

Containing Muslim Extremism and Radicalism¹

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that wars, atrocities, radicalism and extremism have been caused by many interrelated external socio-economic, political and ethnic factors, even though religious communities are involved. However, internal factors such as the role of religious education, are instrumental in understanding religious radicalism and extremism, including among some Muslims. This article also elucidates the dual nature of Islamic religiosity in Asia i.e. its manifested diversity and underlying unity, traces Muslim historical treatment of religious extremism, and suggests that certain methodological and doctrinal aspects of contemporary Islamic education may have contributed to an extremist outlook and behavior. It offers a few specific and practical recommendations involving the external and internal factors to significantly reduce the phenomena of extremism among Muslims, especially in Asia.

Key words: Radicalism, extremism, external factor, internal factor, contemporary Islamic education.

ABSTRAK

Makalah ini menegaskan bahawa peperangan, persengketaan, kekerasan dan sikap melampau banyak berlaku kerana motif-motif bukan agama, terutama faktor luaran seperti politik, ekonomi serta perkauman, walaupun pengikut pelbagai agama yang terlibat. Namun begitu, faktor dalaman seperti peranan pendidikan agama juga penting dalam memahami sikap keras dan melampau umat beragama, termasuk sebahagian dari umat Islam. Karya ini menelusuri hakikat kesatuan dan kepelbagaian umat Islam di Asia, meninjau sejarah pemikiran penentangan terhadap sikap melampau dari dalam tradisi Islam sendiri, dan menganalisa beberapa akibat melampau dan keras yang lahir dari kaedah dan doktrin pendidikan Islam kontemporari khususnya di Asia. Rencana ini mengusulkan beberapa penyelesaian praktis terhadap faktor luaran dan dalaman bagi membantu menyelesaikan kemelut sikap radikal dan melampau di kalangan umat Islam Asia.

Kata kunci: Kekerasan, sikap melampau, faktor luaran, faktor dalaman, pendidikan Islam kontemporari.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of Muslim extremism and radicalism in Asia is indeed important not only in its already huge Asian contexts, but also because in a globalized world, Asian developments are linked to developments in other parts of the world. However, the problems of extremism and radicalism and their relationship to international relations and security are not only limited to Muslims but also to those who profess other religions and secular ideologies. It is indisputable that national, regional as international conflicts and tensions have been justified in the name of various factors namely religion, ideology, King, Country or even Humanity.

These factors were not, and are not used in strict isolation. Often times, several factors were, and are involved in different orders of influence. For example, the colonization of Latin America and large parts of Africa and Asia from the 16th century was perpetrated in the name of the King (country) and God, while the First and Second World Wars and the Korean and Vietnam Wars can be attributed to ideological and national causes, in which God played a much smaller role, if at all. The Balkan ethnic cleansing, where the victims were largely Muslims and where the perpetrators were mostly orthodox Christians, was neither motivated by ideological nor national reasons, but more by ethnic and socio-economic ones. The mass genocide in the Christian majority state of Rwanda is largely tribal; the Ugandan civil war is primarily due to Christian religious radicalism, the mass killings of the Muslims in the Ivory Coast were committed by Christian and Indigenous groups, while the exact reverse is true in southern Sudan. The two decade old Sri Lankan civil war between the Hindu-Tamil minority separatist group--some of whose methods are quite similar to the Muslim terrorists--against Buddhist-Sinhalese majority is driven by ethnic and religious factors (GlobalSecurity.org. 2008).

DIVERSITY AND UNITY OF ASIAN MUSLIMS

Muslims in Asia are divided into three categories: the Majority (Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Brunei), the Indigenous minority (Singapore, India, Thailand, Philippines, China), and the Immigrant minority (Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Australia), each with its own peculiarities, reflecting the rich diversity of global Muslim thought, cultures and political experiences. The overwhelming majority of Southeast Asian Muslims adhere to the Ash'arite theological framework and the Shafi'ite legal school; compared for example to Indo-Pakistani Muslims who are Maturidite and Hanafite. Both groups have had different political experiences with Western colonialists and have chartered different political frameworks. Despite these differences,

Asian Muslims---like their co-religionists everywhere---are unified with each other through certain basic aspects of the worldview and ethical and legal principles of Islam. A most noteworthy indicator is that one of the most comprehensive and authoritative work on the Creed of Islam by the 12th century central Asian Maturidite theologian, Abu Hafis Najmuddin al-Nasafi was translated into Malay and commented upon and widely read in the Malay-Indonesia world till at least the mid-19th century (al-Attas 1988, Wan Mohd Nor and Khalif 2009).² Beside this, Asian Muslims also possess a sense of *ummatic* solidarity which is further facilitated by an efficient modern communication technology.

These unifying elements and a sense of ummatic solidarity explain why gross atrocities against Muslims and the prolonged deprivation of their homeland and ancestral rights--for example in Palestine, Southern Thailand, and the Philippines—the discrimination against fellow Muslims in other parts of the world, and any efforts at denigrating or belittling the fundamental aspects, pillars, and institutions of Islam---such as on the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad---will naturally elicit responses from Muslims everywhere. The varying degrees of intensity and expression of these responses depend on the educational level, socio-political organization and leadership of each Muslim community.

Atrocities against Muslims and attacks on Islam are certainly not recent phenomena as witnessed during the centuries of Christian crusades and the Spanish Inquisition (in which the Jews also suffered, albeit on a relatively much smaller scale) that followed the colonization of Muslim lands. In addition, attacks on various aspects of Islam have been carried out in the writings of numerous Christian missionaries, Western orientalist, political scientists, sociologists and journalists, notwithstanding many great contributions some of them have made. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and *Covering Islam* (1981) are just two of the most popular expositions of these aspects.

MUSLIM MODERATES AND EXTREMISTS

Extremism (*ghuluw*) is a vice in the Islamic worldview and ethics, while moderation (*wasatiyyah*), which has been universally practiced throughout its history—including in Muslim Asia, is a praiseworthy virtue (*fadhilah*). Presently, the terms Muslim moderates, fundamentalists, and radicals are interpreted from the dominant Western perspective, which generally seems to equate secularized and westernized Muslims as moderates and inclusive; traditional Muslims as fundamentalists and exclusive; and all Muslims who oppose Western and non-Islamic intellectual and geo-political hegemony as radicals and even militants. The largest majority of Muslims are moderates—even if some of their traditional religious views and social-legal practices are not acceptable to modern secularists, or even when they have to resort to military

means to defend their homeland and their basic human rights. In their struggles against various Western colonial forces from the 16th Century CE onwards, these moderate Muslims derived their inspiration and strength from Islam and its military aspects of Jihad, but did not wage wars of terror such as the intentional killing of non-military population, the destruction of non-military institutions and buildings, and suicide bombings—as recently employed by militant extremists.

Briefly, it is instructive to note that throughout most of its history, Muslims have succeeded in intellectually rejecting the extremists of various philosophical, theological, mystical and political orientations. Many eminent Muslim scholars such as Abdul Qahir al-Baghdadi (d.1037) in *al-Firaq bayn al-Firaq*, Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali (d. 1111) in *Tahafut al-Falasifah*, *Ihya Ulumiddin*, and *Munqidh minal Dhalal*, and Taj al-Din al-Shahrastani (d.1153) in *Kitab al-Milal wal Nihal*, and in the Malay-Indonesian world, Nuruddin al-Raniri (d. 1658) in *Hujjat al-Siddiq an daf' Zindiq*, have identified many of these groups and their doctrines. Even the Khawarij and Batini Assassins---the Hashahshiyun---who managed to create tremendous mischief, were finally intellectually defeated and made socially insignificant (al-Attas 1986: 186-192; 199-221).

The recent atrocities committed by Muslims as recently as the last Sept 21st 2008 Marriott Hotel bombing in Islamabad (although no Muslim group has yet claimed responsibility has been blamed by the Pakistan Interior minister, *Tehrik e-Taleban e-Pakistan* (TTP), on a militant group suspected to have links with it al-Qaeda (The Times 2008) ---are largely a modern phenomena, and can be attributed to many interlinked external and internal factors.

Contemporary Muslim extremism can be contained and intellectually defeated and socially ostracized if the external and internal causes can be properly addressed.

External factors

By external factors, we mean certain long-standing problems, such as that of Palestine, where Muslim holy and historic places and symbols are grossly affected, where many of their fellow Muslims and Christians were oppressed, and where international laws, which have been vigorously and systematically applied against other offending nations—rightly or otherwise---have been consistently ignored in this case. The half a century of displacement from their homeland and the constant humiliation and suffering will naturally elicit a deep-seated resentment and anger within the psyche of these generations, not only against the direct perpetrators, but also their allies. This state of mind shows not only the utter disregard for all international laws and conventions, but also for themselves. Hopelessness breeds fearlessness, not courage.

These factors that contribute to the rise of modern Muslim radicalism in the Middle East are also found, to a large extent---although not with a similar degree---in other parts of the world where this radicalism rears its contemptuous head. The loss of ancestral rights and privileges and the socio-economic deprivation and political alienation within new modern nation-states are evidenced in the decades-old conflicts in Kashmir, India, Southern Thailand, Southern Philippines, and Central Asia. The less publicized nature of the conflicts in these regions does not negate an almost similar sense of desperation for group existential survival against oppressive national governments.

Another key external factor that has contributed to the deepening Muslim cynicism and distrust towards some Western powers and their allies, especially in the age of electronic communication revolution, is Islamophobia and the related double-standard attitude towards Islam and traditional Muslims. Muslims notice that while the Western media generally treats most non-Western religions and their cultural manifestations as positive reflections of the rich diversity of the human tapestry, a similar stance has not been shown towards Islam. While in all Muslim countries---with Malaysia as one of the better examples---non-Muslims were and are given the rights to practice their religion, in liberal Western countries, who are championing global human rights, multiculturalism and tolerance, Muslim religious freedom is being restricted under various pretexts. Repeated incidences of Islamophobia and the double standards on Islam and Muslims will not only be used as fodder by Muslim extremists and militants to recruit new members worldwide. Leaders of Islamic countries have regularly expressed concerns regarding Islamophobia, the latest being the statements of the Foreign Minister of Malaysia in Washington on Sept 25th 2008 (*The Star* 2008; OIC 2008).³ The awareness of the discrimination against Muslims has also reached higher levels of Western leadership. For example, on 9th-10th Oct 2007, the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) organized a conference on discrimination and intolerance towards Muslims in Cordoba attended by high level officers from 56 member states from Europe and Central Asia as well as non-governmental organizations (*AFP* 2007).

However, I concur with scholars like Bassam Tibbi and others, that attacks and critics on the politicization of Islam should not be equated with Islamophobia, although he and many Western scholars only regard the non-politicization of Islam as one that is publicly secular and free from its Sha'riah obligations (Tibbi 2006: 70-74).

Internal factors

However, the internal factors in the rise of modern Muslim radicalism are more significant---which help to explain the inability to control the

negative effects of the deplorable external challenges: 1) Detraditionalization and demysticization of Islamic discourse and ethics, and 2) Loss of proper and legitimate religious and political authorities.

Traditional Islamic education, which was interpreted and practiced through an authoritative sufi perspective, the mystical dimension in Islam, helped to spread Islam in Asia and Africa and created civilizing influences in all fields. Since the 19th century, the influence of a narrower and more legalistic vision of Islam has made political power the most central element in religious discourse and struggle, and has denuded the comprehensive sufi ethical narratives and denigrated a whole tradition of spiritual luminaries. Since then, the philosophical and curricular orientation of traditional Muslim education has indicated a much heavier bent towards the legal and political aspects of Islam. The sciences of tafsir, hadith, and jurisprudence and their major scholars and figures have been rightly venerated, but at the expense of the sciences and the scholars of theology and intellectual Sufism. Since in Islamic intellectual history, most scholars were multi-dimensional and were authoritative in many different fields, the rejection of theological and sufi scholars entails also the denuding of works on tafsir, hadith and jurisprudence contributed by theologians and sufis such as Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali (d. 1111), Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi (d.1240), Jalaluddin Rumi (d.1273) etc. These trends have excluded even the Asha'arites and all the Sufis from the category of the Sunni community which, to them consists only of the Hanbalites and the scholars of hadith, after the three generations of pious ancestors after the Prophet Muhammad (Tim Ulin Nuha Maahad Aliy 2003; Kamaruzzaman Yusoff et. al. 2002).⁴

In conjunction with these trends, the key term which comprehensively reflects the Islamic concept of education, *ta'dib*, which was traditionally used by all Muslims, especially the Sufis, was dropped out of currency and replaced exclusively by *ta'lim* (instruction) and *tarbiyyah* (training). Increasingly, we also notice that scholars and writers such as Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d.855 CE), Ibn Taymiyah (1328), Said Qutb (1966), Abu A'la Maududi (1979), who suffered physical sufferings from political leaders, were given greater authority and a more elevated status than others. It needs to be said though, that Ibn Taymiyah and especially Ibn Hanbal were highly prominent traditional scholars were not politically partisan, whereas Said Qutb and Maududi were self educated Islamic writers and key members of politically interested Islamic organizations. The fundamental agenda of these groups, such as al-Qaeda, Jamaah Islamiyah, Darul Islam Nusantara and Hizbu Tahrir is to re-establish the global Caliphate and to set-up idealized transnational Islamic states. Hizbut Tahrir, for example does have a large following in Indonesia, and a much smaller one in Malaysia (Musa 2008: 112-115; 78-93).⁵

The trends cited above are also a response to the gradual but effective secularization of Muslim governing elites in most parts of the Muslim world. These leaders, with their secular personalities and ineffective socio-economic policies, have created disillusionment among the population on modern political experiments and on the positive elements of modernity. State appointed religious authorities are perceived to be fettered by an executive branch, many of whom are influenced by Western liberal ideas, and who are not respected by the more serious minded among the Muslim masses. Truly independent-minded and traditionally moderate religious scholars are sidelined both by Muslim governing elites and non-Muslim supporters at home and abroad. The almost total rejection of the modern nation state and the extremists' calls to "return to Islam" through the establishment of an idealized Islamic state and total implementation of the Shariah, are also intricately linked to these developments. The increase in democratic space in the post-Suharto Indonesia and in Malaysia can be misused by small independent extremist Muslim groups to exercise the Islamic commands of jihad and *amar ma'ruf nahi mungkar* (commanding good forbidding evil), and to express the solidarity of Muslim brotherhood. These are shown by fighting against the allegedly anti-Islamic Western nations and their institutions, disrupting entertainment, gambling and prostitution outlets, and attacking aggressive non-Muslim groups and religious establishments perceived to be aggressively against Islam (Zainuddin Fananie et al. 2002; Endang Turmudi & Riza Sihbudi 2005; Musa Jaafar 2008: 112-115).⁶

Under the present circumstances, non-Muslims, whether in the West or the East, seem to measure the moderateness of Muslims with the latter's affinity with the secular and western worldview and ethical orientations. In most conferences and dialogues, most of the "moderate" Muslim scholars and leaders, men and women invited to participate therein are mostly secularized and Westernized, the traditional attire notwithstanding. These "moderates" —who don't really represent the majority Muslim religious view---would regularly receive various financial and socio-political support from non-Muslim leaders and institutions. This would further confirm the long-standing mistrust among the majority of Muslims that non-Muslims, especially those in the West, have an agenda of trying to subvert Islam, to mold it into their own image, and to westernize it. Dialogues between such Muslim "moderates" with their non-Muslim and Western counterparts are thus not reaching the target audience—and instead, have derailed their noble objectives, while alienating and radicalizing previously moderate Muslims.

Inter-faith and inter-civilisational dialogues can be helpful to promote mutual understanding, compassion and benevolence. Similarities, wherever they exist, must be emphasized. But it is clear to

me that the greatest challenge is not to force an artificial unity amidst fundamental and meaningful differences because this will lead to radicalism among those who feel that the truly distinguishing aspects of their legion, culture and identity have not been properly recognized and acknowledged as such, but are forced through a prism of another, and more dominating worldview. The greater challenge, and a more honest one, is to recognize and admit these differences and to place them accordingly. Reality, as aptly observed by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, is difference, and knowledge of a thing is possible because of its distinguishing characteristic(s) from others. Justice is attained when we are able to recognize this and to ensure that everything is put in their right and proper places (al-Attas 2001).

The right and proper place of some matters are determined primarily by a just implementation of a legal system while of some other matters they are decided by a proper understanding and right application of the historical, moral, and religious traditions of a people. Oppression, barbaric acts, and injustices have been carried out against fellow humans because of the inability to justly treat the differences between us.

SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

To contain Muslim radicalism, both the external and internal factors must be seriously and urgently addressed, and with sincerity. While radicalism and extremism are not only religious in nature, but also tribal and secular, religious leaders and institutions can play an effective role in minimizing conflicts that not only involve religious issues but also, and more importantly, involving non-religious matters.

I would like to offer the following suggestions without, in any way, pretending to be original.

1. Internal reform of Muslim religious education should be of utmost priority, concentrating first at the higher levels, especially the *madrassah* and the university. This reform can be done by re-traditionalizing Islamic education and re-introducing proper Sufi narratives and ethical discourse by authoritative and traditionally moderate scholars representing their Community, and who may be critical of certain secular and Western ideas and institutions. Subjects dealing with modern humanities, including comparative religion should be introduced. A very good example where many aspects of this proposal were successfully carried out was the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) Kuala Lumpur during the leadership of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1988-2002).⁷ Westernizing or liberalizing traditional Islamic education will be counter-productive (Blanchard 2007; US Agency for International Development (USAID) 2003).⁸

2. The establishment of a more just and transparent leadership and governance, who are not perceived to be Western stooges. The West's persistent support for political leaders who are widely perceived as unjust and corrupt will increase support for Muslim extremists and radicals.
3. Permanent peace in the Middle East, especially in Palestine and Iraq, must be urgently achieved. Muslims and Arabs must accept the right of Israel to exist and prosper within the boundaries determined by the UN; but Israel and the international community should help with the restorative and other forms of compensation for the Palestinian people to live and prosper with meaningful independence (BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights 2008).⁹
4. A similarly permanent solution to the problems of indigenous Muslim minorities must be found. They should be made to understand that they must live under current national governments—but meaningful autonomy should be granted. Their religious, linguistic, and cultural identity should be protected, and their socio-economic opportunities should be enhanced. The economic costs to carry out these and the above suggestions are certainly high but the alternatives have been proven to be worse on all fronts: economic, social, and the security of the region and the world. Consider for example the financial costs of the Iraq war and the war on terror on the US alone. On June 30, 2008, US Congress has approved a total of about USD\$864 billion to cover all military operations, base security, reconstruction, foreign aid, embassy costs, and veterans' health for the War in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere since 9/11 2001 till part of FY2009, and which is estimated to increase to USD 1.3 or 1.7 trillion by FY2018 depending on troop levels (Belasco 2008).
5. Migrant Muslim communities in Asia and elsewhere should be given due rights like others. They must recognize the true responsibilities within the new nation-states and contribute their utmost to be the moral and socio-economic strengths of the nation. British government's reported sanctioning of shariah judges in the currently five Muslim courts to rule on family law as well as financial disputes with the full power of the British judicial system, through the county courts or the High Court, if indeed true, is a very positive development (Times 2008: 14 Sept; Oct 31).¹⁰
6. The international community should be more consistent in their efforts to promote international peace, inter-religious tolerance, and prosperity of the human race, as much as humanly possible. Demonizing Islam and Muslims because of the faults of an extremely small number, while conveniently ignoring or glossing over the more serious atrocities against Muslims and others by other

religious, secular or tribal entities will only breed a larger number of Muslim extremists and radicals worldwide and make many Muslims less supportive of the international community's peaceful endeavors.

NOTES

- ¹ This paper is a corrected version of the one presented at the *Seminar on Islam and Asia: Revisiting the Socio-Political Dimension of Islam*. Jointly organized in Tokyo by Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA) and Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM), 15-16 October 2008. I wish to thank Hisham A. Helyer, Fellow, Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations (CRER), University of Warwick, UK for his critical comments.
- ² The earliest extant Malay manuscript is the Malay translation of the Aqa'id of al-Nasafi dated 1590 CE while Malay commentary on it--*Durr al-Fara'id bi Sharh al-'Aqa'id*-- was accomplished by Nur al-Din al-Raniri in 1631CE which was widely copied throughout the Malay Archipelago. See Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. 1988. *The oldest known Malay manuscript: The 16th Century Malay translation of the Aqa'id of al-Nasafi*. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya. Between August-December 2008, we found several copies of al-Raniri's manuscript, only four of which are complete. See Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud and Khalif Muammar. 2009. Kerangka komprehensif pemikiran Melayu Abad ke 17 Masehi berdasarkan manuskrip Durr al-Fara'id karangan Sheikh Nuruddin al-Raniri. *Sari. International Journal of the Malay World and Civilisation* 27(2): 119-146.
- ³ The Star, 26th Sept 2008. See 1st OIC Observatory Report on Islamophobia - May 2007 - March 2008. www.oic-oci.org/oicnews/is11/english/Islamophobia-rep-en.pdf.
- ⁴ See, for example, a very popular book published by one religious school in Surakarta, Indonesia, Tim Ulin Nuha Maahad Aliy, *Dirasatul Firaq: Kajian Tentang Aliran-aliran Sesat dalam Islam* (Solo/Surakarta: Pustaka Arafah/ Pustaka Ulin Nuha, 2003. For a study of Muslim perceptions on radicalism in Malaysia 2004-2006, see Kamaruzzaman Yusoff et. al, *Persepsi Masyarakat Islam Tentang Radikalisme di Malaysia*. National University of Malaysia. IRPA Projek 0702020029 EA 263.
- ⁵ M. Musa bin Jaafar. *Tarbiyah Jihadiyah. Sumber Ideologi Salafiyah Jihadiyah di Malaysia*. Unpublished MA Thesis. Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Malaysia, Bangi. 2008. pp. 112-115. pp.78-93. M. Musa was a staff of Royal Malaysian Police Force at Bukit Aman, Kuala Lumpur.
- ⁶ For studies on these activities in Indonesia, see Zainuddin Fananie, Atiqa Sabardila and Dwi Purnanto, *Radikalisme Keagamaan dan Perubahan Sosial*. Surakarta: Muhammadiyah University Press and the Asia Foundation, 2002; Endang Turmudi and Riza Sihbudi, eds. *Islam dan Radikalisme di Indonesia*. Jakarta: Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia, 2005; on the activities of one such group Malaysia such as the now defunct Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM), see M.Musa bin Jaafar, *Tarbiyah Jihadiyah Sumber Ideologi Salafiyah Jihadiyah di Malaysia*. Unpublished MA Thesis. Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Malaysia, Bangi. 2008. pp. 112-115.

- ⁷ See Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas: An Exposition of the Original Concept of Islamization* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1998); idem, *Budaya Ilmu: Satu Penjelasan* (Singapore: Pustaka Nasional, 2003).
- ⁸ See Christopher M Blanchard. *Islamic Religious Schools, Madrassa: Background*. CRS Report for Congress. Order code RS 21654. Updated January 23, 2007; also US Agency for International Development (USAID). *Strengthening Education in the Muslim World*. USAID Issue Paper. No 2 June 2003.
- ⁹ For a more elaborate discussion on the various UN Resolutions pertaining to the rights of Palestinian refugees and on the compensation for various losses, see BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights. <http://badil.org/solutions/text01-text03.htm>. access on 9/16/2008.
- ¹⁰ Times (London) 14 Sept 2008. However, Jack Straw the Justice Secretary, stressed that Sharia law should not be made a separate system in the UK, and that its provisions should not conflict with English law. (Times (London) Oct 31, 2008.).

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