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**Research Report**

## The West's darling in Syria: Seeking support, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party brandishes an anti-jihadist image

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## The West's Darling in Syria

Seeking Support, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party Brandishes an Anti-Jihadist Image

*Khaled Yacoub Oweis*

US bombings in 2015 repulsed Islamic State attacks on cities in mostly Kurdish self-rule regions called cantons in northern Syria. The three cantons, which border Turkey, are dominated by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). The party is linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a former client of the Syrian regime and considered a "terrorist" group by the United States, the European Union, and Turkey. At the risk of deepening an Arab Sunni backlash that has fanned radicalization, Washington is set ever more on the prospect of the PYD retaking mostly Arab territory captured by the Islamic State. In line with German reluctance to arm warring sides, Berlin has refrained from giving military aid to the PYD, which is accused of carrying out war crimes. Still, an international effort to rebuild the cantons tied to breaking the PYD's monopoly on them could help stabilize the area – even more so if Turkey could be brought on board.

The Kurds have scored some of the biggest territorial gains in Syria since the outbreak of revolt against Assad family rule in 2011. Cooperation with the Assad regime and backing from the United States against the so-called Islamic State have strengthened Kurdish militias affiliated with the PYD. Advancing into a multi-faceted ethnic and tribal landscape, the so-called People's Protection Units (YPG) captured Kurdish-majority regions near Turkey and Iraq but also areas with a significant Arab population. In defiance of Turkey, the PYD set up three self-ruled cantons in 2014 comprising around one-fifth of Syria under the umbrella name of "Rojava Self-Ruled Democratic Administration, Syria" (in Kurdish, *Rojava* means "Western Kurdistan"). The

PYD is not calling for outright secession. Its declaration of self-rule and accompanying "social contract" mix Marxist jargon and a vague form of popular democracy. The documents also emphasize rights for women and minorities. Underneath the rhetoric, power rests with the PYD/YPG and their parent organization, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, whose military command is based in the Kandil Mountains of Iraq. Senior political figures linked to the PKK are also based in Turkey.

In Syria, Kurds constitute around 10 percent of the population, compared with 15 percent in Iraq. Apart from Syria's north, a large Kurdish concentration also exists in Damascus, but many have left – mainly to Turkey and Iraq – because of a worsening

economy since the revolt. Not many headed to the cantons. Bombings and incursions by jihadists into Kurdish areas, as well as forced recruitment into the YPG, which drove thousands of youth to flee the cantons, have limited the region's appeal.

### **Kurdish politics in Syria**

The fall of the Ottoman Empire and its division by Western powers (1916–1920) deepened ethnic and religious conflicts across the Middle East. Turkish repression drove waves of mainly Christian and Kurdish refugees into Syria during and after the First World War (1914–1918). The refugees crossed mostly into Hasakah province, an ethnically-mixed area in Syria where the Khabour River, a tributary of the Euphrates, provided water for agriculture. Oil was later discovered, raising the economic significance of the region, which also borders Iraq. Bowing to a rising current of Arab chauvinism, in 1962 the Syrian government conducted a census that denied citizenship to 120,000 Kurds living in Hasakah and kept them and their descendants outside mainstream society.

Ending their disenfranchisement became a main demand for Kurdish political parties, the first of which, the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (KDPS), was set up in the 1950s. Known as "Al-Party," the KDPS was an affiliate of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) of northern Iraq. The KDP was founded by Mustafa Barzani in 1946, and later headed by his son Masoud. The Al-Party spawned numerous Kurdish parties in Syria that mostly deferred to the Barzani clan or to Jalal Talabani, who became Iraq's first president after the US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003. Talabani founded his Patriotic Union of Iraq (PUK) party in the 1970s in Damascus and had good ties with Bashar's father, Hafez al-Assad, which helped keep the Kurdish political movement in Syria largely docile. Talabani's influence over Kurdish politics lessened in the last decade because of his ill health and defections from the PUK.

Barzani has thus been left as the main outside player dominating Syria's Kurdish players, along with the PKK.

### **Divide and rule**

During Hafez al-Assad's rule (1970–2000), the authorities moved thousands of Arab tribespeople from Raqqa governorate into a Kurdish-populated area north of Hasakah city, the provincial capital. The tribesmen came from areas slotted to be submerged in plans for a hydro-electric dam on the Euphrates River. Known as the al-Ghamar Arabs (the Arabs of the flood), they became among the staunchest supporters of Assad family rule. The population transfer, which occurred in the 1970s, was typical of the divide-and-rule tactics that have been key to keeping Syria in the Assad family's grip.

A new wave of Kurdish refugees crossed into Syria to escape Turkish bombardment and the razing of their villages after the PKK had launched guerilla warfare against Turkey in 1984. Within the Kurdish community in Turkey, the PKK dealt brutally with dissent, for example killing teachers who taught Turkish-language curricula. In Syria, the regime allowed the refugees in but extracted a price. Mohammad Mansoura, a security lieutenant of Assad, is thought to have made fortunes in the 1980s and 1990s by running protection rackets and taking bribes from Kurdish refugees for letting them in. Demographically, the new influx altered the composition of Syria's northeast and contributed to thousands of Christian families in Hasakah, who were better off on average, migrating to the interior of Syria or abroad. Many were driven away by what they regarded as pro-Kurdish bias by the regime, which resulted in Kurdish seizure of their land and unfair competition for resources.

### **Turkey, Syria, and the Kurds**

Assad, the father, whose government was embroiled in water and territorial disputes with Ankara, supported the PKK in its war

in Turkey. Similar to Hafez al-Assad's Baath Party, the PKK revolved around the personality cult of its founder, Abdullah Öcalan, and dissent was met with violence. In the 1980s and 1990s, Öcalan lived in Syria and used Syria and areas in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley under Syrian control as military and propaganda bases.

Content that the PKK had fallen under the orbit of the Syrian regime, Hafez al-Assad did little to improve the mass lot of Syria's Kurdish population. The elder Assad upheld the 1962 census and pursued an "Arabization" policy that deepened bans on Kurdish language and culture, including celebrating the Nowruz festival.

### **Political wind turns against PKK**

Under the threat of a Turkish invasion in 1998, Hafez al-Assad expelled Öcalan and submitted to Turkish demands dictated to Syrian officials at a meeting in the Turkish city of Adana to stop supporting the PKK. The Adana agreement also forced the Syrian government to designate the PKK as a terrorist organization – the same official designation of the PKK in Turkey, Europe, and the United States. The PKK tried to deflect pressure in the following years by establishing sister organizations in Iran, Turkey, and Syria (the PYD). By then, Bashar al-Assad had inherited power. The younger Assad tolerated the PYD when it was set up in 2003, although Syrian authorities had started handing over former PKK guerrillas to Turkey as part of newly-found security cooperation with Ankara.

Meanwhile, the Kurds' lot worsened from a water crisis. State corruption contributed to the destruction of the water table from illegal wells in Hasakah and eastern Syria. Migration of Arabs and Kurds rose after 2004 into what became shanty towns around Damascus and Aleppo.

With Syrian-Turkish ties peaking between 2007 and 2010, a closed security court in Damascus sentenced dozens of PKK guerillas to long prison sentences on terrorism charges. The PYD head, Saleh

Muslim, was arrested briefly in 2010 and then left Syria for Kandil. But the Assad regime kept lines of communications open with the PYD, which Turkey did not mind, as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan sought to improve ties with his own country's Kurds.

One unintended consequence of the improvement in Syrian-Turkish relations was related to Turkey scrapping visa requirements for Syrian nationals. Kurds in Syria were able to travel and see their relatives in Turkey, often for the first time, which helped rekindle ties between Kurds in the two countries. It also became easier for the people in northern Syria to buy Turkish mobile phone lines and escape the eavesdropping of the Assad secret police. Unmonitored cell phones became instrumental in organizing protests.

### **Kurdish uprising and aftermath**

A crackdown on the Kurdish movement across the board followed a grassroots Kurdish uprising in 2004, which was crushed after Assad's forces killed 30 civilians. Provocation by Assad loyalists of Kurdish spectators at a football match in Qamishli apparently triggered the riots. It brought to the surface Kurdish frustration about disenfranchisement, poverty, and the regime's readiness to sacrifice the Kurds for better relations with Turkey. But the PYD and traditional Kurdish parties coordinated with the Assad regime to calm the Kurdish street in return for promises to resolve the issue of disenfranchisement arising from the 1962 census.

Assad kept ignoring the issue till 2011. But the iron fist of the regime did not stem the rise of a new generation of activists frustrated at the failure of the PYD and of the Syrian Kurdish establishment to capitalize on the uprising. Among them was Masoud Akko, a journalist who was instrumental in documenting the repression of the Kurds during the uprising and afterward. Akko and other young activists admired Mashaal Tammo, a Kurdish leader who established the Kurdish Future Move-

ment in Syria in 2005 as an alternative to the traditional parties. Tammo cooperated with Arab dissidents and was a more open Kurd in this regard. He also appealed to young people and paid little heed to power centers in Iraqi Kurdistan. Among more religious Kurds, Mohammed Ma'shouq al-Khaznawi, an independent Soufi imam, built up a following through sermons critical of the authorities. But Khaznawi was assassinated in the city of Qamishli in 2005. Riad Drar, a moderate Syrian Arab sheikh and a respected scholar, was arrested for eulogizing Khaznawi at the funeral and showing solidarity with the Kurdish cause. Drar then spent five years in jail.

The regime also sentenced Tammo in 2009 to three and a half years in jail for "weakening national sentiment." The audience in a Damascus courtroom shouted "Tammo, Tammo" once the verdict was read. This was unheard of in Syria, where the only public chants were to exalt Assad or his father in choreographed rallies.

### **The Kurds and the Syrian revolt**

Weeks after the outbreak of the Syrian revolt in 2011, the Assad regime moved to strengthen its former PKK clients. The support for the PYD rekindled Turkish fears of a Kurdish state, although it primarily appeared to be meant to undermine the nonviolent core of the revolt and build up militia that could be allied to Assad from the country's minorities. By the middle of 2011, dozens of former PKK operatives had been released from prison. The Assad regime also set free senior jihadists, many of whom had returned from Iraq and were then jailed (for details, see Oweis, *SWP Comments* 39/2015). Despite misgivings about their jihadist ideology, many in the opposition came to regard the jihadists as the bulwark against perceived Kurdish expansionism at the expense of Arab Sunnis battered by Assad's carpet bombardment.

In the first year of the revolt, paper reforms – combined with a deepening crackdown on the pro-democracy protests –

failed to pacify Syria's Arab Sunnis. The Kurds received a different treatment. Assad restored most Kurdish rights lost as a result of the 1962 census. The regime also helped arm the PYD by leaving the group weapons in the northeast. On the broader ethnic map, the PYD joined a de facto alliance of armed minority groups that has been crucial to strengthening Assad's position in the civil war. The alliance – comprised of Kurdish, Alawite, Shi'ite, and Christian militias – also helped Assad repulse rebels in the center of Syria and the Mediterranean coast, as well as maintain control over pockets in outlying regions bordering areas in what became the Kurdish cantons.

Placating the Kurds started in April 2011 with rescinding the 1962 census. As a result, thousands of Kurdish former "non-persons" received official papers. The restoration fostered a line advocated by the PYD and most traditional Kurdish parties to keep the demands of the protests in Kurdish areas modest while pursuing concessions for Kurds. This pitted the PYD and traditional parties against Tammo, who saw Kurdish demands as being inseparable from the demands for regime change of the wider protest movement.

Tammo was released from jail in June 2011, shortly before his sentence expired. Weeks later he joined Arab opposition figures in preparing a meeting in the Qaboun district of Damascus to plan a political transition. The organizers included veteran dissident Walid al-Bunni, a physician and former political prisoner from the town of Tel, near Damascus, and economist Aref Dalila, another former political prisoner from Assad's Alawite sect. But the dissidents were forced to cancel the conference two days before it was due to convene when Assad's forces killed 14 demonstrators in Qaboun. Despite warnings by the PYD to stop aligning with the goals of the wider revolt, Tammo kept up his calls for the Kurds not to isolate themselves and joined the Syrian National Council (SNC), the largest grouping of the then peaceful opposition. But Tammo, who advocated non-

violence, was no match for the PYD as security branches began letting in hundreds of PKK militia based in Kandil into Hasakah beginning in April 2011. Saleh Muslim also returned from Kandil the same month and became the public face of the group. On the military side, power remained with PKK commanders from Kandil, while the rank-and-file included many poor Kurds recruited over decades from northern Syria, trained in northern Iraq, and sent to serve in the YPG after the beginning of the revolt.

### **PYD critics silenced**

The PKK militia's new local recruits, including women, helped the PYD act as enforcers for Assad. Gunmen suspected of links to the PYD began assaulting protest leaders, but Tammo was unperturbed, predicting in October 2011 that the Assad regime would soon use its allies to assassinate non-violent activists. Days later, Tammo was killed when gunmen stormed a house he was at in Qamishli. An aide, Zahida Rashkilo, survived and was smuggled for treatment in Germany. Other figures in the Future Movement also fled PYD persecution to Germany.

Following Tammo's assassination, a string of activists who publicly opposed the PYD were beaten, killed, or disappeared, with the PYD always denying responsibility. For example, Radeef Mustafa, a prominent human rights lawyer and an ally of Tammo, was forced to flee his hometown of Kobanê to Turkey after receiving PYD threats in 2011. His son was subsequently beaten in the town. In January 2012, three brothers of the Badro family – a prominent clan that had fallen afoul of the PYD – were killed in Qamishli after their father repulsed an apparent YPG incursion into their home and killed a YPG gunman. Also, dozens of activists were killed or disappeared in PYD-controlled territory in Hasakah and Afrin between 2012 and 2015, such as Ahmad Farman Bunjuq, who was killed in a drive-by shooting in Qamishli, and Bahzed Dorsen, the KDPS head in Malikiya.

Kidnappings and deaths in detention by the PYD have also been documented. In one case in early 2015, Suhail al-Nisr, a German-educated Syrian-Arab surgeon from Aleppo, was kidnapped in Afrin, despite the fact that he treats Kurdish patients in the region. Nisr was released after paying a US\$50,000 ransom. He said he had spent his two-week captivity among YPG militiamen in a house adorned with PYD insignia. In total, the YPG are suspected of killing at least 30 Kurds opposed to the PYD since 2011.

### **Arab-Kurdish tensions**

Tammo's assassination in October 2011 dealt a fatal blow to the "third way" of Kurdish politics in Syria, throwing the Future Movement into disarray and deepening splits between the Kurds and the SNC. The acrimony continued when the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (the Coalition) was set up in Qatar in November 2012 as a replacement of the SNC. The Coalition has seen heated debates on the Kurdish issue. Kurdish members, who number 17 out of 117, have been frustrated. They point to what they regard as the Coalition's failure to shed the legacy of Arab nationalism and cultivate non-Arabs wary of Assad but fearful of a jihadist alternative.

The Kurdish-Arab divide widened after the Islamic State killed at least 220 civilians in an incursion into Kobanê in June 2015. International and Syrian human rights organizations have documented what they said were war crimes and ethnic cleansing of Arabs by the YPG after it captured areas in the cantons. At the same time, YPG militia had refused to let an investigation team from the Coalition cross into the Kobanê canton to see villages and neighborhoods from which the Arab population had fled following the PYD's capture of the border town of Tel al-Abyad. The ethnic tension threatens to derail truces between Kurdish and rebel neighborhoods in Aleppo, and between the town of Atmeh on the border with Turkey and the town of Jindairis in

the Afrin district, where the YPG has been building fortifications and sniper towers.

### **PYD consolidates power**

Days after Tammo was killed, Barzani supervised in the Iraqi city of Erbil the creation of the Kurdish National Council in Syria (KNC), a grouping of 11 traditional parties that joined the opposition Coalition in 2013. On paper, the KNC formed with the PYD a body called the Kurdish Supreme Council. But the Supreme Council did not become an effective coordination body, and Kurdish politics remained broadly split between the PKK and its PYD offshoot on one side, and Barzani and his protégés in the KNC on the other. On the military side, the Barzani camp has trained hundreds of Syrian Kurds, raising the specter of inter-Kurdish divisions turning into an armed conflagration. But the jihadist threat against Kurds in Syria and Iraq has helped keep a semblance of Kurdish unity. Still, in 2012, eight Kurdish officers who had earlier defected from Assad's army disappeared in the PYD-controlled town of Malikiya near the Tigris River, which constitutes the border between Syria and Iraq. The officers were traveling to Iraqi Kurdistan to meet KDP officials. Their families accused the YPG of kidnapping them. A few months before, the officers had formed a grouping called the Kurdish Military Council as a counterweight to the YPG, and sought to cooperate with Free Syrian Army (FSA) brigades in Aleppo.

The PYD on the other hand had joined the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB), a grouping allowed by the authorities to operate in Damascus. Considered "patriotic opposition" by the Assad regime, the NCB does not call for the removal of Assad. In a measure of the PYD's flexibility, Saleh Muslim signed the founding charter of the NCB, which calls for a democratic solution to the Kurdish question in a way that does not contradict what the charter terms as the "inseparability of Syria from the Arab World" – an anathema

to most Kurds. On the ground, the PYD has pursued self-rule, helping set the stage for armed conflict with Arab tribes south of Hasakah, as opposed to the al-Ghamar Arabs and other tribes north of Hasakah who stayed with the regime and became allied with the PYD.

### **Turkish opposition to cantons**

As a result of a de facto territorial handover by the Assad regime, the PYD declared self-rule in the cantons in January 2014. Of the three cantons, the so-called Jazeera canton in the northeastern governorate of Hasakah is the largest, containing Syria's wheat reservoir and some of the country's biggest oil fields (Syria's total oil production before the revolt was 300,000–370,000 barrels per day). In the northwest, the Afrin canton near Aleppo is among Syria's most fertile regions, whereas the Kobanê canton is situated between the other two. In an apparent deal with the PYD, Assad's security operatives have remained in Hasakah, accessing a large secret police compound in the center of the city through YPG roadblocks. About 30 intelligence operatives also remained in Kobanê, until an attack on the town by the Islamic State in 2014 forced them to flee. In Aleppo governorate, Afrin has served as a supply conduit to a pro-Assad Shi'ite militia base in the nearby towns of Nubbul and Zahra. US intervention eventually allowed the PYD to join the two cantons of Hasakah and Kobanê. The intervention started with support for the Kurdish Peshmerga forces as well as the bombings by the United States of Islamic State targets in Iraq in June 2014 as the Islamic State declared a Caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Air raids were extended to jihadist targets in Syria in September 2014.

The YPG's gains were curtailed in July 2015 when Ankara abandoned the peace process with the PKK and launched an offensive against the PKK in Turkey and northern Iraq following the killing of four Turkish police (for details, see Seufert, *SWP Comments* 38/2015). By hitting the PKK, Turkey sent a strong signal to the PYD to stop

expanding west of Kobanê. Taking heed of the Turkish strikes, the PYD apparently abandoned a drive to cross the Euphrates and link the Kobanê canton to Afrin. The expansion would have involved capturing a strip 95–105 km wide that separates Afrin and Kobanê. The strip, which is inhabited mainly by Arab and Turkmen, has been divided between Islamist-leaning FSA brigades allied with Turkey on the one side and the Islamic State on the other.

In the course of 2015, Ankara talked with the United States about turning this strip into a safe zone and a potential base for a provisional Syrian government. The Syrian Interim Government currently operates from the Turkish city of Gaziantep and counts Germany among its biggest supporters. With the zone, Ankara aimed to contain the PYD and keep the Afrin canton partially isolated and dependent on Turkey. But the safe-zone proposal quickly fizzled out, with Washington and Turkey failing to reconcile their priorities in Syria. The Russian air campaign, which started in September 2015, has practically finished off the safe-zone idea.

### **Token democracy**

In the cantons, the PYD has advertised its version of local government as a model. It has mandated equal representation for women in municipal councils and legislative bodies, yet with little real political power. At the same time, the PYD has maintained its cult-like ideology, which appears to leave little room for any serious opposition. In September 2015, a branch of the Yekiti (unity) Party, led by dissident Habib Ibrahim, broke ranks with the PYD's political opponents and fielded candidates for municipal elections in the Afrin canton. Pro-PYD candidates ended up being awarded all the seats. On the military side, the YPG promoted women to more influential roles as commanders, in line with a PKK tradition that has helped the group project a "progressive" image and garner support, particularly among European leftists.

Also, representatives of minorities such as Sunni Arab and Christian figures have been installed in the cantons' administration, as well as staunchly pro-Assad tribal figures such as Humeidi Daham al-Jarba from Hasakah. But tensions between Kurds and Christians in Hasakah persist. In September 2015, a self-declared legislative council in Hasakah decreed a law putting the property of absentee owners under the jurisdiction of the administration of the canton in Hasakah, despite the objections of Christian members of the council. The action, which had the declared aim of protecting the properties, raised fears of another Kurdish grab of Christian property in northeastern Syria.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

US support in the context of the fight against the Islamic State has enabled the PYD to thumb its nose at Turkey and pursue territorial claims, as well as maintain its alliance with Assad. Washington is now also counting on the PYD to retake the provincial capital of Raqqa, a majority Arab city on the Euphrates that fell to the Islamic State in early 2014. But the PYD's expansion seems to have fueled Arab tribal support for jihadists. It has also complicated chances of finding a solution to the civil war, in which the main victims have been Arab Sunnis bombarded by Assad's forces.

Germany has responded to PYD requests for help by initiating plans for the de-mining and rebuilding of Kobanê while maintaining a policy of non-lethal aid. Yet, such support would involve significant supplies and logistics and therefore need the cooperation of Turkey. With an eye on its restive Kurdish population, Ankara has been nervous about an expansion of the PYD-run cantons in Syria. The Turkish government has also shown little interest in defusing tensions with the PKK ahead of general elections in November 2015 after Erdoğan's supporters failed to secure a majority in earlier polls. The Kurdish issue, among other geopolitical calculations, has prompted



Turkish support for jihadist and other rebel brigades in Syria. The support has been partly meant to prevent the PYD from capturing the proposed safe-zone area and thus link the three cantons.

The Turkish offensive against the PKK has made Ankara more confident that the PYD will not risk Turkish military wrath by expanding westwards to join the three cantons. Lessened Turkish fears about an expansionist PYD could open the way to bring Turkey into a reconstruction effort that would give Ankara a say in shaping the cantons and improve its relations with the PYD. Leaving a political door open for such a possibility, Ankara has distinguished between the PKK and the PYD, receiving PYD cadres and keeping more channels open with the PYD, partly in the hope of splitting the two groups. Another complaint that Ankara has had about the PYD has been the PYD's cooperation with Assad, but this has lessened since Turkey softened its calls in September 2015 for Assad to leave power. Turkey thus could be drawn into an international effort to stabilize the cantons through aid linked to progress on curbing brutality and lawlessness in the cantons, as well as a more democratic self-rule. In this context, Germany should ask for safe and free access for Kurdish dissidents and the wider opposition to the cantons. Berlin should also recommend deploying independent observers once elections in PYD territory comply with international norms, rather than being rubberstamp affairs.

Turkish participation in a high-profile project to help the Kurds in Syria could also take away the sting of criticism that the West is ganging up on Syria's Arab Sunnis and promoting the country's minorities. Many in the mainstream Syrian opposition already regard Western pressure to agree to renewed UN efforts to solve the conflict as a ploy to keep Assad and his allies among Syria's minorities in power. In the international arena, UN envoy Staffan de Mistura plans to convene working groups in Geneva starting in October 2015 to bring together

relevant Syrian forces. The talks could be also a way to cajole the PYD into working with the rest of the Kurdish body politic, for example by achieving a unified Kurdish vision for the north and a transitional administration in Damascus.

Despite PYD appeals aimed at drumming up German support, it would be a mistake for Berlin to toe the US line and support the PYD/YPG in the fight against the Islamic State beyond the Kurdish areas. The PYD has not only silenced other Kurdish voices, it has also been accused of ethnic cleansing in villages and towns inhabited mainly by Arabs, and it maintains cooperation with the Assad regime. Too strong a support will also further antagonize Turkey as well as rebel formations. A sustainable solution to end the bloodletting can come about only through internationally-backed compromise between all groups prepared to work for a pluralist country.

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