

FMSO's Military DIME (M-DIME) Research Project

Tracking Russian and Chinese military influence in states around the world

Instruments of Chinese Military Influence in Tunisia

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OVERVIEW OF FMSO'S M-DIME RESEARCH PROJECT

The Military DIME (M-DIME) Research Project is a dynamic effort from researchers at the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command's Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO). Its goal is to provide Army leaders with a clear, comparative understanding of how China and Russia employ instruments of national power to obtain military influence around the world. The M-DIME framework is derived from the "DIME" concept, which classes instruments of national power into four types: Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic. Based on this concept, the M-DIME framework gives more narrow attention to the instruments that China and Russia employ to gain military influence in third-party countries.

The M-DIME framework's purpose is to track and analyze the military influence of "Benefactor" countries (i.e. China and Russia) in select "Recipient" countries in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and South and South-east Asia. Benefactor countries are assumed to engage in activities that result in them having increased military influence in Recipient countries to gain leverage over global rivals, competitors, and adversaries; for China and Russia, this means the United States. Within this framework, "military influence" is defined as the ability of a Benefactor country to shape or alter the attitudes, behaviors, and capabilities of actors within—and entities associated with—the armed forces of Recipient countries.

The M-DIME framework identifies 12 distinct instruments of national power employed by Benefactor countries to gain military influence in Recipient countries, three for each of the DIME categories. They are as follows:

DIPLOMATIC INSTRUMENTS

- D1 Defense-Related Diplomacy
- D2 International Military Education and Training
- D3 Soft Power Activities

INFORMATIONAL INSTRUMENTS

- I1 Cultural and Media Outreach, Collaboration, and Alignment
- I2 Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Support
- I3 Cooperation in Military Intelligence and Communications

MILITARY INSTRUMENTS

- M1 Formal Bilateral Military Engagements
- M2 Shared Informal/Multilateral Military Engagements
- M3 Defense/Security Pacts and Agreements

ECONOMIC INSTRUMENTS

- E1 Arms Transfers
- E2 Technology-Sharing and Joint Production Agreements
- E3 Trade and Cooperation in Strategic Commodities/Sectors

M-DIME analysis is based on qualitative assessments of Benefactor influence in Recipient countries along each of the 12 M-DIME instruments of influence. These assessments are made for the Benefactor's **Current Influence** (assessed as Very High, High, Medium, Low, Very Low, or Unobserved) and **Projected Influence** (assessed as Increasing, Steady, Decreasing, or Unknown). Current assessments are made based on activities from 2012 to the present, while future assessments are three-year forecasts.


The bulk of activities considered in the M-DIME Research Project involve members of the armed forces or defense sector personnel in both Benefactor and Recipient countries. Such activities include formal and informal military-to-military diplomacy, security cooperation engagements, and arms transfers. However, the M-DIME Research Project also tracks and analyzes Chinese and Russian activities that employ non-military instruments of influence but ultimately bear on the decision-making and capabilities of the Recipient country's armed forces. Such activities include Chinese and Russian collaboration with Benefactor states in media, communications technology, and strategic sectors.

The M-DIME Research Project's findings are derived from open-source research. Each M-DIME product is produced with the collaboration of analysts from across FMSO, frequently with the assistance of non-Department of Defense subject matter experts coming from academia, think tanks, and the private sector. Given its basis in open-source research, the M-DIME Research Project has an inherent limitation. It cannot track Chinese and Russian military influence activities that are deliberately kept secret. Consequently, assessments of Chinese and Russian influence based on instruments for which secrecy is important or where information would typically be classified by the Benefactor or Recipient countries—for instance, military-technology sharing or intelligence collaboration—are acknowledged to be made with low confidence. Assessments of **Projected Influence**, unless otherwise stated, are also made with low confidence given pervasive information gaps and the potential for bilateral dynamics to quickly shift. In certain cases, assessments are not made where open-source data is considered inconclusive

In sum, the M-DIME Research Project is a tool for U.S. Army and U.S. Government personnel to better understand the instruments of national power employed by China and Russia to gain global military influence and the impact these activities have on U.S. national security interests. Over time, FMSO will expand the body of research and assessments based on this framework, increasing its comparative value across Benefactor and Recipient countries.


KEY ASSESSMENTS


China’s current M-DIME influence in Tunisia is assessed as Very Low. Some of the most important instruments contributing to China’s current military influence in Tunisia include:










 **Cultural and Media Outreach, Collaboration, and Alignment (I1).** China has demonstrated interest in the Tunisian media sector and has emphasized media cooperation as a highlight of bilateral cooperation. Additionally, Chinese diplomats published at least 20 op-eds in Tunisian state media between 2019 and 2021 to paint China in a positive light among Tunisians.

 **Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Support (I2).** China has some level of influence over the Tunisian telecommunications sector, with Chinese mobile companies Huawei and Xiaomi making up a quarter of the Tunisian market. Huawei has also partnered with the Tunisian company Tunisie Telecom. A June 2023 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) aims to consolidate official bilateral ICT cooperation and demonstrate China’s interest in the Tunisian ICT sector.

China’s projected M-DIME influence in Tunisia is assessed as Steady. Some of the most dynamic instruments informing China’s projected military influence in Tunisia include:

 **Cultural and Media Outreach, Collaboration, and Alignment (I1).** China’s interest in Tunisia’s media sector is expected to increase. Chinese representatives have recently emphasized increased bilateral media cooperation, perhaps signaling an intent to extend the employment of this instrument for influence.

 **Trade and Cooperation in Strategic Commodities/Sectors (E3).** China has launched several infrastructure-related projects in Tunisia in recent years, and Tunisian representatives have reiterated the importance of Chinese-Tunisian cooperation in this sector. Cooperation between China and Tunisia is expected to increase in the strategic commodities sector, with both countries signing agreements pertaining to future projects and their officials pledging further cooperation. China’s interest in influencing Tunisia is motivated in part by its strategic location for China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

DIPLOMATIC / INFORMATION			MILITARY / ECONOMIC					
	D1	Defense-Related Diplomacy		M1	Formal Bilateral Military Engagements			
	D2	International Military Education and Training		M2	Shared Informal/Multilateral Military Engagements			
	D3	Soft Power Activities		M3	Defense/Security Pacts and Agreements			
	I1	Cultural/Media Outreach, Collaboration, Alignment		E1	Arms Transfers			
	I2	Information/Communications Technology Support		E2	Technology-Sharing, Joint Production Agreements			
	I3	Cooperation in Military Intelligence/Communications		E3	Trade/Cooperation in Strategic Commodities/Sectors			
CURRENT DEGREE OF INFLUENCE			PROJECTED FUTURE DEGREE OF INFLUENCE					
Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low	None/Unobserved	Increasing 	Steady 	Decreasing 

INTRODUCTION TO CHINA-TUNISIA RELATIONS

Diplomatic relations between China and Tunisia were established in 1964, but they have historically been marked by very little military-to-military interaction. Tunisia was the last country in the Maghreb to recognize the People’s Republic of China, and its first post-independence president, Habib Bourguiba, kept the newly independent country politically and ideologically aligned with the West by—among other tactics—promoting secularism, women’s rights, and economic liberalism.¹ After Tunisia gained independence in 1956, Bourguiba purposely kept the military small for fear of coups; his successor, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, followed suit.² The first meeting on record between China and Tunisia on bilateral military cooperation occurred in 1992.³ Since then, military cooperation has taken a lower priority than efforts concerning technology, economy, and trade. Nonetheless, five Chinese defense-related delegations visited Tunisia between 2003-2010, and the heads of the Tunisian Army and Navy made separate visits to China during this period.⁴ Tunisia’s post-Ben Ali era began in 2011, following the Arab Spring wave of protests, that the military became a stronger force. Although China has promised to contribute military supplies and educational training to Tunisia in recent years, there is limited evidence suggesting that China

has provided any of this assistance. Instead, Tunisia’s military has mainly collaborated with the United States and other NATO member countries.⁵

Tunisia’s military ties with the United States date back decades, as the United States was the first major power to recognize Tunisia’s sovereignty, supplying its military as early as the late 1950s and to this day remaining among its largest military suppliers.⁶ Washington also seeks to strengthen Tunisia’s counterterrorism efforts in the region, as well as promote good governance and economic growth.⁷ Additionally, the United States has an interest in preventing malign and destabilizing activity from China in Africa,^{8 9} and designated Tunisia as a major non-NATO ally.¹⁰ Military cooperation between the United States and Tunisia remains strong—the two held their 36th Joint Military Commission in 2024 to discuss the ongoing strengthening of their bilateral partnership.^{11 12} In 2023 and 2024, Tunisia was one of the African countries to host the “Africa Lion” exercises, the largest U.S.-led military exercise on the African continent.^{13 14}

TUNISIA AT A GLANCE	
Capital	Tunis ¹⁵
Population	12,048,847 (2024) ¹⁶
GDP per Capita	\$12,300 (2023 est.) ¹⁷
Head of Government	Kamel Maddouri ¹⁸
Head of State	Kais Saied ¹⁹
Minister of Defense	Imed Memmich ²⁰
Chief of General Staff	BG Mohamed El Ghouli (Army Chief of Staff) ²¹
Military Expenditure (total)	\$1.208 billion (2023) ²²
Military Expenditure (% of GDP)	2.4% (2023) ²³
Armed Service Branches	Tunisian Armed Forces: Tunisian Army, Tunisian Air Force, Tunisian Navy ²⁴
Active Armed Forces Personnel	Approximately 35,000 Active Personnel (2023) ²⁵

D - Diplomatic Instruments

Chinese military-diplomatic relations with Tunisia have been minimal. Defense-related diplomatic visits have been infrequent but saw an uptick in activity in 2021 and 2022. Further bilateral cooperation has been a topic frequently discussed between senior officials on both sides, with an emphasis on regional security. There is no evidence of military education and training programs between the two countries, and Chinese soft power activities relevant to military influence in Tunisia are infrequent.



D1: Defense-Related Diplomacy

Current Influence: Very Low

Projected Influence: Steady

- **Senior nonmilitary officials from China and Tunisia have met often to discuss matters such as regional security, countering terrorism, and Tunisian national security.**
 - » In May 2024, Tunisian President Saied visited China and signed a “strategic partnership.” It was the first time in three decades that a Tunisian President had done so.²⁶
 - » In 2023, a special envoy to the region, Zhai Jun, visited Tunisia and met with the Tunisian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nabil Ammar, to emphasize the traditional friendship between China and Tunisia. Both Zhai and Ammar pledged to develop further bilateral cooperation on pressing regional issues, including regional security, Libya and Syria, and the Palestinian question.²⁷
 - » Due to Tunisia’s recent political and economic crises, the Tunisian government has been unable to pursue major initiatives, and military cooperation with China has lagged other efforts related to infrastructure and tourism.²⁸
- **Since 2012, there has been only one bilateral diplomatic meeting involving high-level defense officials.**
 - » In 2015, former Chinese Defense Minister Chang Wanquan hosted his Tunisian counterpart.²⁹
- **Defense-related diplomacy between China and Tunisia is likely to remain steady in the future, as the two countries have recently expressed interest in furthering bilateral cooperation but have not identified whether this will include defense collaboration.**



D2: International Military Education and Training Programs

Current Influence: Unobserved

Projected Influence: Unknown

- **There is no publicly available information about Chinese attempts to cooperate with Tunisia in international military education and training programs.**
- **Instead, Tunisia has established a closer relationship with the United States and other NATO countries, and in the last year has completed U.S.- and NATO-led military training exercises.**
 - » Tunisia participates in NATO’s Defence Education Enhancement Program (DEEP), along with 14 other countries, working to strengthen its defense and military domain.³⁰
 - » The 35th annual U.S.-Tunisia Joint Military Commission took place at the U.S. Africa Command headquarters located in Stuttgart, Germany, where issues such as security cooperation and strengthened bilateral relations were discussed.³¹
- **Projected Chinese influence via this instrument is unknown because of the lack of observed activities.**



D3: Soft Power Activities

Current Influence: Very Low

Projected Influence: Steady

- **Military soft power activities between China and Tunisia have been minimal, consisting largely of China’s participation in Tunisia’s naval parade and a Chinese People’s Liberation Army-Navy port call in 2018.**
 - » In October 2018, the Chinese frigate Wuhu participated in Tunisia’s international naval parade celebrating the 60th anniversary of the Tunisian Navy.³²
 - » In January 2018, the 27th Chinese naval escort taskforce—consisting of the guided missile-destroyer Haikou (Hull 171), guided-missile frigate Yueyang (Hull 575), and supply ship Qinghaihu (Hull 885)—made a five-day friendly visit to Tunisia. Commanding officers met with the Chief of Staff of the Tunisian Navy and local government leaders, visited the Tunisian Naval Academy, hosted receptions, and conducted friendly exchanges.³³

- ***In 2021, China provided Tunisia with support during its COVID-19 health crisis, particularly in military health and training, two areas in which China has pledged to support Tunisia.***
 - » In a November 2021 meeting between the Tunisian Minister of National Defense Imed Memmich and the Chinese Ambassador to Tunisia Zhang Jianguo, Memmich praised China-Tunisia military cooperation in the fields of military health and training.³⁴
- ***Chinese military soft power activities in Tunisia are expected to remain steady in the next three years as both countries continue to focus on nondefense-related cooperation.***

I - Informational Instruments

China's use of informational instruments to gain military influence in Tunisia is notable and increasingly significant. China has emphasized the importance of media cooperation with Tunisia and has supported the modernization of Tunisian state television. Chinese diplomats also increasingly published op-eds in Tunisian state media between 2019 and 2021. Additionally, Chinese ICT activity has played a significant role in Tunisia's telecommunications sector.



I1: Cultural and Media Outreach, Collaboration, and Alignment

Current Influence: Medium

Projected Influence: Increasing

- **China has emphasized the importance of media cooperation as a highlight of its bilateral cooperation with Tunisia, often done under the auspices of the BRI.**
 - » China gave state-run Tunisian National Television several televisions and other equipment in 2021.³⁵ This followed a statement from the Chinese Ambassador calling for the need for deepened cooperation between China and Tunisia through the BRI.³⁶
 - » The Chinese Embassy gifted Tunisia's state-run news agency, Agence Tunis Afrique Presse, digital and technological equipment in July 2023, and China's Ambassador to Tunisia, Li Wan, stated that China is seeking to expand cooperation between the two countries in the media sector.³⁷
 - » In 2019, Tunisian journalists participated in a two-week Belt and Road News Network media workshop.³⁸ The workshop, which involved traveling to several tourist destinations in China to learn about development topics, was sponsored by China's State Council Information Office with the goal of creating "a good atmosphere of public opinion for the joint construction of the Belt and Road."³⁹
- **In 2017, representatives from China's Xinhua news agency met with the editor-in-chief of Agence Tunis Afrique Presse and the head of the Tunisian parliament with the stated goal of deepening media collaboration and establishing mutual understanding between the people of China and the people of Tunisia.**
 - » Xinhua has published information from Agence Tunis Afrique Presse and has covered Tunisian issues, including the Tunisian tech sector, but it seems that the Tunisian news agency is not as actively publishing information from Xinhua.^{40 41}
- **Chinese diplomats have consistently published op-eds in and granted interviews to prominent Tunisian media outlets, particularly since 2019.⁴²**
 - » Most of these Chinese op-eds are published in French, with some in Arabic. In 202 and 2021, Embassy officials signed at least eight articles each year.^{43 44} In 2019, Embassy officials published at least four signed articles.⁴⁵ The volume of publications has been largely consistent through 2024.⁴⁶ Many of the op-eds pertained to bilateral cooperation between China and Tunisia.
- **General sentiment toward China among the Tunisian public is positive.**
 - » Polling from July 2024 finds that 68 percent of Tunisians have favorable views of China. Of the 35 countries surveyed, Tunisia had the fourth most positive view of China, after Thailand, Nigeria, and Kenya.⁴⁷
- **Media cooperation and Chinese influence in Tunisian media are expected to increase, as China continues to burnish its image in Tunisian media.**



I2: Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Support

Current Influence: Medium

Projected Influence: Steady

- **Chinese mobile companies play a significant role in the Tunisian ICT sector through the implementation of 5G and collaboration with Tunisian companies.**
 - » As of 2023, Chinese mobile companies make up more than 25 percent of the Tunisian mobile vendor market—Xiaomi at 14.4 percent and Huawei at 11.5 percent.⁴⁸ Both companies are banned in the United States because they pose an "unacceptable risk" to U.S. national security.⁴⁹
 - » In June 2023, China and Tunisia signed an MoU to cooperate in the field of communications and information technology, covering legislative/legal issues, digital infrastructure, research and innovation, skills development, development of digital tech, cyber security, digital economy, and exchange of expertise.⁵⁰
 - » Tunisian company Tunisie Telecom has asserted itself as "determined to take the lead in Tunisia's ICT market" and has partnered with Chinese company Huawei to do so. In a 2021 interview published on Huawei's website, Tunisie Telecom's CIO discussed why Huawei is an ideal partner.⁵¹

Very High

High

Medium

Low

Very Low

Unobserved

- ***In 2018, China opened its first overseas center for Beidou Satellite Navigation System, the China-Arab Beidou Center, in Tunis. The center is significant in promoting cooperation between China and Arab nations, as well as providing training and technological research for Arab nations.***⁵²
 - » The center is a pilot project between China and the Tunisia-based Arab Information and Communication Technology Organization.⁵³ Tunisia’s Secretary of State for Scientific Research stated that Tunisia is partnering closely with China to access and develop database services, in addition to other satellites for “various uses.”⁵⁴
 - » There is no indication that the China-Arab Beidou Center provides China with any meaningful military influence, as the focus of this technology in Tunisia so far has been related to the fields of space and agriculture.⁵⁵⁶
- ***Cooperation between China and Tunisia in the ICT sector is likely to remain steady in the next three years with no clear indications of future increases or decreases.***



I3: Cooperation in Military Intelligence and Communications

Current Influence: Unobserved

Projected Influence: Unknown

- ***There is no publicly available information about Chinese attempts to cooperate with Tunisia in military intelligence and communications.***
- ***Due to Tunisia’s close intelligence and security relationship with the United States, there is little-to-no future activity between China and Tunisia expected regarding this instrument.***



M - Military Instruments

Evidence of agreements or interactions between China and Tunisia in the military sphere is minimal. Tunisia is hesitant to allow a foreign military presence within its borders and has a longstanding, close military relationship with the United States.



M1: Formal Bilateral Military Engagements

Current Influence: Unobserved

Projected Influence: Unknown

- ***There have been no reported formal military engagements between China and Tunisia.***
- ***Tunisia has a firm stance against foreign troops or military bases in the country.***
 - » In June 2021, Tunisian President Kais Saied announced he would not allow any foreign troops or military bases on Tunisian territory. This statement was delivered on the 65th anniversary of Tunisia's National Armed Forces and came after the United States expressed its intent to send military trainers to Tunisia, following Russia's involvement in Libya.⁵⁷
 - » In June 2020, Tunisian Defense Minister Imed Hazgui made a similar statement, asserting that Tunisia will continue to maintain control of its land, seas, and airspace.⁵⁸
- ***Projected Chinese influence via this instrument in the next three years is unknown because of the lack of observed activities.***



M2: Shared Informal/Multilateral Military Engagements

Current Influence: Unobserved

Projected Influence: Unknown

- ***There is no publicly available information about Chinese attempts to conduct informal or multilateral military engagements with Tunisia.***
 - » Instead, Tunisia has partnered with the United States and other NATO countries for multilateral military engagements, such as Africa Lion.
- ***Projected Chinese influence via this instrument in the next three years is unknown because of the lack of observed activities.***



M3: Defense/Security Pacts and Agreements

Current Influence: Unobserved

Projected Influence: Unknown

- ***There are no meaningful defense/security pacts or agreements between China and Tunisia.***
- ***Projected Chinese use of this instrument in the next three years is unknown given the lack of observable data.***

E - Economic Instruments

There is no evidence that China and Tunisia have engaged in arms transfers or technology-sharing or joint production agreements since 2012. This is largely explained by Tunisia's longstanding relationship with the United States and other NATO member countries in this area. Sino-Tunisian trade and cooperation in strategic sectors is increasing, however, with several ongoing energy and technology projects in addition to expressed mutual intent to further develop relations in strategically important sectors.



E1: Arms Transfers

Current Influence: Very Low

Projected Influence: Steady

- **No arms transfers have occurred between China and Tunisia since 2012, with only one known instance of a deal for China to transfer a small amount of military equipment to Tunisia in 2013.**
 - » In December 2013, China and Tunisia signed an agreement allowing Tunisia to receive an USD\$8 million grant for the Tunisian Army to receive more advanced equipment to fight terrorism and for border security.⁵⁹
- **Instead, Tunisia partners with the United States and other NATO member countries regarding arms transfers.**
 - » Tunisian arms imports only came from the United States, Canada, and Turkey.⁶⁰
- **Chinese influence via this instrument is projected to remain steady in the next three years with no clear indications of future increases or decreases.**



E2: Technology-Sharing and Joint Production Agreements

Current Influence: Unobserved

Projected Influence: Unknown

- **No technology-sharing or joint production agreements were observed between China and Tunisia since 2012.**
- **Projected Chinese influence via this instrument is unknown because of the lack of observed activities.**



E3: Trade and Cooperation in Strategic Commodities/Sectors

Current Influence: Low

Projected Influence: Increasing

- **China has financed and invested in several Tunisian industrial projects pertaining to energy and technology.**
 - » In 2022, Emirati energy company AMEA Power and Chinese company TBEA Xinjiang New Energy Co., Ltd. announced plans to begin joint construction on the Kairouan solar project in Tunisia in the second quarter of 2023.⁶¹
 - » In 2019, an MoU was signed between Tunisian authorities and Chinese companies specializing in renewable energy, with the goal of constructing a large solar power plant in Tunisia.⁶²
 - » In 2018, a Chinese engineering team began construction on Tunisia's largest dam, the Mellegua Dam, in the Kef region in northwestern Tunisia.⁶³ As of August 2024, construction appears to have been completed.⁶⁴ The dam is intended to protect central Tunisia's agricultural regions from flooding, as well as enhance irrigation systems and domestic use of water in the region.⁶⁵
 - » At the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Summit in Beijing in September 2018, Tunisia signed agreements with China for a variety of projects. These included the development of the port of Zarzis into a commercial center and free trade zone at the Libyan border, construction of a railway line linking Médenine and Zarzis, and forming a production plant for SAIC Motor Corporation Ltd, a Chinese state-owned company, to build and export cars to other countries around the Mediterranean and in Africa.⁶⁶
 - ◇ The railway line between Médenine and Zarzis is particularly significant because Médenine is rich in minerals and is an important location for the petrochemical and processing industries of phosphates.⁶⁷
- **It is likely that Chinese influence via this instrument will increase in the next three years given the numerous ongoing projects, as well as the fact that Tunisian officials have expressed the importance of the BRI and their hope that it will further Tunisian infrastructure efforts in the future.**

CONCLUSIONS

China's current M-DIME influence in Tunisia is assessed as Very Low. China's military involvement in Tunisia is minimal, with the bulk of China's influence occurring via informational instruments. China's level of influence over the Tunisian telecommunications sector, with Chinese companies Huawei and Xiaomi making up a quarter of the Tunisian market, is significant (I2). Huawei has partnered with Tunisie Telecom with the goal of taking the lead in the Tunisian ICT market. Additionally, China has shown interest in Tunisia's media sector, with Chinese ambassadors consistently publishing op-eds in Tunisian state media over the past few years (I1). China has also provided Tunisian state television with more modern media equipment, which provides Beijing the opportunity to build a positive media narrative regarding China.

China's projected M-DIME influence in Tunisia is assessed as Steady. China's projected influence in Tunisia is expected to remain steady over the next three years, with projected increases in the use of some informational and economic instruments. China appears likely to focus on deepening its ICT influence in Tunisia by building on the 2023 bilateral MoU on ICT collaboration and potentially capitalizing on the Saied government's increasing clampdown on independent media (I2).⁶⁸ In the strategic commodities sector, China has initiated and participated in several infrastructure projects in Tunisia, with some of the projects pertaining to valuable resources, such as solar power and the railway line between Zarzis and mineral-rich Médenine (E3). Tunisian officials have indicated that further BRI involvement will be extremely beneficial for Tunisian infrastructure and the country's economy, and they have suggested that there is potential for future collaboration with China in this sector.

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