An Analytical Review About the Causes and Process of Syria Crisis

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Abstract

Since the Arab uprisings started in Tunisia in December 2010, there have been early attempts to rime them with generic economic arguments about poverty and destitution, with regional comparisons to the case of Syria. Equally, narrow arguments about the uprisings being a reaction to decades of authoritarian rule do not help us to understand why they are occurring now.

The article argues that while generalizing is useful, it often obscures the particular dynamics in each case of the Arab revolutions, and discusses how the Syrian case is not only about geopolitical competition, but more so an entrenched system of local economic and regional dynamics that makes the Syrian case different and requires thus a different approach.

Keywords: Low Intensive War, Regime Change, Geopolitical Competition, Ideological Competition.

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Introduction

Since the Syria crisis started, many observers from different point of views attempted to interpret the causes and repercussions of the crisis. The above mentioned political, economic, revolutionary, and communal arguments often have made form an amorphous explanatory lens through which the battle on the ground interpreted, at least in the mainstream media. Most narratives focus on symptoms rather than on the tangible causes that have driven the confrontation. Unfortunately, much weight placed on the here and now as opposed to the political and economic context of the last few decades.

Thus, analysis has proceeded from the basic binary that pits dictators against democrats, reducing decades of institutional and strategic relations and contexts into a simplified normative battle. What compounds the analytical fog is the deluge of "knowledge production" in the form of articles, opinion editorials, and books that are responding to a public thirst on all matters related to the uprisings. The uprisings thus became a fad of sorts that will eventually be shattered by counter-revolutionary efforts in the region and beyond-if onlookers continue to pay attention.

This article tries to explain how Syria regime may be changed through current crisis and the hypothesis has been raised on this topic. In this way, paper examines the causes of the Arab uprisings but the emphasis of the argument will be on the Syrian case, particularly in terms of the weighted political-economic considerations that have been neglected in some analyses.

The Syrian case invites analytical pause as it disrupts the normative binary opposition. It is not that the Syrian regime is not authoritarian or that the sentiment behind the protest is not about freedom. Rather, class, sect, region, institutions, ideology, domestic strategic relations, and foreign relations all come to the fore in creating the ten-month old stalemate there, with no foreseeable exit in sight. However, without identifying the structural causes for the Syrian uprising as well as the strategic relations that continue to hold the regime together, we will be lured and misled by the glitter of the normative aspects of the uprising, even as we make our analysis.

The stalemate in Syria at the time of writing is indicative of a need for a more nuanced and multifaceted analysis of the causes of the revolt. The paper concludes by foreshadowing the shape of things to come in

terms of the continuity of similar political-economic formulas, irrespective of who remains standing.

The prevalent "social media revolution" narratives merely obscure the important issues at play. In this way, little attention paid to the interaction between political and economic variables, and even less to the particularities of every case and their political economic legacies and trajectories. The urge to see commonality has often clouded both the differences and the analysis of single cases. A case in point is some of the analysis on Syria. An examination of events in Syria through 2011 can, intentionally or otherwise, elevate "sectarianism" arguments or the "sectarian rule" argument. More nuanced analyses that recognize the inadequacy of the "sectarianism" narrative still fail to highlight that nearly half of Syrian society is itself comprised of minorities, a fact that dilutes the misplaced claim that a small sect rules the majority.

1) The role of domestic and regional factors in Syria revolt

In Syria the ideological context was a socialist-nationalist coloring that provided a basis for judgment and norms, an ideological, or rhetorical underpinning that was influential from Egypt to Iraq. Hence, social polarization, poverty, and developmental exclusion were considered "wrong" and unacceptable. Today, such disturbing effects have become the new norm, a means to a "better" future, a legitimate station along the way to prosperity and efficiency. All such designations were short-circuited by the uprisings, but it is too early to sound the death-knell for growth formulas that are zero-sum in character (Agha and Malley, 2011:14).

Perhaps most significantly were the socioeconomic implications of a new elitism that vehemently emphasized on urban development and non-productive economic activity, characterized primarily by consumption. The increase in shares of the tourism and service sectors at the expense of manufacturing and agricultural production produced different kinds of needs in society (Seale, 2011:22).

There is significantly less need for skilled labor, along with the educational systems and institutions that would be required to train skilled labor. Whatever is arising in terms of the "new economy" and the field of Information Technology lags far behind other countries. It is too small and too underdeveloped to substitute for losses in other sectors and is certainly not competitive internationally. Employment of hundreds of

thousands of yearly new entrants into the job market will continue to suffer accordingly if public policy continues to be colonized as it has been by the new elitism in the context of authoritarian governance or post-revolution reform.

The much heralded private sector is nearly everywhere in the region only picking up "shares" of fixed capital formation from the embattled and bloated public sector, but is nowhere near compensating for job losses, let alone accommodating new job-seekers. The revolts of spring 2011 are not unrelated to the failure of the "private-sector-led" alternative to state-centered economies, neither model served people or sustainable growth. Hence the need for a more imaginative approach that involves an optimal division of labor between the private and public sector as well as the proper distribution of emphasis across sectors and regions (Abbas, 2011:16).

The often-neglected elements in some circles are the combination of measures that fall under the rubric of trickle down economics. It is erroneous to place the causes of the protests squarely on these economic variables. However, one cannot understand the depth, breadth, and magnitude of the revolts without reference to the effects of these policies, and their agents.

The problem of development is not simply about rules and markets and will not be resolved as such. Whatever else is at work, the most egregious problems stem from various and continuing forms of political and economic disempowerment and denial of self-determination at the individual and collective levels. Most of these problems were/are being exacerbated by a new nexus of power that is as unrelenting as it is/was unchallenged. This new elitism was not the only source of these problems, but a guarantee that they will fester if alternative agencies and institutions do not develop (Abboud, 2010: 45).

2) New elitism in Syria

This article, instead of surveying the factors and claims about the causes of the uprisings, examines a factor that has been given scant attention despite its centrality in each of the countries that have experienced revolts and turbulence. Namely, I stress on the growing relationships in the past few decades between the political and economic elites in the countries undergoing mass uprisings.This nexus of power pervades most global political economies but produces deleterious effects

to the extent that the context allows. In many Arab countries, it is associated with the protracted process related to the unraveling of state-centered economies there. One must proceed with caution in the same breath against the emphasis on such factors as singular causes for the uprisings (Achy, 2011:9).

Assessing the impact of this alliance/nexus is difficult because it requires one to disentangle the extent of existing political, social, and economic ills in the region and neatly attribute some of them to the uprisings. To be sure, there are many sources of polarization, poverty, repression, and, ultimately revolt, that some analysts are finding it convenient to go back to the residual category of the cultural black box to explain the region's shortcomings.

It is possible, however, to highlight some problematic are as that have been exacerbated by the new elitism, and the modes of coping, resistance, governance, and living that it has engendered. Systematic research is required to conduct rigorous process-tracing, but some of the direct and not-so-direct effects are inescapably evident, especially when one considers the new forms of collaboration between repressive political elites and happily unaccountable business actors.

We can preliminarily divide the impact of this nexus of power into at least two categories, both of which have directly or indirectly affected the outcomes we have witnessed last spring. Politically, the new nexus of power between the political and economic elite seems to have buttressed authoritarian rule over the past decades, whether or not other factors contributed to this outcome. This is not simply a function of "support" for the status quo by these elites, for this is the norm nearly everywhere. It is also a form of legitimation of the status quo because the corollary of this nexus involves various forms of "liberalization" or state retreat (Ayubi, 1995:37).

The new nexus of power in and of itself is not sufficient to bring about sustained protests. It was only the constellation of various factors that brought an end to the seemingly impenetrable wall of fear. These factors are by no means restricted to structure: politics and strategy, as well as subjective calculations, ultimately played a significant role to tip the balance in favor of the unthinkable: public protest in Syria (Batatu, 1999:17).

Namely, in addition to the economic deterioration brought about by the nexus of power in Syria, we can identify two major factors: the

independent effect of authoritarian rule and the demonstration effect. Deep economic deterioration, elite capture of public policy, and authoritarian rule proceed without the existence of meaningful avenues for redress.

This created a pressure cooker effect for many years, leading to a sense of despair across broad sectors of the population, affecting more than just people's livelihood and desire for political "freedom". What took the situation to a deeper level is that this combination also struck deeply at people's dignity. But we must stress on this fact that even that outcome was not sufficient to spur mass mobilization in some countries, notably in Syria (Bayat, 2009: 38).

What tilted the calculus of individuals and groups in Syria in terms of going to the streets was the feeling that, NOW, after Tunisia and Egypt, they can actually do something about it. Thus, the structural political/economic factors and the injury to one's dignity are all important, but such factors required some strategic principle or agency for them to spur mass uprisings. Many scholars ask why people were willing to risk their lives and continue to risk their lives, especially in Syria? (Breisinger, 2011:7).

It is precisely because of the deep injuries that were incurred for long periods of time, coupled with the presence of hope for a way out. In that sense, we can observe that this explanation comports with a rational actor model if we adjust preferences. Ultimately, this somewhat crude narrative manifested itself in various ways across the countries that experienced upheaval, and certainly in Syria. However, some countries were less ripe for such uprisings in the sense that the discontent as well as the tools/factors available did not allow for critical mass and/or immediately effective/terminal challenge to the status quo.

Syria, and Yemen to a lesser extent, is a case in point. Ripe here means that the injuries discussed and the possibility of a better alternative had not yet reached deep into the core of all major segments or regions of the country. Hence the relative quiet one witnesses in Damascus and Aleppo (Davis, 2011: 38).

3) The role of social effects in Syria revolt

The social effects of this new nexus of power have been all too clear in the years before the 2011 revolts. Economic reforms have led to the destruction of social safety nets that have usually compensated for the

failure of the market to keep people out of poverty and hardship. Basic health and education provision has been affected during years of neoliberal led economic policies. Poor and low-income people in the Middle East rely on state subsidies on wheat, flower, and sugar as well as oil, so that they can afford the basic necessities such as bread.

Such drastic changes are contributing to two dangerously related phenomena. Increasing poverty and thus social polarization, make societies increasingly lost their middle classes. Secondly, economic exclusion from the "market," a phenomenon that has contributed to a dramatic increase of the informal sector, make many people almost completely live outside the market.

The incremental stake of workers' and labor interests in the private and public sectors is another outcome that can be easily attributed to policies and political decisions associated with the new elitism. The shifting of effective alliances from labor to business in various Arab regimes was part and parcel of the unraveling of state-centered economies. Rights, rules, and regulations increasingly favored business at the expense of labor since 1970s.

Through the 1980s and1990s trade unions, peasant federations, and labor organizations in countries like Egypt and Syria were increasingly co-opted by corporatist authoritarian systems of representation, but continued to enjoy some privileges. Therefore, it is true that the political elite started this process of shifting alliances and privileging capital long before business actors became prominent, but the sort of change that took place in recent years has had a different character (Goodarzi, 2006:16).

4) A continuum of causes and consequences

In Syria, even as bloody revolt and fighting continued in late 2011, areas with strong minority concentrations, the business community and, most crucially, the major metropolitan centers of Damascus and Aleppo remained ambivalent and did not appear to have turned against the regime in a wholesale fashion (Haddad, 2005:31).

The opposition to al-Assad has only recently begun to overcome its serious internal disunity. In Bahrain, the uprising was characterized by the deep rift between Shi'a and Sunni, despite the fact that Sunni liberal elements also opposed the regime's authoritarianism, at least in the first stages. In Libya, Tripoli, the capital city and heart of the regime, did not experience major protests until the very end of the civil war, which

finally overthrew Qadhafi. Libya's dictator retained at least the acquiescence of significant social and political elements, and his overthrow might not have been possible without foreign intervention.

In Syria, there is a Islamist element in the anti-Assad rebellion, despite the vicious suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood since the 1980s. The absence of a strong Islamist presence does not mean that alternative ideologies or groups dominated the rebellions, which on the whole appeared to be post-ideological and patriotic in nature. If anything, love of country seemed to fire the protesters—who can forget the sea of Egyptian flags in Tahrir Square? Even in Bahrain, with its deep division between Shi'a and Sunni, the protesters claimed that they stood against sectarianism, chanting 'No Shi'a, no Sunnis, only Bahrainis'(Haddad, 2011a:15).

Although it is hard to generalize, pro-Palestine, anti-Israeli and anti-American slogans were not particularly visible in the protests either. If, indeed, the uprisings were firmly focused on domestic, national issues, to which the rival concerns of Arabism and Islam were secondary, Islamist movements will need to adjust their ideological message in this direction.

Despite their limited role in the uprisings, Islamist movements will benefit from them politically. Prior to 2011 one could observe the spread of a personal, apolitical religiosity throughout the Middle East. This trend may now be reversed. The upheavals enabled or forced Islamist movements to re-engage with mainstream politics (Haddad, 2012b:14). The existing, effective structures of the organized Islamist groups will enable them to capitalize on more open political processes. This has already occurred in Tunisia, where the Islamist al-Nahda party, legalized in March 2011 after 20 years, won 40per cent of the vote and 89 out of 217 seats in the 23 October elections.

Uprisings occurred in some Arab states in 2011, and not in others. When they did occur, they developed in distinct ways in particular places. While it is for future research to produce detailed evidence, it is possible now to offer some tentative suggestions as to why this was so. An explosive mix of socio-economic problems and widespread and deepening political grievances constituted a common causal thread behind all the uprisings (Whitaker, 2012a: 7).

Poverty in absolute terms does not take us very far by way of explanation, but relative deprivation and a clash between expectations

and reality played a role. The longstanding structural problems afflicting the Arab world came to a head prior to2011 through a combination of persistently high unemployment, especially among youth and educated youth at that, rampant corruption, internal regional and social inequalities, and a further deterioration of economic conditions because of the global 2008 financial crisis and food price increases. Tunisia encapsulated many of these problems.

Though its economy was robust in many ways, it did not create enough new jobs: recorded unemployment remained high, reaching 16 percent in 2011 by some estimates. Internal regional inequalities were pronounced. Corruption was endemic and, in the case of Ben Ali's immediate family, brazenly offensive, as ordinary Tunisians struggled with rising basic commodity prices, inflation and slower growth rates from 2008 (Smith, 2012:12).

The socio-economic grievances described briefly above were inextricably linked with and fuelled political demands. More than anything else, the rebellions were a call for dignity and a reaction to being humiliated by arbitrary, unaccountable and increasingly predatory tyrannies. The slogan in Tunisia was: 'We can live on bread and water alone but not with RCD.'

In Bahrain, the uprising was dominated by the Shi'a majority which, even more than the country's Sunnis, suffered repression and discrimination despite the promise of democratic reform raised by King Hamad ten years before. In Egypt, one of the organizers of the25 January demonstration was the 'We are all Khaled Said' group, named after a young man beaten to death by police officers in Alexandria the previous June (Sindawi, 2009:61).

Grievances are ubiquitous; rebellion is not. The question confronting observers of the 2011 Arab uprisings is how and why, at that particular moment, the socio-economic and political grievances in the Arab world were channeled into such forceful and purposeful collective action. At this preliminary stage, two possible explanations can be suggested, although neither of them is fully convincing.

The first is that pre-existing civil society and political opposition groups had prepared the ground for the rebellions and were able, when the time came, to coordinate them. The second is that the unprecedentedly widespread use of social media and other means of communication made the rebellions possible and increased their strength

and inclusiveness (Seale, 1988:17).

Middle East analysts and activists frequently bemoaned weakness of civil society and political opposition in the Arab Middle East prior to 2011. Recent events invite us to re-examine this judgment. In Egypt's case, there appears to be a continuum between an increasingly active civil society and labor activism in the 1990s and 2000s and the insurrection of 2011. The 'We are all Khaled Said group', the 6 April Movement, Muslim Brotherhood youth, the group around presidential hopeful Muhammadel-Baradei, the 'new left', human rights and other civil society activists, striking workers: all played a role in Mubarak's overthrow (Philips, 2011:27).

In Bahrain, political and civil society groups which had become powerful in the second half of the 2000s including the al-Haqq Movement for Liberty and Democracy (more rejectionist than the Shi'a Islamist al-Wifaq and the left-leaning, non-sectarian Wa'ad groups)and the human rights movement, centered on the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights—played a vital role in the rebellion.

A second explanation of how grievances were channeled into collective action in 2011 emphasizes the role of the media in allowing the revolts to spread across borders and bringing people out onto the streets. The Qatari-based Al-Jazeera satellite channel continued to air reports on protests in Egypt and Tunisia despite the regimes' pleas to the Qatari government to stop it.

Social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and of course mobile phones, were widely used to organize the revolts and link the protesters to each other and the outside world. Perhaps more crucially, media played a role in preparing for the rebellions over a number of years and even decades, by facilitating the circulation of ideas in national and global spaces and challenging state monopolies of information (Perthes, 2004:23).

Future research will throw light on the complex question of the relationship between the rebellions and the pre-existing opposition structures and social media. However, it appears to this observer at least that neither of these factors can fully account for the rebellions. Pre-existing civil society and opposition groups may have made important contributions in organizing the rebellions, but they were not the protagonists (Hinnebusch, 1996:38).

In Bahrain, despite their considerable power, organized groups

were not 'entirely responsible for drumming up the massive February 2011 demonstrations'. In some cases, as in Yemen, there were tensions between established parties, in the form of the JMP, and young protesters. The hype which has surrounded the use of social media obscures the fact that enormous popular mobilizations in the past were achieved using much more basic methods of communication and organization (Howard, 2011:33).

It also overlooks the fact that social media are used by conservative as much as by progressive and revolutionary forces and that governments used them for their own purposes or simply shut them down. For instance, in the weeks leading up to the fall of Mubarak internet access was often blocked in Egypt.

Ultimately, we may have to accept that the rebellions were spontaneous popular events whose immediate causes and timing will never be explained fully and satisfactorily even with hindsight. Thinking along the lines of the 'butterfly effect', to borrow a term from a very different field, can help us see that the extraordinary dimensions that collective protests assumed in some countries in 2011 may have been the result of a series of events whose connections and causal mechanisms will remain unfathomable (Perthes, 1995:71).

We are better able, however, to explain why some rebellions succeeded in overthrowing their governments, while others did not, at least until the time of writing. To do so, we must look in each case beyond the momentum and inclusiveness of the rebellion to the type of regime it confronted and the nature of the latter's response.

While in some cases regime reaction put a stop to the rebellion, in others it fuelled it. The rebellions' success or failure also depended on whether regimes managed to retain the loyalty of their key allies, most crucially the army and security services, and important sections of the citizenry.

The ruling regimes reaction to the rebellions, which was partly about personal choice and character of the rulers, was crucial in determining how they developed. The response of Ben Ali was slow and weak, possibly because he was taken by surprise: he appeared for a televised speech only on 28 December and then, again belatedly, on 10 January. In contrast, Qadhafi's regime reacted quickly and decisively, which increased its chances of survival (Hokayem, 2011:39).

However, while toughness and determination may be effective, an excessive reaction can have the opposite result. In Bahrain demonstrators were incensed early on by police repression. This contributed to the marginalization of moderate forces within both regime and opposition, represented respectively by Crown Prince Salman bin Hamadal-Khalifa

and al-Wifaq, which impeded compromise. In Syria, regime violence 'almost certainly has been the primary reason behind the protest movement's growth and radicalization' (Hokayem, 2011:14).

Regime behavior was a matter of choice by the leadership but also reflected deeper, structural realities: first, whether the regime was differentiated from other state institutions or was totally identified with it; and second, the position and choices of those state institutions, particularly the army and security forces. In Tunisia and Egypt, where the regimes were overthrown without outside intervention, the security services stood aside and did not attempt to crush the protests for reasons which are still obscure while the army was impelled by popular mobilization to move against the president.

5) The Process of Syria revolts

A review of the history of revolutions and political change might actually advise optimism, despite all seen and unforeseen hurdles. In most cases that have experienced upheaval we could be witnessing what has been termed the "second Arab revolt" or the "1968 current". These consist of more genuine levels of participation and contestation, but often with major counter revolutionary currents in places like Egypt. Another more apt characterization of the current uprisings is that they represent the struggle to end the post-colonial period of successive liberal and autocratic regimes (Wallerstein 2011).

These broad characterizations are important gateways and frameworks for much needed focused analysis on single cases. The lure of the word "revolution" is strong, but must begin to give way to sober and empirically based analysis over and beyond terminology. Most of scholarships casually refer to these events by using one or another of these words. And though the boundary between some of them is not always clear, some of these designations, namely "revolution" and "demonstration," are hardly reconcilable.

Some leftist intellectuals and policy analysts have raised Syria's credentials as a powerful regional player, as well as its record of "resistance to imperialism," to define the struggle at hand. The fears of some leftist watchdogs and so-called security concerns over the possible alignment with imperial aims often take precedence over, and indeed may inadvertently undermine, the very raison d'être of the uprisings (Massad, 2011:24).

While regional and international interference clouds the domestic setting and often alters the "conflict," such factors should nonetheless be integrated into the analysis to reveal the complexity of the Syrian case. They should not simply replace or hijack the essential narrative of the

causes of the uprising. The two discussions are connected by virtue of the fact that we are not actually experiencing real "revolutions" in the Marxist or classic conceptions. After a year of uprisings, we must note that we are no longer witnessing spontaneous protests by a discontented and oppressed public, with jittery responses by established regimes.

Conclusion

The Arab uprisings of 2011 were a series of diverse albeit interconnected events. In Syria, the bloody confrontation between the regime and significant parts of society is continuing. Other parts of the Middle East have experienced less turbulence, while in Jordan and Morocco monarchs offered limited reforms to pre-empt a greater political challenge. The process of low intensive war in Syria has had 9 contextual and textual factors. These elements are:

1- It is difficult to establish unifying causal factors behind such disparate events. Focusing on the reasons for and the mechanisms of popular mobilization is not enough; the manner of regime response was equally important in explaining outcomes. This response was determined by the relationship in each case between regime and state institutions, including the army and security services, and the ability of the regime to retain the support of significant societal allies.

2- Just as the events have been diverse in their causes and outcomes, so their impacts on the region are also varied. Tremendous uncertainty surrounds the Arab Middle East at present. In geopolitical terms, internal political changes in the Arab world will cause shifts in the balance of power across the region, which will affect Iran, Turkey, Israel and the West.

3- With regard to US foreign policy, the impacts of the uprisings will be complex but will not profoundly alter its parameters. None of the uprisings was led by an Islamist movement or posited a demand for an Islamist state; if anything, they were post-ideological, patriotic and 'introverted' in the sense of being focused on internal national politics.

4- A major question is whether the uprisings will lead to the democratization of the Arab Middle East and the dislodging of the longstanding authoritarianism which has bedeviled its political life. How far this will happen, if at all, will vary in each case and, although the region overall has been profoundly affected, there will be no wholesale democratization as a result of the uprisings.

5- The concern about the growing nexus of power is at heart a structural, not an empirical, one. When authoritarian elites began to build relations with capitalists or the business class in the 1970s and 1980s they were doing more than simply pursuing their own interests. They were

trying to respond to growing economic problems or crisis. However, with time, these political elites and their offspring were increasingly becoming the economic elite. Their interests were reflected in their policy preferences, their lifestyles, and their changing social alliances. Most importantly, the incentive structure in the 1980s changed.

6- The increasing structural power of capital drew more and more state officials and, later in the 1990s, their offspring, into a crony-dominated market in which networks that bind bureaucrats/politicians and capitalists were able to skew economic policy formulation and implementation to their favor. And when this was not possible, they were able to transgress the law to the extent that they were well-connected or to the extent that they themselves were the "connection," i.e., the strongmen that can transgress laws with impunity.

7- This process, which started after 2005, when Bashar heralded the Social Market Economy principle, was severely and prematurely interrupted by the advent of the uprisings in March 2011. It remains to be seen what kind of alignments were beginning to take place as researchers go back and revisit the critical years between 2005 and 2011. In any case, it is safe to assume that this social stratum has developed a keen interest in preserving its position at the helm of the socioeconomic pyramid.

8- This explains to a large extent its ambivalence vis-à-visthe Syrian uprisings and its quiet and non-explicit support of the protesters, when they did so. Notably, the upper layer of the business community which is comprised mainly of individuals connected to the regime in an organic manner is firmly supportive of the regime because of their intertwined interests in maintaining the physical assets that it continues to guarantee.

9- In any future formula, it would be erroneous to assume that these business interests and their social carriers are going to revert to a preference for a state-centered economic formula, even if a populist-leaning leadership emerges out of the uprising notwithstanding the analytical fog that surrounds the changing nature of the Syrian uprising beginning in late 2011 and continuing to the time of writing.

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