Original Article

Democracy and National Identity in Israel's Complex Political Landscape

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Abstract - This research examines the relationship between religion, democracy, and national identity in Israeli politics, offering an in-depth analysis of how these elements shape the country's political landscape. The study focuses on the role of religion in governance and policymaking, exploring the influence of religious parties, the tensions between religious and secular communities, and the implications for minority rights and civil liberties. It assesses the functioning of democracy in Israel, considering how well democratic principles are upheld amidst the challenges posed by religious diversity, societal divisions, and the influence of identity politics. The research also delves into the complexities of Jewish identity, investigating the intersection of religious, cultural, and national identities and how these dynamics drive political discourse, electoral behavior, and policy development. By unpacking these issues, the study highlights key challenges, such as the friction between religious and secular groups, while identifying opportunities to strengthen social cohesion, uphold democratic values, and navigate the complexities of religious pluralism in Israeli society.

1. Introduction

The global conflict landscape is often shaped by disputes between ethnic or religious groups vying for control over state institutions. These majorities frequently utilize state mechanisms to impose their cultural or religious norms on the broader society, including minority groups (Aboi, 2024). Debates surrounding secularism typically focus on the use of public spaces, where tensions arise between secular and religious symbols. This tension is particularly acute when it involves symbols of religious minorities, leading to contentious disputes and over-representation. The competition between social identities can often result in one group dominating others and such dominance can lead to perceptions of religious minorities as disloyal or resistant to national values. Fundamentalist movements, even within secular political systems, can push their extreme ideologies onto the wider society (Dallago, 2008). In Israel, the relationship between established and disestablished religions and the state has become a critical issue. Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) groups have gained significant political power and are advancing their religious agendas. Though ultra-Orthodox parties focus on sector-specific concerns and display limited interest in broader political issues, their influence is undeniable. They are often pivotal members of coalition governments and use their position to shape legislation related to religious matters, state affairs, and budgets (Shalev, 2019). As a result, attempts to modify the religious status quo are met with substantial resistance. Efforts to reduce the influence of smaller religious parties often fail due to the delicate balance between religion and state in Israel, with mainstream parties preferring to preserve the existing "status quo" (The Jewish Federations of America, 2022). This research explores the social and political divisions that arise from religion's role in shaping Israel's national identity and culture. Central to this examination is the political debate surrounding the integration of the ultra-Orthodox sector, a divisive issue that has dominated recent election cycles. One of the core issues is whether ultra-Orthodox Jews should be exempt from mandatory military service, with many in the community opting to study Torah with government-funded stipends instead. This debate has fuelled political instability, leading to multiple elections and challenges in forming a stable government. Secular groups argue that the low employment rate among ultra-Orthodox men is linked to their exemption from military service, further exacerbating societal tensions (Heller, 2019).

The research argues that the growing divide between secular and ultra-Orthodox sectors is likely to widen as both groups continue to benefit from the existing social and political structures. This widening gap complicates the possibility of productive debate as identity politics and one-sided narratives increasingly dominate discussions on religious and cultural issues. Israeli politics is heavily influenced by religious parties, particularly the Orthodox,

whose influence extends to education, family law, and cultural affairs. This dynamic interaction between religion and politics impacts not only domestic policy but also Israel's broader stability and response to external threats. The study concludes that Israeli politics is profoundly shaped by the influence of religious parties, which drive much of the nation's policy direction and ideological outlook. Orthodox Judaism, in particular, wields significant power over education, family law, and cultural policies. These religious parties advocate for policies that reflect their interpretation of Jewish law, affecting a broad range of societal norms. By examining the intersection of religion and politics in Israel, the research reveals the profound and enduring impact this relationship has on governance, social cohesion, and national identity. It predicts that the fundamental social, political, and religious conflicts that have characterized Israel since its inception will persist, with various factions strategically using these divides to pursue their political interests. The study ultimately asserts that while Israel may be classified as a liberal democracy, it falls short of being an entirely secular democracy due to the integration of religious parties into the political system and the lack of a clear separation between religion and state. Conflict remains a defining feature of Israeli politics, with religious and political factions leveraging these tensions to secure influence and maintain power.

2. Theoretical Approach

This research concentrates on the dynamics of Israeli politics, where the intersection of religion and state profoundly influences governance, societal norms, and the country's national identity. Central to this analysis is the role of ultra-Orthodox religious communities, which, despite being a minority, wield substantial political power and significantly shape key policies, particularly on issues like military exemptions and educational autonomy. The study emphasizes the ongoing tension between secular and religious factions, which not only dominates internal policy discussions but also influences Israel's self-perception as a nation. The enactment of laws like the Nation-State Law, which emphasizes Jewish identity at the expense of other cultural elements, illustrates the polarization this tension fosters.

This situation contributes to the dominance of a religious-nationalist agenda that strengthens the political power of religious parties. These parties, often holding the balance of power in coalition governments, can block reforms that could threaten their interests, maintaining a "status quo" that prioritizes their agendas and creates challenges for Israel's democratic framework. The research also explores the broader implications of these ideological conflicts, noting how they challenge the liberal democratic structure of the state. As religion plays a pivotal role in public policy, particularly in family law, education, and cultural affairs, the boundaries between religion and state become blurred. This undermines efforts to establish a more inclusive, secular democracy, reinforcing divisions between secular and religious

communities. The political power of ultra-Orthodox parties, which advocate policies aligned with Orthodox Jewish law, illustrates the difficulty of achieving reforms in areas like military service, where religious exemptions create broader societal tensions (Elazar & Milikowsky, 2020). The influence of religious ideologies on Israeli society extends beyond politics into personal life decisions, particularly around marriage, divorce, and education, areas where the Orthodox Rabbinate retains significant control.

These religious norms perpetuate societal divisions, with secular communities often finding themselves marginalized by policies that favor religious traditions. This dynamic complicates governance and perpetuates instability, as unresolved ideological conflicts frequently lead to political crises, multiple elections, and difficulties in forming stable coalitions (Yona, 2012). In this context, the highlights the evolving nature of Israeli political culture.

Ram (2015) asserts that Israeli politics has shifted from solid nationalism with weak religionism to a combination of both provides a framework for understanding the current challenges to secularism. Meanwhile, Tepe's caution against oversimplifying the role of religious parties in democracies serves as a reminder that these parties often prioritize their doctrinal beliefs over liberal democratic principles, further complicating governance in Israel.

Moreover, the external factors influencing Israeli politics, such as ongoing conflicts with neighboring countries and the Palestinian territories, add layers of complexity to the domestic ideological struggles. These external pressures force Israeli leaders to balance national security concerns with the ideological principles that define the nation's identity. At the same time, shifts within the ultra-Orthodox community, including increasing participation in the military and workforce, signal potential changes in the political landscape.

However, these changes are gradual and fraught with resistance from more conservative elements within the community (Barakat, 2024). The analysis concludes that the deep-rooted conflict between secular and religious ideologies will continue to shape Israel's political, social, and cultural trajectory. The entrenched influence of ultra-Orthodox political power and external security pressures create a volatile political environment where frequent elections and instability are likely to persist.

For Israel to maintain its identity as a Jewish and democratic state, it must find ways to reconcile these divergent forces, fostering a governance model that respects religious traditions while upholding democratic principles. This study suggests that the path forward will require not only political solutions but also societal efforts to bridge the divides between Israel's diverse religious and secular communities.

3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative research to explore the complex relationship between religion, politics, and society in Israel. The aim is to examine the dynamics between secular and religious ideologies, the influence of religious parties, and their broader effects on governance and social cohesion. By analyzing the profound ideological divide between secular and religious communities, the research highlights the impact of this schism on political stability, policy-making, and Israel's broader social and economic landscape. The frequent political crises and government reshuffling in Israel, characterized by repeated elections and fragile coalitions, underscore the nation's political volatility. This instability is exacerbated by ideological polarization and political actors' strategic use of religious issues to gain leverage (Levi & Agmon, 2020). Religious parties, in particular, wield significant influence over national policy, especially in education, family law, and cultural affairs. Their agendas often prioritize religious doctrines over public opinion, challenging the democratic ideals of inclusivity and pluralism (Ettinger and Leon, 2018). Moreover, the ongoing tension between secular and ultra-Orthodox communities affects critical societal issues, such as military service and the participation of ultra-Orthodox men in the workforce, with critical implications for social harmony and economic productivity. The study also examines the role of religion in shaping public policy. The state's support of religious education and institutions reflects religion's substantial impact on societal norms and governance. This dynamic has led to a noticeable shift towards increased religious orthodoxy in public life, mainly driven by the political power of religious parties prioritizing religious values over secular democratic principles. As noted by Talshir (2019), this ideological shift has reshaped the discourse within the right-wing political bloc, promoting more muscular nationalism and religious extremism.

The research demonstrates the challenges posed by the intersection of religion and politics for Israeli democracy. The passage of the Nation-State Law, which prioritizes Jewish identity over minority rights, illustrates the difficulties of balancing a religious national identity with democratic ideals. This legislation, and others like it, deepens the ideological divide between religious and secular groups, further complicating efforts to uphold democratic principles while maintaining a distinct Jewish identity. The intertwining of religion and politics in Israel has become a defining feature of the state's political character, where religious freedom is protected. However, there is no clear separation between religion and state. The formal control exerted by the Orthodox Jewish Rabbinate over many aspects of family law is a vivid example of the state's religious influence, demonstrating how religion shapes critical facets of life in Israel. This study reveals that without substantial policy reforms aimed at bridging ideological divides, the tension between preserving Israel's Jewish identity and ensuring democratic inclusiveness will persist. The research suggests that these deep-rooted conflicts pose ongoing challenges to governance, societal cohesion, and national identity. Ultimately, the study underscores the need for comprehensive efforts to address these ideological divisions and promote inclusive policies. Israel's support for religious institutions and the absence of a clear separation between religion and state continue to shape public life, driving the country towards greater religious orthodoxy. This, in turn, exacerbates tensions between secular and religious communities, highlighting the ongoing challenge of balancing religious tradition with democratic principles in a deeply divided society.

4. Debate about the Role of Religion

This research highlights Israel's intricate political landscape, where deep ideological divisions—primarily driven by the tension between religious and secular values—significantly impact governance and societal cohesion. The predominant role of religion in politics, fueled by Orthodox Jewish parties, underscores the challenge of balancing Jewish religious traditions with democratic principles. This tension permeates policy decisions across sectors such as education, family law, and public life, contributing to an ongoing debate over the role of religion in state affairs (Plesner, 2021). The political manipulation of religious symbols by elites for political survival, coupled with the critical role of coalition politics in Israel's multi-party system, underscores the complexities of governing a society with diverse, often conflicting, ideological stances. Policymakers must navigate these ideological divisions to ensure effective governance, stability, and inclusivity while maintaining Israel's dual commitment to both a democratic framework and a specific religious and national identity. The power struggles and ideological conflicts within this dynamic interplay between politics and religion present continuous challenges to the state's ability to govern effectively and meet the needs of its diverse population (Kinsbury, 2022). Israel remains a complex case study for political scientists, juxtaposing long-standing democratic traditions - such as free elections and stable institutions - with a deeply fragmented society and ongoing conflicts with Arab neighbors and Palestinians. The interwoven relationship between religion and the state further complicates this landscape. While religious parties advocate for policies rooted in Orthodox Jewish principles, secular parties push for a more precise separation between religion and state. This ideological divide, especially regarding religious freedom and state funding for religious institutions, drives political discourse and contributes to the manipulation of religious symbols by political elites. Malach (2018) notes that the significant influence of the Orthodox community fuels ongoing debates about the role of religion in Israeli society, culture, and politics. The dominance of these religious groups and the lack of a clear separation between religion and state makes it challenging to balance diverse religious and secular interests within a democratic framework. This influence is particularly evident in policies that restrict interfaith and

same-sex marriages, areas in which the Orthodox Jewish Rabbinate holds considerable control. Orthodox Jewish parties, representing a substantial demographic, often hold considerable political leverage in coalition governments. Over time, what began as a delicate compromise between religious and secular groups has evolved into a politicized mediation of religious interests, with Orthodox parties wielding the power to topple governments if their demands are unmet (Roth-Cohen et.al, 2024). The influence of religion in Israel is deeply intertwined with societal life, mainly due to the political power held by Orthodox Jewish parties. This impact is seen in various aspects of daily life, including marriage, education, and the observance of the Sabbath. Orthodox Judaism has a significant say in public policies, mainly because religious political parties, such as Shas and United Torah Judaism, have played pivotal roles in Israeli coalition governments (Hacohen, 2020). One central area where religious influence is evident is in Israel's personal status laws, which govern matters like marriage and divorce. In Israel, there is no civil marriage; all marriages must be conducted through religious authorities. This means that Orthodox Jewish law, or *halacha*, determines the terms of marriage for Jews in Israel. These laws, enforced by the Rabbinical Courts, affect Jewish citizens and non-Jews, who are also subject to the religious courts of their respective communities. This legal framework highlights Israel's strong connection between religion and state.

The Orthodox parties often push for policies that adhere strictly to religious laws. They advocate for laws regarding Sabbath observance, limiting public transportation and commerce on Saturdays by Jewish religious law. Additionally, the issue of military conscription reflects this influence: Orthodox men are often exempt from military service in favor of religious studies, a policy that has generated significant public debate. This religious influence stems from Israel's historical context as a Jewish state, but it is heightened by the political leverage that Orthodox parties wield in coalition governments. Due to Israel's proportional representation electoral system, smaller parties, including religious ones, have often held the balance of power in forming ruling coalitions.

This political influence allows them to enact or block legislation that aligns with their religious views, ensuring that religious law continues to play a substantial role in Israeli life. The political landscape is thus characterized by deep ideological divisions that shape policy on identity, borders, security, and socio-economic issues. Parties represent various ideologies, from nationalist and religious factions advocating territorial expansion to leftist groups pushing for peace and social justice reforms. These divisions drive electoral competition, coalition-building strategies, and political discourse, posing ongoing challenges for governance. The task for Israeli policymakers and stakeholders is to foster dialogue, build consensus, and address societal demands by navigating the complex interplay of politics and ideology in the pursuit of national objectives and effective governance.

5. The Nation-State of the Jewish People

The delicate balance between religion and politics in Israel is central to its political landscape, particularly in how it shapes the country's identity as a Jewish state. The enactment of the 2018 Basic Law: Israel – The Nation-State of the Jewish People, commonly known as the "Nation-State Law," exemplifies this complex dynamic. The law reserves the right of national self-determination exclusively for Jewish people, downgrades Arabic from an official language, and prioritizes Jewish settlements. When a state endorses a majority religion, it tends to increase social cohesion among its adherents, a pattern evident in Israel. While Israel was founded as a Jewish homeland, this strong identification with Judaism creates challenges in accommodating non-Jewish minorities.

This tension reflects religious minorities often struggle to integrate into the national community fully. Israel's situation is further complicated by the interplay of religious, ethnic, and political factors, creating a constant struggle to balance religious tradition with the democratic principle of inclusivity (Baumgart-Ochse, 2014). Debates about religious freedom in Israel often focus on the role of Orthodox Jewish law in state affairs, particularly concerning marriage, divorce, and the observance of religious laws like the Sabbath. The influence of religious fundamentalist groups, which push for policies that align with their strict religious views, can exacerbate social divisions and strain efforts to integrate diverse communities within a secular political framework. The ultra-Orthodox community, though a minority, holds substantial political influence and often uses religious issues to gain political power. Secular politicians, on the other hand, have capitalized on anti-religious sentiment, particularly regarding the military service exemptions for ultra-Orthodox men (Lens, 2023).

Haredi Judaism, which developed in reaction to the perceived erosion of traditional Jewish life in modernity, views Torah study as central to life. Haredi educational institutions emphasize religious learning over general education, which leaves many within the community unprepared for Israel's knowledge-based economy.

The rapid growth of this community and its distinct religious practices create challenges for national policymakers, who must address the tensions between the ultra-Orthodox way of life and the broader demands of contemporary society. Israel's political system, marked by fragmentation and coalition-building, often requires alliances with religious parties to form governing majorities. This grants religious factions substantial influence over government policies, particularly concerning military conscription exemptions and funding for religious education. The lack of a formal constitution means the relationship between religion and the state is governed by a historic compromise, with political power shared between secular and

religious factions. The founders of Israel, although primarily secular, rooted its institutions in ethical values derived from Jewish tradition, creating an ongoing conflict between secular and religious ideologies. The tension was never fully resolved and continues manifesting as ideological conflicts within Israeli society and its interactions with the global community (Malach and Cahaner, 2019). The lack of civil marriage in Israel, which forces Jewish citizens to marry according to Orthodox law, is another area where the balance between religious freedom and state influence is precarious. This arrangement is particularly challenging for non-Orthodox Jews or those from unrecognized denominations. Moreover, efforts to expand civil marriage options face strong resistance from Orthodox authorities, reflecting broader societal divisions. Ultra-Orthodox Jews have a complicated relationship with modernity, often seeking to adopt technological advancements like the internet while filtering out elements they consider morally dangerous.

Israel's Basic Laws, which function as a foundational legal framework, highlight the country's ideological divide. They establish Israel as both a Jewish and democratic state, reflecting ongoing tensions between secular and religious groups. The political status quo is maintained through compromises that prevent definitive choices regarding the role of religion in public life. This system underscores the deep divisions over religious issues that continue to shape political debates (Ami, 2022). Religious parties have played a significant role in Israeli politics since the state's inception, with the proportional representation system amplifying their influence in coalition-building. While these parties can foster solidarity within religious communities, they also intensify societal tensions and complicate governance. However, the absence of a formal constitution further exacerbates debates over the rights of minorities and non-Jewish citizens (Ketchell, 2019).

The interplay between religion and politics in Israel raises fundamental questions about the feasibility of genuine religious pluralism within the state (Kimmerling, 2001). This issue is central to understanding Israel's societal and cultural structure. The need for coalition-building often forces political alliances with religious parties, giving them significant influence over critical aspects of governance, such as conscription exemptions and religious education. This delicate balance between religious freedom and political influence continues to shape the complex governance structure of Israeli society (Howson, 2014).

6. Multifaceted Society

Israel is a multifaceted society composed of various religious communities, including Jews, Muslims, Christians, and Druze, each preserving unique traditions and institutions. While the state recognizes and supports multiple religious groups, Orthodox Judaism plays a dominant role, especially in personal status issues such as marriage and conversion,

overshadowing other Jewish denominations (Magid, 2024). The country's proportional representation electoral system fosters coalition-building, often empowering religious parties and influencing policies like military service exemptions and religious education funding. This power dynamic deepens divisions between secular and religious segments of society. Further complicating matters is the absence of a formal constitution. Instead, Israel relies on a series of fundamental laws that outline governance principles but lack the cohesion of a unified legal framework (Anavi, 2022).

This legal ambiguity contributes to political instability and intensifies social tensions, particularly regarding minority rights and balancing Israel's Jewish identity with democratic values. Religious pluralism advocates argue for inclusivity and mutual respect, calling for legal reforms and cultural shifts that promote tolerance. Through interfaith dialogue and educational initiatives, Israel strives to reconcile its identity as a Jewish state with democratic principles, aiming for peaceful coexistence among its diverse religious groups (Ram, 2015).

Israel's political landscape is marked by a longstanding religious status quo, as exemplified by the "Jewish nation-state law." This law defines Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, reserving the right to self-determination exclusively for Jews. This framework marginalizes the Palestinian-Arab minority, which makes up approximately 20% of Israel's population. Public opinion often supports this ethno-religious statehood concept, fueled by concerns over perceived existential threats to the Jewish state (Shafir, 2023). Historically, David Ben Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, made several assumptions that shaped the nation's founding principles. He believed that many Arabs would leave, many diaspora Jews would immigrate, and that the ultra-Orthodox would either secularize or leave. However, these assumptions proved inaccurate: Arabs remained, fewer Jews than expected immigrated, and the ultra-Orthodox community not only stayed but grew in influence. The ultra-Orthodox community exemplifies the tensions between religious conservatism and modern society.

While adhering to traditional practices, they face challenges integrating into broader society without compromising their values. Despite rejecting much modern technology, the Haredi community engages with the modern world out of necessity, particularly in areas like healthcare and income generation. As Hacohen (2020) notes, the tension between religion and state is a well-recognized issue, with liberal factions typically advocating for the separation of the two, while religious groups resist such moves. Over recent decades, religious parties have shifted towards advocating for a more religiously defined nation-state, a sentiment reflected in the right-wing discourse. The proportional representation system, while democratic, amplifies the influence of smaller religious parties, particularly the ultra-Orthodox, who often become pivotal in forming coalition governments. This setup

allows them to shape national policies reinforcing their religious values, creating friction between secular and religious communities. The interplay between internal ideological dynamics and external security concerns heavily influences Israel's political landscape. They suggest that Israel's ability to reconcile its religious and secular identities will determine its future as both a democratic state and a homeland for the Jewish people (Noeske et al, 2024). This conflict can be described as the clash of identities within Israeli society: the ultra-Orthodox primarily identifies as Jews, while the secular population often identifies as Israelis first.

This is because the ultra-Orthodox community's political influence stems from its deeply ingrained religious identity. This identity is centered on the perceived need to protect Jewish culture from external influences, mainly Western secularism. This cultural segregation manifests in the community's education, marriage practices, and daily life, all of which are designed to preserve traditional Jewish values (Harel, 2024). Fox (2021) explains that the tension between religious tradition and modernity affects many aspects of Israeli life, particularly politics. Keren-Kratz (2020) explains that the proportional representation electoral system allows religious parties to play a significant role in government, amplifying the influence of religious identity in public policy. To achieve a more inclusive society, Israel must navigate the delicate balance between its Jewish character and democratic ideals, ensuring that all religious communities feel represented and respected.

7. Conclusion

Israel's political landscape is shaped by a complex interplay of religion, ideology, and identity, navigating the delicate balance between democracy and significant religious influence. As a nation rooted in both Jewish tradition and democratic values, Israel grapples with ideological divisions that necessitate pragmatic compromises. Orthodox Judaism wields considerable influence, primarily in personal status laws and coalition-building within the multi-party-political system. This dominance often stirs tensions over minority rights and the role of religious institutions, mainly as religious parties frequently secure pivotal roles in government coalitions.

The lack of a formal constitution amplifies these challenges, leaving room for instability and controversy surrounding key governance issues. The need for coalition governments in Israel's multi-party system fosters alliances that frequently empower religious factions, sometimes obstructing critical reforms and exacerbating the divide between secular and religious communities. Orthodox communities, which maintain traditional values while grappling with the pressures of modern society, contribute to the ongoing debate over the nation's direction. Their rapid growth further tests the foundations of Israel's liberal

democracy, highlighting the necessity for adaptive policies that can accommodate evolving societal dynamics. External geopolitical factors, including regional conflicts and diplomatic tensions, add further layers to Israel's political scene, influencing national priorities and shaping policy responses. Conflicts with Palestinians and tensions with neighboring states complicate Israel's governance, intertwining security concerns with domestic political strategies. Despite these challenges, Israel demonstrates resilience in navigating its complex political and social environment. The ongoing debates over the role of religion in state affairs, the balance of minority rights, and the broader identity of the nation reflect Israel's effort to maintain its democratic framework. This intricate relationship between politics and religion, influenced by both internal dynamics and external pressures, defines Israel's ongoing struggle to balance religious influence with democratic principles.

This paper examines religious influence in Israeli politics by analyzing policy debates and public sentiment. The findings reveal that religious parties are critical in shaping social norms and legal frameworks that govern civil rights. The analysis highlights the tension between secular and religious factions and its implications for Israeli democracy. The paper illustrates how religious identity informs individual and collective actions through case studies and legal frameworks, ultimately shaping the national narrative. The research underscores the difficulties in shifting the deeply rooted religious status quo, primarily due to the significant political influence of religious parties. These parties often obstruct essential reforms that might threaten their interests, thereby maintaining a status quo that aligns with their objectives.

Religion and politics significantly influence governance, social unity, and national identity. Examining Israeli politics requires a close look at the tension between secularism and religious orthodoxy, which is deeply woven into the nation's political landscape and shapes essential dynamics. This ideological conflict impacts policy-making and governance and carries profound societal and cultural consequences. The research highlights the complexities of Israeli politics, emphasizing the need for ongoing dialogue and engagement to navigate the challenges posed by entrenched religious and political divisions, aiming to achieve a more balanced and equitable society.

The research concludes that Israel's political environment will continue to be defined by the intersection of religious influence, ideological division, and pragmatic governance. As the nation evolves, it must adapt to shifting societal and political currents to uphold its democratic values while fostering cohesion among its diverse religious and cultural communities.

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