



## Establishment of a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East

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### Introduction

Global security and the promotion of peace remains the United Nation's most important mission. The Middle East in particular is a region that has continually been affected by wars since the 1940s. No goal is more important to the Member States of the UN than prevention of nuclear war. A majority of Member States, led by the 120 countries of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), also oppose use of nuclear weapons for intimidation or deterrence. Nuclear disarmament remains their highest goal.

The dangers of nuclear weapons in the Middle East is of special concern to the Member States of the NAM, who generally agree that Israel's nuclear capability is an unacceptable threat to regional peace and stability. Their support for a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ) is focused almost entirely at Israel. It seeks the disarmament of any nuclear weapons in the

region. Israel, the only acknowledged regional nuclear weapons state, demands that other regional actors assure its security before it will consider the option.

Fear of a regional nuclear arms race are not unfounded. Israel is widely believed to have a mature nuclear arsenal. Iran is on the cusp of nuclear weaponization, with enough fissile material (near-weapons grade enriched Uranium, U<sup>235</sup>) to construct bombs. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are widely suspected of having nuclear ambitions, as might neighboring Turkey. With the Arab League and the Non-Aligned Movement leading support, the General Assembly has repeatedly endorsed a Middle East NWFZ. Making it happen is another matter.

Dealing with this weighty problem is the responsibility of First Committee at ODUMUNC 2025. Can First Committee find a breakthrough? Or will it reaffirm the inability to make progress?

Increasingly, Middle Eastern states are expressing interest in fortifying regional security, including guarding against the dangers brought by the spread of nuclear weapons. Noting the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, Egypt's representative said during the First Committee's 77th session, "Missing another opportunity to construct a consensus-based security architecture that included a zone free from nuclear and other

weapons of mass destruction would lead to catastrophic consequences.”<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, a representative from Iraq, working with the Arab Group and Non-Aligned Movement stated, “The Group stressed the crucial importance of creating nuclear-weapon-free zones throughout the world, including in the Middle East. All efforts would be expended to ensure a zone free of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East to achieve security and stability in one of the most conflict-ridden areas of the world.”<sup>2</sup>



Israeli's Dimona reactor, suspected source of its weapons grade plutonium Pu<sup>239</sup>.

Finally a representative from Iran said that the Middle East, “Was ‘on fire,’ and that a regional security framework was needed there now more than ever.”<sup>3</sup> Emphasizing Iran's position that Israel is the main source of regional instability, the representative continued to say, “The presence of extra-regional players exacerbated the

situation. One of the biggest concerns was the proliferation of mass-destruction weapons in the region, pointing to what he called the Israeli regime's ‘reliance’ on military aid from the United States, as well as its aggressive military establishment, which was a ‘chronic source’ of regional insecurity.”<sup>4</sup>

While Iran continues to increase its stockpile of weapons grade enriched uranium in violation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)<sup>5</sup>, which was a negotiated deal to allow international oversight of Iran's nuclear power facilities so they do not develop nuclear weapons,<sup>6</sup> Israel is the only Middle Eastern state to possess nuclear weapons. Israel neither confirms nor denies that they have nuclear weapons, but estimates agree that Israel maintains an arsenal of between 90 and 200-plus nuclear weapons which they can deliver from land, air, or sea-based attacks.<sup>7</sup>

Since the government of Israel purposefully obscures their nuclear capabilities, they do not publicize policies for member states to consider regarding the handling or usage of their nuclear weapons. Former Israeli leaders have acknowledged that the weapons exist and are managed under “the Samson option.”<sup>8</sup> This option suggests that Israel maintains a second-strike policy and will only use nuclear weapons as a last resort to defend its territory.

<sup>1</sup><https://press.un.org/en/2022/gadis3697.doc.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup><https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/12/1158306>

<sup>6</sup><https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/ira-n-nuclear-deal-definitive-guide>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/israel-nuclear-disarmament/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.jpost.com/features/security-and-defense-mums-the-n-word>

The current situation on the status of nuclear weapons in the Middle East reflects the regions greater instability. Nuclear energy is on the rise, and with it comes nuclear waste that can be enriched into material for weapons. Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons to counter Israel, and a regional uncertainty over nuclear weapons is igniting an arms race that has Middle Eastern states increasing their conventional weapons forces. If the issue of nuclear weapons in the Middle East can be settled, it would lay the foundation for the region to seek a more permanent peace.

## Background

Building a nuclear weapons free Middle East originates from the late 1960s Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). The treaty stipulates that parties not develop nor transfer nuclear weapons, and allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to monitor and inspect existing stockpiles of weapons as well as the development of nuclear power for peaceful energy usages.<sup>9</sup>

Following the NPT, several nuclear weapons free zones were gradually established around the world. The first zone was established by the Treaty of Tlatelolco that declared Latin America and the Caribbean to

be a region free of nuclear weapons.<sup>10</sup> Over the next several decades, the South Pacific,<sup>11</sup> Southeast Asia,<sup>12</sup> Africa,<sup>13</sup> Central Asia,<sup>14</sup> Antarctica,<sup>15</sup> the Ocean Floor Seabed,<sup>16</sup> and even Outer Space<sup>17</sup> and the Moon<sup>18</sup> were agreed to be nuclear weapons free zones by treaties.

The five existing nuclear-weapon-free zones (NWFZs) are: 

- **Treaty of Tlatelolco:** Covers Latin America and the Caribbean, signed in 1967
- **Treaty of Rarotonga:** Covers the South Pacific, signed in 1985
- **Treaty of Bangkok:** Covers Southeast Asia, signed in 1995
- **Treaty of Pelindaba:** Covers Africa, signed in 1996
- **Treaty of Semipalatinsk:** Covers Central Asia, signed in 2006

*Five current Nuclear Weapons Free Zones (NWFZs)*

With nuclear weapons free zones being created and respected, attention turned to the Middle East. Since 1974, the General Assembly has annually adopted a resolution calling for the establishment of the zone.<sup>19</sup> With repeated efforts the call for such a zone was finally heard on December 15, 1994, when the General Assembly adopted another resolution urging member states to collaborate on a treaty declaring the Middle East a nuclear weapons free zone.<sup>20</sup> The following year, the Resolution on the Middle East was added to the NPT to implement the resolution passed by the GA.<sup>21</sup> Since 1995, every 5 years a review conference was held to examine the progress

<sup>9</sup><https://disarmament.unoda.org/wmd/nuclear/npt/text>

<sup>10</sup><https://www.un.org/nwfz/content/treaty-tlatelolco>

<sup>11</sup><https://www.un.org/nwfz/content/treaty-rarotonga>

<sup>12</sup><https://www.un.org/nwfz/content/treaty-bangkok>

<sup>13</sup><https://www.un.org/nwfz/content/treaty-pelindaba>

<sup>14</sup><https://www.un.org/nwfz/content/treaty-nuclear-weapon-free-zone-central-asia>

<sup>15</sup><https://treaties.unoda.org/t/antarctic>

<sup>16</sup>[https://treaties.unoda.org/t/sea\\_bed](https://treaties.unoda.org/t/sea_bed)

<sup>17</sup>[https://treaties.unoda.org/t/outer\\_space](https://treaties.unoda.org/t/outer_space)

<sup>18</sup><https://treaties.unoda.org/t/moon>

<sup>19</sup><https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/389/09/pdf/n2438909.pdf>

<sup>20</sup><https://documents.un.org/doc/resolution/gen/nr0/77/0/60/img/nr077060.pdf>

<sup>21</sup>[https://app.unidir.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/1995-05-11\\_1995%20NPT%20Review%20and%20Extension%20conference%20adopts%20the%20Resolution%20on%20the%20Middle%20East.pdf](https://app.unidir.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/1995-05-11_1995%20NPT%20Review%20and%20Extension%20conference%20adopts%20the%20Resolution%20on%20the%20Middle%20East.pdf)

member states, Middle Eastern and Security Council states in particular, were making on establishing the nuclear weapons free zone.<sup>22</sup> Recurring disagreements over policy, political mistrust, and new military conflicts have continually delayed agreements on how the zone will be established.

Frustrated with the lack of progress, in 2018 the GA passed a decision appointing the Secretary-General to oversee the establishment of the zone, which was expanded to include other chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction.<sup>23</sup>

### Progress Towards a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East

Since 2019, the *Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction* has been held each year with Middle Eastern and Security Council member states attending along with UN agencies like the IAEA and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the Biological Weapons Convention Implementation Support Unit (ISU).<sup>24</sup>

The Conference has convened five times, with no meeting taking place in 2020. The report for the most recent meeting on 18 November 2024, has not yet been released,

but proceedings from the other sessions follow:

#### First Session 18 November 2019

*(a) Welcome all initiatives, resolutions, decisions and recommendations on the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction;*

*(b) Believe that the establishment of a verifiable Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction would greatly enhance regional and international peace and security;*

*(c) Declare our intent and solemn commitment to pursue, in accordance with relevant international resolutions, and in an open and inclusive manner with all invited States, the elaboration of a legally binding treaty to establish a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, on the basis of arrangements freely arrived at by consensus by the States of the region;*

*(d) Call upon all States of the Middle East and all other States to refrain from taking any measures that preclude the achievement of the objectives of the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction;*

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-07/features/middle-eastern-wmd-free-zone-and-npt>

<sup>23</sup> [https://front.un-arm.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Decision-A\\_73\\_546.pdf](https://front.un-arm.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Decision-A_73_546.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> <https://disarmament.unoda.org/topics/conference-on-a-mezf-of-nwandowomd/>

*(e) Convinced that the realization of this long-standing goal would be facilitated by the participation of all States of the Middle East, extend an open-ended invitation to all States of the region to lend their support to the present declaration and to join the process;*

*(f) In that spirit, believe that the Conference, through the elaboration of a legally binding treaty establishing a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, could contribute to building regional and international confidence therein;*

*(g) Commit to undertaking efforts to follow up on the declaration and on the outcomes of the Conference and to engaging in preparations for the second session of the Conference, commend the efforts of the Secretary-General in convening the first session of the Conference, and request his continued efforts and those of relevant international organizations and the strong support of the international community towards the success of the Conference in establishing a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.<sup>25</sup>*

*The Secretary-General welcomes the positive steps taken by participating States under the Kuwaiti presidency to maintain the momentum of the process and to continue to make progress towards achieving the goal of establishing a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, as mandated by the General Assembly in decision 73/546. Attaining this objective could greatly enhance regional and international peace and security.*

*The Secretary-General believes that this conference process provides a valuable opportunity and a meaningful framework for the States in the Middle East and other stakeholders to engage in serious dialogue and to build trust and confidence in a joint effort to address all the issues of concern with respect to establishing a zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction in the region.*

*The Secretary-General commends the constructive, transparent and inclusive approach adopted by the successive Presidents and States that participated in the Conference with respect to the conference process. The Secretary-General continues to call upon all States in the Middle East to participate in and to contribute to this important process, and encourages the international community, including civil society, to continue to provide its support to the process.*

### Second Session 29 November 2021

<sup>25</sup><https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n20/018/59/pdf/n2001859.pdf>



*The Secretary-General is fully committed to fulfilling the mandate entrusted to him in General Assembly decision 73/546 and reaffirms that the realization of such a zone in the Middle East would be of significant value to international disarmament and non-proliferation efforts, and to peace and security, as well as socioeconomic development, in the Middle East.*<sup>26</sup>



The Conference in session at the UN in New York

### Third Session 14 November 2022

*The working committee established at the second session of the Conference provided an important standing mechanism for participating States to continue to address substantive issues related to the Middle East zone during the intersessional periods between the annual sessions of the Conference.*

<sup>26</sup><https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n22/274/97/pdf/n2227497.pdf>

*During 2022, the committee held two substantive meetings to discuss several topics related to the future zone treaty with the participation and input of regional and international experts, including legal aspects of the future Middle East zone treaty and verification in relation to nuclear weapons.*<sup>27</sup>

### Fourth Session 13 November 2023

*The Secretary-General is encouraged by the continuous commitment of successive Presidents and participating States of the Conference to maintain the momentum and to advance this process, with a view to realizing the long-sought goal of establishing a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. The ongoing crisis in Gaza, and its impact throughout the wider Middle East region, only highlight the importance of this commitment. The Secretary-General recognizes that progress towards achieving such a zone in the Middle East will enhance regional and international peace and security and commends the efforts of participating States to engage in dialogue and multilateral diplomacy to that end.*

*The Conference process is an integral part of a broader effort to build a regional peace and security framework in the Middle East. The Middle East zone should be established on the basis of arrangements freely arrived at among the States of the region concerned. The*

<sup>27</sup><https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n23/121/67/pdf/n2312167.pdf>

*Secretary-General reiterates his call that all States in the region should participate in this process, and that the international community should provide full support for this important endeavour.*

*Any threat to use nuclear weapons is inadmissible. Such threats illustrate the importance of the work of the Conference in its efforts to achieve the objective of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.*

## Changes agreed under Iran deal to limit nuclear programme



Iran's largest nuclear-related facilities

The **Arab Group** agrees that Israel is the principle party responsible for preventing a nuclear weapons free Middle East. It strongly support a NWFZ in order to eliminate Israeli nuclear weapons. It requests Israel ratify the NPT and allow IAEA inspections of their nuclear facilities.<sup>28</sup>

**China's** deputy permanent representative to the UN, Geng Shuang, stated China's position as, "China supports the establishment of a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other WMDs and believes that this move will help curb the proliferation of WMDs, safeguard the authority and effectiveness of the international non-proliferation regime, and reduce the risk of an arms race and conflict, thereby providing an important mechanism for the maintenance of long-term regional peace and security."<sup>29</sup> China is a signatory to the Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA).

**Egypt** is the leading actor in the Arab world advocating a Middle East NWFZ, the primary goal of all its diplomacy. Egypt is committed to working towards a Middle East free of nuclear weapons. Egypt has ratified the NPT and urges Israel to ratify it as well. Egypt has proposed resolutions in the GA to establish a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East and to bring all

## Member State and Bloc Positions

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.gulf-times.com/story/700555/qatar-presents-arab-groups-views-on-israeli-nuclear-capabilities-iaea-safeguards-in-middle-east>

<sup>29</sup> <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202311/14/WS6552d5e0a31090682a5ee0a8.html>

Middle Eastern nuclear facilities under IAEA safeguards and oversight.<sup>30</sup>

The **European Union** has expressed its support for a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East. It hopes that members states and regions can cooperate to voluntarily commit their support for international agreements.<sup>31</sup>

**France** remains a supporter of the NPT and is working to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons around the world, including the Middle East. It is a signatory to the JCPOA and calls for better arms control verification to ensure states are not acquiring nuclear weapons.<sup>32</sup>

**Iran** currently does not have nuclear weapons. Inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) show has developed comprehensive nuclear development capabilities. It has a significant stockpile of fissile uranium, U<sup>235</sup> enriched to 60 percent purity, just below the 90 percent purity standard required for nuclear explosives. Most analysts agree Iran could create nuclear weapons within two to four months.<sup>33</sup>

Iran is a party to the NPT and also is developing nuclear power to meet its energy needs. Iran strongly supports a Middle East NWFZ, which it says is essential to disarm

Israel, it's enemy. Iranian leaders perceive Israel and the United States as threat their security, they may develop nuclear weapons as a deterrent.<sup>34</sup> Although it blames the United States exclusively for the collapse of the JCPOA, Iranian spokesmen insist that Israel's war on Gaza and Lebanon, and its attacks on Iran, show the JCPOA is obsolete and a new deal needs to be negotiated.<sup>35</sup>

**Israel** has not ratified the NPT and possesses nuclear weapons. It is widely believed to be the only Member States in the Middle East that has nuclear weapons, with a nuclear arsenal estimated at 80 to 120 nuclear weapons, as well as a variety of delivery systems, including aerial bombs, ballistic missiles, air-launched and submarine-launched cruise missiles. Israel maintains an official policy of nuclear ambiguity. It does not confirm nor deny its nuclear capabilities.

Israel does not support a NWFZ, but seeks to stop the nuclear programs of regional enemies, especially Iran and its near-nuclear weapons status. Israeli leaders repeatedly have been on the verge of massive attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities. On the NWFZ, Israel generally refuses to engage. It does not support a NWFZ which it maintains is focused unfairly on Israel, without solving its security problems.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>30</sup><https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/135996/Egypt-welcomes-adoption-of-its-resolution-on-establishing-Nuclear-Weapon>

<sup>31</sup> [https://docs-library.unoda.org/General\\_Assembly\\_First\\_Committee\\_Seventy-Ninth\\_session\\_\(2024\)/78-17-EU-EN.pdf](https://docs-library.unoda.org/General_Assembly_First_Committee_Seventy-Ninth_session_(2024)/78-17-EU-EN.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/disarmament-and-non-proliferation/>

<sup>33</sup><https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/05/31/analysis-of-the-iaea-iran-npt-safeguards-report-may-2024/>

<sup>34</sup><https://www.reuters.com/article/world/irans-spy-chief-says-tehran-could-look-for-nuclear-arms-if-cornered-by-west-idUSKBN2A91TB/>

<sup>35</sup> <https://iranpress.com/iran-s-araghchi--jcpoa-cannot-be-revived--new-negotiations-must-be-formed>

<sup>36</sup><https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/israel-nuclear/>



**The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)**, the UN's largest voting bloc with 120 Member States, representing most of Africa, Asia and Latin America, supports the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons on a general scale. Not only does the movement support non-proliferation but the eventual banishment and dismantling of all nuclear weapons. The NAM is especially focused on the threat Israeli nuclear weapons pose to non-nuclear countries in the Middle East. It works aggressively to focus global pressure on Israel to abandon nuclear weapons.<sup>37</sup>

**The Russian Federation** strongly supports establishing a Middle East NWFZ. It participated in the Conference sessions and encourages all regional members to collaborate under the principles of the NPT. Russia calls for all Middle Eastern states to join the NPT and for Security Council members to hold Middle Eastern states acceptable in participating.<sup>38</sup>

**Turkey** is interested in nuclear energy and will open its first nuclear power plant in 2025.<sup>39</sup> Turkey remains a NATO member and is concerned over Iran's nuclear programs and has served as a mediator between various Middle Eastern states in negotiating peaceful settlements to conflicts.<sup>40</sup>

**Saudi Arabia** fully supports efforts to establish a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East. It calls for Middle Eastern states to build trust through diplomacy with

each other so that states will not see the need to obtain nuclear weapons. Saudi Arabia remains concerned over Israel and demands that it join the NPT.<sup>41</sup> Saudi Arabia is developing its own civilian nuclear power infrastructure, and it widely suspected of working secretly to develop nuclear weapons.

The **United Kingdom** affirms the 1995 resolution to the NPT and calls on members to do the same. The U.K. supports the NWFZ, the annual Conference and expresses its desire for Security Council members to be more active in negotiations.<sup>42</sup> In contrast to the NAM, the U.K. believes international measures should focus equally on Israel and Iran, maintaining that their insecurity only can be resolved for both countries together.

**The United States** is a major supporter of the NPT, and it supports the idea of a NWFZ in principle, but it maintains that Israeli security must be assured by all countries in the region first. The U.S. is heavily invested in maintaining peace in the Middle East and works to stop the spread of nuclear weapons in the region. In contrast to the NAM, the U.S. and its allies maintain that the focus of international attention should be Iran, not Israel. The U.S. believes a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East is "worth pursuing" while continuing to be allies with Israel. The U.S. withdrew from the JCPOA

<sup>37</sup> [https://wsps.ut.ac.ir/article\\_62282.html](https://wsps.ut.ac.ir/article_62282.html)

<sup>38</sup> <https://pircenter.org/en/editions/russia-and-a-wmd-free-zone-in-the-middle-east/>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.agbi.com/energy/2024/12/turkeys-first-nuclear-plant-to-start-trial-production-in-2025/>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.iemed.org/publication/the-role-of-turkey-in-the-middle-east/>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2199901/middle-east>

<sup>42</sup> <https://vcdnp.org/establishment-of-a-wmd-free-zone-in-the-middle-east-current-status-and-prospects/>



## Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in the Middle East



in 2018 and continues to be concerned over Iran's nuclear prospects..<sup>43</sup>

### Some Possible Proposals for Action

The issue of establishing a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East is not a simple prospect to make into a reality. Long histories of conflicts and the threat of new conflicts have made regional states mistrustful and cautious of nuclear proliferation or weapons elimination. The First Committee can pursue several proposals to mitigate these current circumstances.

**1. Continue to Press the Issue:** As noted, the GA adopts an annual resolution calling for the creation of a nuclear weapons free zone in the Middle East. It took decades of resolutions before action was taken to implement its directives. Persistence eventually worked, and the GA needs to continue this effort.

**2. Continue the Conference:** Member states need to continue meeting during the Conference on the Establishment of a Middle East Zone Free of Nuclear Weapons and Other Weapons of Mass Destruction to

address the issue. Each year, progress is made to work out the details on how a nuclear weapons free zone might be established. The dialogue needs to continue so the issue does not lose its support.

**3. Include Experienced States:** There are numerous other nuclear weapons free zones beyond the Middle East. Including them in the discussion would provide insights on how such a zone can be established. In particular, the nuclear weapons free zone of Africa saw the member state of South Africa develop and dismantle its own nuclear weapons. This can serve as an example for the Middle East.

**4. Security Guarantees:** States possess nuclear weapons to guard their own security. If their security concerns can be addressed, they are more likely to not develop or dismantle existing nuclear weapons. Especially Israel and Iran, if their security concerns could be satisfied by international guarantees, then their perceived need for nuclear weapons would be nullified. Examining the failures of the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 where Ukraine and other states gave up their nuclear weapons in exchange for security guarantees would improve how security guarantees are managed.

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<sup>43</sup> <https://ktar.com/world-news/us-presses-israel-on-talks-for-middle-east-nuclear-free-zone/457892/>



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