OPPORTUNITY 08
Independent Ideas For Our Next President

Countering Iran's Revolutionary Challenge
A Strategy for the Next Phase

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Summary

Iran is a revolutionary power, still in an exuberant phase of its revolution. Geopolitically it seeks to dominate the Gulf; ideologically it challenges the legitimacy of moderate governments in the region. Indeed, Iran aspires to be the leader of Islamist radicalism in the Muslim world as a whole. Iran's conventional military buildup, its pursuit of nuclear weapons in defiance of the UN Security Council, and its interventions in Lebanon and Iraq not only reflect its ambitions but also explain its current self-confidence.

The nature of the regime is at the core of the challenge it poses, but the starting point of a counter-strategy is containment: that is, George Kennan's classic vision of bringing countervailing pressures to bear against a revolutionary power's external expansion until the structural contradictions within the system begin to weaken it internally.

Iran is not mainly an American problem; it is a challenge in the first instance to our allies and friends in the Middle East. Thus, the first stage in a counter-strategy is to bolster Arab allies and friends as counter-weights to Iranian power. While military cooperation with some Gulf Arabs, especially Saudi Arabia, is controversial at home, tightening American links with these allies is logically the core of such a strategy. A wider strategic consensus may be emerging that would join the United States, key Arab states, and Israel against the Iranian threat. This should be nurtured.

Arab countries have other options, including their own nuclear development, or appeasement of Iran. Far preferable is that they retain confidence in us as a reliable friend and protector.

One element of this policy should be an updating of the Nixon and Carter Doctrines, to declare the American stake in shielding the security of the Gulf against nuclear blackmail. This would strengthen deterrence and possibly deny Iran much of the benefit of pursuing nuclear weapons by nullifying the blackmail potential it seeks to gain.

There are serious arguments for bilateral political engagement with Iran, but there would also be serious downsides in the present context. Our Arab friends (and Israel) would be shaken by what they would see as a major reversal, if not collapse, of long-standing U.S. policy. It would have not only procedural but substantive significance, representing final U.S. acceptance of the Iranian Revolution—a card we should not play without some significant benefit in return. We need to achieve a better geopolitical and psychological balance—some deflation of the Iranians' self-confidence and bolstering of our friends' confidence in us—before going down this road.

Restoring this balance needs to include:

- some success in stabilizing Iraq
- broader use of economic pressures (as opposed to the narrowly targeted sanctions resorted to thus far)
- stepping up support of civil society in Iran, including improving the quality of U.S. official broadcasting into Iran

How we conduct ourselves in Iraq is crucial. Our friends in the Middle East view our policy in Iraq in a broader context, as a test of the credibility of the reassurances we are trying to give them over Iran. There is no way for the United States to be strong against Iran if we are weak in Iraq.

Context

How to Help Iranian Moderates

During the Iran-Contra scandal of the mid-1980s, editorial cartoonist Mike Luckovich produced a cartoon on the theme of how to distinguish between "radicals" and "moderates" in the Iranian regime. It depicts two mullahs carrying placards. One's placard reads "Death to America." The other's reads "Serious Injury to America." A bystander says to a companion: "I think the one on the right's a moderate."

While this theme is a familiar one in American discussion of Iran, it is not yet obvious that we have broken the code. Arguably, it really is the pivotal issue confronting American policy-makers: how to understand and influence the internal dynamics of the regime.

- In 1979, radicals seized U.S. diplomats in Tehran in a successful ploy to derail normalization of relations between the new revolutionary regime and the United States.
- In the mid-1980s, President Reagan and his National Security Council staffers pursued what they thought was a diplomatic opening to Iranian moderates; mistakenly believing that a new strategic relationship was within reach, they provided their Iranian contacts with TOW anti-tank missiles (for use in the Iran-Iraq War) and hoped for release of American hostages in Lebanon in return.
- More recently, in March 2007, the regime's elite radical force, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), took British sailors and Marines hostage in an apparent effort to blunt pressures from the international community over Iran's nuclear weapons program, interference in Iraq, and other issues.

The lesson of this experience appears to be that Iranian radicals are quite skilled at manipulating their politics to influence *us*. We have not yet gotten the hang of influencing or outmaneuvering *them.*

Let us begin with two key propositions: one tactical, one strategic.

The tactical point is to acknowledge that there are undoubtedly differences of opinion within any regime. But the way to help "moderates" is not to sneak them TOW missiles that they can show off at a staff meeting, but rather to affect their environment at a more macro-political level. Any government surely includes individuals who are more risk-averse than others—who might be prepared in a crisis to argue that continuation of provocative policies risks harm to the country and to the regime. We can strengthen their arguments by actually posing such risks. The strenuous exertion of American goodwill is less likely to be persuasive in the inner sancta of the regime than visible demonstrations of such costs. Conversely, weakness in the face of Iranian provocation only strengthens radicals, who can show that no price is being paid, indeed that their policies are paying off.

The strategic point has to do with differences, not within the regime, but within the country. During the last few years, the regime's hard-liners have effectively atomized or crushed reformist elements in the intelligentsia and in political life. The replacement of Mohammed Khatami by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 completed the process. Yet, many observers believe the regime's popular support is less solid than it appears. Ahmadinejad's weak showing in the December 2006 municipal elections was one crack in the façade. There are signs of regime nervousness about international pressures and of a ferment that has never been completely suppressed. How do we influence *that*?

The Challenge: Iran Is a Revolutionary Power

The Iranian challenge is not hard to define. Iran is a revolutionary power, still in an exuberant phase of its revolution; it combines a geopolitical and an ideological thrust.

Geopolitically, Iran seeks domination of the Gulf (the "Persian" Gulf, as it would say) and leadership of the Middle East and the Muslim world. Its buildup of naval, air, and missile forces testifies to that ambition, as does its pursuit of nuclear weapons. Iran urges on its neighbors a concept of Gulf security that excludes all outside powers and leaves it to "us Gulf countries" to run things; this would leave its weaker Arab

neighbors without their traditional recourse to an outside protecting power (once Britain, now the United States) to counterbalance a would-be regional hegemon.

The ideological thrust is Iran's radical Islamism, which is implicitly if not explicitly a challenge to the legitimacy of the domestic structures of all its moderate neighbors. This thrust is in part channeled through its Shi'a brethren in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Bahrain, and other nearby Arab countries. But one can now detect an Iranian ambition to be the leader of the broader Islamist movement as a whole. Ahmadinejad's open letter to President Bush of May 2006 reflected this aspiration. In that letter he presented himself as President Bush's equal and moral counterpart; Ahmadinejad writes as if he were the spokesman of the Muslim world. This claim is hardly accepted in the Arab world, but it is being asserted nonetheless.

For a few years after the fall of the Shah in 1979, there were fears that Iran's revolutionary Islamist ideology would spread in the Middle East. But it did not spread then—due to Arab allergy to things Persian, and the Sunni/Shi'a divide. The Muslim Brotherhood had been brutally suppressed in most Sunni countries throughout the long ascendancy of the secular, nationalist, "Arab socialism" of Nasser and his heirs. After the fall of the Soviet Union, however, the radical left was weakened globally. Secular, "socialist" radicalism was discredited; legitimacy now came from a different ideological direction. Sunni Islamists were emboldened also by their triumph against the Soviets in Afghanistan. (They thought they did it themselves.) In this new post-Cold War environment, then, Islamist movements gained traction in many places at the expense of old-line secular forces—in Egypt, Algeria, Palestine, Lebanon, and now Iraq. During the Lebanon War in the summer of 2006, we saw the broader crossover appeal in the Sunni Arab world of the Shi'a Hezbollah's struggle against Israel.

This is not to say that Iran's pretensions to leadership of the whole Islamic world will ever be willingly accepted by Arabs and others; most likely the rich diversity of the Muslim world will prove resistant to Iranian charms. But Iran is building its power, and pressing its claim, and its successful defiance of the West over nuclear and other matters is boosting its status—and its self-confidence.

Today, Iran also profits from the weakness of Iraq. One of the geopolitical objectives of the U.S. intervention in Iraq in 2003 was not only to remove a regime that was seen as a looming threat, but also to help put in its place a moderate Iraq that would be a fit partner for us and the Arabs in facing the longer-term problem of Iran. To this day, Iraqi Shi'a leaders insist on their loyalty to Arab Iraq and their rejection of Iranian dominance or interference.

The temptations of opportunism, however, have proved irresistible in Tehran. When Muqtada al-Sadr appeared on the scene as a radical spoiler, Iran began funneling him support, at the expense (and to the consternation) of rival Iraqi Shi'a groups (like SCIRI) that had long enjoyed Iranian support. The IRGC Qods Force is now funding Iraqi extremist cells, training them on Iranian soil, arming them with advanced explosive munitions and other weapons, and in some cases providing advice and direction. While Iranian interference is not the main source of Iraq's turmoil, Tehran appears to have made a strategic decision to fuel instability there in order to weaken the United States. There cannot be serious doubt of the regime's responsibility for this activity. The Qods Force is not a non-governmental organization; it is an arm of the Iranian regime and reports to the Supreme Leader.

Bolster Our Regional Partners

Iran is not mainly an American problem; it is a challenge in the first instance to all our allies and friends in the Middle East. Not only Israel, but our Arab friends as well, see revolutionary Iran as an existential threat. Thus, 2006 saw the rare spectacle of leading moderates at an Arab League meeting openly rebuking Hezbollah for precipitating the Lebanon crisis. These leaders saw the Hezbollah war as a power play by Iran to extend its influence in the Arab world. Their discomfiture at Hezbollah's seeming success was as real as that of many in the West.

Our first line of defense—and the first stage in constructing a counter-strategy—is to bolster Arab allies and friends as counter-weights to Iranian power. This the United

States has been doing. Whatever the prospects for influencing the regime's internal evolution, the starting point is containment: that is, George Kennan's classic vision of bringing countervailing pressures to bear to block a revolutionary power's external expansion, until the structural contradictions within the system begin to weaken it internally. This is the very least that must be done.

In 2006, the State and Defense Departments jointly launched an initiative called the Gulf Security Dialog. The United States has worked in concert with all of Iran's Arab neighbors on measures to deter Iran, including strengthening air and missile defenses, improving conventional defense capabilities, cooperation in counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism, engaging them in stronger support for Iraq, and other steps. Egypt and Jordan have joined a foreign ministers' forum with the Gulf Arabs, and with us, with the same strategic purpose.

Most of these countries have traditional ties with Iran, and some are not eager to be drawn into public military or political alignments against their powerful neighbor. The United States has reassured them that it seeks not to provoke a crisis but to prevent one, and to reinforce regional defense and deterrence. Privately the strategic assessments are strikingly parallel. All of them welcome this American commitment.

This is no small matter. Facing an Iranian threat, these countries have other options. They could seek nuclear weapons themselves, as the Gulf Cooperation Council countries may in fact be flirting with. Or, appeasement of Iran could be their default position. The far preferable course is that they retain confidence in the United States as a reliable friend and protector.

The Role of Saudi Arabia

The key principle here is the recognition that our Gulf Arab friends are our partners and are on the front line. But implementing such a strategy is inevitably controversial here at home. The strategy involves weapons supply, training, exercises, and other military cooperation with Gulf Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately,

Saudi Arabia does not tap into a great reservoir of goodwill among the U.S. Congress or public; on the other hand, if Iran is our focus, then we need the Saudis as a partner. They are the leading power of the Arab Gulf. On many strategic issues (*e.g.*, Lebanon/Syria, Iran) they have lately been unusually clear-headed and assertive. One does not have to agree with every Saudi initiative to recognize that they are objectively one of the most important partners we could have.

Our Israeli friends need to be assured that the United States is committed to Israel's Qualitative Military Edge. At the same time, solidifying Arab ties to us is a common interest. This is a delicate balance to strike, but the United States needs some flexibility. Israelis need to assess their risks in a different way, weighing their worst-case fears of the capability of certain hardware in Arab hands against the real-world strategic benefit of linking them more tightly to the United States, and trusting more in the objective strategic context that governs the region today. The extraordinary strategic fact is that preoccupation with Iran is uniting us all—the United States, the Arabs, and Israel. There are rumors of Saudi-Israeli contacts, as well as open links between Israel and other Gulf countries. This emerging strategic consensus is one of the positive developments of this era. It is real, and it needs to be nurtured.

Declare the U.S. Commitment

One piece that is missing so far in the Gulf Security Dialog is what is called declaratory policy: a public American commitment to provide an umbrella over regional countries threatened by Iran's pursuit or acquisition of nuclear weapons. This would be a logical extension of what is already implicit in the Gulf Security Dialog and in other recent steps, such as deploying a second U.S. carrier strike group in the Gulf. It is especially needed at a time when the United States is seen as weakened by its Iraq engagement.

The time has come to update the Carter Doctrine (which declared America's vital interest in the Gulf) and the Nixon Doctrine (which offered an American shield for allies and friends threatened by nuclear blackmail). Like those two famous pronouncements, it would not be a formal defense commitment but a statement of policy; it would

articulate the American interest in maintaining the security of the Gulf against major threats that the countries of the region could not reasonably be expected to meet by themselves. Such a declaration today would strengthen deterrence. Arguably it might deny Iran much of the benefit of pursuing nuclear weapons by nullifying the blackmail potential it seeks to gain.

Exhausting Our Political and Economic Tools

Use Our Economic Leverage

By the time the next President takes office, it is unlikely that the present multilateral diplomacy will have succeeded in halting Iran's nuclear weapons program. The world community will face even tougher choices than it faces now.

Military options are not attractive, especially with the United States preoccupied in Iraq and Afghanistan. Any person of goodwill will surely prefer that political and economic tools of leverage be exhausted first. Further, economic sanctions in this case could have a significant political effect. But to "exhaust" these tools means to use them, not to exhaust ourselves in debating them for two years, doling them out in small increments, and then wondering why the Iranians have not been intimidated.

There is reason to believe the regime fears economic sanctions, worrying that its weak economic performance is a domestic political vulnerability. The Treasury Department has influenced many foreign private banks that have cut ties with major Iranian banks on the grounds of their links to terrorism and proliferation. This is a significant financial blow. Yet our UN diplomacy has focused on narrowly "targeted" sanctions, aimed at specific individuals and entities in Iran directly connected to proliferation. Much of this self-denial is due to Russia's obstruction of stronger measures. But it has also been explained on the U.S. side as a way to "target the regime while sparing the Iranian people." The downside of this approach is its limited impact, which would seem to conflict with the goal of imposing costs on the country that discredit the radical policies that cause them. The U.S. government should be willing to follow through on its stated commitment to go outside the UN Security Council, ratcheting up

sanctions in a "coalition of the willing" (with Europe, Japan, and others) if serious action continues to be blocked at the United Nations.

Should We Engage Diplomatically?

Direct diplomatic engagement with Iran has also been proposed, including by the Baker/Hamilton Iraq Study Group. A number of arguments have been advanced for it:

- The United States had diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union from 1934 onwards, which did not prevent us from pursuing containment or whatever other firm strategy we wished to pursue.
- Diplomatic contact should thus be treated as an instrumental, not substantive matter. Any initial shock to our allies should wear off if our substantive policy remains as firm as before. (Our Arab allies, after all, all have their own political and economic relations with Iran.) So we should just get it over with.
- It can also be argued that the passage of time works against us, so that waiting in the hope of building up greater bargaining strength may only leave us worse off as Iran pursues its nuclear project.
- An American political overture might even have a usefully subversive effect in Tehran, where hard-liners who resist it from their side (using arguments that mirror arguments used in Washington) would see it as a collapse of revolutionary purity.

These are serious arguments, and some in the U.S. Government may be tempted by them. Nonetheless, there are serious downsides that need to be borne in mind in the present environment:

- If there is anything our Arab friends fear more than Iran, it is the United States and Iran cutting a deal. Past rumors of U.S.-Iran political contacts have caused a degree of panic in the Arab world. In the context of Iran's continued defiance on the nuclear issue and aggressiveness in Iraq and Lebanon, an American political overture to Tehran would be understood as a major reversal, if not a collapse, of a long-standing U.S. policy. (Indeed, some others would hail it for that very reason.)

- The fact that the Arabs have their own ties with Iran does not alter this calculus. We are not in the same position as they; they are counting on us to hold the line against Iran, in order to ensure their survival. In addition to unnerving the Arabs, a U.S. overture to Iran could also unhinge the Israelis, who have so far been relying on a firm U.S. policy to prevent an Iranian nuclear weapon.
- What Tehran would gain from the fact of such a political engagement is the final step in its quest for international legitimacy, that is, acceptance by the United States of the finality of the Iranian Revolution. This would be a huge *substantive* step for us, which would reverberate loudly in the region. (Given the anti-regime ferment inside the country, it may also be mistimed in its effects internally.) This is a card we should not play without some significant benefit in return. And what would that be?
- For the record, diplomatic relations with the U.S.S.R. came after Hitler came to power and Stalin feared Japanese as well as German belligerence. Similarly, the U.S.-China rapprochement of the 1970's was driven by the Soviet threat. Thus, geopolitical forces brought these parties together, not a reflexive hunger for "engagement." Today, the main geopolitical force at work with respect to Iran is the rise of its power and the weakness of international counter-weights to it.

We need to achieve a better geopolitical and psychological balance—some deflation of the Iranians' self-confidence and bolstering of our friends' confidence in us—before going down this road. Otherwise we appear a supplicant. Restoring this balance is *the* imperative—and would remain so whether we were talking to Iran or not (all the more so if we were). That imperative deserves at least a fraction of the attention being showered on the issue of whether American and Iranian diplomats have a meeting.

This bolstering must include some success in stabilizing Iraq. Some might argue that this has it backwards: that we need to engage Iran if we are to succeed at all in Iraq. On the contrary: Unless we and the Iraqis restore some balance of forces by our own efforts, we would be simply begging Iran to stop tormenting us; Iran's price would go way up. The goal is not to concede Iran's dominance in Iraq but to block it.

The fact is, we *have* been willing to deal with Iran at a practical level where this promised to be useful, especially in a multilateral framework. U.S. and Iranian diplomats have met in the context of the UN "6+2" meetings in 2001-2002 in support of post-Taliban Afghanistan, and in March and May 2007 in the context of the "neighbors conferences" intended to garner international support for Iraq. And the United States has promised to join the multilateral nuclear diplomacy with Iran if Iran halts enrichment and reprocessing.

There is also a bilateral ambassadorial channel. Zalmay Khalilzad was authorized, when he was ambassador in Kabul, to talk to his Iranian counterpart for what the Pentagon calls "de-confliction"—ways to avoid significant miscalculations with respect to planned actions. Khalilzad was authorized to do the same when he served in Baghdad, though such contacts never materialized. Perhaps this will be reactivated via Ryan Crocker, our new ambassador in Baghdad, in the wake of his meeting with Iranian diplomats at the Sharm el-Sheikh "neighbors conference" at the beginning of May 2007. But, again, expectations should not be raised that the vaunted political rapprochement is at hand.

For our problem with the Iranian regime is not a communications problem. We understand each other all too well. Iran's ambitions are driven by ideology, by the deeply held convictions of its leaders, and these ambitions are on their face incompatible with fundamental interests of the United States. We only insult these leaders—and delude ourselves—if we imagine it's just a misunderstanding. In present conditions the concrete benefits to us of a political dialogue with Iran do not match the negatives that are foreseeable. We should not sell ourselves cheaply.

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Perspective

The United States has resumed its engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy. Our Arab friends constantly tell us that this diplomatic commitment should always be at the heart of our Middle East strategy. But, as we pursue this, we should do so with our eyes open.

It is best to dispense, first of all, with the cliché that this conflict is the core of all the problems in the Middle East. The generation of turmoil in the Gulf—encompassing the Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, and the Iraq War—has very little to do with the Palestinian problem. A more precise way to characterize the U.S. strategic interest in a Palestinian solution is that prolongation of this conflict, especially in the age of *Al-Jazeera*, is a source of radical pressures on moderate Arab governments, complicating their ability to cooperate strategically with us. The author heard a wise Gulf leader say that the best reason to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is to shut down the problem on that front and free all of us—meaning Arabs, Americans, and Israelis—to unite in confronting the real problem, Iran.

The Israelis, for their part, are quite conscious that progress on the Palestinian issue, if attainable, would yield a significant strategic payoff for them in their regional relations. The obstacle to progress has been that, while the Israeli political consensus has continued to move toward acceptance of a Palestinian state and flexibility on borders, the Palestinians have elected a Hamas government that does not want Israel to exist on any borders. This is yet another self-inflicted wound on the part of the Palestinians. The present disarray of the Israeli government also makes a breakthrough unlikely.

The United States should always show that it's making the effort, but undue expectations should not be raised in the present context.

Influencing Iran's Internal Evolution

Influencing Iran's internal evolution is a more difficult challenge. It was George Kennan's insight in the Soviet case that maintaining external pressures to block expansion was an indirect way of fostering internal pressures as well. But it was Ronald Reagan's insight that such regimes' internal conditions are susceptible to more direct influence. The Islamic Republic is a regime with many vulnerabilities, including ethnic divisions, economic mismanagement, and disaffection among both the intelligentsia and the broader population.

Economic sanctions have already been discussed in the context of the nuclear diplomacy. The weakness of the sanctions so far imposed is a missed opportunity not only to discredit radical policies but also to exacerbate fissures within the system.

The U.S. government has initiated a number of programs to aid or encourage civil society in Iran, in the hope of enabling pluralism to survive. The United States has never explicitly adopted regime change as a policy objective in Iran, nor does it have to. There can be no doubt that the nature of this regime and its ideological thrust are the core of the problem it poses. However, in the real world the most immediate task is to mobilize leverage; we can err on the side of understating what may be the result rather than overstating it.

The quality of U.S. official broadcasting into Iran has been poor. There is a tension between our broadcasters' aspiration to balanced journalism and our policy imperative to get a message out. The current structure of all our international broadcasting—which includes many barriers between broadcast content and U.S. policy—should be reviewed by the next Administration. It may not be consistent with our strategic necessities during a period of intense ideological competition.

Concluding Observations

U.S. Steadfastness in Iraq

Finally, a further word must be said about Iraq. Our goal must continue to be a stable, moderate Iraq that is a fit partner for us and the Arabs in the new strategic environment in which Iran looms so large. After almost three decades of facing two hostile powers in the Gulf, it will be a stark relief to have an Iraq that is a partner, rather than an erratic, truculent, disruptive danger in its own right.

Iran now exploits the vulnerability of an Iraq in turmoil. The Bush Administration's decision in early 2007 to crack down on IRGC subversive activities on Iraqi soil was long overdue. More broadly, there is ample reason to believe that the Iraqi people still

hold in their own hands the power to consolidate their national institutions, and as these national institutions are consolidated, the structure will regain its resistance to outside interference. This is part of the struggle that is now under way.

A pivotal element here is U.S. policy. Our Gulf Arab friends, whom we are seeking to reassure regarding Iran, respond by referring to Iraq: "Don't abandon us," they implore. They are viewing Iraq in the context of Iran. We Americans are understandably preoccupied with Iraq. But there is a broader region out there, a vitally important one, which is the strategic context of our current debate. To many in the Middle East, our steadfastness in Iraq is a test of American credibility, which will affect their confidence in whatever assurances we are trying to give and their willingness to go along with American initiatives.

There is no way for the United States to be strong against Iran if we are weak in Iraq. Some may be tempted by the idea of "cutting our losses" in Iraq while compensating for this by appearing strong in the region in other ways. But there's no way to square this circle. The next President may find this an uncomfortable truth, but it will be an inescapable one.

Organizing a Counter-strategy

We know from the Soviet case that revolutionary ideologies can be defeated—they can be discredited by failure. The renewed militancy of Iran's clerical rulers in recent years may mask a deepening uncertainty about whether their people support them. Those who want change, who were many in number a few years ago, have been cowed into silence; they have not gone away. Thus in the longer run we deal from strength, even if we are scrambling in the short run for an effective international counter-strategy.

Organizing such a counter-strategy will be one of the most important tasks on the next Administration's agenda. It will be able to build on the policies of its predecessors. Iran's nuclear challenge may prove to be the forcing event; if Iran continues its defiance, then the international community will need to find ways to increase

pressures. The time may soon come for us to play offense, not only defense, pressing harder against the regime's internal vulnerabilities.

The alternative—a nuclear-armed, militant, aggressive Iran, with its neighbors and the world bowing to it—is not acceptable.

About the Authors and the Project

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