Violent extremism in Australia: An overview

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Abstract | Since Federation, Australia has not been immune to violent extremism, although the scale of such violence is less evident than in many countries throughout the world.

While such acts of violence within Australia have been intermittent, around 150 have occurred since World War II, though most have not been successful. Further, Australian nationals have also died overseas, such as during the 9/11 attacks in New York and the bombing of the Sari Club in Bali in 2002. These incidents have sensitised the public to extremism.

Currently, the nation is responding to a heightened risk of violent extremism. It is therefore timely to describe the nature of violent extremism that has manifested in Australia – ethno-nationalist, political and most recently, jihadist.

This paper examines the nature of extremist violence that has impacted on Australia, and highlights changes in the risk and the nature of violent extremism over time.

Australia is one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse nations in the world. Australians identify with over 100 different faiths or religious traditions (Bouma 2006) and over 300 languages are spoken in Australian households (AMF 2013). Although a wide range of backgrounds and beliefs are present within the Australian community, the nation has experienced a relatively peaceful recent history. While violent extremism is considered more or less a 'permanent feature of western societies' (Neumann 2013: 893), the threat to the Australian community from violent extremism has been comparatively small. However, that threat has remained persistent for a long period of time. According to the 2010 Counter-Terrorism White Paper, the threat from violent extremism is 'real and enduring' and 'has become a persistent and permanent feature of Australia's security environment' (DPM&C 2010: 2).

Violent extremism involves individuals or groups seeking to change society or a government's policies by threatening or using violence to achieve an ideological, religious or political goal. Although most have not been successful, in excess of 150 planned acts of violent extremism have occurred in Australia since World War II. In this paper, the various forms of violent extremism that have impacted Australia over time are briefly chronicled and analysis is provided as to how the phenomenon contrasts with other broadly comparable countries.

This paper is not intended to provide a comprehensive catalogue of violent extremist events. Rather, it is written to provide a historical overview of the scale of the threat in Australia and how it has evolved over time. Given the prominence of violent extremism in the current national security debate, it is important to place the current threat in historical context. By identifying trends and contrasting the violent extremism phenomenon in Australia with other broadly comparable countries, this paper lays the groundwork for future analysis explaining specific elements of violent extremism today.

Ethno-nationalist violence

Groups involved in international political or independence struggles are commonly termed *ethno-nationalists*. In today's globalised world, nations such as Australia, with large diaspora communities, have been directly impacted by violence connected to ethnic and political conflicts internationally (DPM&C 2010). For example, between 1967 and 1973, the Australian wing of the Croatian Revolutionary Brotherhood was responsible for 10 separate bombings in Australia. Targets included the Yugoslav Consulate-General offices in both Sydney and Melbourne, the Yugoslav Embassy, a Serbian Orthodox church and a travel agency in Sydney (Koschade 2009). Although nobody was killed during these bombings, 16 people were injured in the last attack, two of them critically (Koschade 2007).

Ethno-nationalist motivated acts of violence perpetrated on Australian soil have also originated overseas. In December 1980, the consul-general of Turkey and his bodyguard were shot and killed by two assassins on a motorcycle (Crown 1986). The Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide ultimately claimed responsibility for the killings. Two members of this group also attempted to detonate a car bomb at the Turkish Consulate in Melbourne in 1986. In this instance, one individual was killed (Crown 1986).

Israeli interests in Australia were also targeted in December 1982 when more than five kilograms of explosives were detonated at Sydney's Israeli Consulate-General offices. On the same day, there were also two explosions at the predominantly Jewish Hakoah Club in Bondi (Crown 1986). Envelopes containing explosives addressed to the Israeli Consulate and the Israeli Embassy (which originated from Amsterdam) were also discovered. A Cabinet Submission by Attorney General Ivor Greenwood attributed responsibility for the bombs to groups originating from the Middle East (Koschade 2007).

Australia has also been used as a base to fundraise for violent extremist groups that operate internationally. Although *financial contributions through formal charitable donations* was listed by AUSTRAC as the principal method by which funds supporting international violent extremist groups are raised in Australia (Bricknell 2011), individuals with ethnic connections to international conflicts have also been arrested for directly financing banned international organisations.

For instance, three Victorian businessmen with connections to the Sri Lankan Tamil community were convicted of knowingly raising over $1,000,000 between 2002 and 2005 to directly support/ finance the actions of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (R v Vinayagamoorthy & Ors. VSC 148 (31 March 2010)). These three men also provide the only case of non-jihadist's being prosecuted under terrorism laws in Australia.

Moreover, Australia has been used as a base to prepare for acts of violent extremism internationally. Two incursions by Croatian groups into Communist Yugoslavia originated from Australia. In July 1963, two members of the Croatian Liberation Movement and seven other Australian residents illegally entered Yugoslavia with the intention of 'waging a terrorist campaign against the Yugoslav government' (Koschade 2009: 292). All nine were caught and sentenced to lengthy prison terms. Similar events occurred in 1972 when six Australian citizens and three others who had previously lived in Australia were also caught committing 'terrorist acts' in the former Yugoslavia. All but one of the insurgents were killed (Koschade 2009).

There are also a number of incidents connected to international events, which although involving Australia, would not be classified as ethno-nationalist. In one of the more unusual cases, members of Aum Shinrikyo (a Japanese cult listed as a terrorist organisation by many countries around the world) purchased a remote property northeast of Perth in 1993. At this property group members 'carried out experiments with the nerve agent sarin, testing it on sheep at the station' and there were also attempts made to extract uranium from the ground (Koschade 2007: 60). Six months later, members of Aum Shinrikyo released sarin gas into the Tokyo subway, killing 12 people and injuring over 5,500. Seven people were also later killed in similar attacks in the city of Matsumoto.

On 13 February 1978, a bomb exploded outside the Hilton Hotel in Sydney, where the first Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting was scheduled to take place later that day. The bombing killed three people and injured several others. Three Ananda Marga members were jailed over the incident but later pardoned in May 1985. The case remains unsolved today and therefore cannot be classified under any particular category (Hocking 1993).

Far-right violence

There is a long history of far-right activity in Australia (see Box 1) and a number of violent incidents have also occurred post-2000.

For instance, an organised campaign of violence was planned in Perth in 2004, with Jack Van Tongeren and four associates convicted of conspiring to firebomb four Chinese restaurants (Billing v The State of Western Australia WASCA 11 (21 January 2008)). Tongeren had previously led the Australian Nationalists' Movement in the 1980s and the attacks were intended to coincide with the launch of his book on the group (Van Tongeren v The State of Western Australia WASC 10 (27 January 2006)). There were also reports of the ANM threatening to kill then Prime Minister John Howard and West Australian Attorney-General Jim McGinty (Nicholson 2004).

Members of other far-right groups have also perpetrated violence in Australia in recent times. The Victorian leader of the World Church of the Creator was convicted of stabbing another member of the group (Kelly 2002) and two Melbourne men with affiliations to a skinhead group were jailed for assaulting an Asian student with a brick (R v O'Brien and Hudson VSC 592 (12 December 2012)).

Box 1: A brief history of far-right violence in Australia

While far-right violent extremist groups have existed in Australia for almost a century, their criminal activities have traditionally been sporadic and relatively contained. Historically, the first far-right groups in Australia appeared post-WWI (including the ex-soldier's fascist movement known as the White Army) and emerged more strongly in the late 1930s in the form of the Australia First Movement (whose membership was interned during World War II; Bessant 1995). Later came the explicitly Nazi Nationalist Socialist Party of Australia in the 1960s, the National Front of Australia and the Australian National Alliance during the 1970s and early 1980s, and National Action from the early 1980s onwards (Henderson 2002).

Although in 1969 an Australian associated with the evangelical and Millennialist Church of God set fire to the al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem (Lentini 2008), acts of systematic violence by the far-right did not appear consistently on Australian soil until the 1980s.

Of particular significance was the 1984 breakaway of the Australian Nationalists' Movement (ANM) from National Action. The ANM split because they considered National Action to be insufficiently explicit in its anti-Semitism and neo-Nazism, and members of the newly formed group proceeded to launch a campaign of violence that included brutal assaults and fire-bombings (Henderson 2002). When sentencing the leader for 53 offences including wilful damage, assault occasioning grievous bodily harm, arson and causing an explosion the Judge noted:

> It is, in my view, no overstatement or exaggeration to term your campaign of those months a terrorist campaign and again it is no exaggeration to say that in that period you waged a guerrilla war against the public (Moss 1991: 221).

Individuals within National Action and ANM were also responsible for the murders of fellow members (James 2005) and two members of National Action fired shots into the home of a representative of the African National Congress in Australia (Bearup 2009). This led the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation to note in their 1989–90 annual report that, 'the only discernible domestic threat of politically motivated violence comes from the racist right' (McGlade 2000: 7). However, it is important to note that the overall membership of these groups has never been particularly high and Australia has not experienced anything like the levels of right-wing extremism and violence that impacted Europe and North America in the 1990s (James 2005).

A man was also arrested in Queensland for sending explosives to prominent political figures, noting in a letter to Tony Abbott '[w]e will wipe all foreigners off Australia soil real soon. Curse them all with an agonizing death. One man shall make 10,000 free' (Keim 2012: np). Further, the White Pride Coalition of Australia were found to be circulating an article containing bomb-making instructions (Fraser & Roberts 2006). In February 2010, two members of the Perth chapter of Combat 18 were also arrested for firing three shots into the roof of Canning Mosque (Robinson 2010).

However, understanding the precise nature and scale of the far-right in Australia is made difficult by a lack of empirical information and research. Gaining reliable data on the far-right is firstly complicated by debate over exactly what constitutes violence motivated by far-right ideology. Henderson (2002: 8) notes that the left–right dichotomy of the conventional political spectrum is 'at best imprecise and often subjective'.

Moreover, Australia does not have any formal monitoring systems for this form of violence, such as that of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation's 'Hate Crime Statistics' (James 2005). In Australia, an act of violence characterised by the motivations of the offender 'is not usually considered legally different to an act of violence motivated by profit or revenge' (James 2005: 107). The only clear method of drawing such a distinction would be to prosecute offenders using terrorism legislation and to date, this has not occurred with acts of violence motivated by far-right ideology.

Although the Scanlon Foundation did reveal a marked recent increase in the reported experience of discrimination (recording 19% in 2013: 5 percentage points above the previous highest level; Markus 2013), unfortunately, there remains no systematic way to track acts of far-right violence in Australia.

By contrast, data collected internationally can be used to describe the volume of violent incidents occurring over a defined time period and trends in the nature and location of the violence perpetrated. For instance, the United States has recorded 4,420 violent incidents, which occurred between 1990 and 2012 and that 'caused 670 fatalities and injured 3053 people' (Perliger 2012: 86).

The 2012 EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report also recognised that 'the threat of violent right-wing extremism has reached new levels in Europe' (Europol 2012: 6). Although large-scale mass casualty attacks perpetrated by the far-right in Europe remained rarer overall than those conducted by other groups, 'a mounting wave of harassment and violent outbursts targeting asylum seekers and ethnic minorities' has been observed (ISD 2012: 1).

Thus, while at a glance, far-right extremism in Australia may appear less violent and smaller in scale when compared with its Western counterparts, further research is needed to better understand the specific scale of the current threat and the demographics of those who perpetrate such acts, as well as the victims of this violence.

Issue-oriented violence

Violence dedicated to a specific cause, such as environmental protection or anti-abortion, is known as *issue-oriented violence*. For the most part, criminal behaviour associated with a specific issue is disruptive and largely involves using threatening behaviour and criminal damage to promote a particular group or message. For example, a co-founder of the animal rights group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals noted that 'arson, property destruction, burglary, and theft are 'acceptable crimes' when used for the animal cause' (Liddick 2006: 51).

In Australia, logging contractors in Tasmania have had more than $4m worth of machinery, buildings and timber vandalised by individuals opposed to logging in old growth forests (Tierney 2002) and in 2009, the threat of property damage was articulated in a letter delivered to the manager of the Hazelwood power station (Wilson 2009).

Although people may not always be the direct targets of such operations, individuals have been intimidated, harassed and directly placed in harm's way. For example, in 1976, two armed men kidnapped a security guard and planted gelignite at the Bunbury woodchip export terminal in Western Australia. While a conveyor tower was destroyed, additional charges failed to explode and were ultimately defused by police (Skehan nd).

Firebombing is another tactic that has been used in Australia. For instance, three Molotov cocktails were thrown at the Darwin offices of the Jabiluka uranium mine in 1998 (Small & Gilling 2010) and in June 1995, the French Consulate in Perth was firebombed by individuals protesting France's decision to resume nuclear testing in the Pacific (Rose & Nestorovska 2005).

While these and other 'direct action' tactics used by protesters in Australia (for examples of such tactics see McFadzean v Construction, Forestry, Mining & Energy Union VSC 289 (19 August 2004): 192–203) have the potential to cause significant harm to individuals, the scale of the problem in Australia is again much smaller than that seen internationally. For instance, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has estimated that environmental and animal rights extremists committed around 2,000 criminal incidents in the United States between 1979 and 2009, causing more than $110m in damages (Bjelopera 2012).

Issue-oriented violence has also manifested in a range of organisations, which can be broadly categorised as anti-government or anti-capitalist. Many groups in this category have large support bases and generally do not pose a violent threat to the community. However, individuals or groups that advocate or become involved in the use of violence or threatening behaviour to promote their cause have appeared in Australia.

For instance, a small group of protesters at the World Economic Forum in Melbourne in September 2000 violently confronted the former Western Australian Premier, spray painting his car and slashing its tyres. There were also violent clashes with police, which resulted in eight people being hospitalised and more than 100 injured (Victorian Ombudsman 2001). Similarly, in October 2011, a small section of Occupy Melbourne protestors refused to comply with a Melbourne City Council deadline to relocate. Their refusal resulted in physical confrontations with police and a number of individuals being charged with assault (Preiss & Sexton 2011).

There are also examples of deaths associated with issue-oriented extremism in Australia. In July 2001, anti-abortion activist Peter Knight murdered a security guard in an attempted massacre at a fertility clinic in East Melbourne. Although Knight had planned to shoot as many people as possible before setting fire to the clinic and sealing the doors, he was overpowered by those inside (R v Knight VSC 498 (19 November 2002)). Notably, five years later, another Melbourne man was charged with making threats to murder staff and patients at the same abortion clinic (Anderson 2006). Between 1979 and 1985, there were also at least five serious instances of violence directed against the Family Court. Two individuals were killed in a series of shootings and explosions, while threats were issued against at least nine Family Court judges and lawyers (Hocking 1993).

Jihadist violence

In recent times, the primary violent extremist threat to Australia has come from jihadism. The 2010 Counter-Terrorism White Paper defines jihadist's as 'extremists who follow a distorted and militant interpretation of Islam that espouses violence as the answer to perceived grievances' (DPM&C 2010: 2; for a detailed description of the evolution of this ideology see Lentini 2013).While acts of jihadist violence are often justified by the perpetrators using selectively literal interpretations of traditional Islamic texts, it is important to note that the motivation for such violence is predominantly political.

Jihadism emerged in Australia around the turn of the 21st century, predominantly due to the social links between Australians and those associated with Indonesian group Jemaah Islamiyah (Neighbour 2004). The first major violent extremist plots on Australian soil were subsequently funded and directed by several prominent international jihadist organisations.

The first of these occurred in 2000 when prominent Jemaah Islamiyah and al Qaeda figures plotted to attack Israeli and Jewish targets during the Sydney Olympics (R v Roche WASCA 4 (14 January 2005)). In 2003, a cell was also uncovered in Sydney that was planning to attack the city's electricity grid (Koschade 2007). The actions of that group were being directed from Pakistan by the Lashkar-e-Taiba commander responsible for the 2008 attacks in Mumbai (Rotella 2010).

Post-2003, Australia's domestic jihadist events have shifted from being funded and directed by international organisations, to homegrown self-starting plots. This shift, which was not consistent with comparable countries internationally, was predominantly due to the removal of key facilitators with significant overseas connections from within the Australian Jihadist network (Zammit 2013a).

This shift initially manifested in two self-starting cells uncovered in November 2005 (in Melbourne and Sydney) in what was to become Australia's largest investigation connected to violent extremism (codenamed Operation Pendennis; Harris-Hogan 2013). A cell of Melbourne-based men was also arrested in Operation Neath in 2009 while planning a suicide attack on Holsworthy Army Barracks (Zammit 2012). However, rather than disparate isolated plots occurring over time, a social network analysis of Australian jihadists revealed an interconnected network of individuals which transcend operational cells (Harris-Hogan 2012b).

Overall, 23 Jihadists have either been found guilty, or pleaded guilty to terrorism charges in Australia (when referring to the legal charge, the term *terrorism* will be used). Three others have also been jailed after pleading guilty to terrorism-related offences.

While it is important to acknowledge that working with such small numbers can mean that percentages are easily skewed, these 26 convicted men do provide a working sample from which comparisons and tentative conclusions can be drawn.

In Australia, 85 percent of convicted jihadists were aged between 18 and 35 years at the time of their arrest, with the youngest just 20 years old and the oldest 48. This age range is broadly similar to that found among Canadian jihadists (Mullins 2013) and the average age of jihadis in Australia (27 years) was also similar to the United Kingdom (27 years) and United States (29 years; Zammit 2010). Although the demographics and social conditions experienced by Muslim populations in the United States and United Kingdom are somewhat different to Australia, such comparisons need to be subjected to more detailed qualitative analysis.

It is also significant to note that this sample is exclusively male. Indeed, apart from a few notable exceptions, jihadists have traditionally not welcomed women to play an active role in violence (Lahoud 2014) and while women are certainly present in the Australian jihadist network (Harris-Hogan 2012b), they play a less visible and more facilitatory role.

One significant departure from international trends was that only one convicted Australian jihadist had completed any form of higher education and 65 percent of the sample had not finished high school. This contrasts sharply with places like Canada, where most prosecuted jihadists have

completed high school (Mullins 2013) and the United Kingdom where 58 percent had completed or were attending university (Zammit 2012). Hence, Australian jihadists on the whole appear less educated than their international counterparts and universities certainly cannot be considered a 'breeding ground' for jihadism in Australia.

It is also worth noting that only 12 percent (n=3) of convicted jihadists in Australia were converts. This proportion is significantly lower than the United Kingdom. While converts represent between two to three percent of the UK's 2.8 million Muslims, they account for 31 percent of jihadist terrorist convictions from 2001 to 2010 (Kleinman & Flower 2013).

The final point of departure was that 85 percent of the Australian sample were married. In Western Europe, the majority of prosecuted jihadists were unmarried (Bakker 2006) and only 38 percent of those prosecuted in Canada were married (Mullins 2013). Although another series of arrests could significantly change the profile of this sample, it appears that Australian jihadists are, on the whole, quite different to their counterparts in broadly comparable countries.

Jihadist foreign fighters

Analysis of open source court documents and media sources has revealed that clusters of aspiring Australian jihadists (numbering somewhere between 3 and 20 in each instance) have sought training overseas, chiefly in Afghanistan and Pakistan between 1999 and 2003, and Somalia or Yemen from 2006 onwards (Harris-Hogan 2012a). There have also been a significant number of instances of Australians prosecuted for involvement in jihadist activity in Lebanon throughout the past decade (Harris-Hogan & Zammit 2014).

David Irvine (former Director-General of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation) noted that around 150 Australians are believed to be supporting or recruiting for the current conflicts in Syria and Iraq, or are actively involved in them. Of these, between 60 and 70 Australians are believed to be actively fighting in these conflicts and Australian authorities have issued arrest warrants for at least two Australians fighting in the region (Grattan 2014).

Fifteen individuals have already been reported as killed (including 2 Australian suicide bombers) and a significant number of those who remain are believed to be fighting with jihadist elements such as Jabhat al Nusra or the Islamic State (Zammit 2014). Indeed, as of December 2013, Australia had (among Western countries) the second highest number of confirmed death notices issued by jihadist groups (n=5), ahead of the United States (n=3), the United Kingdom and Canada (n=2), and behind only France (n=6) (Zelin 2013).

Australians have also appeared in an Islamic State propaganda video directly targeting Western recruits (Levy 2014) and have been implicated by media sources in the execution of Shi'ite civilians (Schliebs & Maley 2014). Moreover, an Australian man is believed to now sit on the Sharia Council of Jabhat al-Nursa (al Qaeda's official proxy in the region; Josceyln 2014).

One study, combining a range of resources drawn from a large number of Western countries, noted that up to one in nine Westerners who trained or fought in an overseas insurgency subsequently became involved in plots against Western countries (Hegghammer 2013).

Preliminary analysis of open source court documents reveals that in Australia (prior to the outbreak of the Syrian conflict), the number of individuals convicted for terrorism-related offences on Australian soil who had previously fought in an overseas insurgency or attended a jihadist training camp is close to one in four.

In October 2013, the chairman of the US House Intelligence Committee warned that al Qaeda allies in Syria were now 'talking about conducting external operations, which is exactly what happened in Afghanistan, which led to 9/11' (Wong 2013: np). Subsequently, individuals who have fought in Syria have been implicated in a number of planned attacks in Western countries, including Mahdi Nemmouche who killed four people at the Jewish Museum in Brussels on 24 May 2014 (Penketh 2014).

Hence, the recent marked increase in the number of Australian foreign fighters, many of whom appear connected to extremist groups within the opposition, has meant that the scale of the potential threat to Australia may have increased.

Recent domestic trends

In a direct response to the conflict in Iraq and Syria, the Commonwealth Government has raised the terrorism threat alert to high and have cancelled around 45 passports in the last financial year, compared with 18 in the previous year and less than 10 in most of the preceding years (Zammit 2014). Moreover, on 23 September 2014, a Melbourne man whose passport had been confiscated because of potential plans to join the Islamic State was shot and killed by police after stabbing two members of the Victorian Joint Counter-Terrorism Team (Zammit 2014).

There has also been a significant recent increase in violence perpetrated by members who are closely linked to the jihadist network in Australia.

Individuals with close family connections to prominent Australian jihadists have been convicted for assaulting a police officer during the Hyde Park riots in 2012 following the release of the 'Innocence of Muslims' film (Box 2012; Dale 2013); while others have been convicted of assaults perpetrated against Muslims they perceived as being too moderate (Dunn 2009; Olding 2013a, 2013b) and for whipping a young Muslim with an electrical cord in the name of Sharia Law (Davies 2013).

There are also charges pending against individuals with close links to the network for attempted murder (Ralston 2013). One man allegedly involved in this case was already on an international watch-list having suspected links to notorious American preacher Anwar al-Awlaki (Welch 2011) and was most recently convicted over an ATM ram raid perpetrated to raise money for the Taliban (Bashan 2013). He was also subsequently charged with threatening to cut the throat of a Commonwealth official (Box & Maley 2013). American Shia Muslims have also accused Australian extremists of attacking them while on Hajj in Saudi Arabia (Husain 2013).

Further, between 2012 and 2013, in excess of a dozen acts of violence were perpetrated against members of the Australian community, allegedly committed by supporters of the Syrian opposition (Zammit 2013b). Many of these incidents have involved individuals directly connected to earlier jihadist figures. This recent increase in the number of violent incidents would appear to indicate an escalation in sectarian tensions within the Australian community connected with the conflict in Syria.

Conclusion

When contrasted with other broadly comparable countries, the threat of violent extremism in the Australian community is small. Yet violent extremism has been a persistent concern over a long period of time, with such acts manifesting in a range of different forms in Australia since World War II.

The primary violent extremist threat to Australia currently comes in the form of jihadism. This threat has been heightened by the recent increase in the number of Australians travelling to fight in Syria and Iraq, and the documented connection between fighting in overseas insurgencies (as well as participation in training camps) and the perpetration of acts of violent extremism in Western countries.

However, this is not the only potential threat. A historical presence of far-right extremists in Australia and dramatic attacks conducted internationally by individuals such as Wade Michael Page, Anders Breivik and David Copeland has demonstrated the potential for far-right violence. Further, issue-oriented and ethno-nationalist groups continue to operate in Australia and are likely to remain as an ongoing security concern into the future.

Given there is currently a dearth of academic research and primary source analysis concerning issues of violent extremism and radicalisation in this country (Rahimullah, Larmar & Abdalla 2013), the approach taken in this paper has been necessarily descriptive in nature. However, this type of study lays the groundwork for future studies into the underlying causes of violent extremism in Australia and begins the formation of a solid evidence base from which targeted policies and programs aimed at countering violent extremism can emerge.

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