

ARTICLE

Conceptualizing and understanding the Gülen movement

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UNC Charlotte, NC, USA.Email: sfitzger@uncc.edu**Abstract**

The Gülen movement (GM) is a controversial international Islamic movement originating in Turkey. Interestingly, the movement seems to be “in between” the standard conceptual categories used by social movement scholars: The GMs' focus on individual transformation and religious practices suggests that it is a religious movement; its extensive outreach into various institutions (i.e., education, health care, and media) suggests a social movement seeking legitimacy and broad social change; its purported infiltration of key government and military offices suggests a political movement. In this article, I demonstrate the utility of conceptualizing the GM as an everyday-life-based movement and of using a multi-institutional politics model to examine this type of movement. By doing so, it becomes clear that sometimes, movements focusing on individual change may also be seeking to transform social, economic, and political institutions.

1 | INTRODUCTION

On March 4, 2016, Turkish police in Istanbul surrounded the offices of the daily newspaper Zaman and, with the authority of a court order, seized control of one of the country's few remaining independent news organizations. This seizure extended a growing trend of silencing dissent and preventing freedom of the press by the Turkish government. In fact, Turkey currently ranks 151 out of 180 countries in terms of press freedom (Reporters Without Borders, 2016).

In addition to signaling further erosion of democratic principles in Turkey, the takeover of Zaman is noteworthy because it is one flashpoint within a larger struggle between a prominent Islamic movement and the state.¹ In the 2 years since his election to President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan has increasingly used the police and courts to prosecute critics of the regime and has actively enforced legislation, making it illegal to criticize the president (Timur & Arango, 2016). For years, Zaman, which is part of a larger media conglomerate associated with the Gülen movement (GM), consistently published stories challenging state-sponsored media's celebration of the Erdogan regime. After the seizure of the Zaman, President Erdogan claimed that the act was strictly a judicial matter targeting a terrorist organization and not politically motivated; however, the paper was quickly relaunched under state control with a decidedly pro-Erdogan slant—representing a radical departure for this formerly critical media outlet (Al Jazeera, 2016).

2 | BACKGROUND

Drawing inspiration from the writings and teachings of a charismatic Turkish scholar and Islamic preacher, Fethullah Gülen, the GM is a controversial Islamic movement active primarily in Turkey, Eastern Europe, Africa, and the United States. The GM has received increased academic and media attention in the United States and elsewhere during recent years. Supporters view the movements' focus on interfaith dialogue, scientific education, community service, and market economies to be an important bridge between the East and the West and a crucial step towards integrating Islam and Turkey into the global economy and reducing religious and cultural conflict. Opponents view the GM as an insidious plot to take control of the Turkish state and/or expand the reach and power of Islam throughout the global West. The wide availability of movement-generated promotional material, academic studies, and media coverage to English-speaking readers has increased awareness of the movement, but too often these writings digress into Pollyannaish celebrations or demonizing caricatures that add little to our theoretical knowledge of contemporary movements and the state. In this article, I bring together empirical and theoretical studies from a variety of disciplines to better understand the emergence and strategies of the GM. In doing so, I highlight the work of social scientists who have conducted extensive ethnographic studies and other empirical work designed to bring light, rather than heat, to the debate. I do not attempt to adjudicate between the various claims regarding the "true" motives or goals of the GM or those of the movements' critics—but rather focus on demonstrating the utility of social movement theory in understanding contemporary social and political developments. Specifically, I problematize the standard approach of conceptualizing social movements by demonstrating that not all movements for change neatly fit into extant categories. The GM represents just such a movement: one that exhibits characteristics of a social movement, a religious movement, a political movement, and a civil society movement, yet seemingly remains "in between"² these categories. I argue that a multi-institutional politics model (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008; Gürbüz & Bernstein, 2012) is particularly well-suited to examine the GM and other movements of this type.

The article proceeds in five stages. First, I provide a brief background on religion and democracy in Turkey to provide context for understanding the GM. Second, I discuss various ways to conceptualize the movement within the social movements' literature and provide a provisional categorization of the GM as an everyday-life-based movement that can be fruitfully examined through a multi-institutional politics model. Third, I locate the emergence and development of the GM within the context of neoliberalism and analyze the movement's framing activities, organizational strategies, and political engagement. Fourth, I identify various ways that the GM's successful legitimacy seeking activities have also resulted in backlash. Finally, I offer conclusions regarding the future of the GM and call for additional studies of "in between" movements.

3 | RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY IN TURKEY

A pressing question of the current era is the relationships between Islam and the state. Witnessing repressive reactions to large-scale protests and revolutions of the "Arab Spring," the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and acts of terrorism linked to religious fanatics throughout the world, some commentators have concluded that Islam is antithetical to democracy and modernity. However, as Bayat (2007:4) writes: "The question is not whether Islam is or is not compatible with democracy or, by extension, modernity, but rather under what conditions Muslims can make them compatible. Nothing intrinsic to Islam—or, for that matter, to any other religion—makes it inherently democratic or undemocratic." Muslim literalists can and do differ regarding whether Islamic Law should be the sole foundation of the state (Davis & Robinson, 2006), and Turkey is currently the only secular-democratic Muslim state in the world (Eligür, 2010).

In the 1920s, the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, became the nation's first president and embarked on a series of campaigns to radically transform Turkish society into a secular state. This dramatic break from

Turkey's Ottoman past created new social cleavages and marginalized many traditional segments of society, including Muslims. Religion did not play a key role in the political life of the new republic until 1980s and 1990s when the Welfare Party, led by Necmettin Erbakan, supported the expansion of private enterprise and the development of an export economy as well as a greater role for Islam in Turkish society. These economic policies generated significant revenues for certain business leaders and produced a new middle class (Tuğal, 2009a). Following the nonviolent military takeover of 1997, what is referred to as a "post-modern coup," Turkey's first elected Islamist government was forced to resign. During the next few years, Recep Tayyip Erdogan helped establish a new pro-Islamic political party, the Justice and Development Party also referred to as AKP, that came to power in 2002. Although the JDP/AKP and GM had considerable differences, for a time, the two groups' interests aligned as they both benefitted from providing greater social and political space for Islam in Turkey and for pursuing neoliberal economic policies.

The Turkish case is unique in that, like France, the constitution officially defines the state as secular, yet it provides Islamic instruction in schools and pays the salaries of the imams who are civil servants (Kuru, 2009; Yavuz, 2013). The Directorate General for Religious Affairs is part of the state and oversees hundreds of local branches that provide services to Muslims only. The Sunni-Hanefi version of Islam is taught, which means that other Islamic sects and non-Muslims are not recognized nor supported by the state (Dagi, 2013). Rather than indicating state support and privileging of Islam, this arrangement is the product of historical state actions designed to place Islam under state control (Kuru, 2009). In Turkey, there is a conflict between Kemalists who champion assertive secularism and various pro-Islamic conservatives advocating passive secularism (Kuru, 2009:11). These competing visions of the proper role of religion and the state have produced shifting loyalties that sometimes produce temporary collaborations that dissolve over time. Perhaps the most dramatic split has been between the current President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Fethullah Gülen who, for years, seemed to work in concert advocating for a greater Islamic presence in Turkey. However, since 2007, the two sides have been engaged in a series of high-profile confrontations including corruption charges against the President and other AKP politicians and conspiracy charges brought against GM supporters, journalists, and activists. Most recently, President Erdogan has declared the GM responsible for an attempted coup that took place in July 2016 and has used emergency powers to dismiss, arrest, and/or prosecute an estimated 100,000 Turkish citizens in military, civil service, media, and education sectors (*The Economist*, 2016b).

4 | CONCEPTUALIZING THE GÜLEN MOVEMENT

What began as a small group of like-minded individuals discussing Islamic faith in practice has now evolved into \$25 billion business with a global reach that includes charter and private schools and a media empire of newspapers, book publishing, and TV stations (Wood & Keskin, 2013). It is estimated that the GM has been involved in establishing over 1,000 schools located on five continents, six hospitals, and hundreds of student dormitories (Ebaugh, 2010:4). The funding for schools, hospitals, school dormitories, and various Gülen-inspired service projects comes solely from donations made by members. Tithing, the process of donating approximately 10% of one's income to religious causes, is a common practice amongst followers and is nearly universal for members employed in one of the dozens of Gülen-related businesses (Hendrick, 2013). By providing financial support, access to resources and networks, and opportunities for religious discussions, school dormitories play a key role in the recruitment of youth into the movement. These strategies have facilitated a phenomenal growth in the movement: There is an estimated 8 to 10 million people worldwide who are a part of the GM (Ebaugh, 2010).

Davis and Robinson's (2012) examination of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt reveals how political opportunity structures affect movement emergence and strategies. Religious movements that seek to create a "state within a state" may seek to transform the state through creating alternate institutions rather than directly challenging the state—particularly if they face heavy government repression. As discussed below, the rise of the GM during the past two decades suggests additional ways that emerging movements are shaped by political, social, and economic

structures and how these configurations, in turn, affect movement strategies. Yet it is not clear precisely how to best conceptualize the movement. Is it a social movement? A religious movement? A political movement? As I will discuss below, empirical studies of the GM reveal a multifaceted movement that does not neatly fit into any of these categories.

Social movements are typically defined as “a loose collectivity acting with some degree of organization, temporal continuity, and reliance on noninstitutional forms of action to promote or resist change in the group, society, or world order of which it is part” (McAdam & Snow, 2010:1). Generally, the use of noninstitutional forms of action (e.g., protest) is the distinguishing feature of a social movement as opposed to a political movement, which is focused primarily on working within the political system and/or creating political change. Religious movements tend to focus solely on individual transformation, and these movements may or may not be interested in affecting broader societal changes. However, in cases where religious movements face government repression, movement activities may blur the lines between religious and political action, as was the case in China for the Falun Gong (Junker, 2014; Madsen, 2000; Zhao, 2003) and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (Davis & Robinson, 2012).

The GM does not fit readily into any one of these categories. The GM's focus on individual transformation and religious practices suggests that it is a religious movement; its extensive outreach into various institutions (i.e., education, health care, and media) suggests a social movement seeking legitimacy and broad social change; its purported infiltration of key government and military offices suggests a political movement. Given this uncertainty, I provisionally conceptualize the GM as an example of an everyday-life-based movement that uses social networks, media, and community building to develop Islamic identity and engage in activities to integrate Islam into market activities.

Attending to cultural change and identity is also a defining characteristic of new social movements³ (Buechler, 1995; Melucci, 1989; Taylor & Whittier, 1992); however, it is easy to overstate the nonpolitical nature of new social movement and everyday-life-based movement activity—just because movement activities are not directly targeting the state or engaged in contentious politics, that does not mean the movement is not working towards politically transformative goals. Specifically, by employing a multi-institutional politics model (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008; Gürbüz & Bernstein, 2012), we can illustrate how everyday-life-based movements, such as GM, that appear to focus on individual and social change are also, ultimately, engaged in activity that seeks to create broader political changes. For example, as Tuğal (2009a, 2009b, 2013) and Bayat (2007, 2013) have argued, various new Islamist movements focus on transforming everyday practices (i.e., cultural and religious practice) to change society and ultimately the state. The multi-institutional politics model posits that power and domination not only are vested in the state but also are embedded throughout the different institutions of society (e.g., education, economics, and cultural practices). From this analytic framework, our attention is drawn to the range of strategic choices movements make about which institutions to challenge when seeking change. We can then see how even everyday-life-based movements are thus engaged in multifaceted challenges that are not solely individual, social, religious, or political.

5 | EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT

A focus on reconciling Islamic faith with secular institutions and a global neoliberal economic order is a defining characteristic of the GM (Turam 2004). The opening of markets in the 1980s produced rapid economic development that led to the emergence of a new Turkish middle class, which played a crucial role in the emergence and development of the GM (Yavuz 2006, 2013). Much like in the United States, the neoliberal mantra that privatization will benefit everyone has been internalized by many in Turkey—even struggling small business owners (Tuğal, 2009a). Merchants and businessmen trumpet the virtues of capitalism in opening new markets and opportunities for Islam (Yavuz, 2013). The reconciliation of Islam and capitalism is reminiscent of the Protestant Ethic in that material success is interpreted as an indicator of proper faith—if it remains subservient to contributing to the common good: “Believers must act always with the purpose and the glorification of God. There is nothing wrong,

on the contrary it is a blessing, in being rich as long as you know the ultimate goal: serving others (hizmet). Second, believers must work to improve socio-political conditions to live their conception of the good life” (Turkish merchant, quoted in Yavuz, 2013).

The GM is a product of neoliberal globalization (Dreher, 2013; Hendrick, 2013; Tuğal, 2009a). Modernity and globalization has created new opportunity structures for transnational movements (Keck and Sikkink, 1998), and as discussed below, the strategies of the GM have taken advantage of these opportunities. The GM's collective action frames, business and media strategies, and service activities function to establish legitimacy within a global economy dominated by Western, neoliberal policies. Research on Muslim activism and mobilization both within and outside of Muslim countries demonstrates that Islamist movements vary considerably in the content of their messages, goals, and strategies (Eligür, 2010; 2004). Not all are seeking an ‘Islamic Order’—a religious state, shari’a law, and moral codes in Muslim societies and communities (Bayat, 2013:4; Wiktorowicz, 2004). In fact, certain groups, such as the GM, appear to be intentionally positioning themselves to engage with a broader global community.

6 | FRAMING AND MOVEMENT STRATEGIES

The framing activities and organizing strategies of the GM center around the teachings of Fethullah Gülen (b. 1941) who began preaching in Izmir, Turkey, during the 1970s. Over multiple decades, he has extended the teachings of Said Nursi (1876–1960), an influential Sufi theologian who sought to reinterpret the Qur’an and connect Islam to the emerging modern industrial world (Bilici, 2006). Said Nursi and Fethullah Gülen's promotion of reason, tolerance, science, and public discourse represents an “Islamic Enlightenment” (Yavuz, 2013:5) and views Islam as a source of ethics and morality—not a political force (Şenay, 2010).

Gülen's teachings focus on developing individual faith and practice. A key strategy involves meeting in small study groups—a practice that dates to the mid-20th century when the modernization and nationalist program implemented by Atatürk disbanded Sufi orders and made it illegal to engage in religious worship. As a result, practicing Muslims who wanted to maintain their heritage formed local social groups, *cemaat*, which function as study groups (Ebaugh, 2010). The *cemaat* serves as the primary organizational strategy of the GM. Within these groups, *sohbet* (conversation) is a mechanism to encourage greater spiritual reflection, increase knowledge of Islam, and build strong associational networks. This is a primary form of engagement in the movement for middle class housewives (Jassal, 2013) and also provides a central mechanism for information sharing amongst businessmen who meet separately and on a routine basis. These practices are quite similar to Bible studies and other small group interactions common amongst Evangelical Protestants and other Christian denominations in the United States (Smith, 1998).

Goffman (1974: 21) defined a frame as “schemata of interpretation” that enables individuals to “locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large.” Frames enable individuals to interpret their experiences, identify the sources of their problems, and develop responses to these problems. Social movement scholars define frame alignment as “the linkage of individual and social movement organization (SMO) interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO activities, goals, and ideology are congruent and complementary” (Snow et al., 1986:464). In other words, through a variety of frame alignment processes, individual and collective understandings converge. In the case of the GM, these processes are facilitated through the practice of religiously inspired service labor, charity, or service (referred to as *hizmet*), which is central to the teaching of Fethullah Gülen (Ebaugh, 2010; Sevendy, 2008; Yavuz, 2013). In fact, the GM is alternately referred to as the *Hizmet* Movement by people within the movement as well as outside journalists and scholars. The concept of *hizmet* has a long history in Turkish-Muslim society and serves as relatively stable cultural map for individuals (Bilici, 2006). Because cultural maps provide individuals with sets of ideas and values that can be used to make sense of the world, the focus on *hizmet* by the GM provides a high degree of frame alignment to many Turkish Muslims. In addition, by creating shared understandings, this practice of *hizmet* produces “social capital by bringing people together for a collective goal in terms of rendering their time and resources to create a positive environment for

the advancement of society" (Yavuz, 2013:78). Further, the practice also builds interpersonal trust amongst members that can facilitate business transactions and economic advancement (Hendrick, 2013).

The framing efforts of social movement entrepreneurs, such as GM leaders, have the potential to mobilize new participants, create awareness and sympathy from the broader public, and shape the parameters and content of public discourse—both by affecting public opinion and by creating elite allies (Fitzgerald, 2009; Johnston and Noakes, 2005; McCammon, 2012; Snow et al., 2014; Snow, Rochford, & Benford, 1986). The GM has spent considerable resources to develop media outlets and forums in English-speaking countries to exert control over their own framing efforts and identity. These efforts have allowed the GM to engage in the symbolic contest over meaning, which takes place through media discourse in the public arena (e.g., Fitzgerald & Rubin, 2010; Tarrow, 1998; Gamson & Stuart, 1992; Rohlinger, 2014). Gülen's message, which is carefully constructed and distributed by GM-owned media outlets, focuses on encouraging interfaith dialogue, supporting science education, bridging East and West divisions, economic development, and being of service to humanity.

Hendrick's (2013) political ethnography reveals the competing, and at times contradictory, collective action frames produced by leaders of the GM using a process he calls strategic ambiguity. Specifically, just as politicians rely on ambivalent sound bites with culturally recognizable symbols to appear to be taking a stand when in fact the meanings associated with the statements are left open to interpretation by listeners (e.g., "family values" and "freedom"), so too does the GM. By framing the issues in terms of "dialogue" and "tolerance," Gülen and others are able to advocate for particular understandings of these issues without excluding other interpretations. Using strategic ambiguity in its discourse helps create a sense of solidarity amongst a diverse network of actors and also allows leaders to maintain plausible deniability if members acting in the name of the GM commit actions that others in the movement, including Fethullah Gülen, do not support. Finally, the discourse created by the GM has incorporated language of universal human rights—concepts associated with Western values and social movements—in order to create space for Islamic values and beliefs (Dagi, 2013: 89). Understanding the importance of international communication flows, the GM has strategically sought to cultivate a positive image for itself and Islam in general (Bilici, 2006:17). In doing so, "... they have redefined the ground of public debate in Turkey by stressing secular concepts while also bringing faith back into secular sites to discuss the meaning of virtue and the good life" (Yavuz, 2013:20).

Although primarily an everyday-life-based movement, Gülen's teachings that individual transformation and service to others will lead to societal transformation as long as certain freedoms are protected lead followers to engage in political lobbying and legitimacy seeking. Unlike other religious movements seeking individual and societal transformation, for example, Soka Gakkai in Japan (Aruga, 2000; Hammond & Machacek, 1999; Metraux, 2000), the GM does not directly field candidates nor have an official political arm of the movement. In contrast to other movements and protest groups active in Turkey (Göker, 2011; Gürbüz & Bernstein, 2012), the GM does not typically engage in street protest or use violence to advance its agenda. In this way, the movement relies primarily on a strategy that Gürbüz and Bernstein (2012) describe as strategic nonconfrontation. However, as the multi-institutional politics model suggests, political engagement can take many forms. Individuals associated with the GM can and do seek to influence electoral politics through lobbying and business networks (Hendrick, 2013; Yavuz, 2013).

7 | LEGITIMACY PROBLEMS AND BACKLASH

As part of the movements' broad strategy of shaping the public discourse and gaining legitimacy, dozens of Gülen-sponsored conferences have been held since the late 1990s. These conferences have brought together journalists, academics, and major political and spiritual leaders to pursue Gülen's mission of interfaith dialogue and bridging Eastern and Western cultures. Despite early assessments that these meetings were successful in obtaining these goals, according to one observer, the intellectual vigor of these conferences declined over time and "since 2004, many critical intellectuals, except those who are either the followers of the movement or connected to its media outlets have stayed away from meetings" (Yavuz, 2013:147). As the GM has continued to expand its presence and lobbying

efforts in Washington, D.C. and in select U.S. states, some express concern that the GM's efforts to garner legitimacy is resulting in the co-optation of influential politicians, journalists, and academics (Hendrick, 2013). This movement strategy parallels the mobilization of Evangelicals in the United States (Smith, 2000; Wilcox, 1989). Some organizations within the Christian Right movement, for example, the Moral Majority in the 1980s, were designed to engage and influence the electoral process, other branches of the movement focused on developing higher education institutions and media outlets. By doing so, the movement could gather resources and build networks that would facilitate the integration of members into the secular establishment. This was followed by the cultivation of an Evangelical power elite within the federal government whose work is supported and promoted by think tanks and privately owned media (Lindsay, 2008).

Conspiracy theories regarding the "shadow state" and questions regarding the ulterior motives of GM actors continue to undermine the movement's quest for legitimacy. The Islamic principle of *takiyye* allows for the hiding of one's beliefs when in danger (Dagi, 2013), and critics have pointed to this principle as indicating the true nature of the GM. In 1999, state-owned Turkish television stations played a recording made of Fethullah Gülen speaking to a group of supporters. In the speech, he appears to be advising them to infiltrate the system and wait until they have power to reveal their true intentions. At the time, these remarks were used by prosecutors to request a warrant for Gülen's arrest "on charges of plotting to overthrow the state by establishing a clandestine organization" (Yavuz, 2013:42). Due in part to the increased political and state-owned media attacks he faced in Turkey, Gülen relocated to the United States and has since lived in Saylorsborg, Pennsylvania (Yavuz, 2013: 43). The networked structure and lack of financial transparency of the GM has drawn comparisons to Opus Dei (Introvigne, 2006; Hendrick, 2013) and The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints (Hendrick, 2013)—two other religious organizations with loyal and committed members that face considerable general public skepticism.

8 | CONCLUSION

The emergence and strategies of the GM provide an important case of how some movements may fall in between our standard movement typologies. The case of the GM also brings to light broader questions of the relationship between religion, civil society, and the state and suggests that more comparative studies examining how various movements, whether they are predominately everyday-life-based movements or religious movements, may represent multi-institutional challenges to the state and society. Social movement scholarship has documented the import of religious beliefs and organizations in motivating participation and mobilizing resources in a variety of contexts, and much is to be gained by further examination of non-Christian religious movements and other movements for change. In particular, there are many ways that movements for change can transform societies and states, and it is important to examine the context of movement strategies to gain a richer understanding of the movement. Finally, a clearer understanding of the GM, built on careful, objective empirical research, is needed both to contribute to the study of movements for change and to address important questions regarding Islam, social movements, and the state. The GM, like other movements, employs multiple strategies to pursue multiple institutional goals and largely adopts a strategy of strategic nonconfrontation. Although for millions of participants it represents an engaged faith that pursues laudable goals and encourages service to others, its rapid expansion and concerted efforts to gain international legitimacy has brought considerable negative attention. As discussed throughout this article, the multifaceted nature of the GM makes it difficult to conceptualize and analyze—in many ways, the movement is in between the definitions employed by social movement scholars. Identifying and analyzing other movements exhibiting similar characteristics will advance the theoretical and empirical study of movements for change.

On a final note, beyond the current political and legal battles between the Erdogan regime and movement supporters, the broader messaging and activities of the GM also place it in between competing religious, political, and societal world views. As Yavuz writes, "... the movement is too Islamist and conservative for some social democrats and the secularist military, too liberal and pro-American for Islamists, too Turkish nationalist for the Kurdish

nationalists, too Sunni-Hanefi for the Alevi, and too worldly for some Sufi-oriented Muslims" (Yavuz, 2013:241). Given this complexity and the current political opportunity structure, it is unlikely that the controversy surrounding the GM will soon dissipate.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ On July 15 and 16, 2016, members of the Turkish army staged an attempted coup that resulted in more than 230 deaths and was quickly thwarted. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan publicly blamed the Gülen movement for the coup attempt (and charge that Fethullah Gülen categorically denies). Within days of the attempted coup, President Erdogan began arresting, suspending, and/or detaining thousands of soldiers, generals, police officers, judges, academics, and civil servants for suspected links to the Gülen movement (*The Economist* 2016a).
- ² I thank an anonymous Sociology Compass reviewer for suggesting this particular phrase.
- ³ Both everyday-life-based movements and new social movements focus on collective identity and cultural change. However, new social movements tend to engage in radical mobilization tactics and disruption (Laraña, Johnston, & Gusfield, 1994).

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