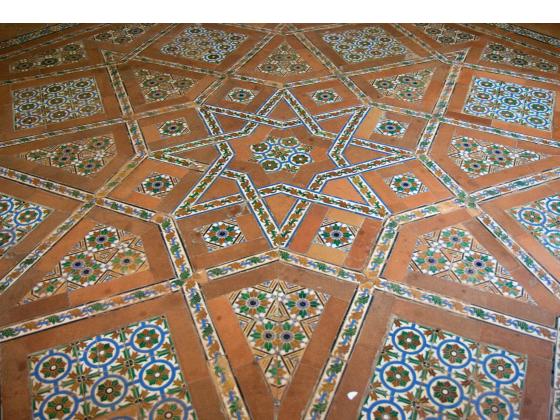


Islamist radicalisation among the Turkish Dutch

An exploration



'Resistance to radical Islamic ideologies [remains] generally high.' So wrote the AIVD about the Turkish-Dutch community in its 2008 annual report. The service saw no danger of large-scale radicalisation among the Turkish Dutch. Nevertheless, the AIVD did also observe a worrying development: the number of young individuals in the Turkish-Dutch community becoming radicalised was growing. In this brief analysis, the NCTV describes how this development, which caused concern, proceeded. A number of events give us cause to do so. Over the past decade, dozens of Dutch citizens with a Turkish background have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join jihadist militant groups. In addition, a man with a Turkish background committed a terrorist attack in a tram in Utrecht on 18 March 2019. And finally, in recent years the NCTV has found that radical messages of Turkish preachers have been disseminated through various web forums and the social media of Turkish-Dutch organisations. Have there been any substantial changes in the resilience of the Turkish-Dutch community to political-religious extremism? This exploration revolves around this question; it is based on open sources (including academic literature and media reports), websites and social media of some organisations, and interviews with staff of various organisations (including government ones) and experts.

1

The Turkish-Dutch religious landscape

Before discussing Islamic radicalism among the Turkish Dutch, we will first sketch the broader social and religious context. More than 420,000 people of Turkish origin (first and second-generation inhabitants with a migration background) live in the Netherlands. Of these, 52.7% were born in the Netherlands.2 In early 2020, there were also approximately 30,000 'third generation' Dutch citizens with a Turkish background.3 The Turkish-Dutch community is very diverse in quite a number of regards, including ethnic origin, socioeconomic position, age, cultural orientation, political affiliation and religious experience. Approximately 86% of the Turkish-Dutch population considers itself Muslim.⁴ Some of them belong to the Alevis, a non-dogmatic Islamic movement of a religious-humanist persuasion. Figures on their numbers vary, but they could comprise a quarter of all Turkish Dutch citizens. 5 he vast majority of Dutch Muslims with a Turkish background are Sunni Islam adherents. The way religion is experienced and religious practice vary greatly. To a greater or lesser extent, most Turkish Muslims follow the Hanafi legal school⁶ and the Maturidi theological school.7

The degree of organisation among Turkish-Dutch Muslims has been high for several decades. There are four main organisations that provide for the religious and social needs of the Turkish Dutch:

- The Islamitische Stichting Nederland (ISN; Islamic Foundation Netherlands, which is the Dutch representation of Diyanet);
- Milli Görüş (which has had two umbrella organisations in the Netherlands since 1997, Milli Görüş Noord-Nederland (MGNN; Milli Görüş Northern Netherlands) and the Nederlandse Islamitische Federatie (NIF; Dutch Islamic Federation) in the southern Netherlands;
- the Süleymanci (SICN: Stichting Islamitisch Centrum Nederland; Netherlands Islamic Centre);
- the Gülen movement (which often refers to itself as 'Hizmet').8

Two of these organisations, the ISN and Milli Görüş, are discussed in greater detail here. In the Netherlands, over 150 mosques are affiliated with the ISN, the Dutch Diyanet branch. Diyanet is the Turkish Directorate for Religious Affairs. Since the establishment of the Turkish secular state in

1923, the relationship between state and religion has been a prominent and fraught topic of discussion in Turkish politics and society, in which different phases can be distinguished. In the fourth and current phase (since 2003), President Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) dominate the political scene. His taking office 'did not mean the end of the secular state model, but an integration of Islamist-oriented social forces into the secular state'. 10 Diyanet is also responsible for sending Turkish imams to countries with a Turkish community, such as the Netherlands. As a government organisation, Diyanet spreads the Turkish government's vision of religion and society. With the rise of the AKP, President Erdoğan's party, it has increasingly been espousing a conservative religious take on affairs.11 However, the perception that the ISN is simply an AKP mouthpiece is too simplistic, according to research conducted in 2017.12 In addition, the ISN is transparent in its religious message: the Friday sermons, which are partly prepared in Turkey, are published in Turkish and Dutch on the ISN website.

Milli Görüş was long considered the 'parallel Turkish Islam', a more conservative counterpart of 'formal' Turkish Islam, represented by the ISN. Together, the two Milli Görüş umbrella organisations manage some forty mosques and claim to have over 15,000 active members. Since the end of the 20th century, both umbrella organisations have been organisationally embedded in the European Milli Görüş umbrella organisation, the Islamische Gemeinschaft Millî Görüş (IGMG), based in Cologne. Whereas in the past there was animosity between Milli Görüş and the ISN, the organisations seem to have grown closer in recent years. This is closely related to the changed religious orientation of Diyanet, which in the era of President Erdoğan is more closely aligned with that of Milli Görus.

Islamist radicalisation

'Islamism' (or: 'political Islam') refers to the fundamentalist politicalreligious pursuit of a society based on the principles of sharia, a polity that is at odds with the democratic rule of law. 15 The consensus among academics, Turkish-Dutch religious institutions and experts is that political-religious radicalisation is a marginal phenomenon among the Turkish Dutch.16 n 2014, Staring and colleagues provided various explanations for the resilience of the Turkish Dutch to radicalisation. The strong institutionalisation of Islam through the umbrella organisations gives young Turkish Dutch the opportunity to experience their faith without becoming radicalised. In this sense, these umbrella organisations are a buffer against extremism. Other factors include the strong ties and internal orientation within the Turkish-Dutch community, a positive self-image and confidence in their own social mobility. Largely due to their internal orientation and positive self-image, feelings of discrimination and exclusion are less prevalent among the Turkish Dutch compared to other large communities with an immigrant background.¹⁷

Still, a small minority of the Turkish Dutch population is susceptible to a radical, Islamist discourse. This is not a new development. The AIVD already noted this in its 2008 annual report. This susceptibility is reflected, for example, in the limited participation of Turkish Dutch citizens in Islamist organisations and movements such as jihadism, Salafism, Hizb-ut Tahrir (HuT) and the Kalifaatstaatgroep ('Caliphate State Group' or Kaplan movement). The latter two are Islamist organisations that are active in several countries and have small representative offices in the Netherlands, consisting entirely (Kaplan) or partly (HuT) of Turkish Dutch. The HuT – which unlike the Kaplan group in the Netherlands is visible on the internet, social media and at demonstrations – is multi-ethnic and in no way presents itself as Turkish.

Jihadism

The jihadist movement in the Netherlands has between five and six hundred followers.²⁰ Among them are a few dozen people with a Turkish background; this is relatively few in light of the proportion of the Turkish Dutch in the total number of Muslims in the Netherlands. There are also several dozen Dutch jihadists with Turkish origins who travelled to Syria and Iraq.21 Turkish-Dutch jihadists are usually part of a multi-ethnic network. Jihadism, like Salafism, makes no ethnic distinction. All Muslims, regardless of origin, are included in the global Muslim community, the ummah. Jihadism poses a threat of violence. On 19 March 2019, Gökmen T., a Turkish Dutchman, shot a number of the public in and around a tram in Utrecht, killing four of them. This was the only terrorist attack in the Netherlands since 2004 with (supposed) jihadist intent. 22 Although he probably had links to the Kaplan movement, T. must be seen as a lone perpetrator. There is no evidence, incidentally, that Turkish-Dutch jihadists take to violence any sooner than other jihadists in the Netherlands. For example, among the perpetrators and suspects of attack plans in recent years, which were reported in the Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland (Terrorism Threat Assessment Netherlands), there are no other persons with a Turkish background. There are no further indications that the number of Turkish-Dutch jihadists in the Netherlands is growing. The size of the movement as a whole has been stagnating for several years.²³

Salafism

It is not clear how many of the Turkish Dutch are Salafism followers. According to a 2018 study by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau), 0.3% of Turkish Muslims over the age of 15 in the Netherlands would consider themselves Salafists; which would amount to fewer than 1,000 individuals. The actual number is probably higher since, according to the study, Salafists do not always refer to themselves as Salafists. ²⁴ There are no exclusively Turkish-Dutch Salafist mosques or institutions in the Netherlands. For many years, a small number of Salafist agitators of Turkish origin have been active. Salafist agitators are influential leaders who in essence propagate the notion that turning away from or even hating non-Muslims or Muslims of another religious persuasion is an obligatory part of being a 'true' (i.e. Salafist)

Muslim. In some cases, they do not recognise the democratic rule of law, such as the legitimacy of the Dutch constitution, government, police, judiciary and other democratic processes. ²⁵ Agitators with a Turkish background do not focus their radical message exclusively on Turkish-Dutch supporters. Yet given that some of the publications are in Turkish, they explicitly address that segment of the Dutch population as well.

Other relevant developments

The NCTV has found that religiously radical messages from certain Turkish preachers were disseminated through various web forums and social media of some Turkish-Dutch organisations, particularly between 2012 and 2018. 26 These are mainly youth organisations that are part of the Milli Görüş umbrella organisation. The ideology can be characterised as intolerant and seems to be at least partly inspired by Salafist thought. For example, some statements are in line with the Salafist doctrine of al-wala wa-l-bara, or 'loyalty and disavowal'.27 Other statements do not fall exclusively within the Salafist spectrum but can be characterised as hate speech and discrimination, particularly against Jews, Shiites, homosexuals and women. The social media of the associations also show that there have been visits between young members of the Turkish Dutch community and a number of Turkish preachers who shared radical messages. The spread of bigoted ideas as well as the contacts seem to have declined sharply after 2018, when negative publicity about it arose and social media were sanitised.²⁸ However, dissemination and contacts continue on a somewhat more limited scale. It is not clear whether young individuals have been thoroughly and permanently inspired by the radical ideas that have been disseminated, and have themselves become radicalised as a result.

Influence originating in Turkey?

The question arises as to whether the upsurge in the dissemination of intolerant views of certain Turkish preachers, especially in 2012–2018, is related to developments in Turkey. The Turkish government has no direct involvement with radicalisation among Turkish Dutch citizens. The export of political-religious extremism is not part of diaspora politics. ²⁹ But indirectly, developments in Turkey can have an impact. In recent years, certain groups with an Islamist agenda have been given greater latitude by

the Turkish government. For example, an estimated 1,500 Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood members found refuge in Turkey after the Egyptian army's coup against Mohamed Morsi in the summer of 2013.30 They hold conferences in Turkey and make radio and TV broadcasts through their own channels.31 PPolitical Salafists use social media, publishing houses, bookshops and schools to manifest themselves.32 Yet Turkey is not a sanctuary for international Islamism. The room for manoeuvre that the current Turkish government grants to individuals and organisations associated with this movement has its limits, especially when statements and behaviour go against the interests of the state, the AKP or President Erdoğan. Recently, for example, Muslim Brotherhood TV stations in Istanbul have been restricted as part of the Turkish government's efforts to normalise relations with Egypt and other countries in the Middle East.33

The room for manoeuvre for preachers with an Islamist profile is not curtailed by national borders. For example, cooperation is sought with Turks in the diaspora, including in the Netherlands. There seems to be an interaction here, as similar contacts also originate from within the Netherlands. Islamist circles in Turkey can therefore have an encouraging effect. In addition, the fierce anti-Western rhetoric of the Turkish government may have a negative effect. The Turkish government, as well as organisations affiliated with it, systematically report on the supposedly disadvantaged position and discrimination of Muslims in Europe. Via the Turkish-language media (including online ones), these messages also reach many of the Turkish Dutch. Since radical agitators play on sentiments of Islamophobia and discrimination, they too benefit from the at times fierce anti-Western discourse of President Erdoğan and other Turkish politicians.

Threat to national security

The vast majority of Turkish-Dutch Muslims want to have absolutely nothing to do with Islamic extremism. Nevertheless, on the fringes of the community there is limited support for radical movements in Islam. This is not a new phenomenon and there are no indications that its extent has changed significantly in recent decades. This limited support poses a potential threat to national security. It is most clearly manifested in jihadism, since this movement legitimises violence against anyone not sharing its philosophy. As far as Salafism is concerned, the potential threat mainly comes from the small number of Turkish-Dutch Salafist agitators, given that they could actively encourage others to undermine the democratic legal order. The number of Turkish-Dutch agitators has been low for many years and there are no indications that this number has been growing or declining. Finally, the spread of intolerant ideas among some Turkish-Dutch youth is not an immediate threat to national security, although it is nevertheless worrying. In many respects, this way of thinking is at odds with the generally open, pluralistic and democratic Dutch society. Embracing this ideology may therefore lead such youth to drift further away from a society based on these values. In time, it could lead to isolationism and undermine social cohesion. The fact that much of the radical content disappeared after 2018 should be seen as positive, as should be the reduced contact with radical Turkish preachers. This does not alter the fact that a small number of Turkish-Dutch youth still seem to be susceptible to an intolerant Islamist discourse.

Finally

There seem to be no major changes in the nature and extent of the Turkish Dutch's susceptibility to radical religious discourse. Resistance to politico-religious extremism is still strong. However, shifts do seem to be taking place in its manifestation, such as the dissemination of radical ideas on social media by youth associations, which - although this activity seems to have diminished of late – has not disappeared entirely. How this sensitivity to such thought will develop in future remains to be seen. Much depends on the orientation of young individuals. According to research, there is a generation gap in Muslim groups in the Netherlands, with the youth, who are more oriented towards Dutch society than their parents, adopting a more critical stance towards Islamic organisations.35 The question is whether these organisations can form a buffer against political-religious extremism to the same extent as they have earlier. Although Turkish-Dutch youth continue to feel Turkish as well as Dutch, they are more oriented towards Dutch society than previous generations.³⁶ This is a positive development. However, greater integration into general Dutch society may also lead to some individuals experiencing more discrimination and exclusion: the well-known integration paradox. Negative feelings in response to discrimination and Islamophobia seem to be very prevalent among many young people with a Turkish background, possibly more so than among previous generations.³⁷ As early as in its 2007 annual report, the AIVD observed that the intensity of the debate on Islam in Dutch society was leading to some Turkish Dutch feeling at a remove from the rest of Dutch society. That debate is still regularly and vehemently playing out, just like the one about the supposedly lacking loyalty of the Turkish Dutch towards the rest of Dutch society. Radical agitators are eager to capitalise on these themes. This could have a negative impact on resilience to extremism.

Endnotes

- 1 AIVD Jaarverslag 2008 (2008 General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) Annual Report, AIVD 2009.
- 2 As of 1 February 2021. https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/dossier/dossier-asiel-migratie-en-integratie/hoeveel-mensen-met-een-migratieachtergrond-wonen-in-nederland.
- Formally: someone with parents who are second-generation Turkish Dutch citizens, including those with a single such parent. See: https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/maatwerk/2020/46/personen-met-ouders-van-tweede-generatie-1-januari-2020.
- Figure from 2018: W. Huijnk (2018), De religieuze beleving van moslims in Nederland. Diversiteit en verandering in beeld (The religious experience of Muslims in the Netherlands. Diversity and change in focus), Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB), p. 6.
- 5 In Huijnk's research, 6% of Dutch Muslims call themselves 'Alevis' (Huijnk, De religieuze beleving van moslims in Nederland, p. 25). According to another publication, about 25% of the Turkish Dutch population is Alevi: Verhoudingen tussen Turks-Nederlandse groeperingen (Relations between Turkish Dutch factions), Integration & Society Knowledge Platform and Social Stability Expertise Unit (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment), SZW 2019.
- 6 There are four major schools of Islamic jurisprudence (madhhabs) in Sunni Islam. The Hanafi madhhab is dominant in Turkey, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Egypt and West Africa.
- 7 Religious schools of thought within Islamic theology concern themselves with the question of how Muslims can use or interpret primary source texts. Maturidiyya is considered the traditional rationalist school, according to which human reason is equivalent to the primary sources. Human ratio is ultimately decisive. Moskeeën in verandering. Zes casestudies (Mosques undergoing change. Six case studies), Nuance door Training en Advies (NTA: Nuance by Training and Advice) 2020, p. 128.
- 8 For the sake of brevity, please refer to a number of other publications for more information on these organisations: Verhoudingen tussen Turks-Nederlandse groeperingen (Relations between Turkish-Dutch factions) (I&S Knowledge Platform and ESS); T. Sunier and N. Landman (2014), Turkse islam. Actualisatie van kennis over Turkse religieuze stromingen en organisaties in Nederland (Turkish Islam. Review of knowledge about Turkish religious movements and organisations in the Netherlands); Wat zijn dat nou voor clubs? Praktijkonderzoek naar SICN, ISN (Diyanet), Milli Görüş en Hizmet (Gülen) (What kind of clubs are they? Practical research into the SICN, ISN (Diyanet), Milli Görüş and Hizmet (Gülen)), Radar Bureau voor sociale vraagstukken (Radar Office for Social Issues), 2017. There are some other Turkish organisations that run religious secondary schools or mosques; these are smaller (such as the Nurcus) or are more political and social than religious in nature (the Turkse Federatie Nederland).
- 9 Sunier and Landman, Turkse Islam, pp. 31-51.
- 10 Sunier and Landman, Turkse Islam, p. 31.

- See the position paper for and testimony by Erik Jan Zürcher before the parliamentary committee of inquiry into the undue influence of non-free countries (POCOB: Parlementaire ondervragingscommissie naar ongewenste beïnvloeding uit onvrije landen).
- 12 Wat zijn dat nou voor clubs?, pp. 40-44.
- 13 https://www.milligorus.nl/over-ons/
- 14 Wat zijn dat nou voor clubs?, p. 31.
- For the concepts of jihadism, political Salafism and Islamism, see: J. Wagemakers (2021), 'Making definitional sense of Islamism', *Orient*. As for 'jihadism', in this and many other publications the NCTV uses this more common term to refer to global jihadi Salafism, although this latter term is more precise.
- 16 As expressed in the most recent academic study in which radicalisation among the Turkish Dutch was specifically studied: Staring et al. (2014), Maatschappelijke positie van Turkse Nederlanders: ontwikkelingen en risico's op criminaliteit en radicalisering (The social position of Turkish Dutch citizens: developments and risks of crime and radicalisation).
- 17 Staring et al., Maatschappelijke positie onder Turkse Nederlanders, pp. 266-267. F. Geelhoed and R. Staring (2016), Wereldbeelden en weerbaarheid van Turks-Nederlandse jongeren. De twee gezichten van een sterke interne gerichtheid (World views and resilience of Turkish-Dutch youth. The two faces of a strong internal focus), Justitiële Verkenningen 2-2016, p. 61. The umbrella organisations themselves also claim this: Wat zijn dat nou voor clubs?, pp. 49-50.
- 18 AIVD Jaarverslag 2008 (2008 AIVD annual report). See also: AIVD Jaarverslag 2007 (2008 AIVD annual report), AIVD 2008.
- 19 On the HuT, see P. Grol and D. Weggemans, Eigen koers richting kalifaat, een beeld van Hizb ut-Tahrir in Nederland (Striking an own course towards the caliphate, a description of Hizb ut-Tahrir in the Netherlands), Tijdschrift voor Religie, Recht en Beleid 2020 (11) 3; hardly anything has been written in Dutch academia about the Kaplan group (originally an extreme secession of Milli Görüş), partly because of this organisation, which is very closed in nature, is very small: see Staring, Maatschappelijke positie onder Turkse Nederlanders, p. 223; Sunier and Landman, Turkse islam, p. 71.
- 20 Jaarverslag AIVD 2020 (2020 AIVD Annual Report), p. 6.
- 21 See: A. Weenink (2019), De Syriëgangers (The travellers to Syria), Landelijke Eenheid Politie (National Police Unit), p. 45; E. Bakker and R. de Bont (2016), 'Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012-2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq', Small Wars and Insurgencies, p. 841.
- 22 The perpetrator of the terrorist attack at Amsterdam Central Station on 31 August 2018 acted from a radical Islamic motive but is not considered a supporter of global jihadi Salafism.
- 23 See for example Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 54 (Threat Assessment Terrorism Netherlands 54), NCTV, April 2021.
- 24 W. Huijnk, De religieuze beleving van moslims in Nederland, p. 25.

- 25 See: https://www.aivd.nl/onderwerpen/radicale-islam; Policy response to the parliamentary committee of inquiry into the undesirable influence of unfree countries (POCOB: parlementaire ondervragingscommissie ongewenste beïnvloeding uit onvrije landen), 20 October 2020, p. 8.
- 26 This passage is based in particular on the Facebook pages of various youth organisations. This development was previously reported in: Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 46 (Terrorist Threat Assessment Netherlands 46), NCTV November 2017 and Dreigingsbeeld Terrorisme Nederland 49, NCTV February 2019.
- 27 On this topic, see: Salafisme in Nederland: diversiteit en dynamiek (Salafism in the Netherlands: diversity and dynamics), AIVD and NCTV, 2015, p. 13.
- 28 'Milli Görüş nam jongeren mee op 'kamp' naar radicale imam' (Milli Görüş took youth on 'camp' promoting radical imam), NRC Handelsblad, 18 August 2018.
- 29 On diaspora politics, see: C. Houtkamp and K. de Bruijne (2021), 'Whose long arm? Challenges to understanding Turkish diaspora politics', Clingendael Policy Brief. See also the testimony of E.J. Zürcher in: (On)zichtbare invloed. Verslag parlementaire ondervragingscommissie naar ongewenste beïnvloeding uit onvrije landen (Visible and invisible influence. Report of the parliamentary committee of inquiry into the undue influence of non-free countries), 2020, p. 457.
- 30 Decimated Muslim Brotherhood Still Inspires Fear. Its Members Wonder Why', The New York Times, 15 July 2017.
- 31 'Muslim Brotherhood in Turkey', Counterterrorism Project, 2 May 2019, pp. 4-5.
- 32 A. Hammond, 'Salafism infiltrates Turkish religious discourse', MEI@75, 22 July 2015. A. Hammond (2017), 'Salafi thought in Turkish public discourse since 1980', International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, pp. 417-435.
- 33 'De Egyptische oppositie was welkom in Istanbul. Nu moet ze daar ook op haar tellen passen' (The Egyptian opposition was welcome in Istanbul. Now it has to watch its step there too), De Volkskrant, 27 April 2021.
- 34 Based on material found on websites of Turkish-Dutch organisations.
- 35 E. Butter and R. van Oordt (2017), Zuilen in de Polder? Een verkenning van de institutionalisering van de islam in Nederland (Societal pillars in the polder? An exploration of the institutionalisation of Islam in the Netherlands), p. 423-426.
- 36 Staring, Maatschappelijke positie van Turkse Nederlanders, p. 264; Wat zijn dat nou voor clubs?, pp. 52-53; F. Geelhoed and R. Staring, Nooit Nederlander genoeg. Turks-Nederlandse jongeren over hun sociaal-culturele posities, wereldbeelden en attitudes ten opzichte van (religieus geïnspireerd) geweld (Never Dutch enough. Turkish-Dutch youth on their sociocultural positions, world views and attitudes towards violence, including religiously inspired violence), in: Werelden van verschil. Over de sociaal-culturele afstand en positie van migrantengroepen in Nederland (Worlds of difference. On the sociocultural distance from the rest of society and position of migrant groups in the Netherlands), Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2015.
- 37 Wat zijn dat nou voor clubs?, pp. 52-53. Geelhoed and Staring, 'Nooit Nederlander genoeg'. Over de toegenomen beleefde discriminatie van moslims in Nederland ('Never Dutch enough'. On the increased discrimination against Muslims experienced in the Netherlands); see further: Huijnk, De religieuze beleving van moslims in Nederland, pp. 65-66.

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