran-Iraq

⁷⁵ VAN BRUINSEN, Martin. *Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*. London: Zed Press, 1992.

⁷⁶ ALLSOPP, Harriet. *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2014.

war; simultaneously, the Baathist regime's counterinsurgency measures, and its Arab nationalism, became increasingly murderous, acquiring fully genocidal proportions in the 1988 Anfal operations, which attempted to end Kurdish guerilla activity once and for all. Between 100,000 and 180,000 noncombatants were killed in this period alone.⁷⁷

These operations left the Kurdish population decimated, and the Kurdish parties thoroughly demoralized.

The 1990s

The End of the Cold War marked new and unexpected opportunities, however. The end of the authoritarian 'people's democracies' in Eastern Europe made leaders like Syria's Assad and Iraq's Saddam Husayn visibly nervous. Assad gambled by signaling a willingness to enter into negotiations with Israel and to warm up towards the United States, and won. Saddam Husayn, however, made a major strategic miscalculation by invading Kuwait in the summer of 1990. In earlier years, the Iraqi regime had been able to play off the Soviet Union against the US; but now, for a brief period, the two superpowers acted in concert: an international force ousted Iraqi troops from Kuwait, leading to a popular uprising in Iraq and the near-collapse of Saddam's regime. In the aftermath of the war, Kurdish parties seized control of much of the Kurdistan region and succeeded in establishing - and maintaining - a form of Kurdish self-rule under the protection of the U.S. and its allies. Since 1991, the region has gradually stabilized under initially adverse conditions and despite open rivalry between the major Kurdish parties, which has repeatedly led to serious infighting.⁷⁸ Although formally united, it split in the late 1990s into two de facto separate one-party states based on Leninist models of one-party rule. This did not change much after the 2003 war against Iraq, but the Kurdistan Region was recognized for the first time as an official autonomous part of Iraq.

In Turkey, the Kurdish insurgency showed signs of turning into a genuinely mass-based revolt; but it clashed violently with a strong and ideologically unwavering state, where the military retained their place. For a while, it might have looked as if Turkey would lose its prominent status as a NATO frontier state; but it managed to retain its geostrategic importance. As a result, neither the US nor the EU were willing to criticize its increasingly murderous counterinsurgency operations too harshly. By the late 1990s, partly as a result of

⁷⁷ HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH/MIDDLE EAST. *Iraq's Crime of Genocide: the Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds*. Yale University Press, 1995.

⁷⁸ LEEZENBERG, Michiel. Urbanization, Privatization and Patronage: The Political Economy of Iraqi Kurdistan. In F. Jabar & H. Dawod (eds.) *The Kurds: Nationalism and Politics*. Saqi Books 2006.

this unprecedented repression, the Kurdish insurgency appears to have lost momentum; and in many respects, it came to a sudden halt with the 1999 kidnapping and subsequent imprisonment of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. In the courtroom, Öcalan pleaded for his life, arguing that the Kurdish question in Turkey could not be solved without him. This marked the temporary end of guerrilla activities on Turkish soil, and a seemingly radical shift in PKK ideology, from the struggle *for* an independent state to an anarchist ‘democratic autonomy’ *from* the state. What did not change, however, was the consistent effort by PKK actors to dominate political, social and cultural life in the Kurdish-populated parts of Turkey, and subsequently also Northern Syria.⁷⁹

The Kurds in the 21st Century

The assaults by al-Qaida suicide bombers against American targets on September 11, 2001, once again dramatically changed the geopolitics of the region. As part of its subsequent worldwide fight against ‘Islamic terrorism,’ US forces first invaded Afghanistan, and subsequently Iraq. Against its proclaimed aim, this fight did not lead to a weakening of salafi-jihadi militancy (nor even to the political or military elimination of Afghanistan’s Taliban rulers); instead, the Middle East witnessed new and unprecedented forms of revolutionary violence in the name of (Sunni) Islam, and newly violent actions against both Shi‘ites and non-Muslim minorities. The most famous, or notorious form of this violence was perpetrated by the so-called Islamic State (IS), which, in fact, amounted to a reappearance of Iraqi and Syrian intelligence forces under a Sunni-Islamic veneer.

Kurdish forces in both Iraq and Syria were the most important counterbalance to IS; but although they gained much sympathy for their opposition both among Western governments and among the Western public at large, they only partially managed to capitalize on this sympathy. Shortly after the declared end of the fight against IS, Iraqi Kurdistan regional president Massoud Barzani called a referendum on independence, a move which (no matter how morally justified it might have been) proved a major strategic miscalculation; as a result, much of the gains the Kurds had made since 2003 if not 1991 was undone.

In Syria, forces of the Kurdish-led PYD had heroically resisted IS at Kobani; but the Kurdish-dominated enclave of Rojava or ‘The West’ [of Kurdistan] is one of the more contradictory phenomena of the wider regional conflict that erupted after 2010. Ceded

⁷⁹ LEEZENBERG, Michiel. The ambiguities of democratic autonomy: the Kurdish movement in Turkey and Rojava. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2016, 16.4: 671-690.

without a shot being fired by the Assad regime to the PYD, a Syrian franchise of the PKK, Rojava was perceived by Turkey as a major threat, and by the Iraqi Kurdish KDP as a major rival. Hailed as an anticapitalist anarchist utopia by Western observers like David Graber and many others, it very much reproduced the strictly centralized and hierarchical military leadership of the PKK. And posing as an anti-imperialist initiative, it was crucially dependent on US military support.⁸⁰

In Turkey, the political Islam that came to power early in the 21st century had a very different (and, for the Kurds, initially much more promising) character. The new prime minister (and later president) Erdogan felt strong enough to subvert long-standing Kemalist dogma, and announced a ‘Kurdish opening,’ which granted Kurds in Turkey unprecedented rights: a Kurdish-language state TV channel, TRT6 was created, and it became possible to study Kurdish at universities, though not at elementary schools. During the same period, successive pro-Kurdish parties in local government, created an unprecedented opportunity space for promoting Kurdish culture. For a brief while, peace negotiations between PKK leader Öcalan and Turkish government representatives were opened; but in part because of developments in Rojava, and in part because of a wider authoritarian shift in Erdogan’s behavior and policies, relations gradually soured. Following the 2015 elections, which for the first time gave the pro-Kurdish HDP a prominent role in national politics, a new crackdown against Kurdish politicians and activists was ordered. At the time of writing, many prominent Kurdish politicians and intellectuals are jailed, many of them without due process, with few if any signs of clemency from the Turkish government, and with little if any pressure from either EU or US for their release.

Conclusions

The condition of the Kurds in the various countries of the Middle East has shown dramatic shifts over the decades, and shows no signs of stabilizing anywhere. There are external as well as domestic causes for the region’s enduring instability. Post-Saddam Iraq has seen an upsurge of Iranian influence; and Syria has increasingly come to rely on both Russian and Iranian military support. The American role in the region has been – to put it mildly – variable and contradictory; but there are few signs the US are willing to radically change their long-

⁸⁰ LEEZENBERG, Michiel. The ambiguities of democratic autonomy: the Kurdish movement in Turkey and Rojava. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 2016, 16.4: 671-690.

standing support for Turkey. Finally, China is rapidly becoming a major economic, and – increasingly – political influence in the region.

It is quite possible, though by no means certain, that the regional geostrategic power balance may dramatically change overnight, as has repeatedly happened in the past. For example, in the fall of 2022, the Iranian regime faced an unprecedented wave of protests; should the Islamic regime collapse (a scenario which, admittedly, at the time of writing looks less plausible than in the first weeks of the revolt), the entire power balance of the region will change, given that Iran is a major player not only in Iraq and Syria, but also in places like Yemen and Syria. Likewise, should Russia be seriously weakened as a result of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the regional power balance is also likely to be upset. But nobody can predict which, if any, of these scenarios will play out, and with what consequences for the Kurds in the different countries of the region.

Conditions in the respective countries with a sizable Kurdish population are hardly less stable. In Turkey, it remains to be seen what effect the May 2023 elections, which further consolidated president Erdogan's authoritarian regime, will have on the country's institutions of civil society, and on the Kurds; but the situation does not look very promising at present. In Iraq, the recent emergence of the federal constitutional court as a main player bodes ill for Kurdish autonomy, in particular concerning oil extraction; but political relations between the different Kurdish political parties are equally unpredictable and unstable. The Kurds in Syria remain dependent on US support, in a very volatile field shaped by various other regional and geopolitical forces. Kurds in Iran have gained new hopes for a successful revolt against the regime, but face ever-more violent repression by the Islamic regime and its stakeholders. There are no reasons to expect, or hope, that any of these long-standing conflicts will be resolved in a peaceful and enduring manner anytime soon; on the contrary, given the persistent regional and geopolitical fault lines, the potential for new and violent conflict and social upheaval remains a very real presence in the lives of Kurds in all of the states in the region.

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