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RELIGION AND CULTURE IN IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY

Abstract

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a distinctive example of international relations in which statecraft and foreign policy are intertwined with religion and culture. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has sought to establish itself as a contemporary nation-state while simultaneously serving as the guardian of the Islamic ideological initiative. This duality has had a substantial impact on its interactions with neighboring regions, particularly the South Caucasus, where historical, cultural, and religious linkages intersect with geostrategic concerns. This paper analyzes the conceptual frameworks that inform Iranian foreign policy, focusing on religion and culture, while contextualizing them within international history and applying them to the South Caucasus case study.

Keywords: *Iran, foreign policy, Shia-Islam, Persian culture*

Introduction

Iran, due to its geographic position and natural resources, has consistently played a significant role in regional and worldwide political dynamics. Since the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, significant alterations have transpired in the nation's political system, influencing the development of Iran's foreign policy.

Islamic ideology, rationalism and pragmatism play a pivotal role in shaping the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. After Imam Khomeini's death in 1989, pragmatism replaced ideology as the predominant influence in foreign policy. Mohamad Khatami's foreign policy (1997-2005) focused on diplomacy, tension reduction, and peaceful coexistence with other nations.¹ From 2005 to 2013, under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's "New Conservatism", Iran became a politically and economically isolated country. Foreign policy under Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021) was predicated on "constructive relations with the other world". Currently, Iran's stated position seeks to transition from confrontation to conversation, constructive engagement, and mutual understanding with the objective of ensuring national security, enhancing Iran's prominence, and attaining sustainable comprehensive development.²

The South Caucasus, a strategically significant region, has historically occupied a crucial role in Iran's regional politics. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Iran commenced the establishment of relationships with independent states in the region

¹ Edmund Herzig, *Iran and The Former Soviet South*, 1999, p 3.

² Zarif, Mohamad Javad. "What Iran really wants". *Foreign Affairs* 93 (2014):49-54 55-59. Accessed September 14, 2025

across multiple domains. Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus exhibits a dichotomy between ideological principles and pragmatic considerations.

Georgia, as a primarily Christian nation with Western ambitions, exhibits little receptivity to Iran's religious narrative. Iran attempts to exert influence over Georgia's Shia Muslim community by boosting foundational religious education. Iran also participates in economic and cultural interactions, aiming to exert influence through trade routes and soft power programs.

The same Shi'a identity establishes Azerbaijan as a natural ally. Azerbaijan's secular rule, nationalist views, and strong affiliations with Turkey and Israel hinder Tehran's efforts to engage. Iran has sought to participate via religious networks, advocating for Shi'a clerical institutions and cultural diplomacy; however, these initiatives encounter opposition from Baku.

Iran and Armenia maintained cordial relations based on pragmatism and shared concerns about Turkish and Azerbaijani influence, despite Armenia's Christian identity. Here, Cultural diplomacy is less concerned with religious affinity and more about historical coexistence, with a focus on cultural relations.

Theoretical Framework: International History

International history encompasses the examination of political, diplomatic, and cultural interactions among nations. While formal connections between states remained paramount, there was a growing emphasis on diplomacy, economics, strategy, the domestic origins of foreign policy, ideology, propaganda, and intelligence. By the 1970s, international history had established itself as a mature intellectual practice, complete with dedicated journals, conferences, specialist degree programs, and professional associations.³

International history today is a growing and diverse field. Iran's foreign policy, viewed through the lens of international history, cannot be comprehended merely through material interests. It must be contextualized within the enduring framework of Persian imperial traditions and Islamic revivalism. In the context of Iran, the revolutionary ideology, which is derived from Shia Islam, serves as both a domestic legitimizing instrument and a foreign policy doctrine. Consequently, religion serves as a fundamental component of Iran's international identity, influencing its policies toward regions where cultural and religious similarities are present.

Formation of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, significant socio-political transformations transpired in the nation. The examination of Iran's modern political system is crucial for comprehending the Islamic Republic established following the above-mentioned revolution.

During the formulation of the 1979 constitution, a debate arose between secular intellectuals and the Shia clergy, resulting in a victory for the clergy. That triumph afforded the leader of the Islamic Revolution the opportunity to formulate the constitution in accordance with his own treatise, "Islamic Governance" (*hokumat-e Eslami*) and concept

³ Patrick Finney, "International history". Accessed September 14, 2025

of “velayat-e faqih”. In “Islamic Governance”, Ayatollah Khomeini asserted that Islam is not merely an ethical religion, but also encompasses all the laws and principles requisite for social administration and governance. Islamic government constitutes authentic constitutional governance, with the Qur’an and traditions serving as its constitution. Moreover, the Qur’an and traditions do not delineate the identity of the ruler during the period of occultation, despite the necessity of social order for the comprehensive application of Sharia. Khomeini asserts that a Muslim sovereign must embody justice. He should know the Sharia well, in accordance with his actions to confirm the requirements of the law of God. The most appropriate individual to meet these criteria is the “Velayat-e Fahiq”, who must assume the obligations of the Imam, albeit with unequal standing. Monarchs and other temporal authorities will be excluded from Islamic government.⁴

In March 1979, a referendum regarding the Islamic Republic occurred in Iran, with 98.2% of participants endorsing the Islamic Republic. In November of that year, the “Assembly of Experts”⁵ The constitution was finalized, which subsequently became the principal statute of the Islamic state.⁶

The aforementioned constitution designates the Supreme Leader as the head of the country. The governmental structure of Iran comprises both directly and indirectly elected entities. All branches of government are accountable to him. The paramount branch of the armed forces is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, tasked with safeguarding the values of the Islamic Revolution. They are fundamental cornerstones of the nation’s internal and foreign policy. In Iran, there exist non-formal governance structures known as *Boniads* (Foundations), which are governed by representatives of the Shi’a Clergy. They enhance the economic influence of the Shi’a clerics across the entire nation.

An analysis of the Islamic Republic of Iran's political system elucidates the prevailing socio-political dynamics that impact both regional nations and the global community. It influences the nation’s international policies.

Development of the foreign policy of Iran’s Islamic Republic

The Islamic Republic of Iran’s constitution serves as the foundation for Iran’s foreign policy theory. The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic is delineated by its Constitution:

- Denounces all forms of oppression, acknowledges the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations, safeguards the rights of all Muslims and the principle of non-alignment with imperial powers, and advocates for peaceful ties with foreign governments;
- The Islamic Republic of Iran upholds human happiness and well-being as its guiding principle, asserting that independence, freedom, and the entitlement to equitable governance are universal rights for all individuals. The Islamic Republic of Iran

⁴ George Sanikidze, *Shia and the State in Iran*, 2005 p 317-318

⁵ The Assembly of Experts is a clerical body comprising 88 members, who are chosen by popular vote for eight-year tenure. As per the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the members of the Assembly of Experts: elect the Supreme Leader; Provide counsel to the Rahbar on various matters; have the authority to dismiss the Supreme Leader if he is deemed incapable of performing his responsibilities; convene biannually to assess the activities of the Supreme Leader’s office. (the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran 2009,74)

⁶ Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State*, 2003, 158-159

backs the fight of the oppressed against their oppressors while abstaining from meddling in the internal affairs of other countries.

- Any treaty or pact resulting in foreign dominion over natural resources, economics, culture, and military is illegal.⁷

The construction and evolution of Iran's foreign relations spanned decades, exhibiting varying degrees of change, mostly influenced by the prevailing conditions of the international system. **Shiite Islam and Iranian-Islamic Culture have been and remain the foundation of Iran's foreign policy, despite the shift in priorities.**⁸

During Imam Khomeini's tenure as the leader of the Islamic Revolution (1979-1989), Iran's foreign policy was predominantly grounded in Shiite doctrine and aimed at exporting the Islamic Revolution. The Islamic Revolution's slogan, "Neither the West nor the East- but the Islamic Republic", resulted in Iran's political and economic isolation. Following Imam Khomeini's demise in 1989, pragmatism supplanted ideology as the dominating force in foreign policy.⁹

The foreign policy principles established by the Constitution of the Islamic Republic were interpreted by the presidents, mostly in response to the nation's needs, regional dynamics, and political transformation occurring in the international sphere. The pragmatic foreign policy approach during Hashemi Rafsanjani's administration (1989-1997) was derived from national interests and substantial global transformations.

The election of Mohamad Khatami (1997-2005) marked the emergence of a reformist approach to Iran's foreign policy. Mohammad Khatami's foreign policy was centered on alleviating tensions surrounding Iran, fostering dialogue, and advocating for peaceful coexistence with other nations.

The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), a member of the conservative faction, in 2005 marked a significant shift in Iran's foreign policy towards a hardline stance, with Islamic dogma re-emerging as the predominant influence. Ahmadinejad's "neo-conservatism" has resulted in the Islamic Republic experiencing its most profound political and economic isolation to date.¹⁰ Consequently, Hassan Rouhani, elected president in 2013, prioritized the alteration of the nation's foreign policy.

An article published in Foreign Policy during the Rouhani government's tenure as Foreign Minister and veteran diplomat Mohammad Javad Zarif is frequently referred to when discussing Iran's contemporary foreign relations. Javad Zarif identifies the nation's sovereignty, territorial integrity, national security, and long-term sustainable development as the primary pillars of Iran's foreign relations. In contemporary circumstances, Multipolarity has demonstrated its efficacy and effectiveness at both the regional and international levels as a method of collective search for solutions to common problems, according to the Iranian diplomat.

⁷ Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2009, 99

⁸ M.R. Dehshiri, M.R. Majidi, "Iran's Foreign Policy in Post-Revolution Era: A holistic Approach" Accessed September 14, 2025

⁹ Fakhreddin Soltani, Reza Ekhtiari Amiri "Foreign Policy of Iran after Islamic Revolution" Journal of Politics and Law , 2010. 199-206

¹⁰ George Sanikidze, Giuli Alasania, Nani Gelovani. The History of Middle East and Relations with The South Caucasus, 2011. p.336

Mohamad Javad Zarif discusses the objectives of Iran's contemporary foreign policy in the article:

- Establishing Bilateral and multilateral contacts with nations, international organizations and economic institutions. Multipolarity will significantly influence Iran's foreign relations;
- Promoting the development of Iranian-Islamic culture, the Persian language, Islamic culture, and Islamic democracy as a form of governance, while safeguarding the individual and collective rights of Iranians worldwide;
- Iran will continue to defend oppressed people around the world, notably in Palestine and will reject, on principle, Zionist aggression on the Islamic world;
- Countering the anti-Iran campaign conducted by Israel and its American supporters, which seeks to undermine the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic by depicting it as a global threat;
- Iran is not pursuing the development of nuclear weapons and believes that such armaments will not enhance its security landscape. Iran intends to refrain from pursuing a nuclear deterrent against its foes, either directly or via proxies;
- Trust-building and cooperation will serve as the foundation of Iran's regional policy;
- Iran will endeavor to regulate its relations with the United States and prevent the exacerbation of tensions;
- Iran will also endeavor to establish relationships with European nations and other Western nations. Mutual respect and mutual interest will underpin this process;
- Iran will establish cordial relationships with nations such as India, China, and Russia;
- Other countries must recognize Iran's significant role in the Middle East and comprehend and respect its legitimate national rights, interests, and security problems.¹¹

Religion and Culture in the Relations between Iran and South Caucasus Countries

Following the fall of the Soviet Union and the independence of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, a new era and opportunity in relations between Iran and the South Caucasus countries arose. Given contemporary concerns and Iran's regional stance, significant emphasis was placed on enhancing cultural relations with neighboring countries and leveraging religious elements. This methodology was specifically formulated in the 1990s, evident in the promotion of the region's shared history, and continues to hold significance today.

In the late 1980s, the strict Islamic ideological course in foreign policy was weakened by the new approach, which resulted in the promotion of traditional Iranian elements of cultural life. Iran's cultural-political doctrine toward the Caucasus is not based on Islamic postulates; rather, it emphasizes the promotion of Iranian cultural traditions, the Persian language, and poetry. Iran perceives this not as propaganda, but as a restoration of its intrinsic values. Tehran asserts that the shared culture, history, art, and literature with the

¹¹ Zarif, Mohamad Javad. "What Iran really wants" Foreign Affairs 2014, 49-54 55-59. Accessed September 14, 2025

Central Asian and South Caucasian nations provide a robust basis for enhancing bilateral relations.’¹²

Georgia

Iran is historically regarded as a neighboring country, despite the fact that it does not share a common border with Georgia. The historical relationship between Georgia and Iran is extensive. Following its independence, Iran was among the initial nations to acknowledge Georgia’s sovereignty. In 1992, diplomatic relations were established between the two nations. It is important to observe that the initial agreement was signed with Iran following the declaration of independence by Georgia. The Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran has been functioning in Tbilisi since 1993.

The advancement of relations with Georgia across multiple domains is currently of significant importance to Iran. This will enhance Iran’s standing in the region. After the Soviet Union’s collapse, Tehran began to exert influence in Georgia by exploiting the religious factor. In this regard, Tehran’s target group has expanded to include Muslims living in Georgia, particularly Shia Muslims.

As of today, Georgia is home to approximately 400,000 Muslims. They have established themselves in nearly every region of Georgia. Kvemo Kartli is a region that is particularly intriguing to Iran in this respect. The predominant Muslim demographic in this region is comprised of ethnic Azerbaijanis who practice Shiite Islam.¹³ In the 1990s, Iran sent Iranian clerics to the region, enrolled students in educational programs and provided financial support to Shiite groups. Active Iranian entities functioning in this region comprise Alh Al-Bayt and Al Mustafa International University in Qom. The Islamic Republic of Iran financed and supplied religious texts to local religious institutions. It also dispatched Shiite Muslims to Iran for religious instruction.¹⁴

Despite Iran’s aforementioned activities, it is important to highlight that the local Muslim community in Kvemo Kartli’s linguistic proximity to Azerbaijan and Turkey considerably impedes the spread of Iranian Influence. Local residents express a preference for sending their children to study in Azerbaijan or Turkey, citing employment prospects. Iran is favored for religious education. It is important to acknowledge the comparatively low degree of religiosity among Muslims residing in Kvemo Kartli, significantly shaped by their 70-year experience under Soviet rule.

The common cultural and historical heritage with Georgia enables Iran to utilize the Persian language, literature, and art to enhance relations. In their article “The Islamic Republic of Iran and Republics of the South Caucasus,” Iranian researchers Elahe Kolae and Mohammad Hosseini (University of Tehran) accurately characterize this as “cultural and scientific diplomacy”, as these interactions are primarily conducted through the cultural departments of embassies and diplomatic missions. This is primarily concerned with the

¹² С.Б. Дружиловский, В. В. Хуторская , “ Политика Турции и Ирана в Центральнои Азии и Закавказье” , 2003. 61

¹³ Archil Sikharulidze, Maia Urushadze, Gela Kmaladze, Raul Chincharadze Islam in Georgia: Politic and Integration, 2016, 16-17. Accessed September 14, 2025

¹⁴ Mariam, Gabedava, Koba Turmanidze, “Iran’s Soft power policy in Georgia”, in Religion and Soft Power in the South Caucasus, (1st Edition, 2017), 10-11.

existence of Iranian studies departments in numerous Georgian universities, as well as the teaching of Persian in several schools. Iranian experts observe that a memorandum of collaboration has been executed between Iranian and Georgian institutions; nonetheless, the advancement of relations in the scientific and cultural domains remains significantly constrained. Excluding the involvement of Iranian studies students in short-term Persian language classes in Iran, there are merely a limited number of students in higher educations in the country, as per data from the Iranian Ministry of Education. This is also a result of the structural inconsistency of higher education institutions. There were instances in which Iranian universities failed to acknowledge the documents of Georgian students and vice versa. Consequently, despite the inherent potential, contacts within the realm of “cultural and scientific diplomacy” remain rather constrained.¹⁵

Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan, which borders Iran is the sole Muslim country in the South Caucasus. Moreover, around 85% of Azerbaijan’s population adheres to Shiite Islam, while 15% follows Sunni Islam. The current and socioeconomic dynamics of adjacent Azerbaijan substantially influence Iran’s national security. The current sentiment in Azerbaijan regarding Iran’s northwestern territories is nationalistic in nature. The Republic of Azerbaijan established and operated the “National Committee for the Liberation of South Azerbaijan” following its independence. Several political parties in the country concurred with the stance of the aforementioned committee. For instance, at the behest of “National Front” members, a unified Azerbaijan should be established, with borders extending to Qazvin.¹⁶

In light of these reasons, Iran proactively initiated the development of relations with Azerbaijan following Baku’s declaration of independence. In 1992, diplomatic relations were established between the two nations. Iran has sought to enhance its influence in Azerbaijan through the implementation of religion-based politics. During the 1990s, this was evident in the Islamic Republic’s financial backing of religious organizations, its promotion of student and clerical involvement in educational exchange initiatives and its sponsorship of philanthropic endeavors.¹⁷ At Iran’s initiative, the Iranian television Channel Sahar TV was broadcasting. It is important to note that Tehran made an effort to provide education to young Azerbaijani Shia clerics in Qom, with the intention of achieving long-term benefits. The secular political establishment of Azerbaijan has expressed concern regarding Iran’s aforementioned tactics. Consequently, a narrative of “dangerous Iranian influence” was established, and the ground was prepared for legal action against specific Shiite religious groups and foreign religious lecturers. The government established the “State Committee for Religious Affairs” in 2001 to regulate religion.¹⁸

¹⁵ Elaheh Koolaei and Mohammad H. Hoseini, *The Islamic Republic of Iran and the South Caucasus Republics*. Iranian Studies 43(2010): 393, Accessed January 24, 2020. doi:10.1080/00210861003693935

¹⁶ С.Б. Дружиловский, “ Политика Турции и Ирана в Центральнои Азии и Закавказье” , 111

¹⁷ Seumur Huseinly, “Soft power struggle in the South Caucasus: the case of Azerbaijan”, in *Eurasian Politics and Society*, ed Erman Akili et al.(Cambridge Scholars Publishing,2017),83

¹⁸ Ansgar, Jodicke “Religious soft power in the South Caucasus: The Influence of Iran and Türkiye” (2018), Accessed September 14, 2025

Iranian scholars Mohammad Ali Basiri and Fahimeh Khansari Fardi from the University of Isfahan explain the shortcomings of Iran's religious policy in Azerbaijan by referencing the historical context. According to a professor at the University of Isfahan, Shia Muslims, who were predominantly ethnic Azeris residing south of the Araxes River border line, were under the control of Iranian Shia clerics following the conclusion of "the Treaty of Turkmenchay" between Iran and Russia in 1828. Conversely, those who resided in the north were incorporated into the Russian Empire and were subsequently separated from the primary Shiite cities, including Qom, Mashhad and Tabriz. The same author underscores Türkiye's significant role in the relative failure of Iran's soft power strategy in Azerbaijan.¹⁹

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Türkiye was perceived by the South Caucasus nations as a Western ally and a contemporary democratic state in the region. The efficacy of Turkey's strategy in Azerbaijan relative to Iranian approaches was influenced by common ethic, cultural, historical and linguistic values. Simultaneously, Türkiye's religious policy diverged from that of Iran. In the 2000s, the legal dissociation of the Fethullah Gülen movement from the Turkish State Directorate of Religious Affairs, known as "Diyanet", was advantageous for Ankara. "Diyanet" was dedicated to the construction of mosques, the support of Sunni Muslim organizations in the region and the collaboration with the Religious Department of Baku State University. The Gülen Movement was more effectively assimilated into society and was able to emphasize its Turkish heritage in a foreign country. The distinction between the Gülen Movement and the Turkish government enabled Ankara to harmonize religious soft power with its political objectives.²⁰

The failure of Iran's religious and cultural strategy in Azerbaijan can be attributed in addition to the aforementioned issues, to the political difficulties between the two nations. Considering the geopolitical dynamics in the South Caucasus, the normalization of relations between Iran and Azerbaijan is improbable. Particularly in situations where the underlying causes are intricate, extend beyond the problematic issues between the two countries, and indicate a conflict of interests between regional or extra-regional international actors. Under these circumstances, Iran is unable to effectively implement its religious and cultural policies in Azerbaijan due to a lack of space.

Armenia

Armenia is the only Christian country in the region to share a border with Iran. In 1992, Iran and Armenia established diplomatic relations. Since that time, political and economic relations between the two nations have evolved within the context of geopolitical interests. Iran's implementation of religious and cultural policies exhibits a distinct dynamic concerning Armenia in contrast to the other two regional nations.

¹⁹ Mohamad Ali Basiri and Fahime Khansari Fard, "Tabin-e jaigah-e diplomasi-e farhangi-e jomhuri-e eslami-e Iran dar ghafghaz-e jonubi", *Political Science Quarterly* 35 (2017):99, accessed September 13, 2025

²⁰ Ansgar, Jodicke "Religious soft power in the South Caucasus: The Influence of Iran and Turkey" (2018), Accessed September 10, 2025

Given the limited Muslim demographic in Armenia (about 1,000 individuals), Iran refrains from openly employing “religious soft power”. Tehran remains primarily concentrated on strengthening relations in the domains of culture and science. In 2012, the Armenian Minister of Culture observed that a “Armenian-Iranian Literary Bridge” had been established between Iran and Armenia as a result of joint cultural initiatives, particularly in the field of literary translations. This, in turn, has facilitated the implementation of educational programs and bilateral visits.²¹

It is essential to individually address the ethnic Armenians residing in Iran while discussing Iranian-Armenian ties. Approximately 80,000 ethnic Armenians reside in Iran. They possess two representatives in the Iranian legislature, in contrast to other religious minorities. The Armenian population actively engages in the development of Iranian-Armenian economic and cultural relations and makes substantial contributions. Annually, between 50,000 and 60,000 Iranians travel to Armenia. Despite Iran’s non-recognition of the “Armenian Genocide”, the authorities of the Islamic Republic permit Armenians residing in Iran to observe “1915 Armenian Genocide Day” annually on April 24. Additionally, a section of the Armenia Museum in Isfahan is dedicated to the commemoration of the genocide.²²

The strong cultural connections between Iran and Armenia are likely to be influenced by Armenia’s efforts to broaden its political and economic relationships. In this context, the execution of the “Zangezur Corridor” project and the participation of the American entity are especially intolerable for Iran.

Conclusion

Religion and culture are fundamental to contemporary Iran’s foreign policy, acting as both an ideological guide and a tool for cultural diplomacy. Iran endeavors to exert influence in the South Caucasus by capitalizing on its historical-cultural connections and religious identity. However, the region illustrates the constraints of religion as foreign policy instrument when it is confronted with rival nationalisms, secular identities and great power rivalries. Ultimately, Iran’s involvement in the South Caucasus illustrates the continuous interplay between ideology and pragmatism in its foreign policy, emphasizing the persistent significance of international history and cultural context in influencing state conduct.

It is important to acknowledge that Tehran did not capitalize on the opportunity to fortify its positions and expand its influence in the South Caucasus following the collapse of the Soviet Union, despite the potential that Iran’s shared historical and cultural history with the region provided. A primary factor contributing to this situation is Iran’s political and economic isolation, which is a result of the confrontation with the West, particularly the United States, which commenced following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s government acknowledged and tolerated

²¹ “The current level of the Armenian-Iranian cultural relations is highly appreciated”. Accessed September 14, 2025

<https://armenpress.am/eng/news/688703/hay-iranakan-mshakutayin-haraberutyunneri-nerka-makardaky.html>

²² Clement Therme “The Irano-Armenian alliance” accessed September 14, 2024

the expansion of Russia's influence and the reinforcement of its positions in the South Caucasus for years in order to counteract Western influence. The development following the second Nagorno-Karabakh war in 2020 indicates that the regional status quo has been significantly altered, resulting in an unfavorable scenario for Iran. This has the potential to encourage Tehran to become more engaged and to drive changes in regional politics. In this context, religion and culture will remain significant for Iran in strengthening relationships with regional countries.

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