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Iran Sees New Opportunity for Regional Domination Despite Turkish Competition

Lt. Col. (ret.) Michael Segall

- The Iranian political-military leadership has argued that the protest movement in the Arab world draws its inspiration from Iran's Islamic Revolution. In the Iranian conceptual lexicon, one does not encounter the concept of the "Arab Spring" that is so prevalent in Arab and Western political discourse. Instead, Iran has coined the term "Islamic awakening," which also reflects Iran's policy, course of action, and aspirations.
- Senior Iranian officials contend that the first lines of Iran's defense pass through Lebanon and Palestine. From Iran's perspective, compelling Israel to constantly deal with threats on its northern and southern borders renders the possibility of an Israeli attack on Iran more remote.
- The struggle against Israel also constitutes an important recruiting tool in the protracted battle with "Western arrogance that implanted the Zionist entity deep in the heart of the Muslim world, and the world of Islam." A revival of Iranian activity to export the Islamic Revolution is now gathering fresh impetus in the Arab world, and an anti-Israel dynamic is being fed by an Arab street that has shaken off fear of its rulers.
- In contrast to the perceived economic enfeeblement of the Western economies headed by the United States, which constitute the bases of support for the "Zionist regime," Iran offers a substitute view of a new world order and an alternative, defiant Islamic agenda.
- Yet it is doubtful if the struggle against Israel and "global Zionism" will transform Shiite Iran into an acceptable party that can lead the change in the Middle East, given the

fundamental apprehension of the "Shiite demon" among Sunnis that lingers on under the surface. In addition, Iran is fated to pay a price for its continued backing of the Assad regime in Syria.

- Turkey and Iran are currently in competition to lead the changes now shaping the Muslim world. Initially, Iran reacted with restraint, but now appears to be fighting back, accusing Turkey of sponsoring "liberal Islam" and cooperating with the West. In any case, the focus of the two remains the same – hostility toward Israel and seeing who can harm it the most.

For Iran, the tremors the Middle East is experiencing represent an opportunity to alter the political-religious landscape in the region from top to bottom. Nevertheless, some of these tremors, primarily in Syria, pose a strategic risk for Iran and have already engendered tension in its relations with Turkey after only a brief "golden age."

The Iranian leadership – both its spiritual leader and president, as well as most of the senior military echelon – has argued that the protest movement in the Arab world draws its inspiration from Iran's Islamic Revolution. They also believe the protests can alter the region's landscape and historic strategic equations, to transfer control over regional affairs to the states of the region while simultaneously ejecting the superpowers. In the Iranian conceptual lexicon one does not encounter the concept of the "Arab Spring" that is so prevalent in Arab and Western political discourse. Instead, Iran has coined the term "Islamic awakening," which also reflects Iran's policy. Since the protests began, Iran has sought to color them with vivid Islamic hues and even attempts to leverage them to dovetail with Iranian regional interests and aspirations. Iran has even launched a website entitled Islamic-awakening.ir that functions as a venue for describing regional events in the spirit of its political doctrine and ideology.¹

The Revival of Khomeini's Legacy

This doctrine was broadly and systematically deployed in the course of the speeches and ceremonies marking "International Jerusalem (Qods) Day" that is commemorated annually during the last week of the month of Ramadan (this year on August 26). This event, which has taken place since 1979 following a decision by Khomeini and the Iranian government, is intended to convey Iran's deep support and commitment to the Palestinian cause and its desire to "liberate Jerusalem." Khomeini's dogma continues to serve as an anchor that currently dictates, defines, and shapes the Islamic Revolution's objectives. This includes Iran's export of the revolution and its aspiration to realize these objectives. Part and parcel of these objectives are a hostile attitude towards Israel and the constantly reiterated calls for Israel's (the "Zionist regime's") extermination and removal from the region.

"Qods Day" occurred in 2011 in the eye of the storm represented by the upheavals in the Arab world and the destruction of the old order in the Middle East. From the standpoint of Iran, the downfall of the moderate, "westernized" Arab rulers – and particularly Egyptian President Mubarak who constituted a major impediment towards realizing the Iranian vision and even served as a tool of the "arrogant powers" – is considered additional proof of what the Iranians define as "divine intervention" in Middle East events.

From the Iranian standpoint, the major events shaping the region emphasize the righteousness of Khomeini's path and doctrine. The majority of Iran's enemies have receded: the Soviet Union collapsed; Saddam Hussein was defeated and the Iraqi threat has faded; al-Qaeda has been weakened; the Taliban regime in Afghanistan has collapsed; Hizbullah has become the ruler of Lebanon and stood up to Israel for 33 days during the Second Lebanon War; Hamas in Gaza has drawn closer to Iran and managed to contend with Israel in the 2009 Gaza War; Iran's nuclear and missile programs are progressing despite international pressure; and the Shiites in Bahrain are in ferment. Finally, the Arab world is fragmenting while their Islamic components (some of which have received clandestine Iranian support) not only display unity but may capture power should democratic elections take place. They also express positions similar to the Iranian position in everything connected to relations with Israel.

Thus, after an Egyptian mob occupied Israel's embassy in Cairo, the Iranian leadership and state-run media outlets stated that the event marks the end of Israel's presence in Egypt. The *Basij* (the volunteer arm of the Revolutionary Guards) issued a statement to mark the capture of the "Zionist espionage den in Cairo by Egypt's Muslim warriors" ("espionage den" is a popular phrase in Iran that refers to the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979). The statement further read:

Islamic Iran has expressed its opposition to the Zionist regime since its establishment and has always been the only country to oppose the peace talks between the Arabs and Israel, thus forming the greatest obstacle to fulfillment of the satanic schemes of the Israeli regime and puppet Arab governments in the region. The U.S. and its strategic ally Israel greatly fear the establishment of a strong Islamic bloc headed by Iran that will change the balance of power in the region and the world, and are therefore trying to foment plots as well as intelligence and espionage schemes to prevent the occurrence of similar revolutions.²

Decline of the West Presages a New Islamic Age

According to Iran's appraisal, the power of the Western and Western Islamic Arab regimes that restrained and prevented the people from expressing their true sentiments and strangled their protests in everything connected with Israel and the intervention by the Western states in the region is increasingly eroding. This, in fact, is heralding a new Islamic age in the Middle East led by Iran, whose revolution – so Tehran believes or at least outwardly pretends – furnishes inspiration for the Arab masses. Even prior to the Middle Eastern upheavals, Iran attempted to find ways to reach the hearts and minds of the Arab masses over the heads of their tyrant-

leaders. Currently, Iran feels itself more comfortable and confident in promoting its anti-Western and anti-Israel/Zionist rhetoric and agenda, proposing an Islamic alternative under its patronage for shaping the Middle East, as the country that has consistently stood up to "Western hegemony."

Given the dramatic Arab weakness and the weakening of the superpower grip over the region, Iran is displaying increasing self-confidence. This finds expression in its hardening positions and its confrontational agenda with the West on almost every major issue in the region. These include Iran's vigorous opposition to a two-state solution for Israel and the Palestinians and support for continuation of the armed struggle and "resistance" to Israel's existence; support for Syria (and Syria's clampdown on pro-reform protesters) as a major state in the camp opposing Israel and the West, despite the severe and persistent violence by the Syrian regime against the opposition; support for Palestinian terrorist organizations and Hizbullah; provocative military maneuvers including the launch of long-range, ground-to-ground missiles and sailing Iranian frigates through the Suez Canal; and the promotion of an ambitious nuclear program that recently found expression in the transfer of centrifuges to the new installation in Fordu near Qom, its enrichment of uranium to a level of 20 percent³ and the connection of the Bushehr nuclear power plant to the national electricity grid.⁴

Khamenei: Seeking to Create a Solid Islamic Bloc

The statement by Khamenei (whose status has recently been reinforced at the expense of Ahmadinejad) during a meeting with professors and academics in Tehran on the eve of "Qods Day" accurately reflects the new Iranian credo and Iran's vision for a Middle East after the "end of the age of the superpowers" and the "puppet Arab rulers."⁵

The Iranian leader is aware of the greatness of the moment, but he is also aware of the implicit dangers for Iran and its vision. He said:

The Middle East is experiencing a vast change that implies both prospects and risks. The major risk that is implausible is that the superpowers will return via propaganda to rule over the region for another 50-60 years. They've already begun this with the dangerous precedent of Libya. They are exploiting the vacuum and are attempting to establish a foothold.

Nonetheless, Khamenei estimates that

The most plausible scenario is that the determination of the people will lead to the establishment of countries ruled by the people, and as such they will be popular-Islamic countries as their people are Muslims in various forms....(This) despite the aspirations of the arrogant superpowers, the United States and the Zionists, to force their will upon them....If elections were held today in all the (liberated) countries, the result would favor Islamic tendencies....Who could have imagined that

tendencies in Egypt would be so clearly Islamic?...The plausible scenario is that regional developments will lead to the creation of a solid and clear Islamic bloc in which many members of the elite will participate.

Khamenei emphasizes that

In any event, Iran cannot remain indifferent in the face of these dramatic developments. One thing is clear, recent regional developments have demonstrated that all Western economic, political, and managerial theories have been proven false, valueless, and have reached a dead end in the region; despite all the efforts that they made, their presence in the region is being constantly eroded. All this only demonstrates (what Iran has always contended) that we must rely now more than ever on ourselves and on the Islamic school of thought.

In his address for "International Qods Day," Khamenei tried to connect the Middle East upheaval and the Palestinian issue into a single, systematic doctrine and demonstrate that Iran has always served as a major actor that is genuinely concerned with the Palestinian interest. Khamenei said:

This is the day that the Iranian people can raise a shout for justice with the help of other enthusiastic peoples whose number is only increasing, a shout that the arrogant superpowers had attempted to strangle over the past 60 years, ever since the establishment of the State of Israel.

Khamenei notes that

Without the Iranian shout at least another hundred years would have elapsed and in their course they would have attempted to wipe Palestine off the geographic map....They almost succeeded....But Iran's Islamic Revolution dealt a blow to their schemes....The Islamic Revolution, the declaration of Jerusalem Day, the transformation of the Israeli Embassy in Tehran into the Palestinian Embassy, constituted a warning and an aggressive (Iranian) preventive measure that opposed the schemes of the superpowers (to remove the Palestinian issue from the agenda).

The Iranian leader emphasized an important element that senior Iranian officials had refrained from emphasizing until recently, and this constitutes a major component in Iran's national security strategy. Khamenei emphasized that

Most fortunately, Jerusalem Day has expanded...and constitutes a sort of backstop for Iranian security. Iranian citizens must recognize the fact that every single person taking part in the Qods Day parades is performing his role in preserving Iranian security and the achievements of the Islamic Revolution.

The words of Khamenei dovetail fully with statements by senior Iranian officials who contend that the first lines of Iran's defense pass through Lebanon and Palestine. The Iranian investment in Palestine and Lebanon constitutes part of its national security strategy. From Iran's perspective, compelling Israel to constantly deal with threats on its northern and southern borders renders the possibility of an Israeli attack on Iran more remote, weakens Israel internally (causing damage to its rear), and strikes at its legitimacy in the international arena.

Ahmadinejad: The West and the Zionist Regime Have No Place in the New Middle Eastern Landscape

With variations, Khamenei's messages recur in announcements, addresses, and editorials in the Iranian press that have all closed ranks behind the conclusion that the regional revolutions have their origin in the trailblazing Iranian Islamic revolution that occurred 30 years ago.

Ahmadinejad's inflammatory address in what has become an annual event did not mince words when it came to denigrating Zionism and the West, and reiterated his standard repertoire, with Holocaust denial and calls for Israel's extermination.⁶ He described the "history of Palestine" at length and how the West assumed control over Palestine and installed the Zionist entity there while exploiting the Arab nations' weakness and the "flaccidness of the Ottoman Empire" (a barb at Turkey).

In this fashion the Zionist regime became the critical sacred axis of the West and the colonialists....I'm prohibited from speaking or protesting the reasons for its establishment, not even in the name of free speech....Every mention of the Zionist regime constitutes a sin....The Zionist regime serves as a common denominator for all uncultured, inhuman, arrogant and colonialist nations...and constitutes a reflection of the image, values and principles of the Western capitalist world....Its purpose is to preserve an atmosphere of fear, intimidation, terror, aggression, division, and deceit in the region on a permanent basis in order to lay the groundwork for continued influence and control by the Western countries and to thwart the technological and scientific development of the countries of the region.

Ahmadinejad said that the entire foundations of the Zionist regime are predicated on a lie and the Holocaust is one of these lies. According to him the Zionists don't act only against the Palestinians and the countries of the region, but also serve as a Western tool for exercising control the world over, in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. With this background in mind, the Iranian president determines that Qods Day is a "day of unity for all lovers of justice and freedom and the monotheistic religions against oppression, and with God's help will lead to the total liquidation of the Zionist regime."

Given the expected Palestinian moves at the United Nations, the Iranian president warned that

Formal recognition for the Palestinian state is not the final objective. It is only a first step towards the liberation of all Palestine....The Zionist regime constitutes the heart of bacterial and cancerous cells. If it remains even on one inch of Palestinian soil it will again expand and lurk in ambush for an opportunity to injure everyone....The Palestinian resistance must be certain to avoid tying itself to a weak government (the Palestinian Authority) on a small portion of Palestine....The Palestinian nation and regional nations must never forget the sacred objective of entirely liberating Palestine....Palestinian honor, greatness and power are implicit in a continuation of the struggle for liberating Palestinian soil in its entirety....Any waiver of this objective is tantamount to suicide and provides an opportunity for the enemy to destroy and kill.

Similar to Khamenei, Ahmadinejad also warned the countries of the region against Western intentions to stage a renewed takeover of the region. He said:

Those responsible for all the dictatorial regimes, the tyrants, and the penury of peoples, after they've been kicked out the door, are currently attempting to reenter via the window under the pretense that they are trying to provide democracy and liberty to the nations of the region....We must all stand guard....Liberty, justice, free elections, and the right of self-determination are the privilege of all nations including those in our region and North Africa. Nevertheless, we must be vigilant and cautious and recognize the fact that these rights can never be the result of the NATO gun barrel (policy) and the American armed forces.

In his conclusion, the Iranian president directed a message to "the Zionists and their bosses:"

Your entire existence bespeaks robbery...you have come to kill...destroy...but your time is up....The nations have awakened; their power of faith has again resurfaced. Your interest is to return to your home, to the places from where you came....Go back to your homes....Don't think for a moment that with formal recognition for the Palestinian state you'll arrive at security and rest....This is only the start....You have no place among the nations of the region....You will not be able to persist in your shameful lives, not even on a single grain of Palestinian soil.

In a message to the Western countries, he said:

Four hundred years of colonialism and 100 years of slavery, wars and plunder are enough....You think that you can again draw the geographic lines in our region, control the oil and the will of nations through your plans, but you're mistaken....The nations have arisen from their slumber. They are at peak vigilance and readiness....The Middle East will be reshaped. The nations will no longer agree with the previous situation; they're looking forward to shaping it in their image, in the image of the region in line with Islamic thought....You must recognize the fact that

you (the West) and the Zionist regime will have no place in the new Middle Eastern landscape.

To the Arab leaders:

How many states in the region neglected their peoples in the course of recent decades and only coveted the pleasures of power and tribal brawls. I tell them: Desist, don't play into the hands of the enemy. This is the final and decisive round. Be attentive to your nations, be partners to the divine awakening of the region's peoples against the colonial powers....Have you paid attention that the Americans and Zionists are not loyal friends? And they will sacrifice you on behalf of their interests.

A Permanent Fixation

Khomeini's heritage, reiterated by Iranian leaders again and again, continues to guide the second generation of the revolution. It is an everlasting constant that one must not deviate from, but one can fine tune and adjust it to the times and the location. This principle views the struggle against Israel as something that does not stand independently, but constitutes an important recruiting tool and common denominator with fellow-Muslims in the protracted "hundreds of years-long battle with Western arrogance that implanted the Zionist entity deep in the heart of the Muslim world and the world of Islam."

A revival of the complex web of Iranian activity to export the Islamic Revolution is now gathering fresh impetus in the new atmosphere that has been created in the Arab world, and an anti-Israel dynamic is being fed by an Arab street that has shaken off fear of its rulers. This has occurred primarily because the fetters that Arab leaders imposed on Iranian activity that targeted Islamic opposition groups have eroded and because the "Arab-Islamic street," that previously responded passively to anti-Israel demonstrations (given the repression by the security forces), has now awakened.

Since all the Arab countries are currently preoccupied with their own internal problems while neglecting the realm of joint Arab action, this leaves the regional arena to Iran, which launches diverse initiatives such as broad assistance to Somalia, and attempts to establish direct links with Islamic parties in various countries after years when these contacts were conducted clandestinely.

The Iranian promotion of its revolutionary aspirations and its drive for regional Islamic hegemony by denying the existence of the State of Israel (referred to as the Zionist regime; the regime that occupies "Al-Qods") allows Iran to display an activist approach to Arab problems in general and to the Palestinian problem in particular. This creates a stark contrast with the feebleness displayed by Arab rulers. Iran currently possesses a broad ideological and practical platform for effectively realizing and practicing the vision of Khomeini, the revolution's founder.

For example, Revolutionary Guards Politburo Chief General Yadollah Javani said: "Recent events in the region and the wave of Islamic Awakening in the countries which had earlier been strategic allies of Israel are factors accelerating the collapse of the Israeli usurper regime." Iranian Ambassador to Beirut Qazanfar Roknabadi said: "The Zionist regime is on the verge of collapse after the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak."⁷

Through its rhetoric defaming Israel and Zionism and its active support (with weapons, training, and guidance) of Palestinian organizations, Iran has captured the attention of broad publics in the Arab and Islamic world (including communities in Latin America, Asia and Africa). Iran transmits these messages via its own television channels in Arabic and many other languages. Recently Iran also inaugurated a Spanish television channel.

Ahmadinejad's acerbic anti-Israel rhetoric is not his own invention. He is in fact remarketing the slogans of the original revolution, recasting them to conform to the times and linking them to the new and rapidly changing geo-strategic reality being created in the region and in the world (including the perceived economic enfeeblement of the Western economies headed by the United States, which constitute the bases of support for the "Zionist regime"). In contrast, they position Iran as a stable and robust actor with a systematic and coherent ideological, political, and religious doctrine that offers a substitute view of a new world order.

Furthermore, as world public opinion focuses on the "Arab Spring" in the Middle East, this has diverted the spotlight from Iran as it continues to promote its nuclear programs. From this standpoint, the Middle East upheaval has served Iranian interests admirably.

The Iranian-Turkish Rivalry

Iran senses that with the disappearance of problematic rulers, the conflict with Israel and the West can be turned into something essentially Islamic. However, precisely in this realm Iran is encountering an old rival in the form of Turkey. In this context, the longer the protests in Syria continue and escalate while Iran continues to stand by the Syrian regime, the gap between Ankara and Tehran deepens. Turkey's recent decision to allow the deployment of a NATO anti-ballistic missile defense system in its territory added more tension to Ankara-Tehran relations. Iran's president carefully chose his words, saying, "Turkey is among our brothers and sincere friends; however, when enemies set up a missile shield there and admit it is against Iran, one should be careful."

Iranian criticism of Turkey has intensified in recent weeks, with senior clerics such as Ayatollah Makarem-Shirazi criticizing Turkey for ceasing to support Syria and aligning itself with the "arrogant powers." He said: "We did not expect Turkey to approve of the arrogant powers and be at their complete disposal."⁸ Former judiciary chief Ayatollah Hashemi Sharoudi charged that Turkey was using developments in the region to promote liberal Islam. He stated that "the arrogant Western powers are afraid of regional countries' relations with the Islamic Republic of

Iran and are making efforts to introduce innovative models of Islam, such as liberal Islam in Turkey, and are seeking to replace the true Islam with them."⁹ The terms "liberal Islam" and "untrue" were concepts reserved by Iran for describing Islam in Saudi Arabia – Iran's sworn enemy, Egypt, and Jordan, attesting to the deterioration of relations with Turkey. Numerous editorials in the Iranian press have also addressed the rivalry emerging between Iran and Turkey and the clash between the two over the Syrian issue and regional aspirations.

The Struggle Against Israel: The Common Denominator with the Sunni Arab World

The struggle against Israel and "global Zionism," together with Holocaust denial, constitute the almost exclusive common denominator that connects Iran with the mostly Sunni Arab world. It provides Iran with tools that allow it to bridge Arab-Persian and Sunni-Shiite differences over the heads of the Arab leaders, but it is doubtful if this will transform Shiite Iran into an acceptable party that can lead the change in the Middle East, given the fundamental apprehension of the "Shiite demon" among Sunnis that is encouraged by Saudi Arabia.

There are initial feelers out to resume diplomatic relations between Iran and Egypt and an Iranian parliamentary delegation headed by the Chairman of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of the Majlis has visited Cairo. A number of Egyptian delegations have visited Tehran as well. However, the underlying suspicion between the two countries is still great. The Iranian paper *Jomhuri-e Eslami*, which led the critical line against Egypt during the Mubarak era, recently wrote under the headline "Talks with Those Who Stole the Revolution" (the supreme military council), that the Egyptian revolution was still facing problems, and criticized Iranian officials who were hastening to reestablish relations with Egypt. It claimed that conditions had not yet matured for establishing full diplomatic relations with Cairo.¹⁰

Iran views the new reality in the Middle East as a moment of opportunity to promote the Islamic agenda that it has always preached. Although Iranian propaganda and the anti-Israel messages that emerge from it are currently identical to the calls heard on the Arab street, and dovetail with the Islamic agenda that occasionally peeps out in the new Arab agenda, it is highly doubtful that they will suffice to improve Iran's status in the Arab countries since the basic antipathies that have hitherto limited Iranian activity in the region linger on under the surface. The continued Iranian assistance to Bashar Assad, who persists in killing his own people, may further alienate those who made the revolutions in the Arab world – both those that have already occurred and those on the way. Iran is fated to pay a price for its continued backing of the Assad regime.

In addition, the Turks have entered the Middle East arena, seeking to advance a neo-Ottoman agenda within the same void that Iran is seeking to fill. Turkey is competing with Iran on the same "street" and its leaders are offering the same aggressive messages toward Israel. Turkey has had a number of successes in its competition with Iran – from sending the flotilla to Gaza and its international aftermath to the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador, Erdogan's visit to

Egypt, and its threats to confront Israel at sea (which also serve as a counterweight to the passage of Iranian warships through the Suez Canal).

Iran claims that those who overran the Israeli Embassy in Cairo received their inspiration from the takeover of the American Embassy in Tehran in 1979, but the memory of the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador from Ankara is fresher. Turkey and Iran are currently in competition to lead the changes now shaping the Muslim world. Initially, Iran reacted with restraint toward Turkey, but now it appears to be fighting back. Iran has accused Turkey of sponsoring "liberal Islam" and cooperating with the West. Escalating tension between the two may be expected in the battle for the hearts of the "free Arabs." In any case, the focus of the two remains the same – hostility toward Israel and seeing who can harm it the most.

President George W. Bush's tidings of democratization as a balm for the area, after the liberation of Iraq, have finally arrived in the Middle East. Now these tidings are shared by the entire Middle East, which has become an arena for clashes between the West, revolutionary Iranian Islam, and the Turkish Islamic model.

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Notes

1. <http://www.ummatona.com/?lang=fa>
2. <http://www.iran-newspaper.com/1390/6/21/Iran/4886/Page/2/Index.htm>
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IDF Lt. Col. (ret.) Michael (Mickey) Segall, an expert on strategic issues with a focus on Iran, terrorism, and the Middle East, is a senior analyst at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

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Dore Gold, Publisher; Alan Baker, ICA Director; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor; Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (Registered Amuta), 13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, Israel; Tel. 972-2-561-9281, Fax. 972-2-561-9112, Email: jcpa@netvision.net.il. In U.S.A.: Center for Jewish Community Studies, 7 Church Lane, Suite 9, Baltimore, MD 21208; Tel. 410-653-7779; Fax 410-653-8889. Website: www.jcpa.org. © Copyright. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the Board of Fellows of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

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