

An incident at a state secondary school in Wakefield, Yorkshire: a cautionary tale



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One of DDU's supporters, who wishes to remain anonymous, has undertaken a lot of research on the incident of the scuffed Koran at Kettlethorpe School in Wakefield in February 2023. Like other incidents, it made the news at the time, and then sinks like a stone, with little sign that those in positions of authority have done much more than breath a sign of relief and move on as if no lessons are to be learnt from further reflection.

Well, we think it is worth reflecting on, and so, using our supporter's invaluable preliminary research, we are pleased to add a long essay to our website. We hope you will take the time to read it over the weekend – it is indeed a cautionary tale of moral cowardice of our times.

Foreword

Today we are more aware of something called Islamism that is posing a major problem for our society. Its shape, methods and main protagonists remain unclear or little-known. We hear of dramatic violent events; the bombing at the Manchester Arena, the attack on Salman Rushdie and the teacher in hiding in Batley are but a few recent examples. And since 7 October last year, we are more familiar with the names of Islamist groups like Hamas or Hizb ut-Tahrir. This report focuses on something different. Starting with the observation that, however defined, Islamism's influence depends on the inability of its opponents to confront its beliefs and claims openly with confidence. The specifically cultural problem it poses (as opposed to its political and security implications) is to be found in the daily interactions that take place within the interstices of our public spaces and places that make occasional appearances in our media landscape, but swiftly disappear leaving little trace.

The Batley school teacher went into hiding in 2021; in 2022 there were cases of teachers being [suspended](#) for, among other things, carrying a mug with a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad in the playground. Last year, we witnessed how it was possible for a 14-year-old boy with autism: to be given a record for a non-criminal hate incident; become a target for death threats on social media; be suspended by his school; and for his mother to feel the need to plead her son's case at a community meeting in a mosque. The proximate reason was because he had, to paraphrase the headteacher, disrespected the Koran in the course of an altercation with his peers. We do not know whether those issuing death threats were pursued or sanctioned. The reactions of the main actors involved in the

incident at Kettlethorpe School in Wakefield are worth close consideration – they tell an important story of what can happen when those in elected or publicly mandated positions of authority outsource it to others with less, or no, democratic mandate.

Introduction

On Wednesday 22 February 2023, an incident in which a Koran was scuffed, took place at Kettlethorpe High School, a secular state school in the city of Wakefield. An apparently minor occurrence for those not directly involved, the incident in Wakefield was treated by some members of the Muslim community as blasphemy and an insult against Islam. Echoes of the [fatwah](#) issued against Salman Rushdie, faint as they are, come to mind. Local Muslims emulated Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini’s demand for punishment for the ‘offenders’ even if these were schoolchildren rather than a world-famous author.

Similar to the [event](#) at Batley Grammar School in 2021, the incident in Wakefield initially roused a media storm and commentary from both the Islamic and non-Islamic communities. Two major questions were whether the interests of one specific belief group, Islam, had been given precedence over English law and the interests of the wider community; and whether those who had responsibility for the safeguarding of the child had acted in a timely and appropriate manner. There was also concern that a child and his mother had been placed in the eye of a storm, facing anger and threats with, at best, lukewarm support from the school and others.

There was anger also that agencies like the police and the local education authority were more concerned to assuage Muslim claims of offence than defend the security of the mother and child involved in the incident. Or, for that matter, defend the principle of free speech whereby religious *books* are not afforded special protections. What follows is a detailed snapshot of what happened in the incident in Wakefield, the response to it, and what inferences we can draw about the health of our democratic principles in Britain today.

Background

Formerly a manufacturing and mining town which has experienced some economic decline, in 2021 Wakefield had [a population](#) of around 353,400, of whom 3.2% (11,279) were Muslim. The city is situated in the Metropolitan Borough of West Yorkshire which, since May 2021, has been governed by a metropolitan mayor, Tracey Brabin, formerly a Labour MP. Politically, both Wakefield and West Yorkshire are predominantly Labour-voting. In 2022, Wakefield Council voted to accept the definition of Islamophobia which had been drawn up by an All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims (independent of government and not accorded any powers). The [definition](#), which has *not* been adopted by the UK government, is that *'Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness'*. In November 2022, Wakefield Council held an Islamophobia Awareness Month.

Hardeep Singh, in his report for Civitas, [Islamophobia Revisited](#), is critical of the APPG definition because it conflates the Muslim religion with race. The introduction of 'perceived Muslimness' also introduces a high degree of subjectivism. In the same metropolitan area is the town of Batley where, in 2021, an Islamist mob, enabled by his school leadership who failed to robustly support him, forced a young teacher out of his job and his family out of their home. The immediate [issue](#) was his use of a *Charlie Hebdo* cartoon of the prophet Mohammed in a Religious Education class. The teacher and his family have been given new identities and are still in hiding.

Despite the television footage and newspaper articles, which clearly record a mob, despite the fact that death threats were issued, to date no action appears to have been taken by the police authorities against those who made the threats. The Wakefield incident raises the same core issue that many commentators have identified as a struggle between the enforcement of Islamic religious beliefs and the maintenance of freedoms of speech, thought and expression, which are integral to Britain's democratic and broadly liberal society.

Daniel Ben-Ami's [work](#) on developing a more robust definition of antisemitism emphasises the *political* nature and origins of Islamism, which he defines as striving for political power in the name of Islam. The difference between Islam as a religion and Islamism is an important distinction to bear in mind, even if it is sometimes hard to discern the

difference in practice. The lack of conceptual clarity about Islamism and what it means to uphold the principles of a liberal democracy make it easier for a school incident, not ideal but within the bounds of social norms regarding teenagers' conduct, to become a regional or national conflagration.

The incident: 22 February 2023

Accounts agree that, on the afternoon of Wednesday 22 February 2023, a group of four Year 10 boys were suspended by the headteacher of Kettlethorpe High School, Wakefield, as a result of an incident in which a copy of the Koran, owned by one of the boys (Boy X), was taken into the school as a result of his losing the video game, *Call of Duty*. The forfeit required him to buy the book and take it into school. The motivation behind this, or who made the choice, is unknown although the terms of a forfeit are usually set by the winners. The book was taken onto the tennis courts and into the school corridors where it sustained some damage, the extent of which has been disputed.

The ethnicity and the religious beliefs of the four boys involved in the incident is unknown. Boy X, who appears to have been singled out for his behaviour, has a white British mother and is on the high end of the autism spectrum. It has not been revealed whether aspects of the behaviour of the boys, other than their treatment of the Koran, were also part of the reason for the suspension. Boy X was 14 at the time of the incident and, according to his mother in a [statement](#) made at the Swafia Mosque, he had not damaged the book himself. The book, an English translation of the Koran, was said to have suffered 'minor damage'. A photograph in [The Times](#) showed a slight mark on an inner page and the article stated: 'Photographs seen by The Times show the book had a slight tear to the cover and slight damage to the pages.'

It seems clear that news, and misinformation, about the incident spread overnight through the schoolchildren and social media. In contrast, official sources, including the school, the police and the local authority seemed to have been reluctant to say much at all. Maybe this reticence on the part of the school and police was a sensible decision while ascertaining what led up to the incident. But the silence throughout the time the incident was in the public eye, of Tracy Brabin and her Labour deputy, Alison Lowe (who has responsibility for policing), and the constituency MP, Jon Trickett, also Labour, is hard to explain. Unless, perhaps, they were either told by party

leaders to remain silent or feared stoking community tensions or ruffling the feathers of their potential voters.

What happened next: 23 February 2023

The day after the four pupils had been suspended, a school assembly was held in which they were named and other pupils were told of the incident. The head made a statement, reported in the [New Statesman](#) (NS) on 25 March, that 'awful things' had been done to the Koran. The head's comment had inflamed community tensions to the point where, by midnight on 23 February, there were calls for a lunchtime protest at the school the next day. The article refers to a Facebook page, 'Time to stand up!' written by a Muslim man from Bradford (15 miles away):

Some pupils tore up the Noble Koran in front of Muslim students... Don't listen to the defeatists and sell outs who will tell you it's 'more educated and responsible' to stay at home and to beg the same dirty politicians who promote and defend this behaviour.

Comments on the Twitter feed of the Muslim website [5 Pillars](#) also claimed that the Koran had been desecrated. The local education authority, West Yorkshire Mayoral Authority, kept silence and a low profile throughout this incident, but some local councillors were not so quiet. The NS article refers to comments made on social media by two councillors. Independent councillor Akef Akbar (since resigned), referred to the incident as an 'outrage' in the Muslim community:

Although this school is not in my area, many residents have contacted me in regard to an incident at Kettlethorpe High School today whereby the Holy Quran was sadly disintegrated by students... Initially it was reported that the Quran was kicked around the school. The school carried out a formal investigation and I am told that 30 students were interviewed one to one. Their investigations have found out that the Quran was read out on the tennis courts. The Quran was carried inside the school and it is purported that an unrelated boy knocked it out of the boy's hand and it fell on the floor. The school deny that it was spat on and thrown around.

Usman Ali, a local Labour councillor tweeted, and then deleted, the following message during the night of 23 February:

After todays (sic) events at Kettlethorpe High School, where a Quran has been desecrated are (sic) a serious provocative action which needs to be

dealt with urgently by all the authorities, namely, the police, the school and the local authority. This terrible action could destroy all the good progress that has been made in Wakefield to highlight and tackle Islamophobia. I have been in contact with local leaders to ensure that swift and appropriate action is taken to deal with this grave situation. We all need to work together to make sure that this terrible provocation does not set back community relations for years to come.

Harry Lambert, author of the NS article, emphasises that the chain of events started with the head's public description of a foolish misdemeanour as having done 'awful things' to the Koran - thereby elevating the significance of both the boys' actions and the Koran. It seems that one of the other boy's mother contacted Councillor Akbar to say that the four boys had been 'outed' by the school (in the assembly). She also said: 'The way the school has since dealt with it [the incident] has caused much upset.'

According to the imam, reporting the mother's comments, 'the school had inadvertently made him a target on social media; he had started to receive threats online from Muslim boys at the school, and his photo was being shared online'. According to [the mother](#) of Boy X, by this time her child was receiving death threats and verbal abuse on social media, including from Muslim children from the school, and was upset, unable to eat, and afraid to leave the house.

Whilst the perspectives of Muslims and non-Muslims might differ considerably on what constitutes desecration of a book that is sacred to the former but not to the latter, and while a devout practising Muslim might also feel that using the Koran as a forfeit in a secular game was also some kind of disrespect, it is not clear why such inflammatory and intimidating responses were not dealt with more robustly, nor why the head decided to name the four boys during assembly in the first place.

In such a febrile situation, we could have hoped that as figures of public authority, the councillors, the mayor and the MP would have done more to de-escalate the situation by robustly dismissing aggrandising claims of religious transgression and Islamaphobia, of which is no evidence. We could also have hoped that the Council would also have thought it worthwhile to investigate the reasoning behind the head's actions. From their statement, reported in the NS, it seems unlikely that any such questions were considered:

The action taken in the school, which was supported by the Department for Education, West Yorkshire Police and Wakefield Council, helped the school very quickly settle back into being a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

Of course, any school would want to restore order as quickly as possible. However, by avoiding difficult but necessary questions, or saying little or nothing about the fact that a school incident was being blown out of all proportion by sections of the local Muslim community and their representatives, it is hard not to conclude that Britain's educational and political norms, including the need to support a young boy with autism and his mother, came a distant second to assuaging feelings of religious offence, irrespective of the potential costs of this approach.

The meeting at the mosque: 24 February 2023

On the morning of 24 February, there had been a meeting at the school which was attended by the police and leaders of mosques in the Wakefield area. By now, the events in Wakefield were being reported in the national media. The [BBC](#) and the [5Pillars](#) website both reported a statement from the head, Tudor Griffiths:

*We would like to reassure all our community that the holy book remains fully intact and that our initial enquiries indicate that there was no malicious intent by those involved. **However, we have made it very clear that their actions did not treat the Quran with the respect it should have, so those involved have been suspended and we will be working with them to ensure they understand why their actions were unacceptable.** This morning, we met with our local Muslim community leaders, local councillors and police to share all the information we currently know, the action taken and the immediate steps we have taken to reinforce the values and behaviour we expect from every member of this school community to ensure that all religions are respected. [our emphasis]*

That afternoon, there was a meeting held at the [Jamia Swafia mosque](#). The school had been offered the mosque as a place for a public meeting because the school itself could not be used for safeguarding reasons. No reason has ever been given why, if a threat was thought to be credible, police protection could not have been provided, nor why a neutral venue could not have been arranged with the help of the Education Authority for Wakefield.

The meeting was recorded on video by members of the mosque and was released by them on their Facebook page. The head's comments, along with this video, drew angry responses from many parts of the press and other media. Whether the meeting was held at the behest of the school, as reported in the NS, or not, the proceedings make for painful viewing.

The iman's opening address talks of everyone being there to respect the Koran. The mother of Boy X, head covered, spoke late in the proceedings. She confined her remarks to an apology to those who were offended by her son's behaviour. She explained that he hadn't fully understood the impact of his actions and that his autism meant that he was not always aware that his behaviour might be inappropriate. 'He didn't have any malicious intent, but he's a very, very silly 14-year-old boy.' She said the incident 'put his anxiety to a level where he is beside himself'. She also confirmed that he was receiving death threats and threatening emails from people, including those whom he had regarded as his friends. He was afraid and unable to eat because of his anxiety. The mother has made no further public comments.

It seems that earlier in the day, Councillor Akbar and a representative of the mosque had attended Boy X's home 'to satisfy themselves that he was indeed autistic' and questioned him about what he had learned about Islam. Autism is a medical condition and there is no evidence that either Councillor Akbar or anyone connected with the mosque is in any way qualified to verify the condition. Nor is it clear why he should have to have learnt anything about Islam other than through the choice of his mother. We do learn, however, that in the words of the iman, placing the whole event in perspective was probably not as important as expressing his view regarding the revered status of the Koran in the Muslim religion:

...there's no element of brushing this under the carpet. There's no element of let it pass for a few days and then it die down...we don't let this go.... the Koran is more important to us than our lives. There's no element of brushing this under the carpet and I'm sure our esteemed guests are fully aware of that.¹

¹ Quoted in [a letter to the CEO of the Charity Commission](#), Free Speech Union, 9 March 2023

Two senior members of West Yorkshire Police also attended this meeting. Inspector Andy Thornton, having described the incident of the Koran as a hate incident, told people at the mosque that the damage to the Koran was not criminal. He suggested that pupils had 'a lack of appreciation or understanding' of their actions and the wider impact of any offence this caused. While normal standards of civil conduct are, or should be, part of everyday school practice, fetishising both the giving and taking of offence is, as we can see in this example, ill-suited to the norms of education and adult responsibility for young people in a democratic, largely secular, society.

The police have not confirmed that a non-crime incident has been wiped from Boy X's record. The Free Speech Union has [protested](#) about this and pointed out the disparity of treatment between those involved in the incident and those breaking the law by issuing death threats. Effectively, this is a failure of the police to uphold Boy X's right to freedom from threatening behaviour. The behaviour of the police with regard to the whole incident aroused severe criticism. On Talk TV, [Ian Collins](#) said:

Inspector Andy Thornton, a senior ranking officer, gave the police response, he said it was a hate 'incident' not a hate crime. Did he mention death threats to a 14-year-old autistic child? I don't think he did.

According to [The Independent](#), the police gave advice to a pupil who had issued death threats to Boy X. It was not treated as a hate crime. Maybe this was for good reason. [Section 16](#) of the Offences Against the Person Act requires that a death threat has to be credible for it to be criminal, and the threat may have failed this test. But that only exposes the illogicality and arbitrariness of the non-criminal hate legislation whose low bar allows for a 14-year-old boy to be penalised for accidental damage to a book. These legal anomalies make it easier for politically interested actors, like Councillor Akbar, to minimise threats that cumulatively contribute to a pervasive threat of intimidation. His response was that the death threats were a result of an occasion in which 'passions flare'.

The whole incident, and the responses of those in charge, from the police to the headteacher, are not reassuring for the people they represent, who expect them to be able and willing to ensure the security of *all* sections of the public and to uphold democratic principles of secular freedom. The trade-off may be offending the most illiberal sections of the Muslim community (and those that flatter them), but public figures of authority

might earn more respect from both the non-Muslim majority *and* the minority of liberal Muslims.

Response from the home secretary and political polarisation of the debate

During the meeting at the Jamia Swafia Mosque, the imam [declared](#) that:

the slightest bit of disrespect is not accepted, and it is not going to be tolerated at any point, in any city, in any country by any Muslim, and that's the fact of the matter.

This challenges the settled status of freedom of speech and belief in the UK and implies a right to assert control over belief. The UK is not an Islamic theocracy and blasphemy laws were abolished in England and Wales in 2008, and in Scotland in 2021. At no time have believers in Islam enjoyed any right to enforce their beliefs in any part of the UK. The home secretary at the time, Suella Braverman, who had a responsibility to [ensure](#) that 'our communities, in all force areas, are kept safe and secure, and for protecting our national borders', issued a strong response to the imam's words. In an article in [The Times](#), she was highly critical about the belief that followers of any religion should feel entitled to declare such disobedience to law and order in the UK:

The lodestar of our democracy is freedom of speech. Nobody can demand respect for their belief system, even if it is a religion. People are legally entitled to reject - and to leave - any religion. There is no apostasy law in this country. The act of accusing someone of apostasy or blasphemy is effectively inciting violence upon that person. Everyone who lives here has to accept this country's pluralism and freedom of speech and belief.

She went on to say that the way to ensure community cohesion and peace was not to give in to bullies, but to defend a pluralist society in which that freedom is defended 'robustly'.

Unsurprisingly, Braverman's intervention was criticised in the NS article as condoning 'misinformation' to fuel a right-wing culture war. Also unsurprisingly, the *Muslim News* [reported](#): 'The Home Secretary is now antagonising Muslims seeking to defend sacred beliefs, claiming that "nobody can demand respect for their belief system, even if it is a religion".' Juveriah Alam, writing on 7 March in the 5Pillars website, [said](#) that:

the Conservative Party has not implemented any sort of official definition of Islamophobia, while it has adopted the IHRA definition of antisemitism. To continually accuse Muslims of trying to establish a backdoor blasphemy law while being unable to uphold even a basic definition of anti-Muslim hatred, clearly demonstrates the double standards at play... It makes no sense to blame Muslims for the lack of adequate police response.

The political opportunism of organisations like 5 Pillars, evident in its reactions to perceived blasphemy, itself [upholds](#) a racist idea that, in Braverman's word, 'Muslims are uniquely incapable of controlling themselves if they feel provoked. And it has excused agitators to force people to bend to their demands.' Contrary to the implications in the *Muslim News* report, the law on protected characteristics of the [Equality Act](#) does not require respecting religion. It does prohibit discrimination of people on grounds of religion.

The tension between British values and Islamic belief systems?

In *Living Apart Together*, [a report](#) from Policy Exchange in 2007, the authors distinguish between:

. . . 'Islam' as a religion practiced by Muslims worldwide, and 'Islamism', 'radical Islam' or 'Islamic fundamentalism', which are terms that refer to a political ideology that aims to create a state and society in strict conformity with religious doctrine. Most British Muslims - even those who are devout - are not Islamists. Many Islamists reject the use of terrorism to achieve their goals.

Treating Muslims as a coherent or homogenous social entity reinforces the idea that all Muslims object to British values and creates stereotypes, including the view that because some Muslims are radical Islamic extremists, all Muslims must be. And a devout Muslim is not necessarily Islamist. The APPG definition of Islamophobia fails to acknowledge the differences within the category of 'Muslimness', which is a deeply unhelpful neologism in its lack of specificity and subjectivity. Intended to prevent racism against Muslims, it leaves the way open to characterise any objection to any kind of Islam as racism. And we are seeing the consequences of having let such definitional looseness become accepted as good coin in too many of our institutions and professions.

Sir Trevor Phillips, writing in [The Times](#) in 2016 about a television survey, 'What British Muslims Really Think', referred to 'the unacknowledged creation of a nation within the nation, with its own geography, its own values and its own very separate future'. Phillips also noted that, of those Muslims surveyed:

A quarter supported the introduction of sharia law in parts of the UK - presumably, those areas where they thought Muslims constitute a majority - instead of the common statute laid down by parliament. Allah's law, apparently, need take no heed of democracy.

The article led to his suspension from the Labour Party on the grounds that [his views](#) constituted Islamophobia and racism. From the comfort of hindsight, we could ask ourselves whether Phillips was being Islamophobic, or simply prescient? Was the Labour Party enacting democratic principles in suspending him, or were they contributing to a cultural climate that, in 2023, led to the public shaming of a mother and her son for a schoolground altercation?

Conclusion

From our snapshot of the incident at Kettlethorpe School in Wakefield we need to ask tangible questions:

- whether it is acceptable for censorship to be demanded by a particular religious group
- whether mob violence or intimidation is a legitimate way to enforce of religious beliefs
- whether the school, the police and the local authorities act with due impartiality to which they are legally, not to say morally, bound
- whether school-curriculum content or school ethos should be decided by the wishes of parents, or representatives from, minority backgrounds.

We also need to consider far more seriously the broader cultural depredations evident when adults, all of whom are *de facto* figures of

authority for the next generation, by virtue of age, are unable or unwilling to exert their authority. This effects our collective public sphere far beyond specific school incidents. Since Wakefield, recent events – from the Michaela School [court case](#) to the attack on Israel of 7 October – have added urgency to these questions. The Henry Jackson Society, considering several incidents, including the one at Wakefield, [concludes](#) that:

Accepting a tacit anti-blasphemy law is antithetical to our democratic values whilst also a threat to national security. The Department for Education itself has gone as far as to suggest censoring school materials, suggesting an internalisation of blasphemy regulation at an institutional level.

The aspects of national security are well-detailed as far back as 2012 in Anna Wojtowicz's [study](#), published by the International Institute for Counter Terrorism (IICT). She explains the way in which radical Islamism is promoted through mosques, educational establishments and various Islamic bodies operative in the UK. She concludes that from the 1990s:

The British government, through its support of democratic values and traditions of civil liberties, has failed to act towards the developing Islamic groups in London.

She tracks the progress of Islamic radical preaching and dissemination across British cities where the failure of civil authority led to the establishment of a:

crossroad and safe haven for would-be terrorists, where they could raise money, a destination for men willing to carry out their threats, recruit members and draw inspiration towards militant actions against the West.

Perhaps what our snapshot of the incident in Wakefield suggests is that it is the *lack* of support for Britain's democratic political values and tradition of civil liberties that is a major cultural and political problem today. Those who focus exclusively on the threat being imported from outside the nation state fail to account for the fact that many of the radicalised Muslims who turn to Islamism are British-born, not immigrants. They are also often middle-class and educated beyond compulsory schooling. This is borne out in her report, and by other academic work, notably that of [Olivier Roy](#). We could reasonably conclude that the problem we face is not

reducible to an external threat alone, or of poverty/discrimination as the received wisdom from the left would have it. Our problem in dealing with Islamism arises from the inability of our political class to seriously consider what is needed for stronger integration beyond technical discussions about the numbers of immigrants or, from the other side, community centres or gold stars for celebrating Diversity.

Ed Husain charts his conversations with Muslims as he visits mosques throughout Britain. He tells a compelling story that picks out varying strands of belief and belonging (or lack of) that exists among his interviewees. Some mosques and their educational practices remain compatible with Britain's cultural liberalism, but he notes in some mosques, sectarian and fundamentalist beliefs are being taught to pupils. At its heart, the problem is moral in nature: where or with whom does moral authority - with which political institutions and practices are given consent - lie?

Our snapshot of what happened at Kettlethorpe School in Wakefield shows that those in charge outsourced moral authority to an ill-conceived, poorly understood notion of what was required by discrimination and equality law. They also outsourced it to an organised religious minority group of illiberal Muslims, their representatives and non-Muslim supporters among the left, who clearly are unwilling to observe the ground rules of democratic civil life. We cannot yet give details about ongoing cases in schools and workplaces where offence, and its assumed legal protection via the Equality Act among others, is being weaponised by individuals to stigmatise perceived offenders. But they are happening. If left unchecked, our already weak social fabric and belief in democratic norms and practices will be further eroded.

We cannot begin to tackle this problem if any criticism, any offensive word or act, intended or not, is responded to as if it were a legitimate complaint. Such claims cannot be afforded uncritical acceptance and preferential treatment, to the detriment of Britain's established legal and cultural norms. If this causes religious offence, real or concocted, then we ought to be able to accept this as preferable to the consequences of not giving offence at any cost.

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