



Trump's Syria Shambles

By Max Hoffman

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President Donald Trump's October 6, 2019, decision to withdraw U.S. troops from northeastern Syria has thrown a previously stabilized part of the war-torn country back into chaos. This rash decision—absent any coordination with U.S. allies or Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) partners on the ground—paved the way for a long-threatened Turkish incursion into Syria. As predicted by outside experts and professionals within the U.S. government, the incursion has sparked further violence, displaced hundreds of thousands of people, and forced the SDF to cut a deal with the Assad regime and its Russian backers.¹ It has also shattered American credibility and set off a mad dash by all sides to fill the security vacuum left by the U.S. withdrawal.

This issue brief provides background information on the American withdrawal decision and subsequent Turkish incursion, considers the risks of long-term instability caused by these events, and outlines steps the United States could take to salvage what it can from the situation and begin to reset its increasingly adversarial relationship with Turkey.

The immediate crisis

Before President Trump's withdrawal of U.S. troops from northeastern Syria, American forces were on the ground alongside British and French troops as part of an international coalition helping the multiethnic SDF stabilize the region and guard against a resurgence of the Islamic State (IS). In addition to its counterterrorism mission, the multinational force also acted as a deterrent against Turkish threats to attack the SDF, which is dominated by the People's Protection Units (YPG). The YPG is linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Turkey labels a terrorist organization. Turkey worried that U.S. support would enable the SDF and the YPG to build an autonomous statelet along Turkey's southern border, something that it feared might strengthen the PKK's insurgency within Turkey. Beyond crippling the chances of Kurdish autonomy within Syria, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan wanted to establish a buffer zone extending some 30 kilometers into Syria from the Euphrates River to the Iraqi border into which Turkey could resettle some of the 3.7 million Syrian refugees now living in Turkey. The presence and visibility of the Syrian refugees within Turkey has become a significant political liability and drain on Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party's (AKP) popularity, which slid to a new low before the U.S. withdrawal.²

The U.S. withdrawal and subsequent Turkish invasion has had a number of negative and destabilizing consequences. Most immediately, Turkey's military incursion has led to a humanitarian crisis.³ Hundreds of people have been killed in the fighting already, with the shelling of towns on both sides of the border and intense urban fighting driving people from their homes. The International Rescue Committee says that 200,000 people have already been displaced by the Turkish offensive, but the actual number may be higher.⁴ The United Nations cannot get aid to northeastern Syria for both political and logistical reasons, and independent international aid organizations have now had to suspend the delivery of essential health and humanitarian services and evacuate their personnel to avoid the fighting.⁵ The already inadequate reconstruction efforts to restore normalcy and basic services to the area following the counter-IS campaign have been undercut by the American withdrawal, and important infrastructure has been further damaged. Water shortages have been reported in the Syrian city of Hasakah after a crucial water station was damaged in the fighting.⁶

Abandoned by the United States and facing attacks by Turkey and its proxies, the SDF pivoted to their protector of last resort: the Assad regime and its Russian backers. Based on a poorly understood agreement, the SDF invited Syrian and Russian forces to move swiftly into disputed areas around Manbij, Kobani, Tal Abyad, and Tal Tamr to contain the Turkish offensive. The Syrian regime and Russia raced forces into key positions to stake their claim and establish effective control. All the parties to the conflict are militarily overextended, but even small Russian and Syrian forces act as a political tripwire. Turkey does not want a direct confrontation with Syria or Russia, so these small detachments forced Ankara to either accept the regime's return or attempt to dislodge them and risk an escalation. This was a dangerous strategy, given the tremendous fog of war and the notoriously unreliable Turkish-backed opposition, but it enabled the Assad regime and Russia to reclaim influence over a huge swath of Syrian territory they had effectively abandoned in 2013.

This madcap race to carve up the Northeast has resulted in a patchwork of effective control, with the region split between the Assad regime and the Russians, Turkey and its proxies, and the remnants of the SDF, with varying levels of regime cooperation. The Turkish-backed groups that Ankara is relying on to secure most of the area for Turkey have shown themselves to be violent, ill-disciplined, and bent on revenge against both the SDF and the Assad regime; they have already executed prisoners and civilians.⁷ The risks of inadvertent clashes and further violence remain high. This end state is likely to leave the region more divided, less open to humanitarian aid, and much more dangerous for civilians.

Even before the U.S. withdrawal upended the situation, the region faced a low-grade IS insurgency, and the present chaos could provide the perfect conditions for a return. Already, there are reports of IS detainees escaping from SDF-controlled prisons as guards are drawn away to defend against the Turkish attack.⁸ Trump's sudden decision left little time for contingency planning, and the United States was unable to secure high-value IS detainees in its hasty retreat.⁹ Some U.S. officials have said that Turkish-backed fighters have released IS prisoners, though varying accounts are hard to parse.¹⁰

But senior U.S. government officials confirm that they do not have a clear picture of the security of the more than 10,000 IS detainees in SDF custody.¹¹ The United States and its allies can still conduct a standoff counterterrorism policy through surveillance, air strikes, and raids to prevent IS from returning to its previous strength; however, this strategy will carry greater risks as the Russian and regime presence in eastern Syria grows, complicating U.S. access to intelligence, informants, and airspace. Overall, Trump and the Turkish government have severely weakened the most reliable counterterrorism partner and force for stability on the ground—the SDF—and have hugely increased the risks of further violence and terrorism in the process.

Looking ahead to longer-term prospects for the region

The longer-term outlook is hardly bright for a region split between Turkey and its unreliable proxies, the Assad regime and the Russians, and an SDF that will likely splinter into those in the crosshairs of Turkish assault who cooperated with the regime and those more fearful of the regime and seeking to avoid falling back under Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad's control. Attacks by a resurgent IS would further complicate the picture. Under the current circumstances, it will be much more difficult to bring in humanitarian aid or rebuild basic services, as Turkey may be reluctant to allow cross-border aid and the international community will likely hesitate to provide aid to insecure areas that may eventually be controlled by Assad.

The situation is a disaster for the Kurdish and Arab fighters of the SDF, as well as for the civil councils that had sought to stabilize and administer eastern Syria. Despite having 11,000 of their people killed and 22,000 more wounded in the fight to clear the area of IS, the SDF have lost their dream of autonomy within a federal Syria due to Trump's abandonment and Turkey's invasion. Although the Assad regime is cooperating now because partnering with the SDF lets it reclaim territory cheaply, Damascus will likely want revenge on the SDF—particularly its leadership—for working with the United States and will suspect the SDF of disloyalty. When the Turkish threat recedes, the regime may start to quietly round people up for torture and execution, as it has in the past.¹² Already, residents in Deir Ezzor are protesting the return of the regime, knowing what Assad's control means for Syrians.¹³ The United States' abandonment of the SDF is also a potential intelligence coup for Moscow, allowing Russian forces to interrogate SDF members about U.S. methods, tactics, and covert identities.¹⁴

Whatever contours eventually emerge from this race for territory, the lines of control will be fraught in the long term. As the Center for American Progress argued in an August 2019 report warning of the risks of a Turkish incursion, from a functional standpoint, Ankara has simply moved the border to a new location lacking the fencing, barriers, surveillance infrastructure, and military emplacements established along the formal border.¹⁵ The Turkish-controlled zone in northern Syria will encompass significant majority-Kurdish Syrian areas, including dense urban environments that may be

difficult to secure. Many living in the region view Turkish forces as invaders, and the occupying force will likely be exposed to a prolonged insurgency, roadside bombs, and hit-and-run assassinations.

For Turkey, this unstable situation is unlikely to improve its security in the long term. Although the Turkish government has complained about U.S. support for the YPG and the SDF, the partnership with the United States was a moderating influence on the SDF and prevented any meaningful cross-border attacks on Turkey. Having abandoned the SDF, however, the United States has lost this influence and can no longer press the SDF to seek compromise with Turkey. While most of the force continues to signal a willingness to negotiate a peaceful arrangement with Turkey,¹⁶ the more extreme elements of the YPG component may seek revenge on Turkey for its attacks on Syrian Kurds.¹⁷ Even the more moderate elements of the SDF and the YPG could be undermined in the long term, given that Turkish proxies have already started executing Kurdish prisoners, making it increasingly difficult for the leadership to prevent retaliation.¹⁸ Yet Turkey intends to rely on these ill-disciplined proxies to secure the buffer zone for the eventual resettlement of some of the 3.7 million refugees now living Turkey; this fraught situation augurs further violence and instability, none of which is good for Turkey.¹⁹

The refugee issue is a massive political liability for Erdoğan, hence his fixation on resettlement.²⁰ Across the Turkish political spectrum, there is deep anger about the presence and visibility of the Syrians in major Turkish cities—a discontent that, for the past several years, has slowly eroded Erdoğan's popularity.²¹ The popularity of President Erdoğan's ruling AKP has fallen to historic lows in the polls. After setbacks in local elections earlier this year, Erdoğan needs the public to see him as taking bold steps to address the refugee issue; he has repeatedly highlighted his plan to carve out a zone in which to resettle refugees.²² But most of the Syrians residing in Turkey are not from the northeastern areas now under dispute, and the possibly involuntary resettlement of outsiders into ethnically mixed areas of Syria with long and troubled histories of demographic engineering will likely lead to ethnic tension, lingering instability, and violence.²³ There is also the major question of how Ankara will manage to finance the massive investment needed to care for and house resettled refugees, since Turkey is in the midst of an economic crisis and the international community may balk at the prospect of financially supporting state-sponsored refoulement.

So far, the Turkish offensive has only seized a relatively modest area, as it has come up against stiff SDF resistance and, now, the presence of the Syrian regime and Russian forces. The size of this Turkish-controlled zone may limit refugee resettlement, which could have big consequences for Turkish domestic politics. Currently, Turkey's operation and its aggressive stance toward the United States have driven a spike in nationalist sentiment that will help shore up President Erdoğan's nationalist right-wing constituency for the time being. However, if the logistical hurdles preventing large-scale resettlement of refugees prove as durable as they seem, this sugar rush of popularity may recede as Turks

realize months from now that the domestic refugee issue remains essentially unchanged. This pattern held after Turkey's last cross-border operation, in Afrin. Indeed, the Turkish public may eventually look back and wonder what has been achieved, particularly if there is a significant economic price tag to the invasion. While U.S. sanctions from the Trump administration were minimal and have subsequently been rescinded, the U.S. Congress is considering a stronger response.²⁴ The uncertainty over possible responses to the incursion has even caused Volkswagen to postpone plans to build a \$1 billion plant slated to bring some 4,000 jobs to Turkey.²⁵

How the United States should approach Turkey going forward

As the dust slowly settles on the Syrian debacle, one of the major structural questions will be how the United States should deal with Turkey in the wake of a near-complete breakdown in relations. Even before the latest Turkish incursion into Syria, this breakdown was on display. In March 2019, CAP described the situation in the following way:

The often uneasy cooperation between the United States and Turkey on Middle East policy has broken down entirely due to differing stances on the Syrian war and the regional Kurdish issue. Moreover, any pretense that Turkey is a democracy has long since evaporated. Defenders of the U.S.-Turkey relationship have argued that Turkey is a problematic but essential partner in confronting a newly assertive Russia. The S-400 deal—coming after more than three years of deepening Turkish-Russian cooperation on energy issues and in Syria—cuts right to the heart of this last remaining pillar.²⁶

The accommodative approach to President Erdoğan's revanchist foreign policy—pursued by both former President Barack Obama and current President Donald Trump—has failed. Initially, this approach was understandable given Turkey's importance to NATO defense; to stabilization efforts in Iraq and Syria; to European integration and energy strategy; and to the refugee crisis. It is rooted in the belief that the current tumult is an aberration and that adjustments to address discrete bilateral issues could reset relations. This belief, however, is fundamentally flawed. For both ideological and domestic political reasons, President Erdoğan is likely to continue to pursue a more aggressive and independent foreign policy.²⁷ He sees Turkey as unaligned, not a full member of the Western security order. He wants to maintain the protection of NATO and access to the military technology it provides without accepting the restraints that membership should impose on Turkey's behavior. President Erdoğan's term lasts another four years, meaning the United States cannot reasonably wait things out.

Therefore, as argued in CAP's March 2019 issue brief, the United States and its allies must "face this unfortunate reality and prepare—identifying which core interests warrant a hardline approach, clearly communicating red lines to Turkey, and hedging security investments to prepare for the worst-case scenario."²⁸ Moving forward, the United States should take a firm line with Turkey, imposing consequences for its most

egregious violations of human rights and the spirit of the alliance, while also trying not to destroy the basic structural components of the relationship, which could be used to rebuild relations after Erdoğan's term ends. As Washington considers an array of proposed sanctions, ranging from the symbolic to the devastating, the debate seems to be oscillating from the reflexively punitive to the heedlessly optimistic. While congressional leaders try to prod President Trump into a more assertive line with Turkey, the strategic incoherence of the White House continues to undermine efforts to chart a moderate middle course.

In Syria, for example, if one accepts that the U.S. presence could not be indefinite—and that Trump had previously signaled his strong desire to leave, thereby undercutting the entire deployment—a rational drawdown could have been coordinated with U.S. allies and been phased to allow for the handover of IS detainees and the orderly withdrawal of coalition troops.²⁹ Such a move could have been framed with Turkey months ago to earn some credit and start to rebuild trust, as well as gain leverage to press Ankara to change its rhetorical and strategic approach toward the United States. A smart approach could have allowed U.S. officials to set aside their understandable moral reservations and seek to use the leverage of American control over Syrian oil fields and key infrastructure to get the SDF a better deal with the Assad regime. It may not have worked—and it would have still effectively abandoned many Syrians who fought and died to defeat IS—but there would have at least been a coherent argument for such an approach.

Instead, the Trump administration's handling of this situation has been shambolic. By pulling out U.S. troops, Trump sacrificed the effective deterrent to a Turkish invasion and gave Erdoğan the green light to move in militarily. He did not coordinate with U.S. allies, not even the United Kingdom or France, which also had troops on the ground and were working alongside the Americans. His hurried decision left the SDF exposed, as U.S. policy until that point had been to coordinate the removal of SDF fortifications along the border in order to placate Turkish security concerns. These Turkish security concerns, incidentally, now seem to have been largely manufactured and instrumental in, primarily, advancing Ankara's goal of driving a wedge between the United States and the SDF and taking territory on which to resettle refugees.

Then, when Trump saw the chaos that the Turkish invasion sparked and the political cost he was incurring at home, he threatened draconian sanctions. But instead of waiting to see if his threats could moderate Turkish behavior, Trump then pivoted to publicly defending Turkey's incursion and inviting Erdoğan to the White House. President Trump further muddied the waters by reversing course again and announcing token sanctions, most likely to head off the more serious punitive action threatened by Congress.³⁰ Finally, President Trump dispatched Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Ankara in an effort to appear as if he was still in command of a situation that had, in fact, spun out of control.³¹

By the time Pence and Pompeo arrived in Ankara to meet with President Erdoğan on October 17, 2019, the situation on the ground had transformed. The Turkish assault had run into the reality of tough SDF resistance and the presence of Russian and Syrian regime troops; it was unlikely to go much further. Yet the U.S. withdrawal meant that America had already sold out the SDF and had no influence over the situation. Nonetheless, the U.S. delegation agreed on a “ceasefire” with terms that ceded to Turkey on all key points, including a number of provisions on which the United States had no ability to deliver.³² All the agreement delivered was a veneer of American approval and legitimacy to the Turkish incursion in an attempt to defuse the political firestorm that the Trump administration’s botched approach had sparked at home. For Turkey, the deal was valuable in obscuring for its domestic audience the fact that the incursion did not actually lead to significant territorial gains, meaning refugee resettlement would likely be minimal—a fact that will eventually hurt Erdoğan at home. The deal also allowed Ankara to head off harsh sanctions from the U.S. Congress by appearing to play ball with the Americans.

The U.S. response has been characterized by chaos, and neither the Turks nor the U.S. allies know what to think. President Erdoğan accepted the largely irrelevant American concessions delivered by Pence and Pompeo—concessions on which Washington had no ability to deliver, having relinquished its leverage—and then flew to Sochi to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin to conclude an actual agreement, with force on the ground.³³ That Russian-Turkish deal has largely codified the status quo. Indeed, the terms of the Turkish-Russian deal largely correspond with the terms of the safety mechanism the United States and Turkey had been negotiating prior to Trump’s withdrawal decision.³⁴ In other words, the end-state conditions might have been achieved without needless bloodshed had the United States more effectively managed the crisis and stood up to Turkey’s threats.

What can be salvaged?

First, it is important to address the elephant in the room: It is nearly impossible to craft a coherent policy with President Trump at the head of the U.S. government. The past three weeks have starkly illustrated the president’s willingness to preside over sudden, dramatic, and uncoordinated lurches in White House policy. This unpredictability complicates—and often undermines—the work of U.S. diplomats and troops, as it has in Syria. American allies do not trust the word of U.S. officials, knowing it can be overturned at any point by a poorly informed president, while U.S. adversaries are emboldened to press maximalist claims, knowing that President Trump is often most focused on a headline-grabbing “deal,” has little interest in the detailed provisions therein, and is more than willing to deliver unilateral concessions to seal agreements.

Second, the United States cannot achieve deterrence now, after the fact. As outlined above, the Turkish incursion has largely run its course, no thanks to U.S. engagement.

Sanctions will not save Kurdish or Arab lives; nor will they return things to the previous status quo. President Erdoğan has gone too far and whipped Turkey up into a nationalist fervor. He cannot back down in the face of American threats without being humiliated politically at home. Moreover, the United States can hardly sanction Turkey for something the U.S. president effectively approved. Even if Congress acts, it is likely that President Trump would refuse to implement the response. But perhaps most importantly, Trump's decisions have had effects on the ground that cannot be walked back: The Assad regime and the Russians are now present in many areas, the Turks are present and will not leave, and the SDF has quite reasonably lost trust in the United States.³⁵ So even if Trump has realized his mistake and wants to reverse it, he cannot; he folded the United States' hand at the strategic level. The situation on the ground in northern Syria is now being determined by Presidents Erdoğan and Putin, with a minor role for Bashar al-Assad. Moving forward, the United States can at best draw sanctions redlines with Turkey, perhaps explaining that further human rights abuses in Syria will be sanctioned—as will any forced resettlement of refugees without U.N. approval.

The United States may still be able to prod things toward a less chaotic outcome in Deir Ezzor and south of the areas in which the Turks are operating and the Assad regime has returned. Distasteful as it is, this will require mediating negotiations between the SDF and Russia or, at a minimum, continuing to support the SDF in these areas to provide the group with leverage vis-a-vis Russia and the regime. The Assad regime and Russia do not have the manpower or resources necessary to immediately assume administrative control of the east of the country or take over the fight against IS. The United States could publicly state that it will maintain its dominance of the airspace east of the Euphrates River while backing the SDF remnants in their negotiations with the Russians over the handover of IS detainees and counterterrorism duties more broadly. The SDF still controls the oil fields with U.S. support, and the Euphrates continues to divide them from regime forces. The United States could reaffirm that it will police these boundaries via air power until a satisfactory deal is reached.

At a minimum, these efforts could buy time for the United States to lay the groundwork for ongoing intelligence efforts in these areas to support a standoff counterterrorism strategy that would help keep a minimum of pressure on IS to preclude its resurgence. The breathing room should also be used to coordinate the exfiltration of those who worked with the coalition in the counter-IS effort. Congress could assist in this effort by letting Syrian Arabs and Kurds who aided in the SDF or coalition efforts to defeat IS and stabilize eastern Syria to apply for special immigrant visas (SIVs); raising the cap to allow more visas to be issued and potentially mandating a minimum number; and requiring quarterly reports to Congress on implementation of the Syrian SIV program.

Congress could also work to ensure that war crimes in Syria are documented and, hopefully, prosecuted. A good start would be to use this opportunity to pass the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act and the No Assistance for Assad Act, both of which have passed the House but not the Senate.³⁶ Congress could also mandate and fund positions to track and prosecute war crimes committed in Syria, whether by the Assad regime,

Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, IS, Turkey, or Turkish-backed proxy forces. Most importantly, the United States should redouble its humanitarian efforts, both within Syria and in neighboring countries, particularly the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The United States should appropriate special supplemental funding to provide for additional humanitarian assistance to those fleeing the fighting into the KRI, more funds for refugee resettlement agencies and officers, and more funds for U.N. agencies and non-governmental organizations working on the issue. In addition, the United States should consider humanitarian airdrops into areas of eastern Syria, as needed, exclusive of areas deemed to be under the direct administrative control of the Assad regime.

Moving forward, despite the United States' complicity in the carnage, this episode should, at a minimum, remove any lingering doubts in the U.S. government about Turkey's willingness to flout American and NATO concerns. This reality should have been made clear by Turkey's decision to buy the Russian S-400 missile system, but many policymakers still seem to hold out hope that Turkey will reverse course. In reality, the United States is not dealing with the same Turkey it has in the past; Erdoğan does not trust the West and wants to chart a more independent course.³⁷ The United States should stop denying this reality and adapt. This reframing of the relationship need not be any more emotional than it already is; simply put, if Turkey wants to chart a more independent course, that decision will bring certain changes to the bilateral relationship.

Broadly, the United States should begin a deliberate process to downgrade security relations with Turkey and hedge its defense posture. A previous CAP issue brief outlined many of these steps in detail.³⁸ Most immediately, the United States should plan and execute the removal of the nuclear weapons stored at Incirlik Air Base in Turkey. This step should have been taken long ago, as it is not safe to have nuclear weapons stored in a country of such uncertain alignment. Additionally, the United States should slowly draw down its non-NATO deployments in Turkey, including at Incirlik. This should be done slowly and quietly; there is no need to publicize the process on either side of the Atlantic. Moreover, further defense investments in Turkey are not presently in the United States' interests. This process should therefore be accompanied by an effort to replace essential defense and intelligence functions located in Turkey with new basing arrangements in the region in order to reduce U.S. reliance on Ankara.

The United States should formally eject Turkey from the F-35 program, beyond the suspension already announced. This should be done through the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), prohibiting the use of any funds to transfer aircraft, parts, software, designs, or information related to the program to Turkey. Passing the prohibition through the NDAA would preclude any White House attempt to reintegrate Turkey into the program, which would undercut both U.S. and NATO interests.

The United States could also examine legislation to insert conditionality on U.S.-Turkish military cooperation in order to prevent the sale of further defense articles or arms to Turkey if it is shown to engage in any further human rights abuses in Syria

or further defense cooperation with Russia. On the Russian front, the United States should fully implement the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).³⁹ President Trump has already shown himself to be unwilling to administer the punitive provisions outlined in the law, so Congress should remove the presidential waiver and delay provisions of CAATSA, requiring enforcement within 90 days.⁴⁰ The U.S. government should also convey to Turkey that if it responds by pursuing the purchase of Su-35 aircraft or other major defense items from Russia, Congress may pass further legislation forcing full implementation of CAATSA to include an end to the issuance of Arms Export Control Act licenses, ending the full range of defense cooperation between the United States and Turkey.

Conclusion

What this reevaluation of U.S.-Turkey relations means for NATO is only beginning to become clear. Turkey has long been a critical part of the alliance's commitment to collective defense. As many people point out, there is no mechanism in the North Atlantic Treaty for ejecting or downgrading a member.⁴¹ That said, those NATO mechanisms were all invented to reflect political realities, and the reality today is that the Article 5 commitment to collective defense is uncertain—in part due to President Trump himself, but also due to President Erdoğan's coziness with Russia and his desire to have all of the benefits of membership without accepting its limitations. To better understand the full consequences of this deterioration, as well as to signal to the Turkish government that the alliance's largest power is concerned about its course, the U.S. Department of Defense could conduct a study on the ramifications for European security of Turkey's nonfulfillment of its Article 5 obligations. Ankara might finally take notice of such signals and consider its security situation in broader terms.

The United States should jettison the strategy of accommodation toward Turkey, which has done little to secure U.S. interests or arrest Turkey's own autocratic drift over the past six years. The new approach should not be needlessly punitive, but rather accept that President Erdoğan sees his country's relationship with the United States in starkly different terms. Accepting this reality will prompt the necessary next steps: assessing American and European dependence, hedging against the greatest risks, insulating the most essential activities, and preparing for the day after Erdoğan.

Max Hoffman is the associate director of National Security and International Policy at the Center for American Progress.

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