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Da'esh and Al Qaeda in Somalia: propaganda and the use of drones against military targets

1. Introduction

Somalia occupies a strategic geopolitical position in the Horn of Africa due to its extensive coastline and proximity to key commercial routes such as the Red Sea and the Suez Canal.¹ However, this international relevance contrasts with a profound internal fragility that led the country to be considered the most fragile state in the world in 2024. Since the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, Somalia has experienced political and territorial fragmentation marked by the presence of clans, local actors, and extremist groups, which has prevented the consolidation of a central government with effective authority beyond Mogadishu and its surroundings.²

Currently, the main threat to Somali sovereignty is Al Shabaab, an organization affiliated with Al Qaeda (AQ). Facing this insurgency, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has been promoting a “total war” policy since 2022, backed by international missions such as the African Union’s AUSSOM and counter-terrorism operations by the United States (USA) and Turkey.³

Despite the persistent conflict, Somalia has taken steps toward institutional strengthening, especially with the promulgation of a new Constitution in March 2026, which replaces the provisional charter that was in force for fourteen years and aims to consolidate the country’s democratic system.⁴ This process is part of a regional trend of similar constitutional reforms developed in other African countries, such as Kenya.⁵

In this context, this article aims to analyse the evolution of the operational and communicative capabilities of the main terrorist groups actives in Somalia: Al Shabaab

¹ CONTRERAS LÓPEZ, Cristina, “Somalia y la insurgencia de Al-Shabaab: análisis de los mecanismos de poder paralelo en un Estado fragmentado”, CESEDEN, june 2025, https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieee/somalia_y_la_insurgencia_de_al_shabaab_analisis_de_los_mecanismos_de_poder_paralelo_en_un_estado_fragmentado-1.

² CONTRERAS LÓPEZ, Cristina, “Somalia y la insurgencia de Al-Shabaab: análisis de los mecanismos de poder paralelo en un Estado fragmentado”, CESEDEN, june 2025, https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieee/somalia_y_la_insurgencia_de_al_shabaab_analisis_de_los_mecanismos_de_poder_paralelo_en_un_estado_fragmentado-1.

³ ECHEVERRÍA JESÚS, Carlos. El esfuerzo antiterrorista es aún necesario en Somalia. Revista del Ejército de Tierra Español 997/2025. <https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/media/downloadable/files/links/r/e/revista-ejercito-997.pdf> (consulted 24th February 2026).

⁴ NEWSROOM INFOBAE, “Somalia promulga su nueva Constitución después de 14 años con una carta provisional”, Infobae, marzo 2026, <https://www.infobae.com/america/agencias/2026/03/08/somalia-promulga-su-nueva-constitucion-despues-de-14-anos-con-una-carta-provisional/>

⁵ NEWSROOM INFOBAE, “Somalia promulga su nueva Constitución después de 14 años con una carta provisional”, Infobae, marzo 2026, <https://www.infobae.com/america/agencias/2026/03/08/somalia-promulga-su-nueva-constitucion-despues-de-14-anos-con-una-carta-provisional/>

and Da'esh in Somalia (ISS, by its acronym in English). To this end, the research focuses on comparing the transformations of their tactical and propagandistic strategies in a scenario conditioned by international military pressure, competition between organizations, and the emergence of new technologies.

Furthermore, the main hypothesis holds that, although both groups maintain traditional forms of insurgent violence, they have progressively incorporated more sophisticated capabilities using emerging technologies and more elaborate communication strategies. This evolution not only increases their operational effectiveness but also expands their capacity for influence and projection beyond the local scope, reinforcing their role within the global jihadist ecosystem.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach based on a literature review that integrates contributions from authors such as Palacián (2022), Fuente (2018) along with updated data from the Counter Extremism Project (2025). In a complementary manner, the research incorporates propagandistic material collected during a research stay conducted by Paula María Núñez Guerra at the National Internet Unlawful Content Removal Unit (UNECI) of the Centre for Intelligence against Terrorism and Organized Crime (CITCO).

2. Origins and consolidation of terrorism in Somalia

The germ of the terrorist group *Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen* (Movement of Striving Youth for Islam, hereinafter Al Shabaab) is found in the 1980s as a legacy of *Al Itihad al Islamiya* (Islamic Union), an organization that translated Salafi-jihadism into the region.⁶ The definitive turning point occurred in 2006, when the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) briefly took control of Mogadishu. However, the true catalyst for its professionalization was the 2006 Ethiopian invasion backed by the USA; this displaced the radicals toward the south, grating them a nationalist cause of «resistance» that facilitated their tactical and territorial expansion⁷ (See Table 1).

However, formal affiliation with AQ did not arrive until 2012 with the oath of bay'ah. This

⁶ PALACIÁN DE INZA, BLANCA (2017). Somalia: amenazas a la seguridad potenciadas. In: Izquierdo Alberca, M. J. (coord.). *Panorama geopolítico de los conflictos 2017*. Madrid, Ministerio de Defensa. Pp. 183-204.

⁷ COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT, "Al-Shabaab", Counter Extremism Project", abril de 2025, available at <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/al-shabaab>. Date of consultation: 12.02.2026.

elevated a conflict with local roots to a global jihad scale, allowing Al-Shabaab not only to attract foreign fighters but also to insert Somali grievances into a regional threat ecosystem directly affecting the security interests of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden with Operation “Ocean Shield”, which concluded at the end of 2016.⁸

Dimension	Characteristics
Declared	Establishment of radical sharia, creation of a caliphate in the Horn of Africa, and expulsion of all «apostate» or foreign forces
Operational structure	Use of the Somali nationalist narrative and a sophisticated clan balance. Despite their anti-tribal ideology, co-opting local leaders to avoid factionalism and ensure control

Table 1. Al Shabaab's Duality: ideological Goals vs. Operational Structure. Source: Prepared by the authors based on data collected in the research⁹.

This evolution has culminated in the current “Total War” strategy led by President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, a multidimensional approach that seeks to neutralize the group not only on the battlefield but also in its financial and ideological bases.¹⁰ However, the success of the terrorist network in Somalia lies in its ability to instrumentalize humanitarian crises. During droughts, the terrorist group distributes food and water to win loyalty in rural areas. In addition to this, the author mentions that Al Shabaab maintains its control and authority through the collection of illegal taxes from the population.¹¹

At this point, while Al Shabaab has more than ten thousand fighters, controlling a large part of the south of the country – which in turn allows them to extract economic resources and govern de facto in those areas – the ISS has fewer than 300 personnel in the country, and its presence is located in remote settlements in the mountainous region of Puntland,

⁸ COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT, “Al-Shabaab”, Counter Extremism Project”, April 2025, available at <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/al-shabaab>. Date of consultation: 12.02.2026.

⁹ PALACIÁN DE INZA, Blanca. «Guerra Total» contra Al Shabaab en una Somalia sin lluvias. Boletín IEEE 28/2022. <https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/BoletinesIEEE3/2022/BoletinIEEE28.pdf> (consulted 24th February 2026); and COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT, “Al-Shabaab”, Counter Extremism Project”, April 2025, available at <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/al-shabaab>. Date of consultation: 12.02.2026.

¹⁰ PALACIÁN DE INZA, Blanca. «Guerra Total» contra Al Shabaab en una Somalia sin lluvias. Boletín IEEE 28/2022. <https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/BoletinesIEEE3/2022/BoletinIEEE28.pdf> (consulted 24th February 2026).

¹¹ PALACIÁN DE INZA, BLANCA (2017). Somalia: amenazas a la seguridad potenciadas. In: Izquierdo Alberca, M. J. (coord.). *Panorama geopolítico de los conflictos 2017*. Madrid, Ministerio de Defensa. Pp. 183-204.

in the north of the country.¹²

3. The propaganda narrative of ISS and Al Shabaab in Somalia

In the case of Somalia, on the part of the ISS, the Somalia *wilaya* stands out; in addition to the sections in the Amaq news agency and the Al Fustat repository (both official channels of the terrorist organization). Regarding Al Shabaab, the official channel for disseminating terrorist content is Al Kataib; in addition to the Shahada website, which has a more sympathizer character (See Table 2). This latter terrorist group has developed a highly professionalized communication structure that integrates digital influencers as actors professionalized communication structure that integrates digital influencers as actors coordinated with their military operations.¹³ An example of this was the real-time dissemination of content during the attack on Buulo Mareer in May 2023.

Parallely, the terrorist group has expanded its strategy instrumentalizing global conflicts, especially through the construction of a «digital bridge» between Somalia and Gaza, articulating an anti-colonial narrative to question the Somali government:

«The conflict, therefore, presents a dangerous opportunity for al-Shabaab to both incite its base, celebrating Hamas' 'victory', while also reaching out to wider audiences through the co-option of pro-Palestinian narratives that appeal to many Muslim grievances».¹⁴

In a similar vein, the ISS, despite its territorial setbacks in Puntland, maintains a propaganda infrastructure aimed at delegitimizing local authorities, expanding its reach to audiences in Ethiopia and Kenya, and adopting technological tools – including Artificial Intelligence (AI) – to innovate in content production and dissemination, thereby strengthening its resilience and adaptive capacity in the digital environment.¹⁵

Whitin all the material disseminated between September 2025 and February 2026, a total

¹² COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT, "Al-Shabaab", Counter Extremism Project", April 2025, available at <https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/al-shabaab>. Date of consultation: 12.02.2026.

¹³ GILROY, Gregoria, "Fanboys or the frontline? How Al-Shabaab's social media influencers are controlling the narrative", Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), July 2023, <https://gnet-research.org/2023/07/26/fanboys-or-the-frontline-how-al-shabaabs-social-media-influencers-are-controlling-the-narrative/>.

¹⁴ GILROY, Gregoria, "How al-Shabaab is Using Social Media to Build a Bridge between Gaza and Somalia", Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET), October 2023, <https://gnet-research.org/2023/10/31/how-al-shabaab-is-using-social-media-to-build-a-bridge-between-gaza-and-somalia/>.

¹⁵ HASAN, Mustafa, "Somalia: The New Frontline in the Islamic State's Global Expansion", FIKRA FORUM, february 2025, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/somalia-new-frontline-islamic-states-global-expansion>.

of 23 diffusions and re-diffusions¹⁶ and 122 communiqués¹⁷ have been counted, where Al Shabaab stands out compared to the ISS.

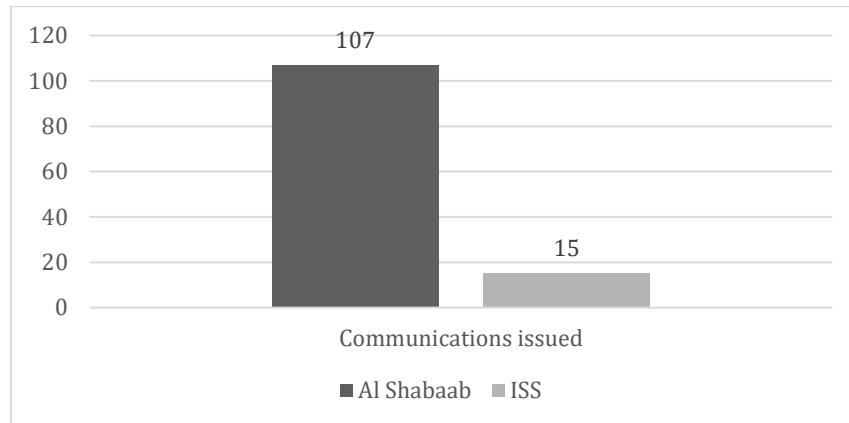


Figure 1. Communications detected from Al Shabaab and the ISS.¹⁸

Among the most recent, in February 2026, Al Shabaab's claim of responsibility for the use of drones in its attacks was observed. An example of this occurred on February 13, 2026, when the terrorist organisation celebrated the death of two foreign officers in an ambush in Lower Juba, southern Somalia. In the claim, the terrorist organisation states that these two officers, who were supervising suicide drones, died in an attack by Al Shabaab fighters against U.S. and Somali forces.

Apart from this example, Al Shabaab, through its official channel Al Kataib, disseminated the claim via a video of the January 2026 attack against military positions on Kudha Island, about 130 kilometres southwest of the city of Kismayo, causing more than 100 deaths. In this material, the producer's logo can be seen in the upper right corner, along hearing:

«This Wednesday morning, Mujahideen forces launched a massive attack on enemy bases located on the island of Kudha, in the Islamic province of Lower Juba. The operation began after the Fajr prayer [at dawn], with the mujahideen attacking, from various axes, the bases of the apostates loyal to the Jews and Crusaders, and hostile to the implementation of Islamic Sharia. The mujahideen were able – by the grace of God – to establish full control over three bases where the apostates were positioned within the island and its borders and entered the strategic island of Kudha. The large-scale attack resulted in significant losses among the enemy ranks, including dead and wounded, as the capture of numerous apostates and the

¹⁶ Re-diffusions refers to material that has already been published and has been redistributed in translation into another language. The main languages used are Arabic, Somali, and English.

¹⁷ The communiqués are primarily claims of responsibility for attacks and bombings, but in this case, there are also translations and announcements from new companies, such as Al Firdous which is aligned with Al Qaeda (January 2026).

¹⁸ Source and own elaboration.

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seizure of weapons and equipment».¹⁹



Image 1. Frame from the statement claiming responsibility for the attack, broadcast on Al Kataib.²⁰

In addition to its official channel, in the case of Al Shabaab, it is important to highlight the role of its sympathizer channel, the Shahada News Agency. As an example of its content, a news item reports that Al Shabaab executed five men between the ages of 23 and 29 accused of belonging to U.S. and Somali intelligence agencies. In the text, it can also be read that one of those executed in the public square of Jilib «supposedly led to the arrest of 12 people who travelled to territories controlled by Shabaab Al-Mujahideen, while another was responsible for multiple U.S. airstrikes in Middle Shabelle».²¹

On the part of the ISS, the Somali wilaya is responsible for the production and dissemination of propaganda concerning the terrorist organisation in the country. Through direct observation, it was noted that on January 26, 2026, this branch of Da'esh used its official Telegram channel to claim responsibility for the explosion of an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) in the Jael valley. Accompanied by the terrorist organisation's media logo at the top, the following can be read in this communiqué:

«With the success granted by God Almighty, the soldiers of the Caliphate detonated an explosive device against a vehicle of the apostate Puntland forces near the village of Tasan in the Jael valley the previous day, resulting in its partial destruction and injury to those on board, and to God is all praise».²²

¹⁹ Translation obtained from a third person.

²⁰ Source and own elaboration.

²¹ Translation obtained from a third person.

²² Translation obtained from a third person.

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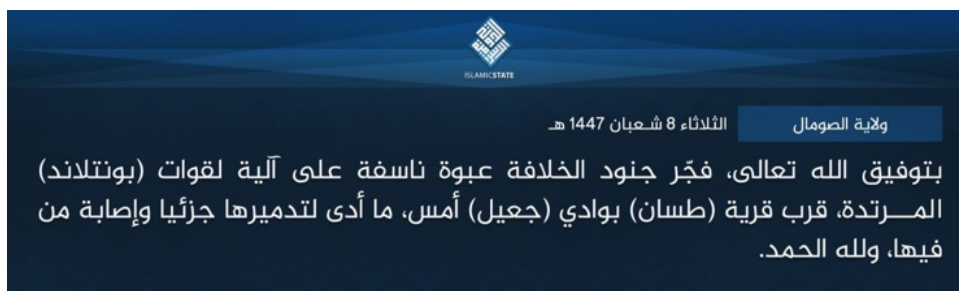


Image 2. Declaration from the ISS claiming responsibility for an IED explosion.²³

In the same way, Da'esh in Somalia issues its communiqués and propaganda through two official media outlets of the terrorist organisation: the Al Fustat²⁴ repository or website and the Amaq News Agency. On both websites, the ISS has a section where claimed attacks and official propaganda of the terrorist group can be consulted. In this case and through direct observation, the claim of responsibility for the same attack was observed on the Amaq Agency. The official producer of the ISS headlines the news as follows: «Assassination of the 'operations commander' of the Puntland forces' campaign in a shocking attack by the Islamic State in northeastern Somalia»²⁵, and goes on to explain that the military campaign carried out by Puntland forces began in December in the Bari region, northeastern Somalia.

Likewise, it explains that the attack by ISS fighters was carried out with the detonation of an explosive against a vehicle carrying Commander Ahmed Abdi Ali while he was traveling from the village of Tassan to the Jacell valley. He is presented in the communiqué as the «Commander of the Second Brigade of the enemy forces»²⁶. Similarly, the official producer of the terrorist organisation explains that those attacks were based on prior intelligence.

Actor	Channels	Recent Threat Milestones (2026)
Al Shabaab	Official channel Al Kataib and Shahada agency. Use of «digital bridges» cooperating with external causes (e.g., Gaza) and influencers	Claim of responsibility for an ambush against U.S. and Somali forces, eliminating foreign officers supervising suicide drones

²³ Source and own elaboration.

²⁴ This repository would be equivalent to the Shahada News Agency, as explained above.

²⁵ Translation obtained from a third person.

²⁶ Translation obtained from a third person.

	coordinated with military operations	(February 2026)
ISS	Al Fustat repository and Amaq agency	IED attack against a commander's vehicle, demonstrating high prior intelligence capability

Table 2. Technical and Media Comparison of Al Shabaab and ISS²⁷

4. Attacks on critical infrastructure and military targets and the use of drones

Attacks on critical infrastructure and military bases constitute one of the primary operational tools of Al Shabaab and the ISS. In this context, Al Shabaab has developed a warfare strategy asymmetrical in complex and sustained attacks. Its most characteristic tactic consists of using Suicide Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (SVBIED) to breach defensive positions, followed by infantry assaults²⁸. This combination has allowed it to execute high-impact operations against military and civilian targets between 2022 and 2026.

Among the most significant attacks was the siege of the Hayat Hotel in Mogadishu in August 2022, where a combination of explosions and armed men left 21 people dead and 117 injured²⁹. In June 2023, the group attacked a base belonging to the African Union Mission (ATMIS); and, two months later, Al Shabaab raided three military bases in Oswein, north of Mogadishu, causing between 150 and 178 government casualties³⁰.

The offensive continued in 2024 with attacks on General Gordon Base in Mogadishu and on the town of El Dheere, carried out through combined SVBIED and infantry operations³¹. Furthermore, in August of that year, the organisation carried out an attack on Lido Beach, an area frequented by businesspeople and diplomats, killing 32 people. During 2025, the group stepped up its activity through coordinated attacks in various

²⁷ Prepared by the authors based on the comparative analysis of the examined channels.

²⁸ KARR, Liam, "Houthi-Shabaab Weapons Deal; SFG Boost in Central Somalia", CRITICAL THREATS, June 2024, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/africa-file-june-13-2024-houthi-shabaab-weapons-deal-sfg-boost-in-central-somalia>

²⁹ EUROPA PRESS INTERNACIONAL, "El Ministerio de Salud somalí confirma 21 muertos y 117 heridos en el ataque de Al Shabaab al hotel Hayat", EUROPA PRESS, August 2022, <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-ministerio-salud-somali-confirma-21-muertos-117-heridos-ataque-shabaab-hotel-hayat-20220821133221.html>

³⁰ JACKSON, Ashley, "Flailing State: The Resurgence of al-Shabaab in Somalia", WAR ON THE ROCKS, June 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/flailing-state-the-resurgence-of-al-shabaab-in-somalia/>

³¹ FRANCE 24, "Más de 30 muertos en atentado en una playa de Somalia reivindicado por Al Shabaab", FRANCE24, August 2024, <https://www.france24.com/es/%C3%A1frica/20240803-m%C3%A1s-de-30-muertos-en-atentado-en-una-playa-de-somalia-reivindicado-por-al-shabaab>

regions of central and southern Somalia, as well as an attack on Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's presidential convoy and a suicide attack on a military recruitment centre³².

The most significant incident took place in January 2026 with the raid on military bases on the island of Kudha, in Lower Juba, where Al Shabaab claimed to have inflicted more than a hundred casualties and seized enemy weapons. These operations demonstrate the group's ability to combine military and propaganda objectives, reinforcing its image as a force to be reckoned with in the face of the Federal Government³³.

Another key aspect is the gradual integration of drones into the operational capabilities of terrorist groups. Initially used for reconnaissance and surveillance, Al Shabaab has sought to move towards the offensive use of these devices. In 2024, Putland forces intercepted kamikaze drones allegedly supplied by the Houthis in Yemen, confirming the existence of a network of cooperation and weapons trafficking between the two groups. Furthermore, international reports indicate that Al Shabaab fighters received technical training in Yemen to develop drone attack capabilities³⁴.

For its part, the ISS, although it has a small number of fighters and operates mainly in the mountains of Puntland, has demonstrated significant strategic capability. In December 2024, it launched a complex attack against Puntland security forces using car bombs and suicide bombers. Shortly afterwards, in January and February 2025, the group used drones in combat for the first time in Somalia, combining them with ground attacks and IEDs. This technological advance made the country the third African theatre where Da'esh employs drones operationally³⁵.

5. Conclusions

Analysis by Al Shabaab and the ISS leads to the conclusion that Somalia remains a particularly favourable environment for the development of jihadist terrorism. Institutional weakness, political fragmentation and the state's limited capacity to control large swathes

³² ECHEVERRÍA JESÚS, Carlos. El esfuerzo antiterrorista es aún necesario en Somalia. Revista del Ejército de Tierra Español 997/2025. <https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/media/downloadable/files/links/r/e/revista-ejercito-997.pdf> (accessed on 24 February 2026).

³³ Own source.

³⁴ ADF STAFF, "Suicide Drone Discovery in Somalia Signals Shifts in Terror Tactics", AFRICA DEFENSE FORUM, September 2024, <https://adf-magazine.com/2024/09/suicide-drone-discovery-in-somalia-signals-shift-in-terror-tactics/>

³⁵ MARUF, Harun y SELDIN, Jeff, "Islamic State in retreat after offensive in Somalia's Puntland", VOANEWS, marzo 2025, <https://www.voanews.com/a/islamic-state-in-retreat-after-offensive-in-somalia-puntland/7999111.html>

of territory have enabled these groups to establish themselves as armed actors with both military and propaganda capabilities.

The first key conclusion is that terrorism in Somalia cannot be understood solely in military terms. Al Shaabab has managed to maintain its influence thanks on its ability to exploit the state vacuum, establish local support networks and provide certain basic services in rural areas where the Federal Government has virtually no presence. Consequently, international military operations have achieved tactical results but have failed to eliminate the structural causes that allow the insurgency to persist.

Secondly, a comparative study of propaganda reveals clear differences between the two organisations. Al Shabaab has a more developed and professionalised communications structure, based on channels such as Al Kataib and Shahada, through which it combines religious, anti-colonial and nationalist narratives. Its strategy seeks to discredit the Somali government and bolster its own legitimacy amongst the local population. The ISS, by contrast, has a more limited propaganda infrastructure, centred on the Amaq agency and the Al Fustat repository.

Another key finding is that there is a marked difference between the operational capabilities of the two groups. Al Shabaab remains the country's main insurgent threat, with thousands of fighters and the capacity to carry out complex and sustained attacks against military bases, hotels, convoys and civilian areas.

However, a final aspect to bear in mind is the emergence of drones as a terrorist tool. Both Al Shabaab and the ISS have begun to use these technologies for surveillance, reconnaissance and, increasingly, for offensive operations. Furthermore, the link between Somali terrorist groups and the Houthis in Yemen demonstrates the existence of regional networks for the supply of weapons and the transfer of technology.

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