

Migration Patterns to and from Israel

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Abstract Israel's migration patterns have been conducive in several ways to the demographic success of Zionism and Israel since 1947. In addition to the decisive success with respect to the growth in the number of Jews in Israel, their proportion in the Israeli population, and the proportion of world Jewry residing in Israel, following the 1967 war Israel attracted immigrants of higher educational level than those arriving during the 1950s and 1960s. In addition, Israel has been successful in keeping emigration rates of Jews relatively low during most years, including the last decade. Moreover, the rate of return migration among Israeli-born Jewish emigrants has been relatively high and the returnees highly educated compared to non-returning emigrants. Finally, it seems that Israel has been quite successful in integrating into Israeli society non-Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Republics. However, this cannot be said about the non-Jewish labor migrants who arrived in Israel since the early 1990.

Keywords Immigration · Emigration · Israel · Immigrants' skills

Introduction

There are several imaginable ways of evaluating the demographic achievements of Zionism since 1948. Arguably, the three most telling measures are the proportion of Jews living in Israel out of world Jewry, the proportion of Jews vs. Arabs in Israel, and the growth rate of the Jewish population in Israel. By all three standards Zionism has been, thus far, a demographic success. In 1947, just before Israel was established, only 6% (about 600,000) of the Jews of the world resided in the area that became Israel in 1949, comprising less than half the population in that area.

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By 2007 Israel had become the home for about 5.5 million Jews (and over 300,000 relatives of Jews), comprising 41% of world Jewry and about 80% of the state's citizens (Israel 2008a).

Immigration patterns (including the forced emigration of Arabs in the context of the 1947–1949 war) along with sustained fertility levels are responsible for the three dimensions of Zionism's demographic success—increasing the proportion and the absolute number of Jews in Israel, as well as their share in world Jewry. In the following pages I shall discuss changes in immigration patterns to Israel since 1948, with an emphasis not only on the number of immigrants, but also on the number of emigrants, as well as on the educational levels of immigrants and emigrants. This inquiry enables us to make an evaluation of other dimensions of the demographic success of Zionism: its success in attracting highly educated Jews to immigrate, reside, and stay in Israel; its success in keeping emigration rates relatively low; and its success in attracting back those who emigrated, especially the highly educated.

Source Countries and Patterns of Immigrants' Self-Selection: Changes Over Time

With some exceptions in the early 1950s, Israel has always attempted to bring as many Jews as possible to Israel, and there seems to have been no upper limit to the number of immigrants it has been willing to admit in a given period. Moreover, unlike other migration countries that prefer skilled and young immigrants, Israel's declared policy is to admit all Jewish immigrants, with no regard to age, educational level, ethnic origin, or skin color. On the face of it, it looks as if actual migration patterns are consistent with this declared policy. At times, however, the desire to bring to Israel as many Jews as possible, led the State to adopt policies aimed at hindering Jewish immigration to countries other than Israel (Lazin 2005). Such was the case in the 1970s and early 2000s when Israel asked the U.S. and Germany, respectively, to stop granting refugee status to Soviet Jews who preferred the U.S. or Germany over Israel as their new home. In general, however, in the last half-century, migration patterns to Israel suggest that the state has been consistently fulfilling the core Zionist mission—"populating the land with a multitude of Jews," in Ben Gurion's words.

While Israel actively attracts and accepts all Jews, not all Jews choose to immigrate to Israel. With time, however, the demographic success of Zionism manifested itself also in the type of people who chose Israel as their destination. In the first two decades after independence, many immigrants were stateless refugees; others fled repressive regimes in Eastern Europe, and Arab states that were in conflict with the new Jewish state. Many of those who were able to go to a more developed state went there, as did about 60% of Holocaust survivors in Displaced Person camps (Grodzinsky 2004). Those residing in developed countries in Western Europe, North America, and Australia did not consider immigrating to Israel. Consequently, the immigrants arriving in Israel in the first 20 years after statehood had lower educational levels than the resident Jewish population of Israel.

Following the 1967 war, the type of immigrants choosing Israel as their country of destination changed. For religious, ideological and economic reasons, immigrants from Western Europe and America, mostly highly educated, began coming to Israel. Immigrants arriving from the Soviet Union and other countries in Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia were of higher educational levels than their predecessors coming from the same countries in the 1950s and 1960s. True, during the 1970s and early 1980s, Jewish emigrants from the FSU that reached the U.S. were of higher educational levels than those coming to Israel (DellaPergola 1986; Cohen and Haberfeld 2007). But, apparently, Israel of the post-1967 period became a more attractive destination for educated immigrants.

The average immigrant coming to Israel during the mass migration of 1948 to 1951, had 7.4 years of schooling, compared to 10.4 years among native-born Israelis. The benchmark to which immigrants' schooling is compared is composed of third-generation Israeli Jews. Immigrants' years of schooling refer to the educational levels of immigrant men at the time they arrived in Israel. This gap between recently arrived immigrants and native Jews gradually narrowed over the years until 1972, when recently arrived immigrants and natives had the same average years of schooling. Eleven years later, in 1983, recent immigrants' schooling surpassed natives by 1.3 years, and this trend continued until 1992, when the first and largest wave of immigration from the post-communist Former Soviet Union (FSU) ended.

To be sure, shifts from low to high-education source countries (e.g., from Yemen to the USSR) contributed to much of the rise in immigrants' years of schooling between 1948 and 1991. However, most of the rise in immigrants' schooling level occurred because of changes over time in the education level of successive immigrant cohorts coming from the same countries (i.e. changes within the same country; Schmelz et al. 1991). Consider, for example, Moroccan immigrants. The average Moroccan immigrant man who immigrated to Israel during the late 1960s had little more than 8 years of schooling. Ten years later the average Moroccan immigrant who arrived during the late 1970s had about 14 years of schooling, more than the average among natives. Apparently, in the 1950s and 1960s, the more educated Moroccan Jews either stayed in Morocco or immigrated elsewhere, especially to France and Canada (Bensimon and DellaPergola 1986). Only in the 1970s did the more educated Moroccans self-select themselves to come to Israel. To be sure, it is possible that these immigrants' schooling represents the average schooling among the remaining Moroccan-born Jews outside Israel. There are no readily available data to test this possibility. It is important to emphasize, however, that even if this is the case (self) selection processes in the 1950s and 1960s are in large part responsible for the dramatic rise in the average schooling of Moroccan immigrants to Israel starting in the mid-1970s.

The increase in schooling level among successive cohorts of Romanian immigrants is even more striking. Their mean years of schooling increased from 9.7 for the cohort arriving during the late 1950s, to 13.8 for the cohort of the late 1960s, and to a peak of 15.6 for those arriving during the late 1970s and early 1980s. In the case of Romanian immigrants, however, available evidence suggests that the negative selectivity in the 1950s was imposed, in part, by the Romanian government

that forbade educated Jews from leaving, preferring to free Rumania of older, unhealthy and unskilled Jews (Ilan 1982; Neeman 1990). The Romanian authorities, like several other Eastern European countries, demanded a fee for allowing Jews to emigrate (Hacohen 2003; Segev 1986). Israel negotiated (“too expensive ... inadequate quality” was Israel’s initial response to the Hungarian demand), but with no real bargaining power, and in line with fulfilling the Zionist mission, paid the price in virtually all cases (Hacohen 2003). Once restrictions were relaxed (Ilan 1982), the educational level of Romanian Jewish immigrants in Israel increased dramatically and was much higher than that of earlier immigrants as well as that of native Israelis. Evidently, patterns of immigrant selectivity from most source countries, improved after the 1967 war until the early 1990s.

There is one important exception to the above conclusion—the schooling level of U.S. immigrants in Israel, which has been declining for the past 30 years. The selectivity of U.S. immigrants is of interest for two reasons. First, the U.S. is the second largest source country for immigrants in the post-1967 area (and the third largest in the post-1989 period). Second, in the U.S., unlike in most other countries, there is readily available information on the schooling level of potential immigrants (U.S. Jews), thereby allowing us to directly analyze immigrants’ selectivity. Available data taken from analyses of the General Social Survey (GSS) between 1970 and 2000 suggest that during that period the proportion of college graduates among American Jews increased by 34 percentage points, from 36 to 67.2%.

At the same time, the proportion of college graduates among American Jews that self-selected themselves to immigrate to Israel declined by 8 percentage points, from 77% among those coming immediately after the 1967 war, to 65–69% among those arriving during the 1990s (see Fig. 1). In short, while in the first years after the 1967 war the “best and the brightest” among U.S. Jews immigrated to Israel, the pattern of educational selectivity gradually deteriorated, and by 2000 those coming to Israel are of the same educational level as that of U.S. Jews.

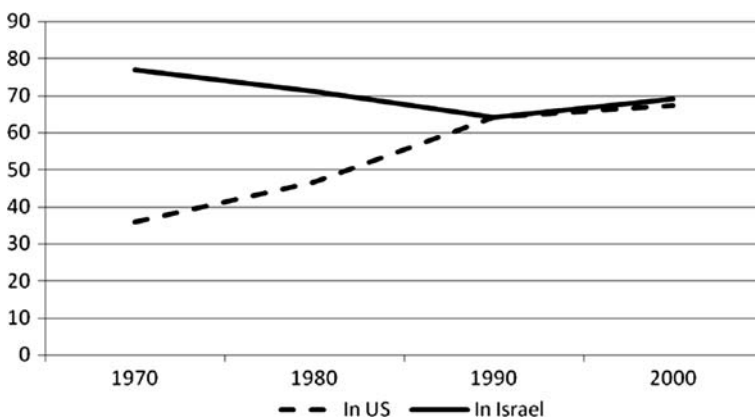


Fig. 1 Percent with at least college education among persons 25–64 years old: Jews in the U.S. and U.S.-born Jewish immigrants in Israel

U.S. immigrants are still highly educated relative to the native population of Israel, hence this case does not alter the conclusion that overall, in the post-1967 period, Israel attracted immigrants whose skill level was higher than that of the native Israeli population.

Apparently, U.S. immigrants were selective on other dimensions, including political ideology. Patterns of political selectivity are evidenced by their higher propensity to reside in Jewish settlements in the West Bank. In 1983 only 0.5% of the adult Israeli population (18 years and over) resided in those settlements; but the respective proportion among adult U.S.-born immigrants in the same year was over five times as high, 2.8%. By 1995 the settler population grew, comprising 2.1% of the adult Jewish–Israeli population, versus 9.4% of the adult population born in North America and Oceania (over four times as high, including smaller numbers of immigrants from Canada, Mexico, Australia and New Zealand). These figures do not include North Americans residing in Jerusalem neighborhoods built beyond the 1967 border.

Emigration, Return Migration, and Selectivity

An equally important demographic achievement of Zionism in the second half of the 20th century is its success in retaining immigrants and their offspring, including the highly educated, in Israel. Despite popular and some scholarly writing to the contrary, the rate of Jewish emigration from Israel is not high relative to emigration rates in other immigration counties. According to the border police (which keeps count of all exits and entries among Israeli residents) nearly 10% of the 1.2 million immigrants who came to Israel since 1989 had left by the end of 2005 (Israel 2007). The emigration rate of Israeli-born is lower. Analyses of U.S. census data based on an algorithm for identifying Israeli-born Jews in the U.S. census data (Cohen and Haberfeld 1997) suggest that the number of Israeli-born Jewish immigrants in the U.S. in 2000 was about 100,000. The respective figure in 1990s was 80,000.

The total number of Israelis living in the U.S., including those not born in Israel, is more difficult to estimate. In 1990 the estimated number of non-Israeli born Israelis in the U.S., based on data from the U.S. census and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, ranges between 30,000 to 55,000 (Cohen and Haberfeld 1997). Assuming that between 1990 and 2000 this group grew at the same rate as the Israeli-born in the U.S., the total of number of Israelis in the U.S. in 2000 (Israeli born and foreign born) is between 153,000 and 175,000. Given that the U.S. is the destination country for at least one half of Israeli emigrants, the total number of Israeli emigrants (Israeli-born Jews plus Jewish immigrants to Israel who eventually left Israel) in 2000, is at most 350,000. The estimates of the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS)—a total of 480,000 emigrants in 1999 (Hleil and Ben Moshe 2002), and 544,000 for the end of 2006 (Israel 2008b)—are adjusted for mortality abroad, but includes an unknown number of Israeli Arabs, probably around 100,000. Without Arab-Israelis the CBS estimate for the stock of Israeli Jews abroad at the end of 1999 is most likely below 400,000, and not much higher than my above estimate (300–350 thousands), which is based on the U.S. data.

Not surprisingly, estimates published by organizations responsible for advancing Zionism's demographic missions, are higher than those of the CBS. The Israeli Ministry of Absorption, to take one example, estimated that at the end of 2003 there were 750,000 Israeli emigrants living abroad. This figure was cited by some academics (Gould and Moav 2007) despite the fact that it is inconsistent with the lower CBS estimates, in part because it does not take into account emigrants' mortality. Higher estimates probably include, in addition to emigrants who died abroad, children born abroad to emigrant parents, and non-Israeli spouses of emigrants. Gross over-estimation of the Israeli Diaspora is not a new phenomenon, nor limited to groups with vested interests in high numbers. In the late 1970s a leading sociologist estimated that in the U.S. alone there were 350,000 Israelis (Kass and Lipset 1979), stating that Jewish emigration of such magnitude threatens the very existence of Israel. Estimates published by the Jewish Agency were even higher, up to half a million in the U.S. (Lahis 1980).

Perhaps the prevailing notion that the Israeli community in the U.S. is larger than its true size is rooted in the popular perception that every Israeli ever residing abroad is an emigrant. It is true that the number of all Israelis who have ever spent a year abroad is much higher than the estimate for the stock of Israeli emigrants abroad in a particular year. However, the assumption that all those leaving Israel forever stay in their new destination is erroneous. Rather, rates of return migration to Israel are higher than to most other sending countries (Cohen and Haberfeld 2001). Indeed, analyses of data drawn from the 1980 and 1990 U.S. censuses suggest that about one-third of Israeli-born who came to the U.S. between 1975 and 1980, returned to Israel prior to 1990. Given the growing Israeli economy in the 1990s, it is reasonable to expect that the rates of return migration during 1990–2000 were at least as high as they were in the 1980s. Moreover, this rate of return migration was derived from immigrants who resided in the U.S. for an average of 2.5 years, and for as many as 5 years. Most immigrants returning to their home countries do so 1 to 2 years after immigration. Thus, the above estimate is a lower limit because it omits from the calculation all those who immigrated to the U.S., and returned to Israel during 1975–1980. An upper limit for the rate of return migration among Israelis abroad can be estimated using data collected by the Israeli border police. These data suggests that the rate of return migration among Israelis who resided abroad for 1–2 years was nearly two-thirds (Cohen and Haberfeld 2001).

In the past 50 years, Israeli emigrants have been of higher educational level than the population from which they were drawn (Cohen 1996, 2002). This fact, together with the current crisis in Israeli Universities, led some scholars to label emigration from Israel as a “brain drain.” The “brain drain” argument, advanced by both scholars and popular writers, is that not only have highly educated Israelis been emigrating in ever larger numbers, but that the share of the best and the brightest among them has been growing in recent years, thereby robbing Israel of its most precious resource, human capital (Gould and Moav 2007; Ben David 2008; Yediot Aharonot 2003). A close examination of the research which supports this argument suggests that it has neglected, thus far, to provide evidence for the intensification of the brain drain over time (Cohen, Forthcoming). Moreover, a complete assessment

of the brain drain must consider not only emigrants' skills, but also the skills of returnees.

Unfortunately, the latest available evidence regarding returnees' skills is from the 1980s (Cohen and Haberfeld 2001). Analyzing the educational level of Israeli-born who arrived in the U.S. during 1975–1979, Cohen and Haberfeld (2001) found that 46.8% of men had at least a college degree in 1980, when they were 25–50 years old. By 1990, when this cohort was 35–60 years old, only two third of its members remained in the U.S. and, as shown in the top row of Table 1, had a lower proportion of college degree graduates (40.5%) than in 1980. Since education is expected to rise over time, the plausible explanation for this decline of 6.3 percentage points in the rate of college graduates during the 1980s is that the one-third of Israelis that were enumerated in the 1980 census, but not in 1990, were of relatively higher educational level, and had left the U.S. sometime between 1980 and 1990, most probably to Israel. In short, if we use educational level as a measure for skills, the return migration to Israel has been positive, at least in the 1980s. But when emigrants' skills were inferred from income rather than education, it appears that, on average, the more skilled among highly educated Israelis in the U.S. remained there in the 1980s. Evidently, updated information on recent trends in the emigration and return migration of highly educated Israelis is needed.

In the meanwhile, it is important to point out that based on the evidence presented in Table 1, it is apparent that some of the “sharpest brains” do return to Israel, and have a positive effect on the Israeli society and economy. For one thing, they find jobs in Israel's universities and advanced industries. For another, many highly educated Israelis, regardless of the place of residence, hold key positions in social networks connecting Israel and the U.S. These networks play an important role in the economic and scientific development of Israel. Therefore, labeling emigration of highly educated Israelis as a “brain drain” is at best an exaggeration, and certainly misses the positive implications of the movement of highly educated Israelis between Israel and the U.S.

Table 1 Percent with at least a B.A. degree in 1980 and 1990: Israeli-born Jews arriving in the U.S. in 1975–79 and staying there in both 1980 and 1990

	Sex and age in 1980	1980	1990 ^a	Difference 1990–1980 ^b
	<i>Men</i>			
	25–50	46.8	40.5	–6.3
	26–35	45.9	39.6	–6.3
	36–50	50.0	43.9	–6.1
	<i>Women</i>			
	25–50	39.0	28.8	–10.2
	26–35	41.2	33.8	–7.4
	36–50	25.0	11.5	–13.5

Source: Cohen and Haberfeld (2001, p. 83)

^a Age in 1980. Age in 1990 is 10 years older

^b Percentage with at least a college degree in 1990 minus percentage with at least a college degree in 1980

Recent Changes in Migration Patterns

Since the early 1990s, the demographic picture has become more complex, raising doubts on the viability of the long-term demographic success of Zionism. Since 1992 the immigrants coming from the largest source country, the FSU, are of lower educational level than their predecessors. Those arriving during 1989 to 1991 belonged to the first wave that brought some 400,000 immigrants to Israel. In subsequent years, up until 2000, the annual number of immigrants from the former USSR was around 60,000 to 80,000. The schooling level of those arriving in the first wave was significantly higher (14 years on average) than that of those arriving after 1992 (13 years). Apparently, in the post-1991 years more FSU immigrants, especially the educated, have been seeking other destinations, most notably the U.S., Canada, and more recently, Germany, which in 2002 took more FSU Jews (about 22,000) than either Israel or the U.S.

In the post-1989 period, the second largest source country, after the FSU, was Ethiopia. In the early 1980s, the educational levels of Ethiopian immigrants were very low. Those who arrived in the 1990s were of similar and perhaps even lower educational level than their predecessors. In sum, immigrants arriving from the two largest source countries, comprising nearly 90% of the immigrants during the 1990s, were of lower educational levels than their predecessors (and also attained lower levels than the native population of Israel).

Interestingly, Jewish immigrants from the FSU who arrived during the 1990s to Canada (Lewin-Epstein et al. 2003) or the U.S. (DellaPergola 1998; Cohen and Habersfeld 2007) were of higher educational levels than their counterparts who came to Israel; however, those arriving to Germany in the 1990s were of similar educational level to those coming to Israel (Cohen and Kogan 2005, 2007). In short, in the competition for educated immigrants from the FSU, Israel performed rather well versus Germany, but lost to the U.S. and Canada.

The migration patterns since the outbreak of the second *intifada* in 2000 are even more suggestive. Since 1999 the annual number of immigrants declined (it dropped to 18,000 in 2007, and to 13,000 in 2008, down from 77,000 in 1999); the annual emigration (emigrants minus returnees) rose from about 14,000 in 1996–2000, to 20,000 in 2001–2002, when the number of terrorist attacks were the highest and the Israeli economy stagnated (Israel 2007, 2008a); and an increasing number of Israeli Jews have been applying for immigrant visas to the U.S., Canada, and Australia (Lustick 2004). Furthermore, between 2000 and 2006, an estimated 53,000 Israelis (Harpaz 2009) applied for citizenship in countries that are part of the European Union (e.g. Germany, Poland, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria). Many of them do not expect to immigrate to any of these countries. Rather, according to reports in the popular press they are seeking *insurance* for themselves and their children in case the political and economic situation in Israel deteriorates. Whether or not many Israelis will use their new European passports for emigration is a matter of speculation. Past experience suggests that most Israelis, especially the Israeli-born, do not emigrate; and most of those that do, eventually return to Israel. Indeed the latest figures available from the Central Bureau of Statistics suggest that with the relative decline in terrorist attacks inside Israel, as well as the improved economy,

the emigration balance declined from the peak of 20,000 in 2002 to 14,000 in 2004, 10,000 in 2005, and 13,000 in 2006 (Israel 2008b). Evidently, the long-term viability of Zionism's success in keeping Israelis from leaving, and attracting those living abroad to return, has been continuing in the 21st century.

Non-Jewish and Labor Migrants

More troubling for the Zionist outlook than lower immigration rates, rising emigration, and declining schooling levels of immigrants, is the monotonic rise in the proportion of non-Jews among immigrants from the former Soviet republics, as well as the non-Jewish labor migrants who were recruited by Israel since 1993. It is ironic that Zionism's very success—military, economic, and demographic—has led to an incipient challenge to the original mission it set out to accomplish. Evidently, contemporary migration patterns are not as conducive as previous patterns in fulfilling the Zionist mission. In addition to about 1.45 million Arab citizens (and over three million Arabs under occupation), Israel now faces a challenge it has never faced before: dealing with about 500,000 non-Jewish, non-Arab residents (some of whom are not citizens). Thus far, however, it seems that Israel has been more successful in dealing with the non-Jewish immigrants from the FSU, estimated at over 300,000 in 2008, than with labor migrants [about 200,000 at the end of 2006 according to the Bank of Israel (2006)].

The main Israeli socialization agents, most notably the educational system and the military, “convert” non-Jewish immigrants from the FSU—not necessarily according to Jewish religious law, but rather socially and culturally—and tend to integrate them, and especially their children, into the Jewish (or Jewish-Russian) community in Israel. That the rate of emigration from Israel among non-Jewish FSU immigrants is substantially higher than the rate among their Jewish counterparts (Israel 2007) is another indication for Zionism's success. Apparently, non-Jewish emigrants are those who were not willing—or failed—to assimilate into the Jewish-Israeli society.

By contrast, Israel's ability to deal with labor migrants proved more difficult, and it is hard to predict whether their numbers will grow or decline in the near future. About two-thirds of labor migrants are undocumented, that is de facto permanent residents, who do not leave Israel despite the hardships they face as undocumented, non-Jewish residents. Judging by the past, it is hard to imagine that Israel will adopt a policy of granting labor migrants legal status as permanent residents, not to speak of citizenship. It is more likely that the “relaxation in the enforcement and deportation activities aimed at reducing the number of undocumented workers,” that was identified worryingly in the Bank of Israel's annual report (2005, p. 181), will be reversed, and Zionist values will be used for the institutionalization and justification of a harsher deportation policy, similar to the policy that prevailed in the early 2000s.

Past experience suggests that enforcement of a harsh deportation policy has not been very effective. It hardly lowered the total number of labor migrants, and did not at all affect the rate of the undocumented among them. The revolving door

practice—recruiting new labor migrants to replace those who left (willingly or unwillingly)—keeps their number high. Thus, labor migrants, especially those in the agriculture and construction industries, assist in fulfilling a core Zionist value: “conquest of the land.” At the same time, however, labor migrants do not help, to say the least, in the realization of another long lasting Zionist goal: “conquest of work.”

Conclusions

Israel’s migration patterns have been conducive in several ways to advancing Israel’s demographic goals. In addition to the decisive success with respect to the 60-year growth in the number of Jews in Israel, their proportion in the Israeli population, and the proportion of world Jewry residing in Israel following the 1967 war, Israel attracted immigrants of higher educational level than those arriving during the 1950s and 1960s. In addition, Israel has been successful in keeping emigration rates relatively low for both foreign-born and native-born Jews during most years, including the 2000s. Moreover, the rate of return migration among Israeli-born Jewish emigrants has been relatively high and the returnees highly educated compared to non-returning emigrants. Finally, it seems that Israel has been quite successful in integrating into Israeli society non-Jewish immigrants from the FSU. However, this cannot be said about the non-Jewish labor migrants who arrived in Israel since the early 1990s.

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