

Social Media, Public Opinion, and Security Cooperation in Saudi Arabia

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“In just 10 years, I have seen young people become very brave, and I wonder what will happen in the next five years. I think a lot will happen.” -Waleed Abu Alkhair, Saudi civil rights lawyer and activist (Time Magazine, 2012)

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been experiencing a variety of cultural and social changes over the past decade. There has been a small relaxation in some religious laws, a push for more rights for women, and even an increase in popularity of the United States. A recent study of public opinion in the Middle East over the last 10 years highlighted an interesting case in Saudi Arabia. While Saudi public opinion of the US was in 2003 among the lowest of the study, it ranked among the highest in 2012 (Cummins, 2012). This poses the questions of what has caused these changes in culture and attitudes in Saudi Arabia that have not occurred in other Middle Eastern or Arab countries and how these changes affect US Security Cooperation and overall relations with the United States.

Is it the wide use of social media by the youth population in Saudi Arabia that has caused these changes? Currently, Saudi Arabia is experiencing a youth bulge with nearly 70 percent of the population being 30 years old or younger. (Holmes, 2012) Is it a result of the Arab Spring movement which has spread throughout the Middle East since December 2010? Or

could the change be linked to the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP), which has sent a record number of Saudi students to the United States for their education?

This article analyzes the different types of social change occurring in Saudi Arabia over the last decade including the relaxation of religious laws, the increase in rights for women, and the improving public perception of the United States. This article then examines the role of social media and the KASP on the youth population in Saudi Arabia and determines how this change affects US-Saudi relations. Research was performed in Saudi Arabia by conducting interviews with Department of State personnel at the US embassy in Riyadh and with Security Cooperation personnel at Eskan Village in Riyadh. Research was also conducted in the United States by interviewing and performing survey research on Saudi Arabian students currently studying in the US.

Cultural and Social Change in Saudi Arabia

One of the most delicate aspects of change in Saudi Arabia is the relaxation of religious laws, which are overseen by the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, Saudi Arabia’s religious police, which are also known as the mutaween. The mutaween

enforce the separation of men and women, strict dress codes, the observance of daily prayers, and other aspects of Sharia law (Al-Sharif, 2014). The mutaween are known for their oppressive restrictions on Saudi citizens, especially women. In 2002, 15 girls burned to death after the mutaween obstructed efforts to let the girls leave a burning building because they were dressed inappropriately (BBC, 2002). In 2007, nearly a dozen mutaween entered a 28-year-old man's home and beat him to death after they suspected he might be in possession of alcohol (Human Rights Watch, 2007). The mutaween have also tried to restrict internet use, and in 2004 attempted to ban camera phones. However, this was unsuccessful as Saudi Arabia is currently third highest in the world in smart phone usage (Al-Sharif, 2014). The slow process of reining in the mutaween began when King Abdullah took the throne in 2005. By 2012, he had appointed the moderate Sheikh Abdulatif al-Sheikh to be head of the mutaween (Said, 2014). Al-Sheikh has reformed the mutaween by restricting private funding, outlawing the confiscation of phones and personal items, and impeding the ability of the mutaween to chase or physically harm citizens (Hilleary, 2013). He also is in the process of relaxing the religious laws that require businesses to close for nearly 45 minutes during prayer time. Instead, business owners will be allowed to pray inside their business in lieu of walking to the nearest mosque (Said, 2014). However, these reforms have not stopped the mutaween from enforcing their harsh interpretation of Islam. In 2013, two brothers ages 22 and 24, died after their car was forced off a bridge in Riyadh by the mutaween because the boys were playing loud music from their vehicle (Al-Sharif, 2014). In 2014, a British man and his wife were beaten by the mutaween outside a mall in Riyadh after they withdrew money from a female-only ATM (Elwazer, 2014). However, both of these events were caught on camera by cell phones and quickly went viral, which has led to a public outcry and lawsuits against the mutaween. This leaves the Saudi

government in a tough situation as it attempts to balance between public disapproval of the mutaween and a backlash from the conservative religious leaders.

Similarly to religious laws, women's rights were a delicate area of reform for King Abdullah after he ascended the throne in 2005. Under King Abdullah, Saudi Arabia has opened its first co-educational university, clamped down on domestic violence, and appointed the first female cabinet member (Ambah, 2005). Women have also been granted the right to vote on the Shura Council, which is the national body that advises the government and helps with writing laws (Holmes, 2012). More Saudi women are graduating college than men and are being encouraged to enter the workforce. Mixed-gender workplaces are also becoming more common, which is something that would have been unheard of 10 or 20 years ago (Butters, 2009). In what became known as the "lingerie movement," King Abdullah enacted a law in 2011 that stated that women were to replace men in all lingerie shops. This also became the first time that it was legal for women to work in retail stores. Katherine Zoepf (2013) writes, "After the King's decree on lingerie shops, in June, 2011, the Ministry of Labor ordered shops specializing in cosmetics, abayas, and wedding dresses, along with the women's sections of department stores, to begin shifting to all-female Saudi sales staffs as well. The process was called 'feminization.'" However, women's rights activists are dissatisfied with the slow pace of reforms. Women are still prohibited from studying, traveling, working, or even receiving medical treatment unless they receive permission from their male guardian (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world where women are unable to drive (Zoepf, 2013). In December 2014, two women were arrested at the Saudi-UAE border when Ms. Al-Hathloul attempted to defy the law by driving into Saudi Arabia (Batrawy, 2014). The two women were held for over two months and transferred to a terrorism court before

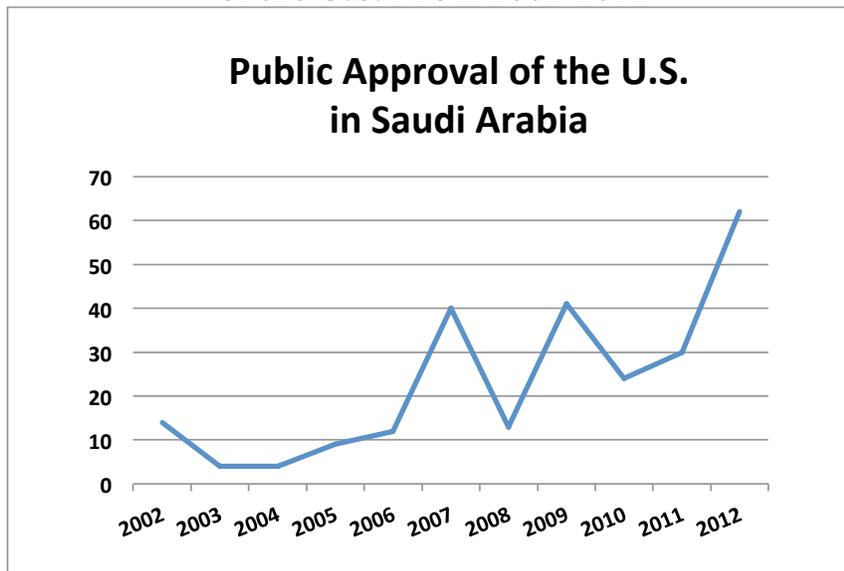
finally being released (Mackey, 2014). Women also remain restricted from certain jobs, must wear the long black abaya and a headscarf, and in more conservative areas women are required to wear the niqab, which reveals nothing but their eyes (Zoepf, 2013). As with religious reforms, King Abdullah remained wary of a backlash from religious conservatives who continue to take a hard stance against allowing more rights for women in Saudi Arabia.

Public Opinion in Saudi Arabia

Another change that is occurring in Saudi Arabia is public opinion of the United States. A recent study observed public opinion of the United States in five Middle Eastern countries over a 10-year period while analyzing US foreign policy and found an interesting case in Saudi Arabia (Cummins, 2012). While public approval of the US was among the lowest in the early years of

the study (4 percent approval in 2003 and 2004), the study showed some of the highest approval levels in 2012 (62 percent approval). (See Figure 1 below for the year-by-year numbers) Bivariate analysis was performed on US foreign policy indicators and survey data from several Middle Eastern countries including Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. (See Figure 2 below for the regional year-by-year numbers) Of the countries, Saudi Arabia had the lowest approval numbers in 2002, 2004, and 2005. However, this changed when Saudi Arabia had the second highest approval in 2007 and 2010. Saudi Arabia was second to Lebanon, which has a significant Christian population that tends to hold much more favorable views of the United States. Saudi Arabia also witnessed the highest approval numbers of the study in 2009, 2011, and 2012.

Figure 1 - Saudi Arabia's Public Approval of the U.S. From 2002-2012



Source: The year-by-year numbers are aggregate means of available Zogby, Pew, and Gallup polling data and represent the percentage of those that indicated favorable views of the United States.

Figure 2: Regional Public Approval of the U.S. Data From 2002-2012

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
EGYPT	15	13	4	14	22	15	12	33	15	5	14
JORDAN	27	6	10	27	10	20	17	22	19	10	18
LEBANON	34	29	20	37	28	47	32	38	36	23	34
MOROCCO	30	6	11	34	7	15	26	36	13	12	13
PAKISTAN	10	13	21	23	27	16	19	13	17	11	12
SAUDI ARABIA	14	4	4	9	12	40	13	41	24	30	62
TURKEY	35	15	30	23	12	9	12	14	17	10	15
UAE	11	9	14	28	34	N/A	22	36	22	12	28

Source: The year-by-year numbers are aggregate means of available Zogby, Pew, and Gallup polling data. The numbers represent the percentage of the public population that indicated favorable views of the United States. For comparison reason, Saudi Arabia’s approval percentages are highlighted. N/A represents years in which there was no available polling data in that county.

When analyzing the survey data, the obvious question became, “Does US foreign policy affect public opinion of the US in Saudi Arabia?” The study concluded that in 2003 and 2004, the US military intervention in Iraq played a large role in increasing anti-Americanism in Saudi Arabia (Cummins, 2012). Both of those years, Saudi public support for the US was at 4 percent, its lowest of the 10-year study. Therefore, one might conclude that foreign policy has played a role in the recent increase in positive views of the United States in Saudi Arabia. This was most likely the case in 2009 with the election of President Obama after his famous Cairo speech, which led to increases in public approval of the US across the Middle East. However, US foreign policy in the Middle East has been counter to Saudi interests over the past few years. This started when the US called for Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, to step down in February 2011. This move shocked and frightened the Saudi government, which was closely allied to Mubarak and saw him as a stabilizing force in the region (Zogby, 2014). Furthermore, the Saudi Arabian government criticized the US for being slow to act when it came to the civil war in Syria. The Saudis have been one of the biggest

opponents to Syrian president, Bashar Assad, and has criticized the US for its reluctance to engage the Syrian dictator. The Saudi government even went so far as to boycott its seat on the United Nations Security Council in opposition to the US-Russia deal to remove Assad’s chemical weapons in 2013 (Worth, 2013). To compound this tenuous relationship, Saudi Arabia was even more disconcerted when it learned that the US was decreasing its economic sanctions on Iran in light of a possible nuclear deal in 2014 (Gause, 2014). Although this resentment might not trickle down to the public population in Saudi Arabia, it certainly does not appear that US foreign policy has improved public views of the US in Saudi Arabia since 2011. So if not foreign policy, then what has led to these changes in culture and public opinion? Some scholars point to wide uses of social media and the KASP, which has led to thousands of students studying in the United States

The Role of Social Media

Another aspect of Saudi culture that has changed dramatically in the last decade – and that might also be contributing to more change –

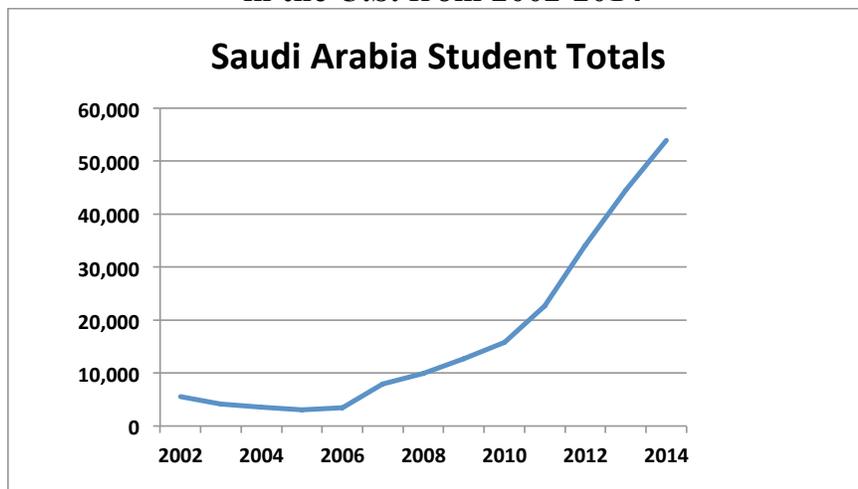
is the use of social media. Websites like Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook are extremely popular in Saudi Arabia and remain very accessible through computers and smart phones. Jacob Templin (2012) from Time Magazine writes, “Saudis are some of the most active social-media users in the Arab world. According to a recent study by the Dubai School of Government, Saudi Arabia has more Twitter users than any other nation in the region, with around 400,000. They also have around 4 million people on Facebook, second only to Egypt.” This gives young Saudis an avenue for dissent against their government (Holmes, 2012). This is the same dissent that built up in countries like Egypt, Libya, and Syria and eventually led to mass protests, coups, and civil wars. Any sort of public demonstrations or protests remain strictly prohibited in Saudi Arabia, but social media gives young Saudis a way to peacefully vent their frustrations. Social media has played a key role in public issues such as the criticism of the mutaween and women’s rights. After the mutaween forced a car with two brothers off the road, killing both of them in 2013, thousands of Saudis took to social

media to express their outrage. It even forced the head of the mutaween, Sheikh Abdulatif al-Sheikh, to issue a public apology and denounce the actions taken by his religious police (Al-Sharif, 2014). Women also used social media to protest the ban against driving. In all, about 60 women participated in the protest, and many uploaded videos of themselves driving on social media sites such as YouTube (The Guardian, 2013). When one woman was arrested after she posted her video, Saudis quickly went to her defense on Twitter and Facebook, posting more than 30,000 comments within a day of the arrest (MacFarquhar, 2011). It remains illegal for any Saudi to go out on the street and gather several people in a group, but now Saudis can immediately share their ideas with thousands of people on the internet through social media.

The King Abdullah Scholarship Program

A contributing factor to this cultural change could be the rapidly increasing number of Saudi students who are studying in the United States. Over the past 10 years the number of Saudi

Figure 3: Number of Saudi Arabian Students Studying in the U.S. from 2002-2014



Source: These year by year numbers were compiled by the Institute for International Education in their yearly publication, “Open Doors Fact Sheet: Saudi Arabia.” The yearly figures reflect the number of Saudi Arabian students who traveled to the United States in that year on a KASP student visa.

students in the United States has increased by nearly 500 percent (Institute for International Education, 2014). In 2003, only 3,521 Saudi students traveled to the US to study abroad, but in 2014 there were 53,919 who came to the US for their studies. (See Figure 3 for the year-by-year numbers.) This is a dramatic increase that could be having effects on Saudi society. Is it possible those students who travel to the US for their education return to Saudi Arabia with improved views of the US? Saudi students who travel to the US for their education make American friends, wear American clothes, and shop at American malls, which could explain the influx of American brands and stores appearing throughout the country. Taylor and Albasri (2014) write, “KASP is clearly impacting Saudi Arabia. The alumni are bringing their experiences from the United States back to Saudi Arabia and trying to recreate them. The impact that the exposure of American culture has on these students will have an impact on the future of Saudi Arabia.” (p. 117). The KASP could also lead to improved public opinion of Saudi Arabia in the United States as many American students befriend their Saudi classmates (Knickmeyer, 2012). Figure 4 below displays the comparison between the number of Saudi students entering the US and

public opinion of the US in Saudi Arabia before and after 2007.

Figure 4 displays the possible causal relationship between the KASP and public opinion of the US in Saudi Arabia. As is shown, both numbers are significantly higher after 2007 when an influx of Saudi students begins to flood the United States. This theory has also been practiced by the US military for decades. The International Military Education and Training (IMET) program has worked to bring military personnel from around the world to the US for training and education. Miles (2011) writes, “IMET is a State Department security-assistance program, managed by the Defense Department’s Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), to provide professional military training and education to US allies.” This has allowed the US to build strategic partnerships with personnel from partner nations who are rising stars in their respective militaries and who often come into leadership positions in the future. Through the IMET program, they are exposed to the American way of life and ideals, democratic values, respect, individual and human rights, and belief in the rule of law (Miles, 2011). This creates much more positive views of the US military and the US in general, which go a long

Figure 4: Potential Impact of KASP on Public Opinion percentages

	Mean from 2002-2006	Mean from 2007-2014
<i>Public Opinion of the U.S.</i>	8.60%	33.14%
<i>Saudi students in the U.S.</i>	3,951.60	25,194.75

Source: The public opinion numbers were averages of the available Zogby, Pew, and Gallup survey results for the years listed. The Saudi student numbers were averages from the Institute for International education’s yearly publication, “Open Doors Fact Sheet: Saudi Arabia” for the years listed.

way in building important relationships. Is it possible that the KASP is doing for the civilian population what the IMET program has done for the military population?

Discussion of Survey Results of Saudi Students Studying in the USA

To test this theory, research was conducted at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio to gauge the views of Saudi Arabian students living in the United States. Wright State ranks fifth in the United States in Saudi student enrollment (Taylor and Albasri, 2014). Anonymous Likert scale surveys were dispersed to fifty-five Saudi Arabian students, asking them to self-report on their views of the United States prior to and after leaving Saudi Arabia for the US. The survey also asked students to report their gender, age, and indicate how long they have lived in the US. It included a comment section to allow students to explain why their views of the US changed. The Likert scale surveys were coded from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating “very unfavorable” views of the US and 5 indicating “very favorable” views of the US. The aggregate mean for Saudi students’ views of the US increased from 3.76 (before coming to the US) to 4.05 (after coming to the US). After studying in the US, only 7 percent of Saudi students indicated negative

views of the US (somewhat unfavorable and very unfavorable), while 51 percent indicated “somewhat positive” views, 33 percent indicated “very positive” views, and 9 percent indicated “no opinion.” Another interesting finding was the difference in gender. The aggregate mean for male respondents’ views of the US after studying in the US was 3.97 while the aggregate mean for female respondents’ views of the US after studying in the US was 4.33. The comparison of means between males and females before and after studying in the US is displayed below in Figure 5. When asked to report their views of the US after studying in the US, 42 percent of females indicated “very favorable”; 50 percent of females indicated “somewhat favorable”; and 8 percent of females indicated “no opinion.” When asked to report their views of the US after studying in the US, 27 percent of males indicated “very favorable”; 54 percent of males indicated “somewhat favorable”; 9 percent of males indicated “no opinion”; 5 percent of males indicated “somewhat unfavorable,” and 5 percent of males indicated “very unfavorable.”

Overall, students reported higher approvals of the US after leaving Saudi Arabia to live in the US. While the differences between views before coming to the US and views after coming to the US are not colossal, they do show a positive change. It is also interesting that Saudi women reported higher approval levels than Saudi men.

Figure 5: Comparison of Saudi Arabia Student Perceptions

Saudi Arabia Student Views of the U.S.		
	Males	Females
<i>Before</i>	3.67	4.08
<i>After</i>	3.97	4.33
<i>Difference</i>	0.3	0.25

Source: These numbers were derived from the independent anonymous survey research performed at Wright State University.

This could be attributed to the vast difference in women's rights between the US and Saudi Arabia. When given the chance to write comments on why their opinion of the US might have changed, many students cited the difference in laws, food, and fashion as causing positive changes. Many wrote that they were surprised by the amount of taxes in the US, and others wrote that they were surprised by how friendly people are in the US. When asked why his opinion of the US changed, one male simply responded by writing "girls and freedom."

The US-Saudi Relationship

How does this change occurring in Saudi Arabia affect its relationship with the United States? The simple answer is that it most likely does not affect the relationship. Before some of these cultural changes and when views of the US were very poor, the United States' relationship with the Saudi government remained strong. Since the 1940s, the US has seen Saudi Arabia as a strategic partner in the Middle East. Its vast oil reserves and strategic location in the Middle East made Saudi Arabia a strong ally against Soviet influence during the Cold War and a staunch ally in the War on Terror since September 11, 2001 (Cordesman, 2010). This is reflected in the Security Cooperation partnership between the United States and Saudi Arabia. Since 1950, the United States has been Saudi Arabia's leading defense supplier with Saudi Arabia's accounting for nearly 20 percent of global US Foreign Military Sales (FMS) deliveries amounting to \$62.7 billion US dollars (Blanchard, 2010). Since 2010, the Obama Administration has notified Congress of over \$86 billion in proposed arms sales with Saudi Arabia, which include fighter aircraft, helicopters, armored vehicles, missile defense systems, and related equipment and services (DSCA: Major Arms Sales, 2014). Saudi Arabia has a robust and complicated Security Cooperation partnership with the US. There are three separate Security

Cooperation organizations in Saudi Arabia: the United States Military Training Mission (USMTM) was established in 1953 and works primarily with the Saudi Ministry of Defense and the Saudi Armed Forces under the authority of USCENTCOM (Blanchard, 2010). The Office of Program Management – Saudi Arabia National Guard (OPM-SANG) was established in 1973 and bilaterally trains, operates, and supplies the Saudi Arabian National Guard under the administration of the United States Army Security Assistance Command (USASAC). The Office of the Program Management – Ministry of Interior – Facilities Security Forces (OPM-MOI-FSF) was created in 2008 to ensure infrastructure protection including border security, civil defense, and coast guard operations and is administered by the Department of State and the US military (Blanchard, 2010).

Although the social changes and public opinion in Saudi Arabia might not directly affect the US-Saudi relationship, it could still play an important role. Blanchard argues that Saudi Arabia's domestic political situation with regard to issues such as human rights, religious freedom, and cultural change might be more important to the US-Saudi relationship than ever before (Blanchard, 2014). Cummins and Braziel (2014) also draw the connection between public opinion of the United States in the Middle East and Security Cooperation. When public opinion of the United States is positive, Security Cooperation Officers (SCO) have more access to their counterparts and can more easily develop strong relationships. Conversely, when anti-Americanism is high it can lead to "delays in decision-making, a lack of access, or even put the SCOs life in danger." (Cummins and Braziel, 2014) Therefore, positive increases in public opinion of the US in Saudi Arabia will only help to strengthen the US-Saudi relationship.

Conclusion

King Abdullah passed away at the age of 90 on January 23, 2015. His death came at a delicate time for Saudi Arabia as the kingdom is dealing with the freefalling price of oil, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), and the call for domestic reforms (Dreazen, 2015). It is unclear in what direction the newly crowned King Salman bin Abdulaziz will take the country. Will King Salman look to appease the youth and move ahead with social reforms, or will he consolidate his power with religious and social conservatives in the country? No matter what King Salman enacts domestically, it appears that the US-Saudi relationship will remain relevant for the foreseeable future.

The research suggests that significant changes are occurring in Saudi Arabia. There does not appear to be one overlying cause, but instead an amalgam of factors such as the widespread use of social media, regional unrest, and the influx of Saudi students traveling to the United States. Public opinion polls in Saudi Arabia show that public opinion of the US in Saudi Arabia has significantly increased over the past 10 years, and surveys of Saudi students in the US suggest that the KASP could be playing a valuable role in this change. What does this possible change mean for the United States? It is unlikely we will see any huge shifts in the US-Saudi relationship, especially in the realm of Security Cooperation, which has been very strong since the 1950s. However, social changes and public opinion of the US can affect a SCO's ability to perform his or her job. Therefore, positive views of the US in Saudi Arabia could lead to more access and more security for SCOs as they live and work in the kingdom. A positive view of the US also means that fewer Saudis will join anti-American terrorist groups such as al Qaeda or ISIS. In 2001, 15 of the 19 9/11 hijackers were Saudi Arabian citizens, and many were in the US on student visas (9/11 Commission Report, 2004). Nearly 15 years later, thousands of young Saudi Arabian

citizens are studying in US colleges, and many are making American friends and returning to their country with positive views of the United States.

The opinions and recommendations expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Lockheed Martin Corporation.

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