

# The Armenian Question According to *Meşveret*, The Publication Organ of The Committee of Union and Progress

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## Abstract

The Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) was a secret organization aimed to dethrone *Sultan Abdülhamid II* and combine all Ottoman nations around the constitution. The CUP, which was founded in 1889 had the thought of collaborating with the Armenian opposition, which had turned to an armed movement in 1882. When the Armenian opposition reached its peak in Ottoman Empire, *Ahmet Rıza* began to publish a newspaper called *Meşveret* in Paris, in 1895. This article aims to evaluate how *Meşveret* considered and reflected news related to the Armenian question as the publication organ of CUP which collaborated with the Armenian committees against *Sultan Abdülhamid II*.

## Keywords

*Meşveret*, Ahmet Rıza, Press, Newspaper, Armenian, Minority.

## Introduction

Annulment of the first Ottoman Parliament and temporarily abolition of the constitution by Sultan Abdülhamid II caused emergence of opposition against the administration. At the beginning, these opposition movements were just limited with several insignificant events like the Çırağan Event in 1878, the formation of the Scaleri-Aziz Bey Committee and oppository publications of Ali Şefkati Bey from 1879 and 1881 in *İstikbal* (Akşin 1987: 22).

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Liberal Party leader William Ewart Gladstone came to power in England, in 1880 and caused significant changes in international dynamics. Gladstone put great effort for independence of Romania, Crete and Bulgaria which caused an enormous opposition movement in the Ottoman State. This opposition movement began with the Anadolu Müdafileri Event organized by the Armenians in Erzurum in 1882 and expanded unstoppably. Meanwhile, annexation of Eastern Rumelia by the Bulgarians in 1885 motivated increasing actions of the Armenians (On Gladstone's influence on the Armenian question see, Salt 1993, Karaca 2011: 211-360).

Based on these circumstances, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) was founded in 1889. CUP was a secret organization aimed to dethrone Sultan Abdülhamid II and gather all Ottoman nations around the constitution (On the activities of the Committee see, Hanioglu 1989, Aslan 2008: 79-120).

Taking into consideration the first declaration of Committee, it can be seen that the Armenian opposition had a significant role in shaping the Committee's policies. This declaration expresses the sorrow for Armenians having the courage to attack the Sublime Porte with the support of western powers but stops short of denouncing the attack itself. Declaration also claims that the fundamental reason of such events was oppressiveness and maladministration. Instead of attempting to oppress the Armenians, CUP suggests attacking Yıldız Palace to gain liberty (Tunaya 1988: 44-45).

As it is understood from the declaration, the CUP had the thought of collaborating with the Armenian opposition, which had turned to an armed movement in 1882. The whole purpose of this collaboration was to end Sultan Abdülhamid II administration. Instead of accepting CUP's control, however, the Armenian opposition was influenced by Hunchak and Dashnaktsuthiun Committees, which were founded abroad and began their activities after 1890 (Uras 1987: 432-442, Gürün 1985: 132-134).

In 1895, when the Armenian opposition reached to peak, Ahmet Rıza began to publish a newspaper called *Meşveret* in Paris. Albert Fua, a Jew from Thessalonica, Greek Aristidi Pasha and Halil Ganem, a Lebanese Maruni are among the founders of the newspaper (Akşin 1987:31). Ahmet Rıza had submitted reform suggestions to Sultan and Grand Vizier but they were not taken into account. He then decided to publish a serious newspaper in Paris as a propaganda instrument of the CUP and to work for the benefit of all Ottomans (Ahmet Rıza 1988: 11-13).

### ***Meşveret***

As it was indicated by Ahmet Rıza, *Meşveret* has held a duty of connecting all subjects of the Ottoman State. In order to achieve this goal, declaration of the Constitution and dethroning of Sultan Abdülhamid II were believed necessary. *Meşveret* made “*veşavirhüm fi'l-emr*” (consult while ruling) its motto by stressing the importance of consultation within the basic Islamic principles (*Meşveret*, 13 Cemazievvel 1313/1 December 1895, no: 1).

*Meşveret* was published a total thirty issues from late 1895 to 1898. Sultan Abdülhamid II complained to French authorities about the newspaper harshly criticizing Ottoman administrations to the degree of insult. Consequently Ahmet Rıza was charged by the French courts (Ahmet Rıza 1988: 15).

*Meşveret* mainly dealt with political issues throughout its three years of publication life. It defended rights of non-Muslims in accordance with principle of “union of nations” (*ittihad-ı anasır*). The news related to the Armenians was especially published. Although the newspaper had an attitude of defending Armenians, it was not able to escape from reporting activities of armed Armenian rebels in the Ottoman territories.

### **The Armenian Question in *Meşveret***

Although opposition against Sultan II. Abdülhamid was covered a lot; the Armenian question was one of the leading matters in *Meşveret*. The other subjects covered were also related to problems of the Ottoman State within the framework of opposition to Sultan Abdülhamid II. Matters related to Syria, Albania and Bulgaria were comprehensively evaluated by *Meşveret*. The Armenian question was evaluated from every angle. Often mention by *Meşveret* were *Zeytun* revolt, the British-Armenian relations, union between the CUP and the Armenian committees, the Ottoman union and the Armenians, and Sultan Abdülhamid’s animosity against the Armenians.

It is also obvious that *Meşveret* struggled a lot while covering Armenian situation. The newspaper defends the Ottoman union and considers Armenians as part of this union. Unfortunate truth was Armenians started a war against the union in Anatolia. Although reason of the war was attributed to maladministration of Sultan Abdülhamid II, news coming from Anatolia about the Armenian massacres of the Muslims let *Meşveret* realize

that events were not developing in line with their ideals. Criticizing the Armenian revolts, *Meşveret* went on to say in its last issues that if there was a need for uprising and shedding blood that must be the Muslims revolting because they suffered the most injustice. For the sake of Ottoman union, the Armenian organizations were still safeguarded. The Ottoman union and the Armenians will be the first topic to be evaluated.

### **Ottoman Union and the Armenians**

Beginning with the first issues, *Meşveret* accentuated justness of the Armenian rebellions. Ahmet Rıza, in the second issue of the paper, claimed that they would evaluate the matter fairly, with a different view than the other Turks and writes as follow: “The Armenian question that Europe has been dealing for a year is a desperate consequence of eighteen years of maladministration. Government’s weakness and unjust treatment of public encouraged the enemies to provoke revolutionary activities. The revolt was in fact caused by current administration’s oppressive management and the Sultan’s fanaticism and inflexibility. There would not be such developments if the state had not been ruled arbitrarily by the Sultans for forty years (the periods of Sultan Abdülaziz and Abdülhamid II) without doing anything else. The Sultan considers the Armenian revolt as improper. He, on the other hand, doesn’t know or think about causes of revolt, refusing to listen to those who want to inform him....it is impossible to find any patriotic Turk who would support such an administration that neither run the state efficiently nor consider country’s future” (*Meşveret*, “İcmal-i Ahval”, 28 Cemazielahir 1313/16 December 1895, no: 2).

While Ahmet Rıza was stressing righteousness of the Armenian revolutionary activities in his article he rejects the demands for independence which was clearly contradicting to the idea of Ottoman union.

*Meşveret* could not reflect its position clearly about the Armenian revolutionary activities, tried to manifest emerging indignation by publishing letters which were allegedly sent by the Turks. As a matter of fact a letter which was published allegedly sent by M.A. criticized the Armenian activities harshly. “The Armenian rebels are responsible of thousands killed and destroying the homeland in the name of asking for independence. They cultivate products of disturbance and separation seeds which they insemnated among the Ottoman nations” (*Meşveret*, “Osmanlı İttihadı”, 17 Şaban 1313/2 February 1896, no: 5).

An explanation in *Meşveret* which followed the letter criticizing the Armenian rebels clearly demonstrates the position of the CUP's newspaper. *Meşveret* said they published one of the many letters they received about activities of the Armenians and wrote as follow: "Do the Armenians demand separation from us and ask for the same privileges as other Ottoman minorities. Or do they demand, like we do, a reform which would equally be applied to all Ottomans?...We demand an explanation from the Armenian committees to avoid any lies and ambiguities" (*Meşveret*, "Osmanlı İttihadı-1", 17 Şaban 1313/ 2 February 1896, no: 5).

The expected explanation never came. *Meşveret* then took some lines from an Armenian newspaper published in London identifying them the requested response. This article states that "the Armenians are aware of the difficulties of having an independent state in Turkey; so they do not have such claims. It is also known that there is a small number of Armenians demanding independence so the Armenians are advised to work together and equally with Muslims" (*Meşveret*, "Osmanlı İttihadı-2", 26 Zilhicce 1313/8 June 1896, no: 12).

The same issue of the newspaper announced that the CUP and the Armenian committees acted jointly and it was claimed that the Sultan had conspired with someone to destroy that relationship (*Meşveret*, "Ecnebi Gazeteleri", 26 Zilhicce 1313/ 8 June 1896, no: 12). According to *Meşveret*, that person was a journalist from Vienna, sent to London (*Meşveret*, "Ecnebi Gazeteleri", 12 muharrem 1314/23 June 1896, no: 13).

According to *Meşveret*, Sultan Abdülhamid II had tried all scenarios to destroy unity between the Armenian committees and the CUP. Since he was not able to achieve this, his animosity against the Armenians diminished. The sultan had to come closer to the Armenians because of his fear of the CUP. If he was able to reach an agreement with the Armenians he could put all his effort to destroy the CUP (*Meşveret*, "Havadis", 12 Rebiülevvel 1314/21 August 1896, no: 19).

There was news in *Meşveret* about activities of Sultan Abdülhamid II's special envoy sent to London to destroy collaboration between the Armenians and the CUP by making promises to the Armenians. According to interpretation of the newspaper, the Armenian committees had waited for the Sultan to fulfill his promises for six months. They revolted again when the Sultan did not keep his promises. The paper reported that the revolt was justified (*Meşveret*, "İcaml-i Ahval", 11 Cemazielevvel 1315/8 October 1897, no: 25).

The matter of the Ottoman union became the most important criteria in *Meşveret*'s interpretation of the Armenian activities. News about massacres committed by the Armenians as well as importance collaborating with the Armenians to secure the Ottoman union appeared in the same issue. According to a comment in one of last issues of *Meşveret*, "if it were not for the crazy activities of the committees, the union might have already been achieved (*Meşveret*, "Havadis-i Siyasiye", 12 Cemazielahir 1314/18 November 1896, no: 22).

Ahmet Rıza and *Meşveret* defended the idea of acting together against Sultan Abdülhamid II with the Armenian committees to achieve the Ottoman union. Relations of the committees with foreign states were not approved. In fact, later, Ahmet Rıza opposed to interventions of foreign states in the 1902 Congress. After the Congress, the Armenians declared their support for Prince Sabahattin's decentralization approach (Halaçoğlu 2001: 22-23).

### **Armenian Uprisings and *Meşveret***

The Ottoman union was the ideal of the CUP. The reality was revolts that rose all around Anatolia. Nearly 30 Armenian uprisings happened in Anatolia during the period from 1895 to 1898 (On the list of revolts see, Süslü 1990: 58-59). *Meşveret* which defended the Ottoman union did not mention the Armenian revolutionary activities except the *Sasun* and *Zeytun* uprisings. The revolts in some regions like Sivas and Kayseri were viewed as "unrests in Kayseri and Sivas continue. There is a great fear in Konya" (*Meşveret*, "Havadis-i Siyasiye", 28 Cemazielahir 1313/16 December 1895, no: 2).

In its first issue on 13 Cemazielelvel 1313/1 December 1895, *Meşveret* dealt with the popular problem of Armenian reform with the title "Reform and Government". The subject of Armenian reform was proposed in the Berlin Treaty but there had not been any progress with its application. When the *Sasun* uprising was suppressed in 1894 the British interfered and revived the subject of Armenian reform in 1895 (Taş 2006: 42-43, and see, Şaşmaz 2000).

*Meşveret* analyzes the reform issue by writing "promises made about Armenian reform after the *Sasun* revolt remained as a big problem for the state since the mutual killings in *Sasun*, but these are not sincere. These promises were not kept makes everyone think that they were not sincere in the first place". According to analysis of reporter A.V.: "Even though the

other states do not have the right of interfering with the internal affairs of the Ottoman State, absence of fair administration causes such interferences. The state would not have suffered lack of self-respect if the work had been done with ‘good faith’ and ‘justice’ in time” (*Meşveret*, “İslahat ve Hükümet”, 13 Cemazielevvel 1313/1 December 1895, no: 1).

The reporter of the newspaper makes a great effort to support Armenian allegations but news about Armenian attacks on villages and fights with soldiers were arriving as well. It is seen that the newspaper hesitated to report these attacks thinking that it would hurt Ottoman union which they try to defend. As a matter of fact, the unrest of November 8 in *Zeytun* was reported only with one sentence; which reads “400 Ottoman troops surrendered to the Armenian bands since they could not receive any help for ten days and they were not ordered to fire their weapons” (*Meşveret*, “Havadis-i Siyasiye”, 13 Cemazielevvel 1313/1 December 1895, no: 1).

In fact *Zeytun* uprising was still going on at that time. It was an important uprising initiated by the Hunchak Committee in 1895 and organized by Nazarbeg in London. The revolt began on 24 October and continued until January of 1896. 50 army officers and 600 soldiers were captured and then killed (Gürün 1985: 157-161).

The massacres committed by the Armenian bands during the *Zeytun* uprising were again briefly reported under the title “Comment” without any interpretation. The newspaper that had down played previous event had no choice but increase its voice because of Armenian massacres against soldiers and the Muslim villagers. While narrating the events of 26 November, the newspaper announced seizure of *Zeytun* and killing of many Muslims in *Çukurhisarı* after a plunder by the Armenian bands. Moreover the newspaper reported about the village of *Kurtul* being set on fire and the massacre of many innocent civilians (*Meşveret*, “Mütalaa”, 13 Cemazielevvel 1313/1 December 1895, no: 1).

The newspaper also reported the following about the *Zeytun* events: “13 thousands Armenians besieged the *Zeytun* castle which housed 600 soldiers. The soldiers were surprised when they saw such well armed Armenians. The soldiers retreated to the castle for shelter when they understood the impossibility of resistance. The Armenians turned off the castle’s water. The soldiers surrendered after a five day siege (*Meşveret*, “Havadis-i Siyasiye”, 28 Cemazielevvel 1313/16 October 1895, no: 2).

*Meşveret* relying on eye witness accounts reported that the Armenians treated the soldiers kindly. However, these soldiers had been killed by the Armenians. *Meşveret* reported in its next issue that the events were very complicated and there were some reports about soldiers being killed (*Meşveret*, “Zeytun Vakası”, 15 Receb 1313/1 January 1896, no: 3).

It is understood that the main reason for *Meşveret*'s lack of information about the current events was that the newspaper was content with information reported by British newspapers (*Meşveret*, “Zeytun İhtilali”, 10 Şaban 1313/26 Ocak 1896, no:4). The British newspapers were also quoted for later news. Paper quoted *Times* saying “230 Muslims were tortured and killed by the Armenians” (*Meşveret*, “Havadis-i Siyasiye”, 2 Ramazan 1313/ 16 February 1896, no: 6).

The Armenian revolts were briefly mentioned by *Meşveret* and massacres were criticized indirectly. The paper blamed the British of using the Armenians for their own benefit and created problems between the Turks and Armenians to destroy the Ottoman union.

### **Britain and the Armenian Question**

From 1792 to 1875 Britain followed policies of protecting the Ottoman State and keeping Russia on the north of the Black Sea. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria revolts in 1875 gave British Liberals the opportunity they had been looking for. Liberal Party leader Gladstone launched a campaign to turn the European public opinion against the Ottoman State. As a result of increasing reaction in Europe, the Prime-minister and the Conservative Party had to abandon traditional British foreign policy (On Britain's policies on the Ottoman state see, Adelman 1985, Karaca 2011).

Gladstone became the prime minister in 1880. As the first order of business, he brought the Armenian issue to the international platform. Gladstone's advocacy of Armenian cause resulted in establishment of the Anglo-Armenian societies in London in a very short period of time (Karaca 2011: 280-286, Kılıç 1998: 89-97).

*Meşveret* evaluates Armenian complaints of fanaticism of the Ottomans, which was mentioned in Anglo-Ottoman Society meeting in London. The newspaper claims that the fanatics are politicians like Gladstone and Salisbury rather than the Turks and went on to accuse them of using the Armenian problem for their own interests (*Meşveret*, “İcmal-i Ahval”, 28 Cemazievvel 1313/16 October 1895, no: 2). *Meşveret* goes on to say that

their ideas of granting independence to the Armenians have nothing to do with being fair. Another article analyzes the British policies of Armenians as follow: “Britain harmed both the Armenians and all Ottomans by pushing Protestantism and religious fanaticism to political matters in the Armenian issue. Their priests and priest minded advocates created a big mess for everyone involved” (*Meşveret*, “İcmal-i Ahval”, 17 Ramazan 1313/ 2 March 1896, no: 7).

In another issue after *Merzifon Events*, the newspaper stresses Britain and Gladstone being the guilty parties for these events by quoting European press. An article in *Peşterloid* newspaper was presented as an evidence for these accusations (*Meşveret*, “Ermeni İhtilalcileri”, 15 Receb 1313/1 January 1896, no: 3).

*Meşveret* attempts in its some issues to differentiate the Armenian terror organizations and the Armenian citizens. According to the newspaper, the terrorist organizations were aiming to disrupt the Ottoman union with the help of Britain, but, they were not supported by the Armenians. To support this claim, an article from *Tan* was quoted. According to this article, *Boghos Effendi*, an anti-revolutionary Armenian from Van was killed and *Karagözyan Effendi* was wounded for refusing to donate to the Armenian committee. *Meşveret* quoted following lines from *Tan* without commenting: “everyone had hoped to be saved from flock of bandits, which abused the Armenians in the name of patriotism. Although many of them were arrested, they did not totally disappear yet” (*Meşveret*, “Havadis”, 17 Şaban 1313/2 February 1896, no: 5).

In the beginning *Meşveret* maintained an attitude against the British on the Armenian issue later it changed the course to defend British. Ahmet Rıza suggested following in his article: “British wants to enter Istanbul with an enormous navy to throw the Sultan out of power. A Russian warship was sent to the Dardanelles fortification to stop British Navy. Administration influenced Istanbul newspapers to publish articles against Britain and the Armenians. Society’s anger and animosity against Armenians were provoked by seized guns and bombs from the Armenians. Russia is supporting these efforts. The goal is to prevent an agreement between the Turks and Armenians, and also destroy the British credibility. (*Meşveret*, “İcmal-i Ahval”, 12 Rebiülevvel 1314/21 August 1896, no: 19).

It is clear that this radical shift was not caused by a simple confusion. As a result of pressure from Sultan Abdülhamid II over Ahmet Rıza and

*Meşveret*, Ahmet Rıza had to leave Paris. He made a last minute attempt to gain British favor. In fact he mentions in his memoir about those pressures and his plans to publish *Meşveret* in London (Ahmet Rıza 1988: 15-17).

*Meşveret*'s main goal was to achieve the Ottoman union. Paper had a pro-Armenian attitude and blamed the Sultan for all Armenian activities. Consequently, the Palace used its power to pressure both *Meşveret* and Ahmet Rıza. Sultan Abdülhamid II was able to stop publication of the *Turkish Meşveret* with a verdict from a French court. Ahmet Rıza then tried to go to Brussels with the idea of publishing *Meşveret* there. He wasn't allowed to enter Brussels with interference of Sultan Abdülhamid II. *Meşveret* then was published in Egypt with the name of *Şura-yı Ümmet* until declaration of the constitutional regime in 1908 (Ahmet Rıza 1988: 16-17).

### Conclusion

When the news in *Meşveret* related to the Armenian question is considered, it is possible to have following conclusions:

1. *Meşveret* was founded as the publication of the CUP and reflected ideas of the CUP.
2. The basic principles of *Meşveret* were animosity against Sultan Abdülhamid II and dethrone him. Sultan Abdülhamid II was seen as the cause of all problems in the state. Abdülhamid II was even accused of being cause of an epidemic or a flood in Syria. Same approach was repeated on the Armenian unrest.
3. *Meşveret*'s main goal was to achieve "Ottoman union". Paper maintained this goal while approaching the Armenian question. It often stressed righteousness of the Armenian revolutionary activities and Sultan Abdülhamid II was pointed as the main cause of these activities. It is believed that the Armenian question would come to an end if Sultan Abdülhamid II is dethroned and the Ottoman Parliament is opened. In order to show its reaction to the autocratic rule of Abdülhamid II the newspaper used "consult while ruling" (veşavirhüm fi'l-emir) as their slogan.
4. *Meşveret* criticized Sultan Abdülhamid II as the source the Armenian unrest. The Armenian issue was shown as a problem between Abdülhamid II and the Armenians rather than a problem between the Turks and Armenians. Armenian attacks against the Turkish-Muslim villages were deliberately down played. Different newspapers were

quoted while reporting events from Ottoman territories. *Meşveret* defended the Armenians hoping to achieve the Ottoman union. After Armenian committee's massacres, *Meşveret* had no choice but criticize the Armenians. Still they did not have any idea about the goals of the Armenian committees. *Meşveret* then demanded an explanation from the committees. Expected explanations did never arrive.

5. *Meşveret* also blamed Britain and the Liberal Party leader William Ewart Gladstone while explaining the Armenian issue in the beginning. *Meşveret* later reversed its course to reflect Britain as the chief enemy of Abdülhamid II. Russia then became the target state while Britain was being defended. Russia was accused of causing problem between the Turks and Armenians.
6. *Meşveret* was published between 1895 and 1898 with support and financial aids of other states.
7. *Meşveret* was published on the direction of positivist principles and it was supported by European positivists.
8. One of the important conclusions on *Meşveret's* approach to the Armenian issue was that intellectuals of the time failed comprehend origin and development of the problem. The Armenian issue was seen as a simple representation problem in the state rather than independence struggle of a Christian nation. The importance of collaborating with the Armenian committees was often repeated by *Meşveret*. Authorcatic rule of Sultan Abdülhamid II was assumed to be the main reason for unrest. Despite all oppressions union of the nations was regarded as indispensable. These expectations were realized in the 1902 Congress of the CUP.

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# İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti Yayını *Meşveret*'e Göre Ermeni Sorunu

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## Özet

İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti, Padişah II. Abdülhamit'i tahttan indirip, tüm Osmanlı milletlerini anayasa etrafında toplamayı hedefleyen gizli bir örgüttü. 1889'da kurulan örgüt, 1882'de silahlı bir hareket hâline gelen Ermeni muhalefeti ile işbirliği yapma niyetindeydi. 1895'te, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Ermeni muhalefeti en kuvvetli hâle geldiği zamanlarda, Ahmet Rıza Paris'te *Meşveret* isimli bir gazete çıkarmaya başladı. Bu makalede, Ermenilerle II. Abdülhamit'e karşı işbirliği yapan İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti'nin yayın organı *Meşveret*'in Ermeni sorununa ilişkin haberleri nasıl yansıttığı değerlendirilmiştir.

## Anahtar Kelimeler

*Meşveret*, Ahmet Rıza, Basın, Gazete, Ermeni, Azınlık.

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## Армянский вопрос в газете «Мешверет» (совещание) - печатном органе общества «Единение и прогресс»

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### Аннотация

Общество «Единение и прогресс» является тайной организацией, свергнувшей с трона падишаха Абдулхамита II и основной целью которой является объединение всех народов Османского государства вокруг конституции. Основанная в 1889 году эта организация желала сотрудничать с армянской оппозицией, которая приняла характер вооруженного движения в 1882 году. В 1895 году, когда армянская оппозиция в Османской империи достигла своего апогея, Ахмет Рыза в Париже начал выпускать газету «Мешверет» (совещание). В этой статье рассматривается отражение новостей, связанных с армянским вопросом, в печатном органе общества «Единение и прогресс», сотрудничавшего с армянами против Абдулхамита II.

### Ключевые слова

Мешверет, Ахмет Рыза, пресса, газета, армяне, меньшинство.

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