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Issue Brief

Modi Redefines India's Palestine Policy

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S*ummary*

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992, India has been 'balancing' its relations with Israel and Palestine. Modi has now de-hyphenated it. Besides being unapologetic about engaging with Israel, he is prepared to deal with both the parties independently and bilaterally. In practical terms, this means more economic engagements than political platitudes. Above all, by not referring to East Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian State, he has signalled a major departure from the past. India is no longer prepared to endorse the exclusive Palestinian claims over the City but desires a negotiated political settlement based on mutual respect and accommodation.

Redefining is perhaps the best way to capture the nuanced changes introduced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India's Palestine policy. Behind the media hype about India's 'unwavering support' for the Palestinian cause,¹ there is a subtle but unmistakable shift in policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This was clearly manifested during the recent visit of Palestine President Mahmoud Abbas to New Delhi – his fifth since being elected as the successor to Yasser Arafat in January 2005, and his first after Modi became Prime Minister. Both leaders met in September 2015 during the annual session of the UN General Assembly.² Modi had, however, met his Israeli counterpart the previous year during the UN General Assembly in 2014.

Abbas' latest visit had all the customary trappings associated with a head of state visit: ceremonial reception in Rashtrapati Bhavan, wreath laying at Rajghat, courtesy calls from Vice-President, Minister of External Affairs and a formal meeting with the Prime Minister. Despite the pageantry, courtesy and pleasantries, India has signalled a new approach towards Palestine as well as the wider Arab-Israeli conflict. Modi's press statement with Abbas at his side was the giveaway. How does one read and interpret Abbas' four-day visit during May 14-17?

The Déjà Vu Moment

Though not his first visit to New Delhi, this would have been a difficult moment for Abbas and not very different from the one undertaken by Arafat in January 1992. When Prime Minister Narasimha Rao hosted Arafat, it was clear to *Mr. Palestine* that India was planning to abandon its four decades old policy of non-relations and follow the footsteps of the major powers like the then Soviet Union and China in normalising relations with Israel. At that time, the politico-diplomatic cards were heavily stacked against Arafat especially after his ill-advised support for Saddam Hussein during the Kuwait crisis. The Rao-Arafat meeting in late January removed the last little hurdle to normalization of relations with Israel, and the Palestinian leader had no option but to accept India's sovereign right to determine its foreign policy priorities.³

Modi, who often expresses his admiration for Rao, took a leaf out of the latter's diplomatic manual and put Abbas in the same predicament. Ever since the idea first emerged in January,⁴ there are unmistakable indications that Modi's impending visit to Israel would be a stand-alone one, that is, without the customary visit to

¹ "Mahmoud Abbas visits India: Narendra Modi conveys 'unwavering support' to the Palestinian cause," *First Post*, May 16, 2017, <http://www.firstpost.com/world/mahmoud-abbas-visits-india-narendra-modi-conveys-unwavering-support-to-palestinian-cause-3449150.html>

² Ministry of External Affairs, "India-Palestine Relations, June 2016," https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Palestine_July_2016.pdf

³ Bansidhar Pradhan, "Seeking clarity in Arafat's message," *Link*, vol. 34, no. 25, February 2, 1992, pp.30-31.

⁴ P R Kumaraswamy, "Modi's stand-alone visit to Israel?" *IDSA Comment*, January 2, 2017, http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/modi-stand-alone-visit-to-israel_prkumaraswamy_020117.

Ramallah.⁵ Until now, most of India's political engagements with Israel also included the areas under the control of the Palestine National Authority (PNA); initially the Gaza Strip and afterwards Ramallah when Arafat moved his headquarters in 2003. The itineraries of all the three visits by External Affairs Ministers Jaswant Singh (June-July 2000), S M Krishna (January 2012) and Sushma Swaraj (January 2016) included Ramallah. The itinerary of President Pranab Mukherjee who visited Israel in October 2015 had Palestine as well as Jordan.⁶ Hence, hosting Abbas just weeks before his visit to Israel is a clear indication that Ramallah will not be on Modi's itinerary.

Abbas recognized the reality of the Indian summer and, when asked about Modi also visiting Palestine, he did not go beyond saying: "Prime Minister Modi is always welcome to visit Palestine, a country loved by hundreds of millions of Indians."⁷

Decisive Shift

Modi not planning to visit Ramallah while engaging with Israel is a remarkable shift. In the early 1920s and amidst the Khilafat struggle, Indian nationalists made common cause with the Arabs of Palestine and adopted a position that was unsympathetic to the Jewish aspirations for a national home in Palestine.⁸ Adopting an identical position, the Indian National Congress opposed the idea of religion-based partition in India as well as in Palestine. Politics pose strange challenges, and the immediacy of independence resulted in the Congress leadership accepting the communal partition of the British Raj. But geographical distance and domestic competition with the Muslim League resulted in the Congress party adopting a different position vis-à-vis Jewish nationalism. Despite its opposition to the partition of Palestine and eventual recognition of Israel in September 1950, India did not establish diplomatic relations with the latter.

So long as India did not formalize relations with Israel, its leaders could invoke Mahatma Gandhi's 1938 statement – "Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English and France to the French" – and highlight India's consistent and steadfast support for the Palestinian cause.⁹ Even a modicum of relations with Israel was seen as anti-Palestinian. This zero-sum approach ended in January 1992 when Rao chose to reverse the four decades old recognition-without-relations policy of Jawaharlal Nehru and established diplomatic relations with Israel.

⁵ Bobby Ghosh, "Why Arabs are not protesting against Modi's proposed Israel visit," *The Hindustan Times*, March 29, 2017, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/columns/the-reasons-why-arabs-are-not-protesting-against-modi-s-proposed-israel-visit/story-EyJfuRUbuT0AJrlmB0fRij.html>

⁶ P R Kumaraswamy, "Mukherjee's Middle East Visit: Setting a New Template," *ORF Issue Brief*, No. 119, December 2015, http://cf.orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ORFIssueBrief_119.pdf

⁷ Suhasini Haidar, "We want India to help in upcoming peace efforts, says Palestine President Mahmoud Abbas," *The Hindu*, May 16, 2017, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/we-want-india-in-peace-process-says-palestine-president-mahmoud-abbas/article18459281.ece>

⁸ P R Kumaraswamy, *India's Israel Policy*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

⁹ For the full article, see, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi: Publications Division, 1958ff, vol. 68, pp.137-41.

Rao was principally responding to structural changes in the international order following the end of the Cold War and was signalling India's willingness to make a break with the past. And he chose to do this through the normalisation of relations with Israel.

Normalisation of relations undermined India's ability to evoke historical positions and consistent support for Palestinians to explain and justify the new-found bonhomie with Israel. How to explain the new situation within the Gandhian paradigm and moral arguments, especially when Realism was seen as a plague to be avoided? India muddled along by seeking a balance between its traditional positions on Palestine and its burgeoning relations with Israel.¹⁰

Since Modi's election, change was definitely in the offing. The BRICS summit in Fortaleza, Brazil, was his first multilateral exposure. Coming weeks after his inauguration, the Fortaleza Declaration *inter alia* reaffirmed the member-states' commitment to "a two-State solution with a contiguous and economically viable Palestinian State existing side by side in peace with Israel, within mutually agreed and internationally recognized borders based on the 4 June 1967 lines, with East Jerusalem as its capital." Ignoring the popular protests and regional turmoil in the Arab world, it identified "the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a fundamental component for building a sustainable peace in the Middle East."¹¹ However, much water has flown in the Ganga since then.

The first sign came in July 2015 when India chose to abstain in the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) vote on alleged 'war crimes' being committed by Israel as well as by Hamas during the 2014 war, referred to by Israel as Operation Protective Edge. Only a year earlier, India had voted with others in the Council to institute an international inquiry into the Gaza violence and attributed its shift to a reference to Israel being taken to the International Criminal Court.¹² India once again abstained in March 2016 when the UNHRC voted on a similar resolution.¹³ Interestingly, a few days after the first UNHRC vote in July 2015, Secretary East Anil Wadhwa visited Ramallah and met President Abbas.¹⁴

Thus, it took more than a year after Modi's election for the government to begin to spell out its policy shift on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and redefine its parameters. While it is keen to further bilateral relations with Palestine, India is no longer willing to view its Israel policy through the traditional Palestinian prism. After his talks with

¹⁰ P R Kumaraswamy, "Reframing India's Palestine Policy", *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, Vol. 4, no.1, March 2017, pp. 3-17.

¹¹ Ministry of External Affairs, "Sixth BRICS Summit – Fortaleza Declaration, July 15, 2014," http://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/23635/Sixth_BRICS_Summit_Fortaleza_Declaration

¹² Suhasini Haidar, "India abstains from UNHRC vote against Israel," *The Hindu*, July 3, 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/india-abstains-from-unhrc-vote-against-israel/article7383796.ece>

¹³ Devirupa Mitra, "India Votes Against Israel on Key Settlements Resolution, but Abstains Again on War Crimes," *The Wire*, March 26, 2016, <https://thewire.in/26075/india-votes-against-israel-on-key-settlements-resolution-but-abstains-again-on-war-crimes/>

¹⁴ Ministry of External Affairs, "Visit of Secretary (East) to Palestine, July 9, 2015," http://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/25444/Visit_of_Secretary_East_to_Palestine

the visiting Palestinian leader, Modi reiterated India's support for "a sovereign, independent, united and viable Palestine, co-existing peacefully with Israel." This is an extremely powerful and loaded phrase with far-reaching implications.

While 'independent and viable' are self-explanatory, 'united Palestine' has become an uphill task, especially since the onset of the Middle East peace process in Madrid in October 1991. The militant Palestinian group Hamas, established in the wake of the first intifada in 1988, has been challenging the legitimacy of the internationally recognized Palestinian leadership. Indeed, even as the western powers were moving towards recognising the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the 'sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people', Hamas challenged, and in the process undermined, the political accommodation that Arafat sought through the Oslo accords. Besides carrying out a virulent campaign of suicide attacks, the militant group also challenged and weakened all the Palestinian institutions headed by Arafat, namely Fatah, PLO and ultimately the PNA. Indeed, internal schism exploded into a full-fledged confrontation following the electoral victory of Hamas in January 2006 and its military takeover of the Gaza Strip in July 2007.

As a result, during the past decade, the Palestinians have been living under two political controls: the internationally recognised PNA headed by Abbas whose authority is limited to the West Bank, and an increasingly isolated Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip. Ironically, while Abbas has visited India five times since becoming President, during the same period he could not set foot in the Gaza Strip, the other half of Palestine. Thus, even occupation and a common fight against Israel could not bring about internal unity and cohesion among the Palestinians. This situation says a lot about the foresight and vision of the Palestinian leadership.

By calling for a 'united Palestine', Modi also differs with the current Israeli government which is gravitating towards a one-state solution, namely, Israel without a Palestinian state. For decades, Arabs and Palestinians adopted this approach and sought a Palestinian state instead of Israel. And frustrated by the failure of the Oslo process, some in the West view one-state as a possible solution to the Israeli-Palestinian problem. In suggesting a one-state solution, both sides seek to negate the legitimate rights of the other; that is, Israel without Palestinian statehood and Palestine without Israel. However, most of the international community including India is committed to a two-state solution, with both Israel and Palestine co-existing side by side with peace and security.

Modi and the Middle East:

Ever since Benjamin Netanyahu became the first world leader to congratulate Modi on his impending victory even as Lok Sabha results were being announced, there were speculations that Israel would be among the first countries that the new prime minister would visit. Writing in June 2015, a former diplomat observed:

a visit has been on the cards ever since Modi's government came to power a year ago. Not only does the Bharatiya Janata Party leader have a strong personal relationship with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, he also exemplifies

the deep and abiding camaraderie that has existed between the hard right of the Zionist movement and our own right-wing Hindutva elements, brought together by the shared sentiment of retrieving some notion of historic destiny.¹⁵

Modi, however, had other ideas and has been actively engaging with the Arab-Islamic Middle East. His first formal meeting was with the then Crown Prince (now King) Salman of Saudi Arabia during the Brisbane G-20 meeting in November 2014. Since then, he has met the Saudi King twice, first in Belek, Anatolia, at the G-20 meeting in November 2015 and later during his state visit to Saudi Arabia in April 2016.

Modi's diplomatic forays into the region began with a visit to the UAE in August 2015, which was followed by visits in 2016 to Saudi Arabia (April),¹⁶ Iran (May) and Qatar (June). In January 2017, India hosted UAE Crown Prince as the chief guest of the Republic Day celebrations.¹⁷ In between, Modi hosted Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi twice; first during the India-Africa Forum Summit in October 2015 and subsequently during a state visit in September 2016. Modi's visit to Turkey for the G-20 meeting November 2016 was followed by the state visit of Recep Tayyip Erdogan earlier this month.¹⁸ With the visit of Abbas, the prime minister has hosted or visited all the major leaders of the wider Middle East.

Furthermore, there were presidential visits to Jordan, Palestine, and Israel in October 2015 and Vice-Presidential visits to Morocco (May-June), Tunisia (June) and Algeria (October) in 2016. Keeping pace with Modi's diplomatic journeys, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj visited almost all the countries of the wider Middle East, with Minister of State M J Akbar making it to troubled areas such as Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. One could say that except for war-torn Libya and Yemen, there were high-level political engagements with all the countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region since Modi became prime minister.

Thus, the deck is clear for Modi's visit to Israel. Disproving the conventional wisdom, he had laid an elaborate ground work to remove all possible domestic hurdles. And hosting Abbas was his last move.

Jerusalem, the Real shift

As with inter-personal relations, what is 'missing' is often more interesting than what is 'present'. This is true for the Palestinian leader's visit, and the highlight was Modi's

¹⁵ Talmiz Ahmad, "When Narendra Modi goes to the Holy Land," *The Wire*, June 1, 2015, <https://thewire.in/2884/when-narendra-modi-goes-to-the-holy-land/>

¹⁶ Md. Muddassir Quamar, "A New Direction for India-Saudi Arabia Ties", *The Diplomat*, March 10, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/03/a-new-direction-for-india-saudi-arabia-ties/>

¹⁷ Md. Muddassir Quamar, "What makes India-UAE relations unique and thriving," *South Asia Monitor*, February 20, 2017, <http://southasiamonitor.org/news/what-makes-india-uae-relations-unique-and-thriving/sl/22196>

¹⁸ Md. Muddassir Quamar, "India-Turkey Relations: Frozen in Time?" *IDSA Issue Brief*, May 12, 2017, http://idsa.in/issuebrief/india-turkey-relations-frozen-in-time_mmquamar_120517

statement outlining India's policy, rather India's redefined Palestine policy. In his public statement with Abbas standing next to him, Modi observed:

The relationship between India and Palestine is built on the foundation of long-standing solidarity and friendship since the days of our own freedom struggle. India has been unwavering in its support of the Palestinian cause. And, we hope to see the realization of a sovereign, independent, united and viable Palestine, co-existing peacefully with Israel. I have reaffirmed our position on this to President Abbas during our conversation today.¹⁹

There is, however, an interesting catch. This measured statement stands in contrast to the traditional Indian position on Palestine. Partly to balance its relations with Israel and partly to reiterate its pro-Palestinian credentials, during the past decade Indian leaders have been expressing support for the Palestinian narrative of the final settlement, namely, "a sovereign Palestinian state with east Jerusalem as its capital." For example, speaking on the occasion of the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinians in 2009, Minister of State for External Affairs Shashi Tharoor observed,

... a just and comprehensive solution can be achieved resulting in a sovereign, independent, viable and united State of Palestine living within secure and recognized borders with East Jerusalem as its Capital, side by side and at peace with the State of Israel, as endorsed in the Quartet Road Map and the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1397& 1515.²⁰

Unfortunately for India, however, neither the Quartet Road Map²¹ nor UNSC resolutions²² describe East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state. This, nevertheless, did not prevent Prime Minister Manmohan Singh repeating the same formulation in his speech before the UN General Assembly in September 2011.²³

This formulation has been repeated by other Indian leaders as well. Until last Tuesday, this was the position of the NDA government as well, with Modi himself accepting this formulation during the Fortaleza Declaration in July 2014. During his

¹⁹ Ministry of External Affairs, "Press Statement by Prime Minister during the State Visit of President of Palestine to India (May 16, 2017)," May 16, 2017, http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/28466/Press_Statement_by_Prime_Minister_during_the_State_Visit_of_President_of_Palestine_to_India_May_16_2017

²⁰ Ministry of External Affairs, Speech of MOS (ST) on the occasion of "International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People", December 2, 2009, http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/1399/Speech_of_MOSST_on_the_occasion_of_International_Day_of_Solidarity_with_the_Palestinian_People

²¹ For the text of the Quartet Roadmap of April 2003, see, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2989783.stm

²² For the full text of Resolution 1397 adopted on March 12, 2002, see, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2002/sc7326.doc.htm>; for the full text of UNSC Resolution 1515 adopted on November 19, 2003, see <https://www.un.org/press/en/2003/sc7924.doc.htm>

²³ Ministry of External Affairs, "Statement by the Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh at the General Debate of the 66th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, September 24, 2011," http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/287/Statement_by_the_Prime_Minister_Dr_Manmohan_Singh_at_the_General_Debate_of_the_66th_Session_of_the_United_Nations_General_Assembly

visit to Palestine in October 2015, President Mukherjee also referred to East Jerusalem being the capital of the future Palestine state.²⁴ The same position was maintained by Vice-President Hamid Ansari during a book event held in January 2016.²⁵

This week, however, Modi has irreversibly transformed this position and, by not making any reference to Jerusalem, he has recognised the ground realities. Jerusalem, especially the Eastern part of the city, has layers of theological, historical, political and archaeological claims and contestations and has to be resolved through negotiations and mutual respect and accommodation.

Indeed, Modi's position comes against the backdrop of India's shifting position in UNESCO over the city of Jerusalem. On April 15, 2016, the 58-member Executive Board of UNESCO adopted a resolution that explicitly endorsed exclusive Islamic claims and narratives over the city of Jerusalem without any reference to the Jewish history or the erstwhile presence of two Jewish temples in the city. India voted for this resolution sponsored by six Arab countries, including Egypt and Qatar, and the Indian position came under criticism.²⁶ However, in two subsequent votes held on October 13, 2016, and May 2, 2017, India chose to abstain. Commenting on the Indian shift, one Israeli commentator observed:

India's vote is also seen as significant in Jerusalem. India is a country that only of late has sporadically taken to changing what for decades was a reflex to vote against Israel in all international forums, and this is an indication that a new pattern of abstaining is setting in. What is even more significant is that India was willing to abstain, even though at first they argued to vote for the resolution because it was so watered down.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is due to visit Israel in July, and this vote is partly seen as an Indian gesture before that visit, but is also a sign of how significantly relations with New Delhi have developed.²⁷

As with his domestic agenda, Modi's primary focus in foreign policy is also on development. Political issues were confined to and compressed in three sentences: "We had extensive exchange of views on the situation in West Asia and the Middle

²⁴ President of India, "India Remains Unwavering And Steadfast In Its Support For The Palestinian Cause, Says President," October 13, 2015, <http://presidentofindia.nic.in/press-release-detail.htm?1820>

²⁵ Vice-President of India, "Remarks by Shri M. Hamid Ansari, Honourable Vice President of India at the launch of the book Israel as a gift of the Arabs: Letter from Tel Aviv written by Prof. Shail Mayaram, published by Yoda Press, New Delhi on 5 January 2016," January 5, 2016, <http://vicepresidentofindia.nic.in/speechesinterviews/remarks-shri-m-hamid-ansari-honourable-vice-president-india-launch-book-israel>

²⁶ Kanchan Gupta, "At Unesco, India votes to deface Jewish heritage," *The Pioneer*, April 24, 2016, <http://www.dailypioneer.com/columnists/coffee-break/at-unesco-india-votes-to-deface-jewish-heritage.html>; P R Kumaraswamy, "UNESCO Tries To Rewrite Jerusalem's History: Why Did India Play Along?," *Swarajya*, May 6, 2016, <https://swarajyamag.com/world/unesco-tries-to-rewrite-jerusalem-history-why-did-india-play-along>

²⁷ Herb Keinon, "Losing at UNESCO isn't everything," *The Jerusalem Post*, May 3, 2017, <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Analysis-Losing-at-UNESCO-isnt-everything-489580>

East Peace Process. We agreed that the challenges in West Asia must be addressed through sustained political dialogue and peaceful means. India hopes for early resumption of talks between Palestinian and Israeli sides to move towards finding a comprehensive resolution.”²⁸ In short, no unilateralism, violence or imposed settlements from outside.

In contrast, much of Modi's focus has been on developmental issues such as 'capacity-building', 'information technology, youth and skills development', 'Techno-park', 'our cultural exchanges', and 'Yoga exchanges.' Five MoUs signed during the Abbas visit pertained to the field of agriculture, sports, health, IT and visa exemption for diplomatic passports. Surprisingly, India did not announce any special financial aid, assistance or major projects.²⁹

For his part, Abbas was measured in expressing his views. In his exclusive interview to *The Hindu*, he thanked the people of India who "stood tall for the universal rights of freedom, justice and peace" and its leaders "for their generous economic support."³⁰ Making pleasantries about India's involvement in the peace process, he blamed the Israeli government for the stalled peace negotiations.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992, India has been 'balancing' its relations with Israel and Palestine. Modi has now de-hyphenated it. Besides being unapologetic about engaging with Israel, he is prepared to deal with both the parties independently and bilaterally. In practical terms, this means more economic engagements than political platitudes. Above all, by not referring to East Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian State, he has signalled a major departure from the past. India is no longer prepared to endorse the exclusive Palestinian claims over the City but desires a negotiated political settlement based on mutual respect and accommodation. As one commentator remarked, the "Abbas visit signals a shift".³¹ Yes, indeed, but not for the reasons commonly understood or explained.

²⁸ Ministry of External Affairs, "Press Statement by Prime Minister during the State Visit of President of Palestine to India (May 16, 2017)," May 16, 2017, http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/28466/Press_Statement_by_Prime_Minister_during_the_State_Visit_of_President_of_Palestine_to_India_May_16_2017

²⁹ Ministry of External Affairs, "List of MoUs exchanged during the State visit of President of Palestine to India (May 16, 2017), May 16, 2017," http://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/28467/List_of_MoUs_exchanged_during_the_State_visit_of_President_of_Palestine_to_India_May_16_2017

³⁰ Suhasini Haidar, "We want India to help in upcoming peace efforts, says Palestine President Mahmoud Abbas," *The Hindu*, May 16, 2017, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/we-want-india-in-peace-process-says-palestine-president-mahmoud-abbas/article18459281.ece>

³¹ Kallol Bhattacharjee, "Abbas visit signals a shift," *The Hindu*, May 14, 2017, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/abbas-visit-signals-a-shift/article18452142.ece>

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