

PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE GAMBIA: ADDRESSING VULNERABILITIES AND STRENGTHENING RESILIENCE

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Sahel has emerged as a hotspot of security crises. Violent attacks against civilian targets and symbols of state institutions by jihadist groups and other violent extremist organisations continue to draw regional and global attention to this complex security situation, which is also gradually extending southward to the West African coastal states. For clarity, in this Policy Brief, violent extremism is defined as the intentional use of violence by groups seeking to assert the dominance of one identity—whether based on gender, religion, culture, or ethnicity—over others. These groups often strive to dismantle the symbols of established political and cultural institutions, replacing them with alternative systems governed by rigid, intolerant, and authoritarian ideologies (Djanato et al., 2024).

Citizens across Sahelian states identify a number of problems as representing key vulnerabilities that are exploited by jihadist movements and other violent non-state armed actors for recruitment. These problems include: societal conflicts, intercommunal tensions, organised crime, and weak governance (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025; Nsaibia, 2024; Thurston, 2024). In addressing the crisis, the United Nations emphasised in a 2013 statement on the Sahel that violent extremism cannot be defeated solely through military confrontation, law enforcement, or intelligence operations (Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, 2013). Instead, a more effective response requires addressing the root causes of communal tensions and social conflict, and strengthening governance by promoting the rule

of law (Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation, 2013). Corroborating this position, UNDP (2016: 4) argued that, while violent extremism calls for interventions to protect the security of people and assets, efforts aimed at preventing violent extremism need to look beyond the narrow domain of security concerns, and in particular towards the development-related causes of, and solutions to, the crisis.



The rise of violent extremism in West Africa has had devastating effects, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, and Benin. Violent attacks by groups such as Jama'at Nasr al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Ansar Dine, and Boko Haram against communities, institutions, and symbols of state authority have surged across the Sahel, raising concerns about spillover effects into neighbouring states, especially the coastal states (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025; Eizenga & Gnanguênon, 2024). Attacks by extremist groups in and around the W-Arly-Pendjari Park (WAP Complex wetlands and parks), especially in northern Benin and Togo, have raised the spectre of infiltration by extremist groups and heightened threats in the coastal states of West Africa.

Countries bordering the conflict zones, including Ghana, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Benin, Togo, and Mauritania, face significant challenges in reducing the potential for infiltration, anti-state messaging, and the eventual spread of violent extremism into their own territories. Violent extremist groups typically exploit internal vulnerabilities—such as limited government presence and weak social service delivery, intercommunal tensions, and socio-economic disparities—to disseminate narratives that undermine trust in state institutions and fuel radicalisation. By amplifying grievances and portraying themselves as a suitable alternative, violent extremist groups aim to destabilise and undermine established governance structures in local communities and expand their influence across national borders (Eizenga & Gnanguênon, 2024).

Contrary to expectations, and despite promises to address the worsening security situation, the frequency of incidents of violent extremism and deadly attacks has increased in the Sahel following military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The dissolution of regional security cooperation frameworks, such as the G5 Sahel and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), has further weakened collective responses to violent extremism and exacerbated the potential for regional instability (Eizenga & Gnanguênon, 2024). The withdrawal of the three Sahel countries (Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso) from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has further complicated regional counterterrorism efforts, making the sharing of intelligence, policy coordination, and response collaboration more challenging (Eizenga & Gnanguênon, 2024).

The Gambia, the smallest nation in continental Africa by both landmass and population, is geographically tied to the Sahel, given its location surrounded by Senegal and its proximity to Mali. Despite its small size, The Gambia has remained politically stable in a region plagued by civil strife, political instability, and rising violent extremism (World Bank, 2020). Even during 22 years of dictatorship under former President Yahya Jammeh, Gambian society demonstrated resilience and strove to maintain peaceful coexistence and social harmony among its diverse ethnic and religious communities, despite the difficulties associated with authoritarian rule (Freedom House, 2023). Throughout the years of rising violent extremism in nearby Mali, the threat of violent extremism in northern Senegal, and the decades-long Casamance rebellion in southern Senegal, The Gambia has managed to remain peaceful, insulating itself from the phenomena of youth radicalisation and violent extremism that have plagued the greater Senegambia region.

For context, The Gambia is surrounded by Senegal on three sides—north, east, and south—while being bordered by the Atlantic Ocean to the west. Senegal, in turn, shares borders with Mali and Mauritania. The deteriorating security situation in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger has heightened fears of spillover effects across West Africa (Afrobarometer, 2021). These spillover effects could easily reach The Gambia, owing to the intertwined nature of social relations with Senegal and the highly porous nature of the Senegal-Gambia borderland.

Although neither Senegal nor The Gambia has experienced a single terrorist attack, Senegal has faced sporadic security challenges along its south-eastern border with Mali. The Kédougou and Tambacounda regions of Senegal, which border Mali's Kayes region, have come under serious security threat, as violent extremist group attacks have expanded from northern Mali westward towards Senegal (Toupane, 2021). The expansion of terrorist groups, especially the Jama'at Nasr al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), into the Kayes region in Western Mali, and the operations of those groups, have raised the spectre of violent extremism for Senegal and, by extension, The Gambia (Tendeng, 2025). Similarly, The Gambia faces conditions that could make it vulnerable to threats of radicalisation and violent extremism similar to those found in the Sahel states. Underlying factors, such as youth unemployment and underemployment, poverty, inequality, governance challenges, and porous borders expose the country to the risk of youth radicalisation and the potential for violent extremism (Voice Gambia, 2023). Thus, worsening economic conditions and high youth unemployment have the potential to exacerbate The Gambia's vulnerabilities to radicalism and violent extremism (Afrobarometer, 2024; NDI, 2024).

In light of the implications of radicalism and violent extremism for development, peace, and stability, the Gambian government, alongside non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based actors, continues to address these challenges through policies aimed at reducing economic hardship while reinforcing traditional peacebuilding structures within the context of the Infrastructure for Peace (I4P) framework. Against this backdrop, this Policy Brief provides an in-depth analysis of the major drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism in The Gambia. It documents the roles of key actors and initiatives in preventing radicalisation and violent extremism, and assesses the effectiveness of collaboration among humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus actors. It also provides evidence-based policy recommendations to enhance collaboration among HDP actors and strengthen community resilience in The Gambia within the context of the ongoing democratic transition and reform agenda.

1

DRIVERS OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE SAHEL AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GAMBIA

Violent extremism in the Sahel is driven by multiple interconnected factors, ranging from political instability to economic hardship and growing religious fanaticism and radicalisation. The situation in Mali exemplifies these challenges, as the country has been a focal point of crises largely attributed to a separatist insurgency led by the Tuareg ethnic group, a fractious landscape of ethnic militia violence, self-defence militias formed among farming communities (Ganda Koi), and jihadist violence in the northern regions. While the Tuareg rebellion predates the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, the fall of Gaddafi and the implosion of the Libyan state opened the floodgate for a new wave of Tuareg insurgency, which was exploited by jihadist/extremist groups, resulting in the unravelling of any semblance of state governance structures and traditional socio-political institutions across Northern Mali (Farhaoui, 2013). This situation has now been compounded by extremist/jihadist violence and a multiplicity of other security challenges, including banditry, transnational organised crime, and inter-communal violence, especially in the central regions of Mopti and Segou (Ananyev & Poyker, 2023; Berger, 2019; Thurston, 2018). Additionally, Mali's status as one of the poorest nations in Sub-Saharan Africa, coupled with prolonged droughts, military coups, and worsening economic conditions, has necessitated increased humanitarian intervention from international actors such as the European Union (EU) (Zoubir, 2017). These dire conditions provide fertile ground for terrorist organisations, which exploit socio-economic vulnerabilities to recruit unemployed and marginalised youth into their ranks.

The Centre on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation (CGCC) has identified further drivers of violent extremism, including political instability, political marginalisation and exclusion, gross human rights violations by governments, corruption, and weak governance. Prolonged violent conflicts and the perception of governments as illegitimate serve as push factors, driving individuals to join extremist groups in search of material benefits, a source of security, and ideological purpose (CGCC, 2013). Some of the drivers, especially those relating to political participation, human rights violations, and governance, have resonance in The Gambia in the context of the nation's 22-year dictatorship and continued governance challenges following the 2016-2017 democratic transition.

2

THE GAMBIA'S VULNERABILITY TO VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Although The Gambia has not experienced incidences of violent extremism in the past, it remains susceptible to them. The Gambia's susceptibility can be situated within the context of its porous borders with Senegal (a state bordering the Sahelian countries of Mali and Mauritania), its internal governance challenges, and a growing influx of young people into reformist groups. While the extent of youth radicalisation in the country has not been comprehensively documented, a 2023 study by the Timbuktu Institute found that the hard-line religious teachings and preaching practised by some religious leaders, and the unregulated nature of madrasas and daaras (educational centres focused on the memorisation of passages from the Quran) serve as potential sources of youth radicalisation in The Gambia. The study highlighted the need for government oversight over religious education and the messages conveyed

through public preaching (dawa'ah), and for the monitoring of returning scholars, especially from the Middle East (Timbuktu Institute, 2023).

The report's findings underscore the danger of religious intolerance becoming a significant driver of radicalisation, religious extremism, and conflict in The Gambia, if left unaddressed. Growing sectarian divides within the Islamic community, particularly between the Sunni groups (notably the Salafi, Ahlus Sunnah, and Tabligh Jamaat) and the Ahmadi sects, have already resulted in minor clashes. Badjie (2024) and Jawo (2022) also highlight the dangers that rising religious intolerance poses for stability, security, and peace in The Gambia. Emphasising these dangers, a participant in a Key Informant Interview (KII) noted that:

Violent extremism creates fear and division within our communities. While The Gambia has not experienced major attacks, the growing influence of extremist ideologies threatens our peaceful coexistence. We have seen a few clashes resulting from the expression of religious intolerance. The presence of different sects within Islam can be alarming, particularly for young people who are drawn to radical views due to frustration, economic hardship, or misinformation. (KII transcript, Islamic Religious Leader, Kanifing, 2024)

An illustrative case of inter-sect tensions as a potential source of extremism and violence is that of the Ndigal Sect, an Islamic movement founded in Kerr Morr Ali Village. The sect practices a distinctive interpretation of Islam that exempts followers from traditional obligations such as the five daily prayers and fasting during Ramadan, unless divinely directed by their leader, Sering Ndigal. This deviation from mainstream Islamic practice led to open disagreement with the Supreme Islamic Council (SIC) in The Gambia, which argued that the sect's practices are un-Islamic (The Gambia Victims Bantaba, 2022). During Yahya Jammeh's regime, the state aligned with dominant Sunni actors and accused the sect of criminal activities, including plotting to overthrow the government, although key figures such as Muhammed Secka were later released for lack of evidence. The sect faced persecution not only from state security agents but also from other Muslim communities, who viewed their beliefs as heretical. This resulted in widespread harassment, torture, destruction of property, and forced displacement to neighbouring Senegal (The Gambia Victims Bantaba, 2022). Despite constitutional protections for religious freedom and a 2017 High Court ruling affirming their right to return, as of 2025 the sect remains in exile and continues to seek justice and the restoration of its rights (Forayaa, 2025).

Beyond the issue of religious radicalisation, The Gambia faces socio-economic drivers of violent extremism that mirror conditions in the Sahel. High youth unemployment and economic distress create an environment where radicalism and extremism can take root. According to Afrobarometer data from 2024, 68% of Gambians have considered emigrating, with economic hardship cited as the primary reason. Among them, 75% are young adults aged 18-35, reflecting the vulnerability of the youth population in The Gambia to radicalism and extremism. The 2024 Population and Housing Census report similarly highlighted that The Gambia contains a young population battling an economic crisis, with a corresponding susceptibility to radicalism and extremism (Government of The Gambia, 2025).

3

EXAMINING THE ROLE OF THE HUMANI-TARIAN-DEVELOPMENT-PEACE NEXUS AND COORDINATION IN PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE GAMBIA

Efforts to prevent violent extremism in The Gambia have been guided by national and international legal and policy frameworks. Following The Gambia's democratic transition in 2016, actors in the country's humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus have played crucial roles in security sector reforms, transitional justice (including the promotion of reconciliation and societal cohesion), and the process of constitutional reform. These reforms aim to address structural vulnerabilities that encourage the growth of radical ideologies, extremism, and organised crime.

At the regional level, ECOWAS has implemented the 2024-2025 Regional Resilience Strategy for West Africa, focusing on good governance, peace and security, economic resilience, sustainable livelihoods, social inclusion, and climate change adaptation. This strategy advocates for a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach to fostering long-term stability and tackling internal governance challenges that have implications for youth radicalisation and extremism (UNDP, 2024).

In alignment with these regional efforts, ECOWAS conducted a Security Sector Reform and Governance (SSRG) training event in The Gambia in 2022, bringing together policymakers, civil society groups, and security personnel to strengthen national security legal and policy frameworks (ECOWAS Commission, 2022). The Gambian government has also produced key policy documents, including the National Security Policy (2019), the National Security Strategy (2020), and the Security Sector Reform Strategy (2020). These legal frameworks aim to build a robust, people-centred security sector capable of addressing contemporary threats such as violent extremism and transnational organised crime (Saka, 2025). The production of these documents reflects a high level of coordination in bringing together security institutions, particularly facilitated by the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF). One official from the DCAF, speaking during a KII about the importance of providing an enabling legal framework and other collaborative engagements for addressing security challenges, including countering radicalisation and violent extremism, observed:

We played a key role in developing the Police Doctrine and the National Security Policy, bringing together all security institutions, including the Office of National Security (ONS), to collaborate on these documents. Additionally, we are planning a community sensitisation [awareness-raising] programme on the role of the police, in partnership with organisations such as the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and the National Council for Civic Education (NCCE). (KII transcript, DCAF, Kanifing, 2025)

Support for security sector reform aligned with national security priorities and concerns, including preventing radicalisation and violent extremism, has also been extended to security institutions in The Gambia by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), through its Police Programme Africa. Central to GIZ support has been the new Police Bill, drafted with the aim of improving the structure, responsibilities, and ethical standards of the Gambian Police Force, which is under parliamentary consideration (Gagigo, 2024). Similarly, the National Security Bill, also under consideration in Parliament, aims to address long-standing gaps in centralised coordination and intelligence gathering—issues that have exposed the country to serious security vulnerabilities (Office of National Security, n.d.). In addition, the government

has developed The Gambia's first-ever National Counter-Terrorism Strategy, marking a significant step towards safeguarding national interests and ensuring citizens can live free from the threat of terrorism through the enactment of an enabling legal framework (Office of National Security, n.d.).

The National Action Plan on Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) is another significant policy initiative designed to engage young people in peacebuilding. Developed through consultations with over 2,000 participants, including youth, women, and marginalised groups, the YPS plan aligns with the five pillars of UN Security Council Resolution 2250: "Participation, Protection, Prevention, Partnerships, and Disengagement/Reintegration". Civil society organisations have actively supported these efforts; for example, Peace Hub The Gambia trained 50 women and young people in YPS in 2023, while the National Youth Council (NYC) partnered with UNDP to host roundtable discussions with 72 participants on the development of the National Action Plan on Youth, Peace, and Security (UNDP, 2024).

As well as organising these training programmes, Peace Hub The Gambia implements targeted initiatives that engage communities, with a strong focus on empowering young people. Through strategic partnerships with community leaders, they provide training that equips young people as peace advocates, thereby fostering grassroots conflict resolution. Additionally, they champion the integration of peace education into school curricula, encouraging long-term societal change through education. A participant from Peace Hub The Gambia, summarising these efforts, commented that:

One of our key initiatives is the Insider Mediator Program, where we train young people to be peace advocates in their communities. We also run community dialogue sessions that bring together religious leaders, traditional leaders, and security forces to discuss early warning signs of radicalisation and extremism. Additionally, we partner with schools to integrate peace education into the curriculum. (KII transcript, Peace Hub The Gambia, Kanifing, 2025)

Under its Multi-Annual Indicative Programme (2021-2027), the EU has also played a proactive role in The Gambia's democratic transition project. With a focus on three priority areas-promoting good governance, fostering a green economy for sustainable job creation, and advancing human development—the EU has directed its support at enhancing the prospects for sustainable peace and human security in a transitioning Gambia (Republic of The Gambia, 2022). Through The Gambia's Responsive and Accountable Democratic Transition initiative (EU-UNDP GREAT Initiative), the EU is implementing projects aimed at addressing The Gambia's vulnerabilities by enhancing political participation in the constitution-building process and improving access to justice through the implementation of the recommendations contained in the report of the Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparations Commission (UNDP The Gambia, 2023). The rationale behind these initiatives is that they will help heal societal wounds arising from The Gambia's history of authoritarian rule, enhance reconciliation, and promote social cohesion, ultimately reducing the likelihood of social conflicts.

As well as focusing on governance and justice, the EU has also prioritised efforts to counter violent extremism in The Gambia through its interventions in the country. As one EU representative noted:

Local communities are at the heart of our approach. Through partnerships with civil society organisations, religious leaders, and youth groups, we ensure that interventions are community-driven. The CONNEKT project, for example, directly involves young people in shaping prevention strategies, recognising them as key actors in countering radicalisation. (KII transcript, EU Representative to The Gambia, Kanifing, 2025)

4

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND TRADITIONAL AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE GAMBIA

Local organisations such as the Gambian branch of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP-The Gambia) have been pivotal in the development of conflict early warning systems, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding. WANEP's Conflict and Development Analysis (CDA) for The Gambia, updated in 2024, identifies economic vulnerability, youth unemployment, and governance challenges as key drivers of conflict. In response, WANEP has initiated community training programs and insider mediation initiatives directed at strengthening community resilience and promote sustainable peace.

Religious and traditional leaders also continue to play vital roles in promoting peace and countering radicalisation and the spread of extremist narratives. According to an Afrobarometer report (2024), 62% of Gambians trust religious leaders, while 35% trust traditional leaders. Popular trust in these traditional institutions, and the influence they wield, make them effective agents for dispute resolution and strengthening community resilience. One respondent, commenting on the roles that religious and traditional leaders are playing in helping to counter radicalisation and extremism narratives in The Gambia, observed:

Religious and traditional leaders educate communities about the dangers of extremism through sermons, dialogues, and mediation, promoting peace and tolerance. (KII transcript, Traditional Leader, 2025)

While there is a common understanding about the dangers of violent extremism, there is also a persistent attitude of denial, which maintains that such dangers do not represent a pressing challenge in The Gambia. On this subject, a participant from the National Youth Council commented:

Many communities acknowledge that violent extremism is a potential risk, but some still see it as a distant threat to societal peace. Economic hardship, social exclusion, and misinformation make some youth more vulnerable to radical ideologies. In some areas, there is also a lack of trust between young people and security agencies, which affects community resilience efforts. (KII transcript, NYC, 2025)

There is, however, a recognition that several drivers of radicalisation, extremism, and violence have disproportionately impacted communities in rural Gambia. These drivers often contribute to violent conflicts or exacerbate the difficulties experienced by young people in these areas. The following perspective from a community leader reinforces the broader observation that structural challenges and mistrust in security institutions are key barriers to peace and resilience in rural areas of The Gambia:

In the rural areas, young people face daily struggles, no jobs, no real opportunities, and poor services. These frustrations build up, and when you add weak border controls and limited state presence, it creates an environment where conflict can easily grow. (KII transcript, Community Leader, 2025)

While there are efforts already under way in the context of the HDP nexus framework in The Gambia, the country lacks a formal structural coordination mechanism that effectively links humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding initiatives. Although this study highlights a correlation between peacebuilding efforts and support for humanitarian interventions aimed at preventing radicalisation and violent extremism, there remains a high level of fragmentation and overlapping of functions among government agencies/institutions, NGOs, and international development partners, all operating in silos and in ways that reveal a lack of synergy and coordination. These challenges were explicitly identified during interviews, where participants emphasised that enhanced coordination could improve collaboration among HDP actors and increase the sustainability of interventions in The Gambia. One participant commented on both the coordination gap and the long-term sustainability of projects, stating that:

One challenge is ensuring long-term engagement beyond project funding cycles. While humanitarian responses provide immediate relief, development and peacebuilding require sustained efforts. There are also coordination gaps between different actors, and ensuring alignment among various stakeholders remains a priority. (KII transcript, EU Representative to The Gambia, 2025)

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

While The Gambia has remained resilient against violent extremism, underlying socio-economic vulnerabilities necessitate urgent policy interventions. A proactive, community-centred approach is essential for enhancing collaboration and ensuring a comprehensive response to emerging threats, including those of radicalisation and violent extremism. This Policy Brief highlights the existing coordination between actors in the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, while also identifying critical gaps in aligning humanitarian support with peacebuilding initiatives. A more structured and coordinated framework is required to prevent duplication of efforts and to optimise approaches to tackling radicalisation and violent extremism. Such a framework should also contribute to building long-term, sustainable peace within vulnerable communities in The Gambia.

The following policy recommendations can strengthen national and regional efforts:

1. Strengthen economic opportunities for youth:

Addressing unemployment through skills development, entrepreneurship support, and vocational training can reduce young people's vulnerability to extremist recruitment in The Gambia. The government needs to prioritise the implementation of policies that enhance youth skills acquisition and to support policies that advance private sector-led job creation.

2. Enhance governance and security sector reforms:

Implementing community-based policing, improving the relationship between security institutions and communities, and strengthening oversight of security agencies can build public trust in security institutions and enhance community resilience to radicalisation, extremism, and violence.

3. Improve HDP nexus cooperation:

Stronger coordination between humanitarian-development-peace nexus actors is crucial to developing holistic and sustainable responses to radicalisation and violent extremism. HDP actors operating in the social ecosystem of The Gambia therefore need to prioritise coordination and collaboration.

4. Regulate religious education and preaching:

Establishing monitoring mechanisms for madrasas and religious sermons can help mitigate the potential for radicalisation and prevent the spread of extremist ideologies. The government should actively regulate religious education by ensuring that the curricula taught in religious educational institutions align with national education policies, in partnership with the SIC. This initiative will standardise madrasa curricula and promote responsible religious teaching and dawa'ah.

5. Improve regional security cooperation:

Strengthening ECOWAS-led initiatives and fostering collaboration with neighbouring states are crucial for countering transnational threats. Regional cooperation enhances the monitoring of organised crime and the tracking of violent extremist activities. The Gambia should draw lessons from affected countries and leverage regional coordination mechanisms to strengthen its own counter-extremism efforts

6. Ensure that interventions are inclusive:

Collaborative efforts must be inclusive, involving religious and community leaders from the outset. Broad-based societal participation in peacebuilding initiatives will ensure that diverse perspectives are considered, fostering a more unified and sustainable approach to preventing violent extremism.

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The REcAP network is an interactive platform for regional cooperation, bringing together organisations and experts in peacebuilding and preventing conflicts and violent extremism in West Africa and the Lake Chad Basin.

Implemented by the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the REcAP Network project has been designed to respond to capacity gaps and limitations to collaboration between peacebuilding experts, policymakers and, practitioners and

to improve the impact, progress, and sustainability of peacebuilding research, policy and practice.

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