



# Policy Brief

Violent radicalisation in northern Nigeria:  
The Macro Regional Context





## BACKGROUND

### With the outbreak of the Islamist insurgency in northern Nigeria headed by the *Jama'atu Ahlul Sunna li Da'awati wal Jihad (JAS)*, a furious public debate has arisen concerning the causes of the insurgency.

While some blame the insurgency on poverty, others point towards the malign influence of intolerant preachers and purveyors of hate speech. Casting the Nigerian experience within the wider West African regional context is one way in which we can test the relative importance of these competing possible causes. If poverty is an important cause of radicalisation, why is Niger Republic, which is similar to northern Nigeria, but much poorer, not witnessing the same levels of radicalisation as in Nigeria? If radicalisation is the product of the activities of intolerant religious preachers, why has Niger Republic, which shares much of the same Islamic religious life with northern Nigeria, been relatively immune to radicalisation? Such a macro regional lens makes possible a better understanding of the drivers of radicalisation in Nigeria.

A comparison of the situation in southern Niger Republic and northern Nigeria suggests that:

- poverty is an important context for radicalisation, but this is especially the case when poverty is combined with high levels of individual and group inequalities;
- the political management of religious pressures in society is important, and it is itself dependent on the cohesion of the national elite and the institutional coherence of the state;
- a more coherent state is likely to have stronger and more robust regulatory capabilities which make possible the containment of religious discontent;
- the active promotion of secularism or the values of religious pluralism and toleration is important for establishing peaceful relations between faiths.

At first glance, northern Nigeria and southern Niger Republic appear very similar since they share a number of important geographical, climatic, linguistic, religious, economic, and social characteristics.

- Both belong to the same sahelian cultural belt just south of the Sahara, a zone in which Islam has exercised significant influence for over a thousand years, and in which life-styles and their expressions in food, music, dance, and dress are fairly similar. The two regions are also united by the prevalence of the Hausa language.
- Both are regions of high levels of poverty and depressed socio-economic indicators.
- Finally, they both share a complex admixture of sectarian communities of Sufi Brotherhoods and reformist Salafist strands of Islam.

Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, religious and political ideas, religious groups, economic actors, and political forces have moved back and forth between the societies in both regions. In the process, events in one region have had ramifications for developments in the other. For instance, the Sokoto jihad of 1804 spread Qadiriyya Brotherhood influence to the territories that are now in Niger Republic. Similarly, the Tijaniyya-Ibrahimiyya Brotherhood was spread from Kano to Niger in the 1950s. The Qadiriyya-Tijaniyya sectarian conflicts which were common in Nigeria in the 1950s and 1960s also took place in Niger. In the same vein, the reformist Salafist Nigerian sect, *Jama'atu Izalatil Bid'a WA Iqamat al-Sunnah (Izala or JIBWIS)*, also made an appearance in Niger Republic in the 1980s, having been formed

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in Nigeria. As in Nigeria, the appearance of this Salafist sect generated high levels of religious discord in Niger. Again, as happened in Nigeria, *Izala* also broke into two main factions in Niger Republic. Though the flow and ebb of ideas and people go in both directions, there is the recognition of Nigeria's formidable cultural, religious, and economic influence on Niger Republic. This is captured in the Nigerien saying: 'When Nigeria has a cold, Niger coughs'. Given this strong tendency for events in Nigeria to influence developments in Niger Republic, why have we not seen in Niger Republic the level of radicalisation and activism associated with JAS in Nigeria? If poverty explains the radicalisation process in Nigeria, why has Niger Republic which is poorer not seen similar levels of radicalisation?

To address these questions, two research projects compared the situation in both sides of the Niger-Nigeria border.<sup>1</sup> The research are based on a range of mixed methods, including interviews and field observations in Diffa and Maradi in Niger Republic, and in Kaduna, Zaria, and Jos in Nigeria. Secondly, the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) developed by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) was used to compare the levels of poverty and inequalities on both sides of the border. Thirdly, the theses archive of the Department of History at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, was used to provide a historical perspective to the analysis of the contemporary relationship between northern Nigeria and southern Niger Republic. Finally, the studies drew on other published works.

## KEY FINDINGS:

### (a) The variable cultural geographies within and between the two regions affect their relative susceptibility to radicalisation:

Southern Niger and northern Nigeria may look alike at first glance, but the two regions have important, cultural, religious, institutional, and political variations between and within them.

The Nigerian side of the border has been institutionally and culturally relatively homogenized over the centuries through a process of Islamization from the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, under British colonial Indirect Rule system after 1904, welded together under a 'Northernization' process from the terminal colonial period in the 1950s, and after 1999, through the declaration of full Sharia law in the states. In short, all the territories on the Nigerian side of the border share fairly similar institutions, historical experiences, and cultural and political perspectives. On the Niger Republic side of the border, however, no such historical, institutional, and cultural homogenization has taken place; instead, there are three distinct – and divergent - cultural trajectories present. The Niger side of the border can be divided into three distinct sections, West, Centre and East, each following a different logic from the other. In the West, around Dogon Dutsi, Islam has very shallow roots as it was only embraced in the 1930s. In the East, Diffa is remote, sparsely populated, marginalized, with no ethnic homogeneity, and marked by insecurity since the early 1990s, while in the Centre, Maradi is densely populated, ethnically homogeneous, and characterized by security-enhancing socio-political regulatory structures.

<sup>1</sup> Idrissa, Abdourahmane, 2014, 'A Dormant Risk?: Why there is only limited Radicalisation in southern Niger Republic', NSRP Project on Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation, & De-radicalisation in northern Nigeria, NSRP, Abuja, and Mustapha, Abdul Raufu, 2014, 'Violent Radicalisation: Northern Nigeria in the light of the experience of southern Niger Republic', NSRP Project on Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation, & De-radicalisation in northern Nigeria, NSRP, Abuja.



The picture that emerges is a level of ethnic, cultural, religious, and historical fragmentation on the Niger side which is at variance with the homogenizing experience on the Nigerian side of the border. In Diffa, the religio-political landscape, and its relations with Nigeria (especially Borno), creates the basis for the extension of JAS influence into the region, resulting in a pattern of 'incipient radicalisation.' The factors of that incipient radicalisation suggest that political and economic factors are less important than ethnic and historical ones, essentially because the latter create strong connections between Borno ideologues and the people of Manga, the Kanuri-speaking areas of

the region of Diffa. By contrast, the economic and demographic complexity of the situation of Maradi is more similar to those in northern Nigeria. Yet, despite increased Islamization in Maradi, the risk of radicalisation is reduced by the robustness of the regulatory institutions of the local and national state. There is incipient radicalisation in Diffa, but not in Maradi, where, on the other hand, ideological factors of radicalisation may be stronger. And in Dogon Dutsi, the youth seem to be more interested in hip-hop! These variabilities in cultural and political geographies on both sides of the border affect the susceptibility to radicalisation.



**Niger- Nigeria Borderlands.**

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### **(b) The continuing impact of historical forces:**

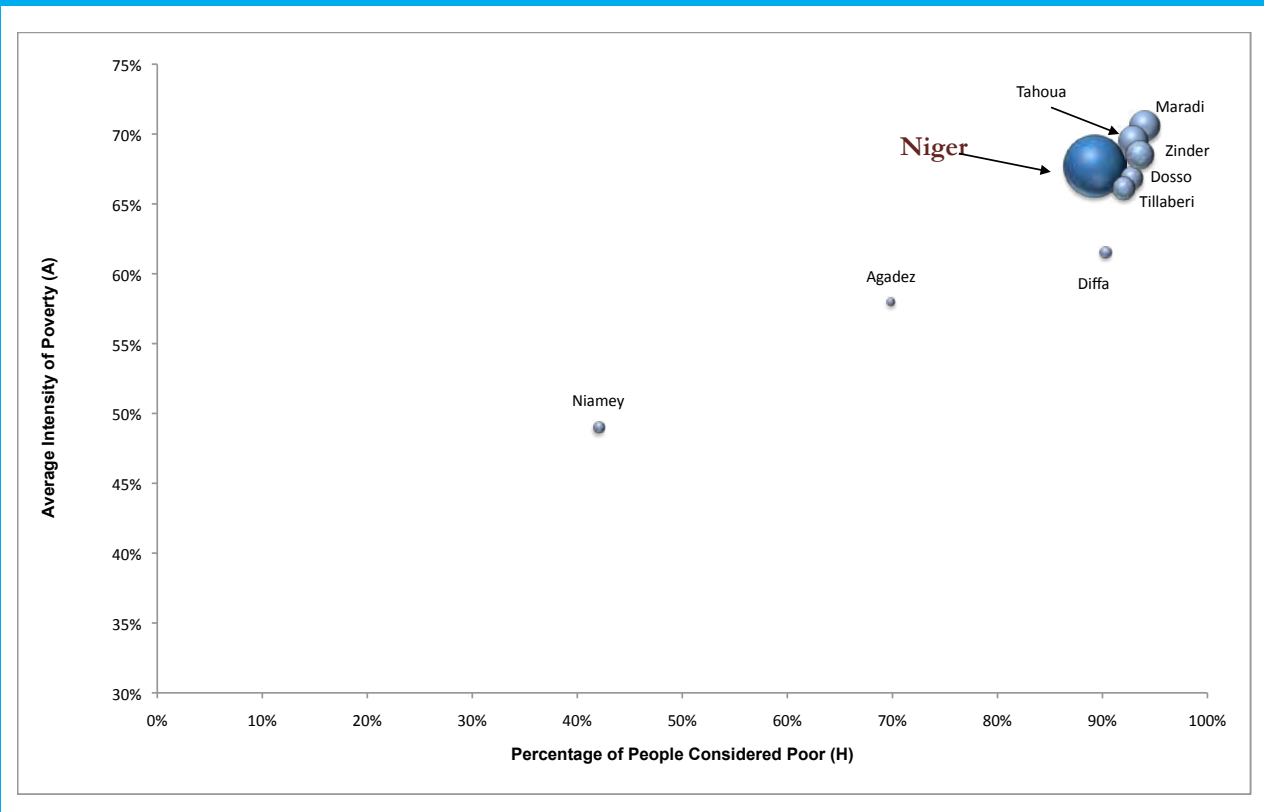
Colonization has followed the pre-colonial lines of division between the societies now living in Niger and Nigeria, whilst at the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, reinforcing the bonds between Nigeria and Niger. Furthermore, colonial policies of secularism by the French and the British policy of Indirect Rule through local Muslim potentates created different possibilities for preserving the cultural and institutional legacies of Islam on the two sides of the border. The legacies of history across the borderlands are therefore contradictory. On the one hand, ideas and people have flowed back and forth in the past, and continue to do so in the present, including radical Islamist ideas. On the other hand, however, the resilience of the pre-colonial divisions and especially the active French colonial policies of the suppression of Islam have created a more highly regulated religious sphere in Niger, relative to that of Nigeria. The continuing capacity of the Niger state to monitor, regulate and discipline religious activity is much higher than that of Nigeria because of these different historical trajectories.

### **(c) The importance of economic processes:**

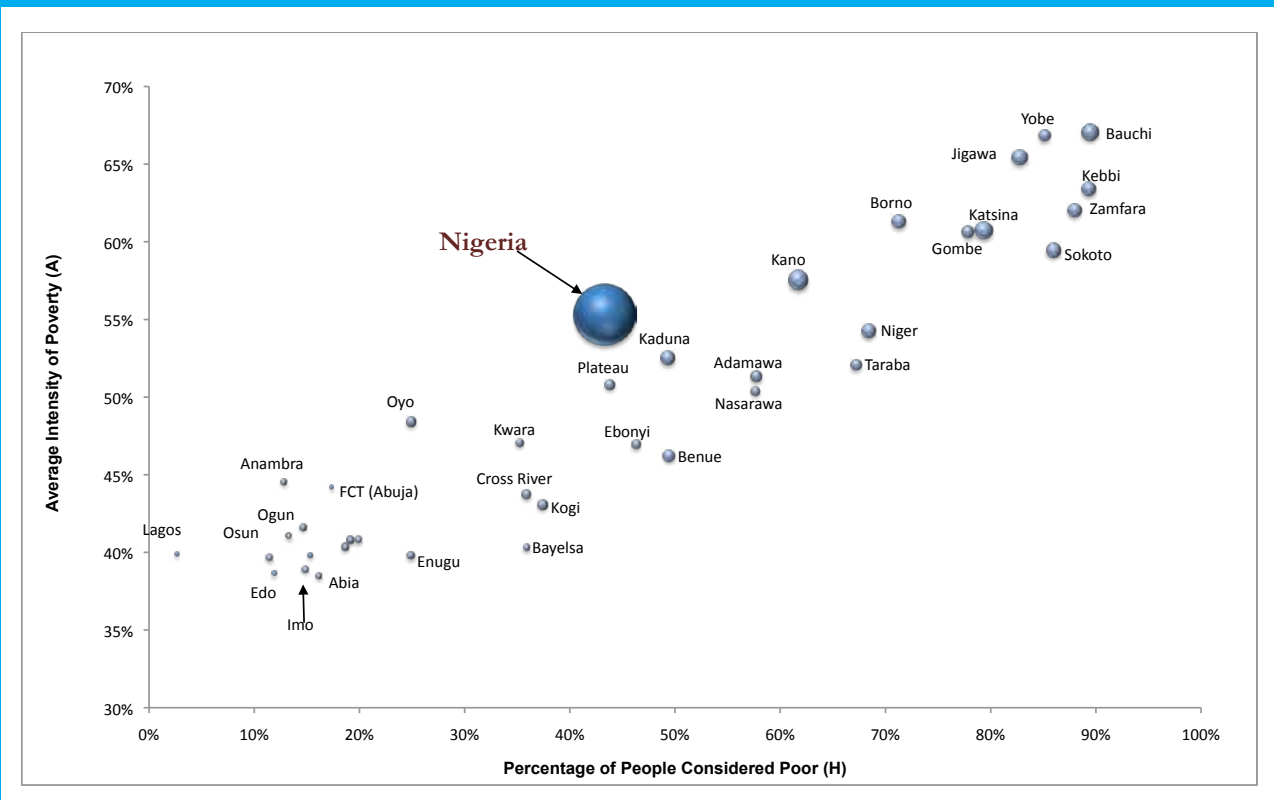
The *prevalence* of poverty is the proportion of the national population affected by it, while the *intensity* is measured by how many of the ten indicators in OPHI's Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) are deficient in the lives of the poor. Niger Republic has very high levels of both the prevalence and the intensity of poverty. Most of the Nigerien population is clustered at the very high end of the prevalence and intensity spectrum, meaning that *most* people (over 90%) are *intensively* poor (in about 70% of the indicators).

Poverty is therefore a uniform phenomenon across most parts of Niger Republic, while individual and group inequalities are low. In Nigeria, by contrast, the distribution of poverty is far more dispersed across the country, with a state like Lagos having only a low prevalence of poverty (about 4%), and a relatively low intensity (about 40%), compared to Bauchi State with a prevalence of poverty of about 67% of the population and an intensity of poverty of about 88% of the OPHI indicators. Consequently, there is a marked regional variation in poverty across Nigeria, with most of the northern states doing far worse than the southern states in terms of both the prevalence and the intensity of poverty.

In Nigeria therefore, the overall prevalence and intensity of poverty may be lower than in Niger Republic, but unlike in Niger, individual and group inequalities are extremely high. How poverty and inequalities interact with each other may be quite an important pathway through which poverty as a whole feeds into grievances and radicalisation. Lower inequalities and higher levels of poverty, as in Niger, may not be as dangerous as the higher group and individual inequalities and relatively lower levels of poverty, as in Nigeria.



Poverty is more intense in Niger Republic and involves a higher proportion of the population.



Inequality is more intense in Nigeria where high rates and intensities of poverty are concentrated in the northern States.

**(d) The political and administrative dynamics in both regions:**

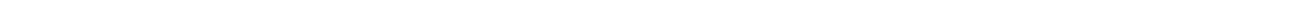
There are significant differences between both countries, looking at their political and administrative systems at the national and local levels. French colonial theory and practice was far more centralized than that of the British, giving local forces at the sub-national level far less room for expression and development, compared to the situation in British-run Nigeria. At independence in 1960 Niger was also a single-party state, an impossible proposition in decolonizing Nigeria, where independence rested on a tripod of ethno-regional powers. The deregulation of Niger’s one-party regime and economic and political liberalization from the 1980s and the 1990s led to the emergence of a public sphere. Significantly, even with all this opening up, the government has frequently cracked down on those who openly defied the state’s authority. Consequently, the capacity of the state to dominate society in Niger is of long-standing vintage and is incomparable to the more relaxed, some would say, even chaotic and undisciplined, relationship between the state, its regulatory apparatuses, and society in Nigeria. The state’s capacity to intervene in local religious practice – either through carrots or sticks - is low in Nigeria, compared to Niger.

A second important feature of national politics in Niger is that it exerts considerable control over local politics. In Niger, national politics count much more than regional and local politics. On balance, therefore, national politics is not as fractious and contentious in Niger as in Nigeria and this reinforces the domination of the regions by the centre. The historical, structural, and processual advantages of national politics over regional politics in Niger are lacking in Nigeria where the contentious politics of ethno-regional brinksmanship is unfortunately the norm. And this fractious politics is institutionally

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supported by the federal system. The federal centre remains a contested terrain in Nigeria to an extent that is not the case in Niger, and its ability to discipline the states remains constrained. The dynamics of contentious politics and the institutional crevasses between the states and the centre have often been exploited by many religious forces in Nigeria to advance their sectarian ends.

At the level of local politics, the dynamic in Niger is also very different from that of Nigeria. In the pre political liberalization dispensation, both the executive rulers of districts (prefects and sub-prefects) and the mayors (in the principal towns of the country) were appointed by the central government. The traditional chiefs, so prominent in the political, administrative, and fiscal arrangements at the local level in Nigeria, lacked any formal recognition and legal autonomy in Niger. Liberalization brought decentralization, but this nevertheless maintained centralism while relaxing it at the margins to allow for some local politics. Opening up the public sphere and decentralizing local governance in Niger did not mean the loss of vital centre prerogatives of control – and suppression. The texture of local governance in Nigeria is very different from that of Niger. Firstly, local traditional institutions have always had a major voice in local affairs in Nigeria. While these local chiefs lost control over vital disciplinary institutions under various local government reforms, these powers were frequently transferred to remote and





indifferent federal bureaucracies whose ethos and objectives were often incomprehensible to many local populations. As a result of all these changes, traditional authorities are now a pale shadow of their former status. And local governments, with their poor staffing and funding situation, and constantly changing political leadership, have lost the capacity to monitor their constituencies and prevent potentially undesirable developments from taking root within their jurisdictions. Along with this institutional disorganization came pressures from population growth, increased migration, urbanization, and economic crises. Compared to the situation in Niger Republic, local level governance in Nigeria is weak and increasingly rudderless.

At the administrative level, religious forces have been able to penetrate the institutions of the Nigerian state – especially educational institutions with responsibilities for socializing the youth – to an extent that has been impossible in Niger Republic because of the continuing commitment to secularism in Niger and the ability of the state to impose this ethos even on religious schools.

#### **(e) The place of secularism and Christianity:**

Despite being predominantly Muslim, Niger Republic has a clear and unambiguous commitment to secularism, based on the French colonial policy of *laïcité* (secularism). Secularist views have taken such strong roots within the Nigerien elite that Islam has not succeeded in stifling the secular identity of the state, even though in recent years, liberalization has created more room for Islamic organizations and forces, and the state has had to react to them in a less clear and more ambiguous ways. While giving more room to Islamic forces in society, the Nigerien state has nevertheless maintained a secularist strangle

hold on the state. By contrast, secularism is not even specifically mentioned in the Nigerian constitution. The concern of the Nigerian constitution drafters is not the philosophical separation of church/mosque and state, but the positioning of the state in an equi-distant position between the two main religions – Islam and Christianity. The Nigerian understanding of ‘secularism’ is therefore the achievement of religious balance - and possibly neutrality - by the state in its relationship to the two main religions. And since such a balance is difficult to achieve in practice even with the best of intentions - not to mention the deliberate manipulation of religious sentiments for political ends – ‘secularism’ in Nigeria is in practice a recipe for religious suspicion and competition which can be spurs for extremism and radicalisation.

The respective philosophical and constitutional positions of Nigeria and Niger on secularism are reinforced by the religious demographics of each country. With a population made up of 99% Muslim and the remaining 1% split between Christians and followers of traditional African religions, Niger is for all intent and purpose a Muslim country. And this very demographic preponderance can be a spur towards tolerance, since the Christian minority is not seen as a viable threat. In Nigeria by contrast, the near balance in the demographic weight of Muslims and Christians in the population, the economic and educational inequalities between communities belonging to the two faiths, and the overlap between religion, ethnicity, and regionalism have all contributed to a very acrimonious and competitive relationship between the two faiths. Within this context, inter and intra religious competition can lead to a bidding game in which religious entrepreneurs seek relevance through outbidding each other. This generates a situation conducive to radicalisation.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NIGERIA:

- **Poverty** is an important context for radicalisation, but it is the combination of poverty with both vertical (between individuals) and horizontal (between groups and regions) **inequality** in Nigeria that has proved more deadly. Studies suggest that policies promoting ‘poverty alleviation’ have been largely ineffective. Worse still, very little has been done to address regional and individual inequalities. Programmes like the Presidential Initiative on the North East (PINE) need to be strengthened to address regional inequalities.
- The state in Niger Republic has an authoritarian past which gives it a significant capacity to exert control over the society. Despite democratization and decentralization in recent years, this capacity for control is undiminished, and is used to counter religious extremism. By contrast, Nigeria’s fractious political system – and its federal system - has engendered a situation in which cracks between ethno-religious elites and between the federal centre and the states can be exploited by religious forces in society for their sectarian ends. The capacity of **national elites** to come together around an inclusive shared minimum vision of the state is therefore an important factor which Nigeria must generate from its democratic system. The short-sighted exploitation of the insurgency for partisan political ends by all the major political forces in Nigeria is a boon to the insurgents.
- Developing a more coherent state system must go along with enhancing the **regulatory capacities** of the state. In Niger Republic, the residue of authoritarianism gives the state a sufficiently robust regulatory capacity vis-a-vis the society. In Nigeria’s chaotic democratic system, the regulatory capacity of the state is often the first casualty of corrupt practices or the squabbling between different factions of the elites.
- While Niger Republic whole-heartedly embraces secularism, the Nigerian state has a more ambiguous relationship to religion. Rather than secularism, the Nigerian state seeks to maintain equi-distance between the two main religious faiths – Islam and Christianity. But everyday practice shows that it is not enough for the state to seek to stand equi-distant between religions – there is the need for an active promotion of religious tolerance and co-existence through the promotion of the values of **religious pluralism**.
- Nigeria needs to have a clearer picture of the relationship of JAS insurgency to the different communities across the border in neighbouring countries. For example, in Niger Republic, Eastern Niger around Manga is more likely to pose a threat to Nigeria than Western Niger, around Dogon Dutsi. Similarly, Chad Republic is an important source of weaponry for the insurgents. This **better knowledge of its borders** will enable the more appropriate deployment of limited surveillance and military resources.

[The research for this Policy Brief was conducted early in 2014. From late 2014 and early 2015, JAS has expanded its zone of military activities to include direct attacks on Cameroon, Chad, and Niger Republic. This growing regionalization of the conflict highlights the importance of studying the macro-regional context of the evolution of the organization. Even with this expansion of the theatre of hostilities by JAS, our primary conclusions regarding the differential processes of radicalisation in Nigeria and Niger Republic remain the same.]

## FIND OUT MORE

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Three Arms Zone,  
Abuja

This brief is based on a study conducted for the Office of the National Security Adviser by the development, Research and Projects Centre, Kano in collaboration with Prof. Mohammed Sani Umar, Department of History, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and Prof Abdul Raufu Mustapha of the Nigeria Research Network, Oxford Department of International Development, Oxford University. The paper also drew on interviews with *alamajirai*, academics, Civil Society Activists, Islamic scholars as well as secondary literature. The research was supported by the Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP).

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