

Beyond Mere Terrorism: The Islamic State's Authority as a Social Movement and as a Quasi-State*

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Abstract: This paper provides an analysis of the sources of authority that the Islamic State employs locally and globally in order to further the establishment of a worldwide caliphate. To allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the propositions the Islamic State makes towards its audiences, we argue it can be regarded as a sociopolitical movement and a quasi-state with different sources of authority and means of power pertaining to each. Both realms of authority are hybridized by the Islamic State, thus providing the Islamic State with a stability that is often overlooked in public debates about its prospects.

Keywords: Islamic State, ISIS, Syria, Iraq

Schlagworte: Islamischer Staat, ISIS, Syrien, Irak

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to provide a review and analysis of the various sources of authority that the so-called Islamic State employs on a local and global scale in order to further the establishment of a worldwide caliphate. It will be shown that the group has managed to create a powerful and stable hybrid form of authority that draws upon its military might, nonmilitary regulatory capabilities, traditional narratives, charismatic qualifications of its leaders, and rational, interest-based coalitions with a variety of actors. The Islamic State evolved since 2003 out of a Jihadist group which was a small part of the Sunni resistance to the US-led occupation of Iraq. The devastating social, political, and economic effects of this military intervention enabled the group to not only seize significant parts of Iraqi and Syrian land, but to also make political gains. Both, current popular accounts of the Islamic State and incipient scientific research, tend to focus more or less exclusively on the aspect of physical violence and terror. In contrast, we will broaden the picture to show how physical and non-physical means of establishing and maintaining authority interact and reinforce each other. We will provide an analytical context for the violent actions of the Islamic State by looking at the group's genesis and position in its immediate environment. This also allows a more comprehensive understanding of the propositions the Islamic State makes towards different audiences, and helps explain its perseverance.

In particular, we argue that the Islamic State can be regarded as both a sociopolitical movement and a quasi-state with different sources of authority and means of power pertaining to each of these two roles. Both of these dimensions of authority guarantee and reinforce each other, thus providing the Islamic State with a stability that is often overlooked in public debates about its aspirations and prospects.

In order to comprehend its dynamical nature, we argue the Islamic State is best understood as a sociopolitical movement which contests its various opponents at a military, political, social, and religious level by deploying "extra-ordinary, extra-usual practices which aim, collectively or individually, institutionally or informally, to cause social change" (Bayat 2005:893-894). These activist practices include the commitment to an ever expanding territory, as well as an attempt to establish a religious code of conduct. By looking at the Islamic State

from this perspective, we emphasize the movement's ability to mobilize particular networks and groups on a local and global scale around a common cause, and to create a shared identity and shared interests among those groups. We also highlight the movement's attempt to collectively bring about, hamper, or reverse social and political changes. However, there is considerable inner diversity of aspirations and objectives among the various constituencies within the Islamic State, which is not always conspicuous. The heterogeneous motivations of these constituencies might coincide with the leaders' utopian claims of the unification of mankind under the black banner. Generally, though, these diverse groups will be motivated by a range of objective and subjective existential, economic, moral, social, and political interests (cf. Bayat 2005/901).

2. Local Alliances with Sunni Tribal Factions

The Islamic State and its predecessors have frequently sought to coalesce with local Iraqi tribes.¹ Aligning with tribal factions promises to enhance the movement's credibility and legitimacy at the local level, while it benefits from the tribe's manpower and offers local leaders protection against other (mostly Shiite) militias and government forces. These pragmatic relationships, however, are of a highly erratic nature. They cannot conceal the potential for economic rivalry and conflict between several Sunni tribes and the Islamic State, let alone ideological differences. The background for these alliances was formed in the course of the disintegration of the Iraqi nation-state during the 1990s. During this period, national identity decreased in favor of sub-identities – a development that rapidly grew after Saddam's ouster in 2003 – and strengthened political and economic autonomy of Sunni tribal factions in central and western Iraq. With the Sunni opposition to the reorganization of the state taking its strongholds in these regions, al-Qā'ida in Iraq (*tanẓīm qā'idat al-jihād fi-bilād al-rāfiḍayn*, AQI) and its leader Abū Muṣ'ab al-Zarqāwī made it clear that it strove for the integration of tribal forces

1 We use the terms 'tribe' and 'tribal' to describe social structures that rest on bonds and solidarity of kinship which both have a considerable impact on and play an important role in discourses around identity and politics in Iraq and Syria. However, we are aware of the persistent ambiguities that these terms carry which is why anthropologists have long been problematizing the applicability of these terms as analytical categories. See González 2009; Tapper 1990.

into its ranks, under the condition they would unquestionably subscribe to the Jihadist's ideology and aspired societal model (Günther 2014: 144-145). Equally, the *Islamic State of Iraq*, which was announced in late 2006, presented the "noble tribes" (*ashā'ir ašīla*) as an essential constituent of its project, and emphasized the necessity of integrating tribal authorities into its hierarchy (Günther 2014: 276). Although individual motivations to enter an alliance with the Islamic State may not be disclosed publicly, security-related and political motifs seem to prevail (Al-Jazeera 2015; Cockburn 2015; Spencer and Malouf 2014).

While some tribal representatives explained their restraint towards the Islamic State's intransigent ideology and tactics (Spencer and Malouf 2014), they still aligned with the movement while others sought to remain neutral or even took up arms against it, which caused intra-tribal and intra-communitarian rifts among Sunni Muslims (Solomon 2015). Moreover, alliances of Sunni tribes with the Islamic State offer security against Shiite militias. This further strengthens the movement's sectarian politics, which build on both 'social sectarianism' (Ismael and Ismael 2010:340) and political discourses in the whole region about Iranian, i.e. "Shiite", influence advancing on numerous levels (Günther 2015b). The Islamic State could, hence, easily capitalize on experiences and feelings of the Sunni population who had been affected by a continuing "De-Sunnification" of power positions in Iraq (ICG 2006: 9-12; ICG 2013), maltreatment on part of Shiite militias, as well as American military and private contractors during raids, and in detention centres (Khatib 2015a), or displacement in the context of ethnic and sectarian cleansing (Günther 2014: 184-187). In order to strengthen its position towards these people, the Islamic State offers protection against Shiite militias and national armies, carries out raids against state prisons such as the infamous Abu Ghraib and Tadmur jails, and frequently appeals to emotional motifs, as it presents itself as the restorer of Sunni honor and pride (cf. Barnard and Arango 2015). The fact that Sunni tribal factions also align with the Islamic State under this rubric affects and impedes efforts of reconciliation on a national basis. This is because these efforts necessarily involve surmounting the sectarian divide which dominates the political arena in both Iraq and Syria. Nevertheless, up until 2015, several tribal elders in both countries have publicly pledged allegiance (*bay'a*; see Günther 2014: 222-225; Wagemakers 2015) to the Islamic State and its caliph, thus placing their entire constituency under the movement's command (Orient News 2015).

3. Alliances with Former Baathist (Military) Leaders

The Islamic State seeks to distance itself from the former Iraqi regime, which it considers apostate due to its secular-nationalist political orientation (Günther 2014: 141-142). Yet the movement and its predecessors have been dependent on the knowledge and skills of former members of the Baath party and the Iraqi military. Thus, it has been of vital concern to the movement to consult with and integrate former Baath party members and loyalists, as another local source of power, into its ranks. At the same time, by assisting the Islamic State's forces during their conquests in Iraq since June 2014, former Baathists might have expected to regain their power lost after the fall of Saddam Husayn's government

in 2003. Interpersonal ties between Jihadist and former Baathist leaders were knit in detention centres, such as Camp Bucca, where Sunnis accounted for the majority of detainees (McCoy 2014; Reuter 2015). They hence entered into a coalition with Jihadist forces, even though they might neither subscribe to the Islamic State's ideological framework nor aspire to establish a religious regime in Iraq in the long run (Sly 2015).

The past twelve years thus saw the evolution of a pragmatic and strategic alliance based on the 'least common denominator' of overthrowing a common enemy, i.e. the Shiite-led government in Baghdad, which continued to keep Sunni representatives from power positions during this period. It utilizes the intelligence and security service structures, as well as the military expertise of the former regime, as an important means to make territorial and political gains. Although the Islamic State explicitly denied their involvement (Dabiq 7: 6), former Baath party leaders as well as officers of the military and security services have been part of the inner circle of the movement as it evolved. The same were also co-opted into councils overseeing the restoration of basic services and the building of state-like structures in the territories conquered by ISIS (Fadel 2014; Harris 2014). Nevertheless, this alliance of supposedly mutual benefit is highly erratic and vulnerable to rifts, as Baathist and Jihadist factions within the Islamic State pursue different means appropriate for social and political changes in Iraq and beyond. Hence, the movement's rational appeal for forging these coalitions tends to collapse as soon as the calculations of its participants change with the achievement of rational aims. This can be seen from the developments after the conquest of Mosul in July 2014 which is of strategic importance to the Islamic State: Within one month after it had taken over the city, the Islamic State began to eliminate potential contenders of its recently acquired power, as dozens of former leaders of the Baath party, its security services, and the army, disappeared (Reuter 2015: 189; Fick et al. 2014). At the same time, reports were released about influential ex-Baathists distancing themselves from the movement's cruel treatment of minorities, and tribal members signaling their demerger from Jihadist forces in order to secure chances for future political reconciliation on a national level (Harris 2014).

In general, the alliance of Jihadist factions with former Baath party leaders and members of the military and security services followed a pragmatic rationale motivated by expectations of a mutual benefit. However, as the Islamic State seeks to consolidate its rule and establish a religious regime in the conquered territories, disagreements between the two factions come to the fore, and it remains uncertain whether the disintegration of the movement and the withdrawal of nationalist forces will affect its hold on Iraqi society as the Islamic State would eventually replace former Baath cadres and take over their networks.

4. The Traditional Appeal of the Islamic State

The type of domination that features most prominently in the Islamic State's claims to power is its recourse to a past sacred order that it aims to reestablish. Hence, it attempts to exert traditional authority in the minds of its followers to the extent that they regard it as a legitimate representative of the proposed order.

This aspect of the Islamic State's rule was recently emphasized by Hans Bakker (Bakker 2015) who regards Max Weber's concept of *patrimonial prebendalism* (Weber 1978:235) as a form of traditional authority that fits the Islamic State's envisaged order. Bakker holds that the following features of patrimonial prebendalism apply to the Islamic State: its political legitimacy is concentrated within one group, which is itself organized around a leading figure; authority in peripheral areas is directly linked to the ruling group; the main sources of material wealth are land and labour with no, or very rudimentary, financial administration structures; individuals are treated as liable for their communities; the existence of slave labour; and "[d]ecision-making is ad hoc and there are no rational-legal administrative codes". We doubt this latter aspect (see below the section on the Islamic State's statehood), but all other features of prebendalism seem to have been developed by the Islamic State at least in a rudimentary form. While we agree that the traditional order envisaged by the Islamic State can indeed be described in the Weberian terms suggested by Bakker, we will in this section focus on the Islamic State's claims to being connected with legitimate traditional forms of authority. Hence, we do not attempt to identify an existing structure of traditional domination, but to focus on allusions to traditional authority by the Islamic State. To the extent that these allusions are regarded as legitimate by a sufficient number of ruled, they can serve as the foundation for the legitimate establishment of prebendalism or any other form of traditional order.

5. Contesting Modern Borders in the Middle East

Among the main rationales that underlie the Islamic State's claim to power in the areas that it covers, as well as worldwide, is its criticism of the effects of political influence exerted by foreign powers on Arab Muslim countries since the beginning of the 18th century. The movement portrays the social and cultural dynamics that changed the Middle East since the beginning of its colonization as being introduced by foreign powers. The intent of these powers, in the Islamic State's view, is to diminish the importance of Islamic values, norms, and beliefs in the operation of Muslim societies. This furthered the 'crisis of meaning' (Berger and Luckmann 1995) that befell Arab Muslim societies. In other words, the Islamic State regards modernization and colonialism as the same thing, the common element being their opposition to supposed traditional Islamic values and order.² By contrast, the Quran and the Hadith figure as fundamentals on which the cultural sovereignty of the Islamic world are to be reestablished, because they are supposed to be a response to "the generalized erosion of systemic ultimate meaning systems [and] the failure of non-religious ideology" (Geoffroy 2004:39). The Islamic State thus presents itself as solely capable of countering these developments, and offers its audience a societal model that is deemed to contribute to the restoration of a glorious past.

An important part of this endeavor is the contestation and eradication of national borders in the region that are considered symbols of the physical and artificial separation of territories

whose inhabitants are inseparable before God. Writing off these topographical constraints is thus deemed to create the basis for a unification of all mankind under the banner of an Islamic State. Both the "Islamic State of Iraq", as well as its succeeding entity the "Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant", constantly used their media to promote this idealized historical motif by articulating and visualizing their rejection and contestation of the Syrian and Iraqi borders (Günther 2015a:39-42). It was only in June 2014, that the recently-announced Islamic State erased and bulldozed the sand berm separating Iraq and Syria, terming it the demolition of "the barriers set up to enforce the crusader partitions of the past century" (Islamic State Report 4:3). To showcase these military gains, the movement published videos both for Arabic and English audiences entitled "Breaking the borders" (*kasr al-hudūd*) and "The End of Sykes Picot", where one of their fighters claimed that "we did not recognize it and we will never recognize it. Insha'Allah this is not the first border we will break; Insha'Allah we will break other borders also" (Al-Hayat 2014).

6. The Charismatic Appeal of the Islamic State

The strong emphasis on traditional authority the Islamic State claims to represent should not conceal the fact that there are aspects of charismatic domination in the Islamic State's propaganda that are, to some extent, mirrored by the actions and self-images of its adherents. This is the case in at least two areas, namely, the way the Islamic State frames its leader, the caliph, and the way it portrays its fighters. Both are seen as being in possession of extraordinary personal qualities that guarantee their respective claims to power, though the legitimacy of those charismatic qualifications is hybridized with traditional authority.

Not just the caliph, but also the Islamic State's fighters, representing the second subgroup within the ruling group (see above), are described as being charismatically qualified by the Islamic State's media outlets. For instance, in an early issue of "Dabiq" they are characterized as being free of hypocrisy (Dabiq 3:25-27). This is supposed to create a contrast to many people who identify as Muslims while they adhere to secular ideologies and lifestyles and do not remain faithful to 'true Islam', hence becoming hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*). Another article in the same series describes everyday work life in the West as being humiliating to Muslims, and sets against this the honorable and powerful existence of the Jihadi whose life is referred to as "larger" and "fuller" than that of other members of the *umma* (Dabiq 3:31). More generally the faith of the *mujāhidīn* is being characterized as stronger and deeper than that of ordinary Muslims: "it is important to remember that the *mujāhidīn* are from the people with the most proper creed, especially concerning Allah's names, attributes, and actions" (Dabiq 2:23). Addressing America and with reference to God's protection of the fighting force of the Islamic State an article summarizes: "This is where the secret lies. You fight a people who can never be defeated." (Dabiq 4:7). Here, too, charismatic authority is not detached from other forms of authority. Just as the caliph's extraordinary qualities are embedded in a traditional order that guarantees their legitimacy, the fighters of the Islamic State are seen as endowed with charismatic abilities insofar as

² For a general description of the link between fundamentalism, modernity and secularity, see Kaden 2014.

their behavior conforms to the social, cultural, and military order that is envisaged by the Islamic State. A lengthy article in “Dabiq” (6:6-15) contains no less than 31 pieces of advice to the fighters that are all based on the norms of religiously righteous behavior. All extraordinary qualities of ruling people within the Islamic State, important as they are, are bound to the traditional norms set forth by the movement, thus creating a powerful hybrid authority where charisma supports tradition, and vice versa.

7. The Islamic State as a Quasi-State

Through the means discussed in the prior segments, the Islamic State has managed to establish its rule over significant parts of Iraq and Syria. Though large swaths have been under the rule of the black banner ever since its large-scale expansion began in June 2014, the area covered by the movement is all but securely in its hands and had been diminished significantly while we finalized this paper. We are, however, neither concerned with the stability or instability of the Islamic State’s borders nor with the sheer size of territory it controls. Our argument relates to the principle structure of the movement’s rule whereby the question arises whether the structure of this rule can be reduced to the forms of authority already discussed, or whether additional factors come into play. We argue that the exertion of power over the course of a relatively long time has led to a quasi-statehood of the Islamic State, at least in its core areas.³ In the context of an increasing fragmentation of civil societies, which not only affects Syria and Iraq but also the whole region, the Islamic State is a prime example of movements that “articulate the populations’ need for relative security, for an intelligible frame of political-cultural reference, and for representation when there is no trust in the state. They serve concrete interests in the context of an on-going process of decentralization, whereby power, notably state power, is ever more diffuse” (Harling and Birke 2015). The socio-political movement that is the Islamic State successfully fills the existing vacuum as it attempts to consolidate its rule by transforming this activism into “usual practices of every-day life” (Bayat 2005:894). Since these attempts seem to have been partly successful, they constitute a separate pillar of authority of the Islamic State, making it necessary to analyze them separately.

In addition to the analysis of authority that the Islamic State exerts over its fighters, who function as the administrative staff in Weber’s sense, we must tend to the third relevant group in his sociology of domination, that is, the ruled. The authority structure described above is supplemented by other forms of authority when it comes to affirming domination over the general population. It is these other forms of *regulatory authority* that lend the Islamic State an identity that goes far beyond that of a terror militia. To the extent that the movement exerts regulatory authority we regard it as a quasi-state.

8. The Islamic State as a Regulatory Force

In the abovementioned atmosphere of political and social sectarianism, the Islamic State has managed to create a powerful and strict regulatory regime in various fields of life. This concerns, first of all, its regulations of everyday life according to the principle of “commanding right and forbidding wrong” so as to make it conform to the religious and ethical standards it prescribes to all people under its rule. These attempts, some of which are described below, are also being used by the Islamic State to garner further legitimacy beyond the fighting mission itself (cf. Dabiq 4:28-29).

Reports from inside the areas occupied by the Islamic State, scarce as they are, repeatedly point to the Islamic State’s attempt at making political gains by filling the void that was left by the Iraqi and Syrian central government – sometimes long before the latter lost considerable parts of their territory to the movement. In doing so, the Islamic State aims to achieve a long-lasting effect on its subjects by replacing former governmental structures, regulating public life and morals, and providing civil services that support and further the populace’s acceptance of, and commitment to, the Islamic State on a personal and legal level. Regulating sectors such as the cities’ waste management, public transport (Naynawa Media Office 2014b), urban developmental projects (see e.g. al-Anbar Media Office 2014; Naynawa Media Office 2015), and other municipal services (Raqqqa Media Office 2014b), as well as medical services (Dabiq 9:24-26; Aleppo Media Office 2015a), is seemingly ephemeral to the movement’s efforts, yet they constitute vital components of this state-building project and are explicitly justified as charitable work serving the prosperity of the Muslim community (Aleppo Media Office 2015b).

Among the areas that seem of particular importance to the movement’s regulatory efforts in order to achieve fundamental and long-lasting cultural changes, are the juvenile labor and educational systems. In previous years, the Islamic State and its predecessors published footage of occasional instances of street festivals for children that would go along with religious activities. Yet these efforts aiming at winning over “hearts and minds” (cf. Dickinson 2009) of the youngest had not been undertaken in a systematic manner. This changed, however, with the movement’s rapid military advancement and the expansion of its territory. In the course of this, the Islamic State gained control over public schools, and began to establish centers for religious learning (Raqqqa Media Office 2015c), where it imposed curricula that are already being taught in Saudi Arabia (Mamouri 2014). Shortly after its takeover of Mosul, the Islamic State released a decree introducing a new school curriculum coming into effect at the beginning of the new school year (Nabeel 2014; Spencer 2014). According to this document, similar versions of which were released in other cities in Iraq and Syria, any topic is banned from the syllabus that might be in conflict with the movement’s creed such as art, music, and subjects relating to the concepts of nationalism or secularism as well as social and natural sciences that contradict the literalist interpretation of the scriptures (Al-Tamimi 2014; see also Al-Khayr Media Office 2015). These prohibitions also affect the organization and structure of institutions of higher learning in the territories under the Islamic State’s control (Nabeel 2014). However, protest against these changes was voiced by parents, as well as teachers, with the latter being, according to some reports,

3 The Islamic State claims to hold at least partial control over considerable parts of Syria and Iraq which it arranges into 16 Provinces (See map at <http://kasmawi.net/?mod=articles&ID=114278&c=245>). Beyond these territories, the Islamic State announced its expansion to Libya, the Sinai, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen (Dabiq 5:22-33) as well as to Khorasan and the Caucasus (Dabiq 7:33-37) incorporating these areas into its caliphate. Yet the movement does not seem to exert genuine control over these areas. Cf. Zelin 2015.

subjected to punishment and replacement by foreign adherents of the movement (Allawi 2015).

Reports on the public life in the territories conquered by the Islamic State also repeatedly speak of fighters who form the so-called *rijāl al-ḥisba* that, broadly speaking, oversee public morals in order to enforce the obligation to “commanding right and forbidding wrong” by interfering and punishing violations of religious law committed in the public realm (cf. Ghabin 2009; Klein 2006; Cahen et al. 1960-2007). These men patrol the streets of cities like Raqqa, Mosul, and Falluja in search of nonconforming behavior, sometimes wearing badges that identify them as *muḥtasibūn* (those who enforce *ḥisba*). This includes checking whether shops are closed during prayer hours and exhorting shop owners to join the community prayer (Naynawa Media Office 2014a), whether the weights used for scales on market stands are adjusted correctly (Falluja Media Office 2014), whether all men of age wear beards (Raqqa Media Office 2015b), and whether women and men are dressed and behave according to the Islamic State’s understanding of decency. *Muḥtasibūn* also search people at checkpoints for forbidden items such as alcohol, drugs, and cigarettes, and engage in their public destruction (Raqqa Media Office 2014a; Raqqa Media Office 2015b). They even raid houses of suspected magicians in search for items that are supposedly used to bewitch other people and oversee the suspects’ public execution (Raqqa Media Office 2015a).

Members of the *ḥisba* are not only concerned with the supervision of public morals, but also regulate everyday life as part of the Islamic State’s penitentiary network that consists of Shariah law courts, and police forces and the *muḥtasibūn*, both of which police public and private places and also execute the courts’ decisions (Raqqa Media Office 2015a; Homs Media Office 2015). Crimes and misconduct that would be punished by these institutions can be categorized according to March and Revkin (2015) into “crimes threatening the state and public order, including espionage, treason, collaborating with foreign interests, embezzlement of public funds; crimes against religion or public morality, including adultery, sodomy, blasphemy, apostasy, pornography, selling or consuming drugs and alcohol, and witchcraft; and crimes or torts against particular individuals, which include theft, burglary, home invasion, rape, armed robbery, and murder.” In general it remains to be seen to what extent compliance with the juridical system of the Islamic State is brought about by sheer coercion, by acceptance of its personnel and contents, or by approval of the religious values behind the rules.

9. Conclusion

A sociological perspective on the Islamic State’s regime paints a surprisingly multi-faceted picture. Its appeal to a traditional order can be regarded as its most pervasive argument to garner obedience. But the Islamic State also manages to forge and maintain alliances on a rational, innerworldly, means-ends basis with various groups.

Our findings are of course tentative given that it is not possible to prove that the means of authority deployed by the Islamic State are, in fact, viewed as the legitimate grounds upon which its fighters and the people ruled by it adhere to it. Some of the Western adolescents that make their way to Iraq and Syria might

be drawn to it not so much due to a theological pondering of their duties as Muslims, but because they identify their crises of adolescence with the Islamic State’s cause of liberating Muslims worldwide. Many of the people under its rule might not so much conform because of their admiration for the Islamic State’s measures of communal organization, but because of the sheer threat of violence against any deviation.

Still these means of authority exist as programmatic and practical features of the social movement and quasi-state that is the Islamic State. Its persistence in the face of military and political opposition suggests that the sources of authority described in this article are at least in part salient. Explaining his basic sociological terms, Weber remarked that no power relationship of people over people is a one-way street. Rather, for a rule to be stable, the ruled need to develop a belief in the legitimacy of the order they are subject to. Naturally, the transition between obedience out of fear of punishment (itself a form of rational domination), and obedience out of a sense of legitimacy are highly fluent (Weber 1978:31). From this perspective the Islamic State’s various claims to authority can be seen as legitimacy constructs that are offered to the population in order to increase the chance of their going beyond obedience out of fear. While it is still uncertain to what extent, and based upon which legitimating narrative, it is seen as legitimate by the ruled, each month that passes with the Islamic State being relatively uncontested makes it appear more plausible that it is, indeed, much more than a mere terrorist movement.



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