

# IRAQ'S NEW REALITY

REPORT II



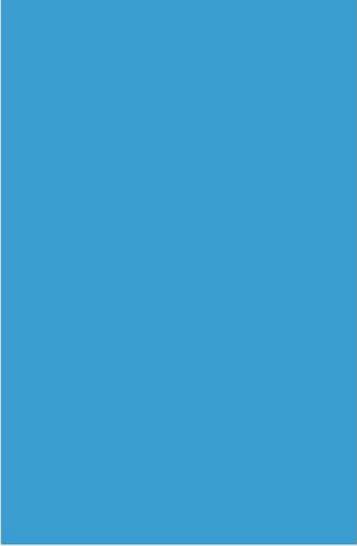
*ENSURING SECURITY AND  
SETTING THE NATIONAL SECURITY AGENDA*



STIMSON



The Centre for International  
Governance Innovation  
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la gouvernance internationale



September 2009

Dear Colleagues,

At this critical juncture in Iraq's history, the Stimson Center and the Centre for International Governance Innovation are partnering to explore the linkages between Iraqi reconstruction, security and a political process of national reconciliation involving all Iraqis. Our goal is to help shape a better understanding of the Iraqi situation and to generate new thinking about Iraq for policymakers.

This project, entitled Iraq's New Reality, includes a series of workshops held in Canada and the United States, gathering leading experts to examine these key issues. A report summarizing the discussions and offering recommendations to parties involved in the Iraq situation will follow each workshop.

This report is based in part on the second workshop of the series, held at the Stimson Center in Washington, DC on August 4, 2009. It benefited from presentations and contributions by Henri Barkey, Paul Dewar, Charles Duelfer, Charles Dunne, Amb. Edward Gnehm, Michael Eisenstadt, Amb. Paul Heinbecker and Nabil al-Tikriti.

Future workshops and reports by the Stimson Center and CIGI will address the issues of governance and the federalism option, and Iraq's relations with its neighbors. The report from our first meeting, Iraq's New Reality: The Impact of Conflict on Minorities, Refugees and the Internally Displaced is available at [www.stimson.org](http://www.stimson.org) and [www.cigionline.org](http://www.cigionline.org).

It is our hope that, at this critical juncture in Iraq's history, this project can explore and shed light on Iraq's new realities and prospects for stability.

Sincerely,

Ellen Laipson      Ambassador Mokhtar Lamani



## Security in Iraq Today

The security situation has improved since the peak of sectarian violence in 2006 and 2007, yet there are still many uncertainties and the situation remains fragile. The surge of US security forces coupled with the activism of Iraq's tribes against radical extremists reduced Iraqi civilian and US troop casualties, and this pattern has been sustained for more than a year.

Overall, there have been gradual, positive changes in the daily lives of Iraqi citizens. Neighborhood militias have been virtually eliminated, as Iraqi security forces have become more effective. Recent sectarian-motivated attacks on civilians no longer generate reprisal killings and cycles of violence. Provincial elections held on January 31, 2009 were successful; there were no major security incidents anywhere in the country.

The Iraqi government declared June 30, 2009, the date the United States officially transferred the responsibility for control of Iraqi cities to its security forces, as a national holiday. With fireworks and cheering in the streets, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki delivered a highly nationalistic and congratulatory speech. Washington also expressed its satisfaction at the transition of power.

It was not a wholly positive experience for Iraqi society, however, as concerns regarding the viability and capacity of Iraqi security forces to act independently of the US were palpable, particularly in the volatile Baghdad and Nineveh provinces. The Iraqi forces, nonetheless, are not entirely on their own. The US military will continue to maintain a presence and play a security role in Iraq

through 2011 and Iraqi forces will continue to rely heavily upon US intelligence and logistical support to carry out their missions, maintaining a level of interdependence that will endure for some time to come.

Some level of insecurity persists in parts of the country, and preventing militant attacks and outbreaks of violence continues to be a challenge for Iraqi security forces. Car and suicide bombings remain frequent in the new Iraq. According to the US

Iraq	August 2005	August 2007	August 2009
Iraqi Civilian Deaths From War	3,300	2,000	300
Iraqi Security Forces Deaths	282	76	42
U.S. Troop Deaths	85	84	7
U.S. Troops in Iraq	138,000	162,000	130,000
Iraqi Security Force	183,000	360,000	650,000
Crude Oil Production (in millions of barrels per day)	2.15	1.9	2.5
Electricity Production (average megawatts, official power grid, prewar: 4,000)	4,000	4,400	6,500

Graph excerpt from:  
Campbell et al., "States of Conflict: an Update," New York Times, October 7, 2009, A29.

Less Favorable Conditions - More Favorable Conditions

Special Inspector General in Iraq, April through July 2009 saw "a wave of suicide bombings [culminating] in a series of 404 bombs detonated across Iraq, bringing the total Iraqis killed...to about 1,000.<sup>17</sup>" One of the deadliest bombings since 2003 occurred in August 2009 when the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Finance in Baghdad were attacked in a massive, coordinated truck bombing. Prime Minister al-Maliki blamed the attack on a group with ties to former Iraqi

Ba'athists located in Syria. The severity of the attack forced Prime Minister al-Maliki to publicly state that a re-evaluation of the government's approach to security was necessary. He called into question the process of removing concrete blast walls and security checkpoints in Baghdad that had been underway in the lead up to the attack.

Incidents of corruption and criminality among government officials and security forces also threaten their ability to operate effectively and establish and maintain trust among Iraqi society.<sup>2</sup> For example, 5 members of Iraqi security forces are currently on trial for a July 2009 bank robbery in which approximately \$5 million was stolen and 8 people were killed. Among the accused is a member of the security detail of Adel Abdul-Mahdi, head of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC), a leading Shiite political party.

## US and Iraqi Military Cooperation: Implementation of the Status of Forces Agreement<sup>3</sup>

In November 2008, the outgoing Bush Administration and the government of Iraq signed a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), to set rules and procedures for the drawdown and eventual withdrawal of US forces in Iraq, and a Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) which addresses the broader US-Iraq relationship, including political, economic and security issues. According to its terms, all US combat brigades will leave Iraq by August 2010 and all US troops will leave by the end of 2011.

The US military is now restricted to serving in training and support functions to independent Iraqi missions, and only when requested. Immediately following the official transition of power, there were reports of confusion in both the US and Iraqi forces about the tactical implementation of the SOFA. In response, joint training teleconferences organized by the Iraqi Ministry of Defense and interventions by senior US and Iraqi military personnel have led to better understanding of the specific terms of the agreement down the ranks. Overall it appears that the practical aspects of the transition are being viewed positively by both the Iraqi and US governments and have resulted in improved relations and coordination.

## Regional Security Dynamics and Perceptions of Iraq

To date, there has been no regional or unified Arab approach towards Iraq. Each state looks at Iraq through a different lens, often reflecting their own perceived vulnerabilities and worries as they relate to regional security.

- For Saudi Arabia, the loss of Iraq as the natural balancer to Iran has left the state preoccupied with the sectarian balance of power in the region. The Kingdom is deeply concerned about a

strong, Shi'a state in Iraq and its implications for the Saudi Shi'a population.

- As for Kuwait, its long-term strategic interest is for Iraq to be a stable and prosperous neighbor. However, enduring anxieties related to the status of the Kuwait-Iraq border and the repayment of war reparations from the Iraqi invasion, as well as current conversations in Baghdad referencing their state as the 19th Iraqi province, continue to dominate the Kuwaiti discourse regarding Iraq. Indeed, Iraq's Chapter VII status resulting from the 1991 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait remains an issue of importance in the US-Kuwait bilateral relationship as Kuwait must provide consent before the status can be lifted.
- Turkey has taken a very different approach to Baghdad and Iraqi Kurdistan, the primary focus of Turkish foreign policy vis-à-vis Iraq. Immediately following the 2003 toppling of Saddam, Ankara was concerned that Iraqi Kurdistan would strive for independence from Iraq, with, in their view, dangerous implications for the Kurdish population in Turkey. More recently the

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Turks have pursued a positive relationship with northern Iraq, believing it may facilitate the resolution of their own domestic concerns regarding the Kurds. As for the Iraqi Kurds, they are now more favorably disposed towards Turkey as they seek a relationship with a competent, stable state. Highlighting the

linkages today between Erbil and Ankara, Kurdistan may be now more economically connected to Turkey than to Baghdad.

- Syria is also deeply concerned about sectarianism and its possible affects on its domestic population. As the largest recipient of Iraqi refugees, with most of them living in Damascus, Syrian fears of sectarian-dominated violence crossing its borders is acute. This fear is exacerbated by the effect these Iraqis are having on the economy, state services and society in general. In terms of regional security however, the new Iraq is not a key determinant but rather a factor in other broader considerations for Syria, including Iran and its relations with the US and the Arab-Israeli conflict.
- For Iran, both the US troop presence and instability in Iraq have profound implications for its own national security perceptions and priorities. Iran has extended its influence in Iraq since 2003 by engaging and supporting various political actors, militias and insurgent groups financially and militarily. Iranian goals have been to challenge the US presence in the region and to help foster the emergence of an Iraq compatible with Iranian interests. Ties between Iraq's Shi'a political parties and Iran are an enduring concern of the Gulf Arabs, who see Iraq as susceptible to pressure and influence from Tehran.

## Strains on Security and Progress: Key Issues for the New Iraq

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US General David Petraeus, then-Commanding General of the Multi-national Force – Iraq (MNF-I), testified before the US Congress in 2008 that progress in Iraq had been “significant but uneven” and “fragile and reversible.” The situation remains the same today, with reduced violence in Iraq similar to the second intifada in the Palestinian territories – low levels of violence continuing for several years. In the case of Iraq, it is likely that similar levels will endure in the short to medium term if several stress points are not addressed. These stress points also relate to the need for a national reconciliation process in Iraq: they will not be fully resolved without reconciliation, and reconciliation may not be meaningful if these conflicts endure.

To date, there has not been an all-inclusive national reconciliation project – that is, not only working to achieve reconciliation among Iraqi political parties, but also among those that by either refusal or exclusion are not involved in the political process.

US policy has been encouraging reconciliation as part of its effort to foster a united, peaceful Iraq, but its definition of reconciliation may not accord with that of the Maliki government. It is also unclear what will happen once the US fully withdraws, particularly with regard to maintain-

ing the political and security improvements achieved in recent years and whether those events will create a more or less fertile environment for reconciliation. There is little doubt that without a concerted effort by both the Iraqi government and Iraqi society to work towards reconciliation, much of the fragmentation that exists today will remain and continue to cast uncertainty over any progress made in Iraq, whether that be political, economic, or security improvements. Indeed, several of the key issues that may constrain progress in Iraq today have at their core a need for reconciliation.

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### The Endurance of Iraqi Militias

One of the most commonly acknowledged drivers of recent security improvements, particularly in the south, has been the 2008 ceasefire maintained by Moqtada al-Sadr’s militia, the Jaish al-Mahdi (the Mahdi Army). While the Mahdi Army has begun to participate in the political process in certain governorates and is officially holding to the ceasefire, some splinter groups do continue to operate and engage in other types of violence and criminality. There are many uncertainties: does al-Sadr still command the Mahdi Army and can he extend the ceasefire indefinitely? Are these smaller groups acting independently of their leader according to their own logic or by connecting

to Iranian interests? A break in the ceasefire or splinter groups that reignite violence would compromise the current delicate balance in the south.

Anbar province in western Iraq used to be the hotbed for the Sunni insurgency, including al-Qaeda. As a main area of focus for the 2007 “surge” in US troops, the US military partnered with local tribes and communities to fight the insurgents. In doing so, the Anbar Awakening and the Sons of Iraq were formed. Funded and armed by the US, their objective was to assist in fighting al-Qaeda and in return they were promised employment in the Iraqi security forces or, if not qualified, to find other government employment.

Sustaining the success of the turnaround in Anbar has not been easy. A combination of budget shortfalls due to the decline in oil prices and an apparent reluctance by the Maliki government to integrate the Awakening forces into the security forces, many now-unemployed Awakening and Sons of Iraq members are becoming increasingly frustrated. Some of the Awakening members have publicly begun to speak out against the Maliki government. Other groups could potentially take up arms against the government if the situation is not resolved.

The Peshmerga, the armed forces of Iraqi Kurdistan, are well-trained and highly capable. As key US allies even before the 2003 invasion, the Peshmerga have fought against insurgent groups throughout Iraq. Like the Awakening groups and the Sons of Iraq, there have been efforts to integrate them into a unified Iraqi security force and today there are several Iraqi Army battalions made up of Kurdish Peshmerga in the north. Complete integration of the Kurdish forces is unlikely, due to the history of mistrust between the Kurds and the national government, the autonomy that was granted the Kurdish region even under Saddam, and the new Constitution that has permitted the creation of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), which is not expected to relinquish the special status of the Kurdish security forces.

## Arab-Kurdish Tensions

Tension along the border of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and in the “disputed territories” – stretching from Ninewa province through parts of Diyala province – has long been a source of concern for Iraqi security. Indeed, US General Odierno has referred to these areas as the “fault line,” highlighting the risk they pose to Iraqi internal security. One of the largest unresolved disputes in Iraq is the status of Kirkuk, an ethnically mixed, ancient city claimed by Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen<sup>4</sup> and a focal point for the oil industry in the north. The future of Kirkuk is an explosive issue for the Kurds, who claim that forced migrations and Arabization of the city under Saddam Hussein has shifted the demographics away from its alleged historic Kurdish majority.

Resolution of this issue is of utmost importance for the future stability of northern Iraq and Baghdad-KRG relations, but the situation is currently stalemated.

A popular referendum was originally scheduled to occur by the end of 2007 to determine whether the city and the province of Kirkuk (renamed Tamim by Saddam) should become a part of the KRG. However it was postponed because the Iraqi government had not undertaken the requisite steps for the referendum, which included the redrawing of the boundaries of Kirkuk province to undo Saddam's gerrymandering efforts and conduct a census to prepare voter rolls as required by Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution. Without a political solution to Kirkuk, there continues to be a risk of violence that could upset the delicate relations between Baghdad and the KRG.

Another flashpoint in Arab-Kurdish relations is Ninewa Province, particularly in the city of Mosul. Ethnic tensions are high, with the main political party, al-Hadba, actively seeking to minimize Kurdish influence in the province. There have been clashes between militias associated with al-Hadba and the Kurdish Peshmerga, and while the situation seems to be a contained conflict within Mosul, it could easily spin out of control.

## National Reconciliation and Security in the New Iraq

An inclusive national reconciliation process is essential for Iraq, both in terms of preserving and strengthening newly created institutions and for reconstituting a society shattered by war and sectarian violence. The US and the international community generally believe that to date, the Iraqi government has failed to initiate a genuine and holistic reconciliation process. To be sure, there is the impetus for reconciliation at the local level, where tribal culture is most prominent. And Prime Minister Maliki has recruited individual Sunnis, but no major Sunni political blocs, to join the central government. At the national level, the political culture is still driven by the desire for revenge and the propensity to engage in zero-sum politics at the cost of compromise and accommodation.

There are structural challenges to reconciliation as well, that, while not absolving the Iraqi government of the responsibility to act, are important to consider. First, even if a national reconciliation process were to begin, there is no guarantee of success.

Additionally, national reconciliation also often occurs once a war has ended. Unresolved grievances and enduring violence in Iraq today set any national project on an uncertain trajectory at the outset. Some of the main fault lines in Iraqi society must be on the agenda in order for mainstream society to fully invest in and support its objectives. Finally, to achieve a true transition away from an old order requires significant time and a strong, inclusive vision for the future, often requiring leadership and generational change to establish and solidify new norms of society and justice.

## US Policy and “What If” Scenarios

US policy in Iraq is in the midst of a deliberate and determined course adjustment. June 30, 2009 was the first of several key dates that will lead to a total withdrawal of US troops from Iraq by the end of 2011. This timeline is not being implemented without criticism. Conversations in Washington and Iraq express concern about the Iraqi forces' ability to maintain security and for the government to continue to uphold its commitments to its citizens, the constitution and the international community.

Some cite the lingering security challenges as reason enough to maintain a troop presence beyond the 2011 deadline. Others have put forward “what if” scenarios that might cause the Obama Administration to adjust its timeline or, in extreme situations, reengage militarily to restore law

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and order. Some of those scenarios have included a re-ignition of widespread sectarian warfare, claims of forced migration or ethnic cleansing by one or several minority communities, or a coup against the current government.

Despite these “what ifs,” the Obama Administration has been clear that Iraq will not dominate its foreign policy priorities as was the case for the preceding administration. It seems to have internalized the reality that certain

actors in Iraq will attempt to take advantage of the US withdrawal, but those actions in and of themselves should not force a new policy towards Iraq. Moreover, one of the administration's primary foreign policy objectives is the reorientation of US forces, resources and attention towards Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is also important to acknowledge that the SOFA, as a legally binding agreement between the two governments, has removed the element of choice in the US decision to withdraw from Iraq.

## The Evolving Nature of the Iraqi State and Prospects for the Future

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This period of transition is also an opportunity for the Iraqi government and people to begin re-defining Iraqi identity and Iraq's long-term strategic goals. Key questions remain: What will be the mission of the Iraqi military? What will be the nature of Iraq's engagement within the region and with the international community? Is Iraq a natural ally of the United States and what should a different US-Iraqi relationship look like? These are some of the major questions that will set the trajectory of the country, both internally and in its foreign policy.

## The Nature of the Iraqi State and Military

Constitutionally, Iraq is a bi-national state, made up of Arabs and Kurds, as well as many distinct minorities and religious sects. But what exactly unites all Iraqis? What is the glue that holds the society together? Citizenship and nationalism in the new Iraq need to be redefined. What is certain is that Iraq will continue to see itself as a state that has influence in the region and the international community. As an economic actor through its oil production and exports and as a historic political and military actor in the region, Iraq will have regional ambitions and will continue to draw attention from and engage with other states. How that engagement takes shape however remains to be seen.

One key factor that will shape Iraqi identity is the desire for independence, both politically and militarily. The past few decades of Iraqi history shows that the country has been on a security rollercoaster, making it difficult to imagine just what this independence might look like. From the consolidation of power under Saddam Hussein, to the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, the 1991 invasion of Kuwait and the resulting sanctions regime, to finally the 2003 US invasion and the toppling of Saddam, it becomes clear that there is no recent previous status to which Iraq is or should be trying to revert. Rather, the country is a new canvas with which to create a new image for itself and set new goals.

Politically, Iraq is still working to find the right balance between creating a strong central government in Baghdad and a more federalist system with power diffused between Baghdad and one or more regional governments. How the Kurdish Regional Government interacts with the rest of Iraq will be essential to this process. Indeed, Kurdish engagement with politics in Baghdad will be essential in shaping the character of the country. Furthermore, Iraq's external political orientation is yet to be determined. Psychologically, relations with the United States are going to be complicated. Iraq will now have to decide who its preferred partner or partners will be in the international community, and whether it orients itself towards the West, East or neither. The decision to send 10,000 Iraqi students abroad for international education is an early indication that, at the very least, Iraq has the ambition to reconstitute its role as an advanced country with technical skills, and to make up for the lost years when Iraq's elite was isolated from new knowledge and technology.

How Iraq determines its national security priorities and the role of its military is also yet to be seen. A critical factor will be whether its military mission will be primarily focused on national defense or one that aims to create a regional role for the military. The Iraqi constitution does state that the country will never pursue weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and it is likely that the nuclear option will not be attractive to Iraq in the short to medium term – particularly as potential primary

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threats to their national security today cannot currently be offset publicly with WMD, most notably Iranian meddling in internal Iraqi affairs. Instead, Iraq will most likely work to reinforce its conventional capabilities. For example, Iraq has already expressed interest in establishing a modern air force.

All Iraqis have a stake in Iraq's ability to export oil, which funds Iraq's reconstruction and has the potential to bring relative prosperity to its citizens. While today it seems that the governance of oil revenue sharing has been a cause for divisiveness in Iraqi politics, over time the oil industry will be a unifying force by establishing a shared interest in its

continued strength. The exertion of Iraqi economic power via its oil interests will also be a key way in which Iraq interacts with the international community.

## Iraq and its Changing External Environment

As the new Iraq grows more stable and confident, it will begin to re-engage with its neighbors in a way it had not been able to in recent years. Yet while strategic perceptions of Iraq have been fundamentally altered since 2003, each state in the region will bring forward to the moment historic competition as well as self perceptions, anxieties and desires. Despite Iraq's internal restructuring, its natural competition with Iran, Saudi Arabia and Syria will endure.

From the perspective of other regional states, Iraq is no longer the only unpredictable actor. Post-election turmoil in Iran has generated new concerns among Arab states about the regional security picture. In previous decades, Iran and Iraq were seen as natural balancers of each other. Iran's main threat to Iraq and the region, however, was not necessarily deterrable by Iraqi military capacity: the Arab world worried about Iran's intentions and ability to export its revolution and to disrupt the freedom of navigation in the Gulf. But Iraq played an important role, and its attack on Iran in 1980 was intended to thwart the spread of the Islamic revolution. It is ironic that today Iran and Iraq have a close relationship, the boundaries of which are not well understood, but which create a new source of insecurity for the traditional monarchies of the Gulf and the majority of other Arab states.

In the long term, regional states look to three key elements to understand the new Iraq's potential influence in the region: its economic influence via oil reserves, its historic military presence and power, and the fear of Iraq as a contagion – that is, the perception that what happens in Iraq will have a spill-over effect, whether it be instability, democracy or something else. Therefore the US-promoted vision of a strong and successful Iraq may not be viewed comfortably by its neighbors.

This reality is illuminated by the example of the 1980s, when the Gulf states were not keen to rebuild Iraq after years of war with Iran. Furthermore, a resurgent Iraq in OPEC might also disturb dynamics in that forum. It is possible that even Iran may be wary of an independent, capable, and largely Shi'a government in Iraq. Even in terms of religious influence, a powerful Najaf would not be good for Iranian influence among the broader Shi'a community in the region.

## The Evolving US-Iraqi Relationship

It is not likely that the United States and Iraq will be natural allies with deeply shared interests in the future. True, this has been a period of exceptionalism in the bilateral relationship, with an unusual interdependence, at least in the short term. But what drives the US relationship with Iraq must and will change. Indeed, the Strategic Framework (SFA) envisions a more comprehensive and normal bilateral relationship, rather than one focused primarily on security.

As the US-Iraqi relationship transitions away from the norm of recent years, so too must mindsets and expectations change. The US must recognize that it will no longer be able to directly affect outcomes in Iraq. For example, the US ability to limit the influence of Iran in Iraq – a primary US foreign policy concern during the Bush administration – will continue to contract. Iraq will also have no obligation to build up its military to the specifications of or with the consent of the US. Over time, the US may not be the primary supplier of conventional military equipment; Iraq could well seek to diversify its weapons supplies as a part of its emerging international political strategy. For the Iraqi government, with independence comes accountability. The US presence will no longer be able to justify shortcomings of policy, politics or security.

This does not mean that all US influence is lost, but rather, it must be redefined. The US will still be able to have an impact on Iraqi decision-making, at least on the margins. A US role in working to create an improved, free-standing regional security

architecture could serve to advance US interests without requiring direct intervention. Additionally, for the US government, progress in the areas laid out in the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) may provide new opportunities for collaboration and to exert different forms of leverage in Iraq. Broadening the US-Iraqi relationship beyond security may help make future US engagement with Iraq more productive, and build more positive perceptions of one another in their respective societies.

**Broadening the US-Iraq relationship beyond security may help make future US engagement with Iraq more productive**

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- 4 Kirkuk has also been home to several other minority groups, including Christian Assyrians.

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