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A U.S. STRATEGY FOR DEALING WITH SYRIA

INTRODUCTION

Syria has become the spoiler of the Middle East. Damascus foiled Israel's 1982 attempt to forge a unified Lebanon under pro-Israeli Maronite leadership; it conspired to sabotage President Reagan's September 1, 1982, Middle East peace initiative; it blocked Secretary of State George Shultz's May 17, 1983, Israeli-Lebanese disengagement accord; it is working to thwart King Hussein's fragile peace offensive. To accomplish these negative ends it has manipulated surrogate forces skillfully and unleashed coldblooded terrorism. In recent weeks it has attempted to deny Israel air superiority over Lebanon by massing anti-aircraft missiles on both sides of the Syrian-Lebanese border.

Syria's ruler, President Hafez al-Assad, has proved himself a formidable adversary. Known to his aides as "the sphinx" because of his inscrutable demeanor, Assad is a shrewd leader endowed with a Machiavellian mind, a pragmatic approach to issues, and a finely honed sense of brinkmanship. Under his 15 years of iron rule Syria has enjoyed precarious domestic stability after years of military coups and has staked a claim to Arab leadership as Israel's chief foe.

Although Assad has risen high, his power base is narrow and steadily shrinking. His regime, dominated by members of his minority Alawite religious group, is resented at home and distrusted in the Arab world. While it trumpets its opposition to Israel, Assad's regime has been responsible for the deaths of more Palestinians than Israelis, and more Syrians than Palestinians.

Assad long has operated under the assumption that time was on his side. Massive financial aid from the Arab oil states and arms credits from the Soviet Union enable him to move towards his goal of strategic parity with Israel. He patiently outlasted both the United States and

Israel in Lebanon. On the domestic front he coopted potential opposition through economic development projects while eliminating all active challenges to his own leadership.

Now, however, the prevailing trends increasingly seem unfavorable to Assad. The oil glut has reduced financial aid from the Arab oil states and hurt the Syrian economy. Assad has ousted the United States and Israel from Lebanon, but it is unclear whether he can overcome Lebanese opposition to Syrian domination. Finally, Assad's personal health may be deteriorating, an ominous portent given the succession struggle triggered by his November 1983 heart attack. Syria is a heterogenous country that may become one of the most unstable states in the Middle East without a firm, established leader at the helm.

Washington should keep a close eye on Syrian missile deployments and provide Israel with satellite-gathered intelligence on Syrian movements in timely fashion. Washington's top priority with Syria should be to force Assad to reconsider his support of anti-Western terrorism. The long-range goal should be to draw Syria into the Middle East peace process. Since this runs completely against the grain of Assad's foreign policy because of his domestic political constraints, Washington should focus its efforts on post-Assad Syria rather than press Assad to do something he probably is unable to do. Because Washington has few carrots it can extend to Assad's Syria, it must rely on sticks, such as furnishing aid to Assad's internal opposition. Together with U.S. friends in the region, the United States can exert enough pressure to deter Syria from sponsoring international terrorism.

SYRIA AND THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

Once described by Egyptian leader Gamal Abdul Nasser as the "throbbing heart of Arabism," Syria long has been the self-appointed custodian of Arab nationalism. Syrians traditionally have considered themselves central to Arab history and take great pride in their role at the forefront of the struggles against the crusaders, European colonial powers, and Israel. A sense of territorial loss permeates Syria's political culture because modern Syria occupies only a portion of "geographic," "historic," or "Greater Syria"¹--an area said to include Lebanon, Israel, the West Bank, Jordan, and a slice of Turkey. In 1920 modern Syria was carved out of the Ottoman Empire by the victors of World War I to serve the interests of Great Britain and France. Many Syrians have never reconciled themselves to the partition

1. See: Added Dawisha, "The Motives of Syria's Involvement in Lebanon," The Middle East Journal, Spring 1984, p. 229.

of Greater Syria, and Pan-Syrianism remains an underlying theme in Syria's foreign policy.

Assad today seeks hegemony over Greater Syria. He has worked tirelessly to extend Syrian domination over most of Lebanon and establish Syrian control over a growing segment of the splintered Palestinian movement. Syrian designs on Jordan have been frustrated by King Hussein's ties to the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Iraq and by Israel's refusal to accept a Syria-dominated Jordan.

Assad's efforts toward Israel--ominously called "southern Syria" by his regime--have been the least successful to date. Assad was militarily defeated in the wars of 1967 and 1973 by Israel. Yet he managed to salvage a semblance of a political victory out of both military defeats. The U.S.-mediated 1974 Syrian-Israeli disengagement agreement, for example, enabled Assad to recover some of the territory in the Golan Heights that Damascus had lost to Israel in the 1967 war. Assad's second military defeat at Israeli hands came during Israel's 1982 intervention in Lebanon. Yet Assad again made the most of a bad situation and used Lebanese and Palestinian surrogates to drive the Israeli army out of most of southern Lebanon.

Damascus has turned its status as a frontline state confronting Israel into a political bonanza. Assad has used Syria's implacable hostility to Israel as a springboard for his claim to Arab leadership. He cashed in on Syria's role as the principal post-Camp David Arab confrontation state by drawing easy arms credits from Moscow and generous financial aid from the Arab world. At the 1978 Baghdad Summit, the Arab oil producers pledged to give Syria \$1.8 billion per year.

Israel also has served as a means of unifying Syria's diverse sectarian groups, mobilizing the population on behalf of the ruling regime and furnishing a convenient scapegoat for a wide variety of political and economic grievances. Moreover, given the fact that Syria is essentially run by the military, confrontation with Israel is central to the very legitimacy of the Syrian government. Without Israel, Damascus would have a difficult time justifying immense expenditures on an army that is needed as much to safeguard Syria's dictatorship as to defend Syrian territory.

Assad thus has a vested interest in obstructing Middle East peace efforts because the present no war-no peace situation with Israel furthers his own interests and those of his Alawite sect. The lessening of Arab-Israeli tensions would downgrade Syria's importance as a confrontation state and ultimately could threaten the viability of minority Alawite rule.

The peace process would have to offer Assad much more than merely the return of the Golan Heights. He wants domination of most, if not all, of Greater Syria and conditions that assure the Alawites

continued primacy within Syria itself. He knows that the Alawites would be vulnerable to a backlash by the majority orthodox Sunni Muslims if they struck a deal with Israel that was perceived to come at the expense of the Palestinians or of the dream of a Greater Syria. For this reason Syria is unlikely to take the necessary risks for peace as long as an insecure Alawite-dominated regime is in power.

Assad has not officially ruled out negotiating a peace settlement with Israel. But he consistently pushes maximal conditions for a negotiated settlement. Because he claims that Israel will negotiate the return of the territories only when the Arab-Israeli balance of power has been changed, he rejects negotiations until the Arabs have attained strategic parity with Israel. Until then, Syria looms as the chief opponent to any Middle East peace initiative. Damascus virulently denounced the Camp David accords, torpedoed the November 1981 Fez Summit convened to develop a consensus Arab peace position, and rejected the September 1982 Reagan initiative that called for a Palestinian-Jordanian confederation. When King Hussein and Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Chairman Yassir Arafat flirted with the Reagan initiative, Assad resorted to terrorism to intimidate them.

Damascus denounced the February 11, 1985, Jordanian-Palestinian agreement that called for an international conference in which a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation would negotiate the return of the West Bank and Gaza Strip to a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation. Syrian media warned that "Syria and the Arab masses will know how to punish traitors."² Assad is on record as saying that "Palestine is not only part of the Arab homeland but is an essential part of southern Syria."³

A major instrument of Syrian foreign policy is the sponsorship of terrorism. Syria provides an extensive infrastructure for training terrorists hostile to the U.S., Israel, Turkey, and moderate Arab states. Damascus is the headquarters of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine--two Marxist Palestinian groups critical of Yassir Arafat's leadership. In addition, Syria controls the National Salvation Front, which is an anti-Arafat Palestinian coalition made up of Abu Musa's rebels from Fatah, the PFLP-General Command, the Popular Struggle Front, Talaat Yacoub's Palestine Liberation Front, and Saiqa. Syrian

2. Editorial in Syrian newspaper Tishrin, quoted in The Washington Post, August 6, 1985, p. A9.

3. Aaron Miller, "Syria and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: The Palestinian Factor," Middle East Insight, June-July 1985, p. 6.

diplomats recruit terrorist trainees, pass weapons through the Syrian diplomatic pouch, and furnish passports and safehouses.⁴ Islamic fundamentalist groups such as Hezbollah, Islamic Holy War, and Islamic Amal are based in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley in Lebanon. Supported by a contingent of Iranian Revolutionary Guards, these groups have claimed responsibility for many attacks on Western targets including the April 1983 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon, the October 1983 bombing of the Marine compound at Beirut Airport, and the June 1985 hijacking of TWA Flight 847.

SYRIA'S DOMESTIC POLITICS

Militant anti-Zionism and Pan-Syrianism are the twin pillars of Assad's foreign policy in large part because of the dynamics of Syrian domestic politics. Assad and most of the key officials of his regime are Alawites, a minority sect that historically has been distrusted and persecuted by orthodox Sunni Muslims. Alawites comprise about 12 percent of Syria's ten million people. They combine elements of paganism and Christianity with Islam. Considered heretics by many Muslims, the Alawites form a secretive, insular community centered in the Latakia region of Syria.

After Syrian independence in 1946, the Alawites, consigned to low economic and social status, flocked to secular socialist opposition parties that promised them economic and status gains. The Baath (Renaissance) Party recruited heavily among the Alawites. When it seized power in 1963, the Alawites had their political vehicle. In 1966 the Alawites spearheaded a radical rural-based Baath faction in the military that displaced Sunni Baathist officers.⁵ Hafez Assad, then Minister of Defense, became the leader of a pragmatic subgroup within this faction and in 1970 launched a bloodless coup against hard-line Baathist ideologues who favored stronger ties with Moscow. Assad sought to minimize the differences between the sects. He appointed Sunnis to high profile offices to build a Sunni facade that masked Alawite dominance. Nevertheless, the Baath Party soon became "a clan masquerading as a party."⁶

Assad's power base progressively shrank from the Baath organization, to the military wing of the Baath, and then to Alawite

4. State-Sponsored Terrorism, Report prepared for the Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism, Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. Senate, June 1985, pp. 17-18.

5. Mahmud Faksh, "The Alawite Community in Syria," Middle Eastern Studies, April 1984, p. 144.

6. Stanley Reed, "Dateline Syria: Fin de Regime?," Foreign Policy, Summer 1980, p. 185.

officers within the military wing. Although he protected his religious flank by having Syrian Sunni Muslim religious leaders verify his status as a Muslim, militant Sunni fundamentalists persisted in viewing him as a "mukaffir"--one who pretends to be Muslim but is not one in his heart. By the late 1970s there was mounting Sunni resentment of Alawite domination, rampant corruption, and economic policies that favored rural (particularly Alawite) interests over those of urban Sunni merchants.

The prime mobilizer of this Sunni resentment was the Muslim Brotherhood. It staged a series of guerrilla attacks, assassinations, and civil disturbances that culminated in a February 1982 armed uprising in the city of Hama. Assad responded with a three-week siege in which 10,000 to 20,000 Syrians were killed by the dreaded Saraya al-Difa (Defense Companies), an Alawite praetorian guard commanded by Assad's brother Rifaat. The ruthless suppression of the Hama revolt broke the back of overt opposition in Syria. Latent opposition, however, remains.

Together with other opposition groups, the Muslim Brotherhood formed the National Alliance for the Liberation of Syria. While the Brotherhood scares non-Sunnis and even the Sunni upper and professional classes, this broad front may eventually draw enough support to topple the regime. In the short run, however, Assad has the opposition on the run. He is so confident, in fact, that last January he offered amnesty to various opposition figures.

For the foreseeable future any political change in Syria is likely to come from within the Alawite community rather than from outside it. Assad has no clearly defined line of succession. When he suffered a heart attack in November 1983 and dropped out of the public eye for several months, his brother Rifaat and two other potential Alawite successors jostled for position.⁹ Assad emerged from seclusion in early 1984 and temporarily banished the three to Moscow and Europe. When they returned, Assad in effect had succeeded himself. Because he is a diabetic, however, his continued good health is far from assured. Assad's absence from last month's ceremonies commemorating the anniversary of his ascension to power has renewed speculation about his health. Another relapse probably would trigger a violent struggle for power within the Alawite community, which could splinter it along tribal lines and plunge Syria into chaos.

7. Moshe Maoz, "Syria Under Hafez el-Assad: New Domestic and Foreign Policies," Jerusalem Paper #15, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1975, p. 11.

8. Yahya Sadowski, "Cadres, Guns and Money," MERIP Reports, July-August 1985, p. 6.

9. See: Alastair Drysdale, "The Succession Question in Syria," Middle East Journal, Spring 1985.

SYRIA AND THE SOVIET UNION

Before Egypt's July 1972 break with the Soviet Union, Moscow considered Syria of secondary importance to Egypt and Iraq. After the loss of Soviet naval bases in Egypt, however, Syria's strategic value rose in Soviet eyes. Moscow pressed Damascus for a naval base and a friendship treaty similar to those signed with Egypt in 1971 and Iraq in 1972. Assad rebuffed the request for a naval base but eventually gave the Soviets access to the port of Tartus, to Tyas airfield, and to a maintenance facility for Soviet submarines. He demurred on the proffered friendship treaty, fearful of losing the financial support of the strongly anti-Soviet Persian Gulf states and of provoking anti-Soviet unrest by Islamic fundamentalist groups at home.

Assad pressed the Soviets for arms. In July 1972, he visited Moscow and signed an extensive arms agreement. Two years later, the Soviets granted Syria a twelve-year moratorium on its military debt. By 1985 Moscow had provided Syria an estimated \$17 billion in weapons, much of which has not yet been paid for.¹⁰

Although the Syrian-Soviet relationship has been strained by policy differences over Lebanon, the Iran-Iraq war, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the quality of Soviet arms deliveries, it has warmed considerably since the 1978 Camp David peace talks, which both Syria and the USSR opposed.¹¹ At Syria's initiative a friendship treaty was concluded in October 1980. Assad's growing domestic opposition and isolation in the Arab world prompted him to seek a more formal Soviet connection. Moscow, for its part, needed to refurbish its image in the Muslim world following its December 1979 invasion of Afghanistan. The 1980 treaty institutionalized existing relations rather than created new ones. The Soviet Union carefully limited the scope of its commitment to the defense of Syria; it excluded, for example, commitments to Syrian forces in Lebanon because Moscow did not want to be dragged into another Arab-Israeli war on the losing side.

When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 and defeated Syrian forces, Moscow played a relatively passive, cautious role. It issued an ambiguous diplomatic warning to Israel only after an Israeli-Syrian ceasefire came into effect. It then sought to assuage Syrian disappointment about the inferior performance of Soviet weapons

10. The Wall Street Journal, October 16, 1985.

11. Galia Golan, "Syria and the Soviet Union Since Yom Kippur War," Orbis, Winter 1978, p. 798.

systems and the lack of a forceful Soviet reaction by rebuilding the Syrian military.

Huge numbers of modern tanks and warplanes since then have been delivered to the Syrians at bargain prices. Sophisticated SS-21 ground-to-ground missiles and SAM-5 anti-aircraft missiles were transferred to the Syrians, the first time these weapons had been deployed outside the Warsaw Pact countries. The SS-21 missiles, with a range of 75 miles, threaten airfields in northern Israel while the SAM-5, with a range of 150 miles, poses a significant threat to the Israeli electronic warfare and command and control airplanes that are crucial to maintaining Israel's air superiority.

The Soviet Union dispatched an estimated 5,000 military personnel in Syria to operate and train the Syrians to use these missile systems. By this summer, approximately 3,000 Soviets had been withdrawn, indicating that the Syrians had assumed greater operational control over the missiles.¹² Nevertheless, the pervasive Soviet presence makes Soviet involvement in any future Syrian-Israeli war a possibility, especially since Israel will be pressed to neutralize Syrian missile batteries, some of which still are believed to be maintained by Soviet technicians.

SYRIA AND THE UNITED STATES

Syrian relations with the United States have been strained by Syrian sponsorship of anti-Western terrorism, by Washington's close ties to Israel, and by Syria's close ties to Moscow. Diplomatic relations, broken during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, were not restored until after President Richard Nixon's visit to Damascus in 1974. Washington brokered the tacit 1976 "Red Line" understanding between Syria and Israel in which Israel ruled out a military response to Syria's intervention in Lebanon on condition that Syria refrain from moving into southern Lebanon and from deploying anti-aircraft missiles inside Lebanon.

When the Red Line agreement broke down in summer 1981, the Reagan Administration dispatched Ambassador Philip Habib to defuse tensions. Following Israel's 1982 intervention in Lebanon, Habib tried to negotiate terms for the withdrawal of foreign troops from Lebanon. Though weakened by its military debacle in Lebanon, Syria cleverly promised to withdraw its forces from Lebanon after Israel had done so. This focused American diplomacy on the Israeli side of the equation and helped drive a wedge between Jerusalem and Washington.

12. The New York Times, July 11, 1985.

The U.S. made the mistake of taking the Syrian promise of withdrawal at face value. Washington overestimated Saudi Arabia's willingness to use its financial support as a lever to pressure Syrian cooperation in Lebanon. Saudi grants to Syria are, in effect, protection money buying immunity from Syrian-sponsored terrorism and an insurance policy retaining Syrian influence in Iran. Due to Saudi caution, Syria wields more leverage over Saudi Arabia than Riyadh wields over Damascus.

Once the U.S. had mediated the May 17, 1983, Israeli-Lebanese withdrawal agreement, Assad did everything he could to block it. He was determined to deny Israel any strategic dividends from its Lebanon war, and he rejected Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in exchange for an Israeli withdrawal. Since Israel's withdrawal offer was contingent on a Syrian commitment to withdraw, Damascus in effect vetoed the May 17 agreement.

During 1983 Syria used Lebanese and Palestinian surrogates to increase pressure on the Israeli army and the Western Multinational Force (MNF) to withdraw. It backed the Druze against the Lebanese government in the Chouf Mountains and provided logistical support and training for Shiite Islamic fundamentalist terrorists who had declared a jihad (holy war) against Israel and the West. The October 1983 truck bomb that killed 241 U.S. Marines at their Beirut airport base was launched by a Shiite terrorist group headquartered in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley. This operation could not have been carried out without the knowledge and permission of Syrian authorities, if not their active involvement.

The lack of an American response to this outrage, together with growing U.S. domestic opposition to continued involvement in Lebanon, led Damascus to conclude that the U.S. was "short of breath." In December 1983 Syrian ground forces fired on American reconnaissance planes, provoking a reprisal in which two American jets were lost, one American pilot killed and one captured. Having gone to the brink, Assad pulled back and relaxed tensions by releasing the captured pilot.

When the Marines were withdrawn from Lebanon in February 1984 because of the collapse of the Lebanese government's authority in West Beirut, Syria was left dominant in Lebanon. Assad patiently had whittled away American resolve through a low-risk strategy of indirect pressure that was implemented by Syrian surrogates, rather than the Syrians themselves, to minimize the danger of a direct confrontation.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Assad's Syria has been compared to a crab. It moves deliberately and has a limited reach, but a tenacious grasp. Because it is armored

heavily against external threats, its pressure points are its internal vulnerabilities--sectarian tensions, lack of an institutional mechanism for political succession, and economic weakness.

The Reagan Administration initially attempted to work around Syria or ignore it completely. It relied on Saudi Arabia as an intermediary only to be disappointed when the Saudis could not deliver what they promised. Washington should not continue making this mistake. It should talk with Assad directly and not use third parties.

Assad's foreign policy victories have been in large part negative ones. He denied Israel a friendly government in Lebanon, he blocked the American-brokered May 1983 disengagement agreement, and he pressured King Hussein and the Palestinians to reject the Reagan peace initiative. Yet now that Israel and the U.S. have withdrawn from Lebanon, it is Syria that faces the frustrating task of cobbling together a Lebanese coalition capable of resolving the Lebanese conflict. Washington now has some leverage over Damascus, for the U.S. can play a spoiler role in derailing Syrian plans in Lebanon.

Syria is unlikely to participate in the Middle East peace process unless its minority Alawite regime is broadened or replaced by a coalition that could withstand the domestic backlash that probably would accompany any agreement with Israel. Rather than try to entice Assad to do something that he probably cannot do, Washington should encourage the emergence of a Syrian leadership that could take risks for peace. Few Syrians would mourn the passing of a regime that literally has murdered thousands of its own citizens.

The American goal should be the formation of a Syrian government responsive to all sectors of Syrian society, not just to narrow Alawite interests. To this end, Washington should establish contact with leaders of the Syrian opposition and the Syrian military, particularly those in line to succeed Assad. Ambitious army officers might welcome such contact if only to gain a potential counterweight to Soviet influence within the military. Egypt's late President Anwar Sadat and Sudanese President Jaafar Numeiri broke with the Soviets after coup attempts by Soviet-backed leftist groups. Anxiety within the Syrian army over the possibility of a pro-Soviet coup in Syria could work to Washington's advantage in the post-Assad era.

As long as Assad is in power, there are few incentives that Washington can offer Damascus to alter Syrian behavior. Because of security considerations, Israel cannot relinquish enough of the Golan Heights to make it worthwhile for Assad to strike a deal. American economic aid could come only after a peace treaty with Israel, a notion that is anathema to Assad if only because he needs an Israeli foe to justify and legitimize his own government.

With no useful carrots the U.S. must fall back on sticks when dealing with Syria. The biggest stick, military confrontation, cannot be brandished unless Washington is provoked by Syrian-sponsored terrorism. Moreover, such confrontation could allow Assad to pose as an Arab hero defying a superpower, a crowd-pleasing role that would unify Syrians behind him and prolong Alawite minority dominance.

Washington instead should emulate Assad and rely on indirect pressures using regional friends as fulcrums. Israel is a source of valuable intelligence and a potent deterrent to Syrian aggression. Turkey, upset by Syrian support of Kurdish separatist and Armenian leftist terrorists, may welcome the opportunity to provide sanctuary for the Syrian opposition. Egypt, a bitter rival of Syria, could provide insight into internal Syrian political rivalries that the U.S. could exploit. Jordan could provide access to some of the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood who remain determined to topple Assad's regime. Lebanese Christians could help frustrate Syrian attempts to exploit Lebanese disunity to establish hegemony over Lebanon. Even Iraq might be open to the idea of cooperating against its Baathist rivals by providing bases and support to the Syrian opposition.

These pressures should be directed toward halting Syrian support of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. Assad's intervention to free American hostages aboard hijacked TWA Flight 847 last summer was prompted not by deep humanitarian feelings but by cold calculation. Now that Israel has withdrawn from Lebanon, Assad fears that Lebanese fundamentalists may turn against his secular regime and aid or inspire the Muslim Brotherhood. For this reason he sought to throw his weight behind the Shiite Amal movement led by Nabih Berri in its struggle against more militant Shiite groups inspired by Khomeini's Iran.

Washington should exploit Assad's anxiety about fundamentalist opposition by privately informing him that the U.S. will transfer funds to the National Alliance for the Liberation of Syria each time a fundamentalist group launches a terrorist operation from Syria or Syrian-controlled territory in Lebanon. Moreover, the U.S. should hold Damascus responsible for every such attack and reserve the right to retaliate against Syrian targets in reprisal for such attacks. Assad would have a difficult time explaining to the Syrian people why they should pay such a heavy price on behalf of Lebanese Islamic fundamentalists, who are similar to the ones Assad is trying to suppress at home.

CONCLUSION

President Hafez Assad has scored several foreign policy victories by manipulating surrogate groups to make things uncomfortable for his enemies and then grinding down their will to resist. Until now, time

has been on his side. But Syria's groaning economy and declining financial aid from the Arab world poses a long-term threat to the growth of his military power while the prospect of a struggle for succession threatens Syria's goal of hegemony over Greater Syria. Time is no longer on Assad's side. Washington should take advantage of these trends to press Assad to end his support of terrorism and to coordinate efforts with his neighbors to reduce the threat that he poses to them.

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