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BIO

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Introduction

In 1969, Palestinians across Lebanon declared that they were carrying out a revolution in their refugee camps. Nationalist militants known as *fidaiyyin** ousted state security authorities from the camps and took charge themselves, asserting control over access and services. The new status quo was codified in the Cairo Agreement, signed the same year between the Lebanese government and Yasser Arafat's Fatah organisation.[1] Around the same time, the *fidaiyyin* took control of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), previously overseen by the Arab League, and established the infrastructure of a pseudo-state in exile. Until the Israeli invasion and siege of Beirut in 1982, the PLO not only trained thousands of fighters but also provided healthcare services, ran social clubs, and organised cultural facilities in refugee camps across the country. Numerous Palestinian refugees and nationalist leaders, along with a range of historians and sociologists, have termed this period *al thawra al filastiniya* ('the Palestinian revolution'), or simply the 'days of the *thawra*' – revolution.[2]

"IT WAS COMPRISED OF POLITICAL, CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL ELEMENTS..."

The *thawra* shares certain characteristics with other more widely-known revolutions such as those of China, Russia, France, and Iran.[3] It was comprised of political, cultural and intellectual elements as well as a military campaign; it mobilised people and resources using the rhetoric of liberation and popular struggle; and it established substantive connections with other radical and revolutionary movements around the world. Yet despite these commonalities, the Palestinian *thawra* fails to meet most of the criteria conventionally associated with revolution. It did not engender the overthrow of a national government or the declaration of a new nation-state. Nor did it destroy one socio-economic system in favour of another. While it created a new status quo in which the *fidaiyyin* controlled and ran the refugee camps – along with parts of southern Lebanon – these areas remained part of Lebanon and the Palestinian refugees remained stateless. As such, the *thawra* does not comply with many of the most influential theories of revolution which take a structural approach in emphasising outcomes. This approach, pioneered by Theda Skocpol and continued by Jack Goldstone and Jeff Goodwin, is grounded in a particular definition of revolutions that does not apply to the Palestinian case.[4] What, then, is the value of studying the *thawra* through the analytical framework of revolutions?

"SELBIN HIMSELF EMPHASISES INSTEAD THE ROLE AND EXPERIENCES OF THE ACTORS WHO MAKE REVOLUTIONS HAPPEN."

It is argued here that in fact, the *thawra*'s unconventional nature as a revolution is precisely what makes it so illuminating as a historical case study. Examinations of the *thawra* can highlight the importance of avoiding overly restrictive definitions of 'revolution', and provide an opportunity to take greater account of subjectivities, narratives and experience. As Eric Selbin argues, studies of revolution need to expand their analyses beyond structural outcomes if they are to avoid being reductive.[5] Selbin himself emphasises instead the role and experiences of the actors who make revolutions happen.[6] The Palestinian *thawra* is a perfect example of this. As such, it has considerable potential as a subject of scholarly enquiry. The *thawra*'s historical significance demonstrates both the importance of subjectivities and the limitations of structural outcomes-oriented theories, of the kind promoted by Skocpol, Goldstone and Goodwin.

Accordingly, this paper's analysis is grounded in critiques of conventional theories of revolution. In particular, it draws on the work of George Lawson, who argues that outcomes-based theories are essentialist and overly restrictive. According to Lawson, such theories erroneously conceptualise revolutions

* The term *fidaiyyin* (singular *fidaiyi*) literally means 'those who sacrifice themselves'. It is usually translated as 'militants' or 'guerrillas'.

in fixed terms, thus denying their true nature as 'dynamic processes' embedded in varying historical contexts.[7] In its concurrence with such critiques, this paper has much in common with the work of William Sewell, whose study of the French revolution emphasises the impact of events rather than structures.[8] Similarly, the Palestinian *thawra* is a case of a revolution that was made by agential rather than structural forces; in other words, its history is entirely at odds with Skocpol's infamous contention that 'revolutions are not made, they come'.[9] Thus at the heart of this paper lie two contentions: that the *thawra* should be considered a revolution despite its structural exceptionalism; and that it is a valuable case study for critiquing and developing scholarly understandings of revolutions more generally.

Instead of fixating on overthrowing a state, the *thawra* centred on the dynamics between a stateless people (the Palestinians) and the foreign state hosting them as refugees (Lebanon). Much of its significance was grounded in its intangible, even psychological impact, of the kind that Selbin deems so important.[10] As such, its effects on Palestinian and Levantine history cannot be quantified, but nor does this mean that it should simply be dismissed. As a case study, the *thawra* shows that political movements can be experienced as revolutionary regardless of their formal limitations. The implications of this are not limited to the case of the Palestinians or even the Middle East, but have a far bigger potential significance.

With these considerations in mind, this paper examines the events of the Palestinian *thawra* to assess how, why, and with what repercussions it can be understood as a revolution. The first section examines the historical developments that precipitated the *thawra*, including the background to the refugee camps' establishment in Lebanon and their connection to the politics of Palestinian displacement. This provides crucial context for understanding the events of the *thawra* itself, which are outlined in the second section. The paper's third section then assesses the various arguments around whether this was truly a revolution, probing the wider significance of Palestinian tendencies to interpret it as such. The final section concludes with a consideration of the *thawra*'s regional legacy, particularly in relation to the so-called 'Arab Spring'. Central to this paper is the notion that the Palestinian *thawra* provides a case study for understanding how 'revolution' is understood in the popular consciousness, and the myriad meanings that are attached to the term. In so doing it illuminates the value of engaging with subjectivities in order to gain a deeper understanding of lived experiences and social history.

"...THE KEY POINT TO HIGHLIGHT IS THAT THE REFUGEES WENT INTO EXILE WITH THE FIRM EXPECTATION THAT THEY WOULD NOT BE AWAY FOR LONG."

The Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, 1948-69

The Palestinians first entered Lebanon en masse as refugees following the 1948 War, which resulted in the creation of the state of Israel and the dispossession of around 750,000 Palestinians[11] (known in Arabic as the *Nakba*, meaning 'catastrophe').[12] An estimated 100,000 sought refuge in Lebanon, mostly coming from Galilee and coastal cities in northern Palestine.[13] The nature of their flight has been highly contested and is the subject of a wide-ranging historiographical debate too extensive to cover here.[14] For the purposes of this paper, the key point to highlight is that the refugees went into exile with the firm expectation that they would not be away for long. Their belief in their imminent return to Palestine defined their collective consciousness as refugees and had a direct bearing on how they came to perceive and relate to their subsequent decades-long exile.[15]

The fate of the Palestinian refugees in the late 1940s varied according to their wealth, resources, and the host country in which they sought shelter. The Palestinians in Lebanon encountered a state that hosted them with reluctance from the beginning. As a tiny fledgling state that had declared independence just five years before the *Nakba*, Lebanon's weak infrastructure had only a limited

capacity to absorb the refugees who now comprised nearly one-tenth of its population.[16] To complicate matters further, the Lebanese state operated on a consociational basis, with political and economic power distributed on the basis of sect.[17] The system favoured the Maronite Christian community, who feared that absorbing the majority-Sunni Muslim Palestinians might endanger their privilege.[18] As a result, the policies of the Lebanese state – always headed by a Maronite President – sought to keep the Palestinian refugees as a separate and subordinate population within the country.

Lebanese hostility towards its Palestinian refugee population was compounded by additional factors particular to that country, and not found in Jordan and Syria – both of which also hosted large Palestinian refugee populations. For one thing, Lebanon's small size meant that its Palestinian refugee population was particularly large in relative terms; a similar number of Palestinians had fled to Syria during the *Nakba*, but the latter's population was almost three times the size of Lebanon's.[19] Moreover, Lebanon's size made it especially vulnerable to the possibility of Israeli attacks, which could be prompted by Palestinian militant activism across the border. As a result, the Lebanese government sought to keep the Palestinian refugees passive, and to suppress any moves they might make to organise themselves politically. In the words of PLO official Shafiq al-Hout, himself a Palestinian refugee who lived in Lebanon, 'Lebanese policy towards the [Palestinian] refugees has always been underpinned by fear'.[20]

A final factor specific to Lebanon was the fact that some factions within the country – particularly the Maronite Christian community – covertly supported Israel, and were therefore politically opposed to the Palestinians, decrying their presence in the country.[21] This was in contrast to Syria and Jordan, where political support for the Palestinian cause was an uncontroversial point of unity. As a result of all these factors, Lebanon quickly became renowned as the Arab host state where Palestinian refugees faced the worst treatment and the worst conditions. Such hostility was not merely rhetorical, but directly shaped the state's policies towards the refugee population, which was designed to keep them in a condition of disempowerment and marginalisation.

As non-citizens without visas, the Palestinian refugees came under the domain of the Lebanese army's security agency, the Deuxième Bureau (DB). Articulating the fear described by Al Hout, DB Head Joseph Kaylani explained his mantra thus: 'The Palestinian is like a spring: if you step on him he stays quiet, but if you take your foot off, he'll hit you in the face.'[22] In the 1950s and early 1960s, the DB controlled the 17 refugee camps that had been established after the *Nakba* to shelter the Palestinians. Although a significant

proportion of Palestinians in Lebanon lived outside the camps, the DB nevertheless focussed its activities on the latter. The reason for this was simple: the camps housed the poorest Palestinian refugees, whom the DB had assessed as the most likely to be attracted to radical politics and nationalist activism. This, of course, was precisely the opposite of what the Lebanese state wanted. Accordingly, the DB continuously worked to prevent any possibility of Palestinian political activism taking root in the camps.

The demarcated nature of the camps as defined geographical spaces made them relatively easy to surveil and control.[23] Utilising this separateness, the DB clamped down tightly on any attempts at nationalist activism or expression in the camps, banning the display of Palestinian flags and insignia.[24] It paid stipends to camp *mukhtars* (community leaders) and informants who kept control and maintained order inside.[25] From 1959, it also used the former Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husseini, as an instrument of control. In exchange for the residency permit that allowed him to live in Beirut until his death, the Lebanese authorities allegedly made use of al-Husseini's standing in the Palestinian diaspora by recruiting him to pacify refugee discontent and potential nationalist agitation in the camps.[26]

Perhaps most importantly, the DB used its power to grant or deny work and travel permits as a way of containing any potential agitation at this time. Anyone who attended political meetings in the camps was subsequently denied permits.[27] Any Palestinian who left Lebanon for military training abroad was barred from returning. Even those who were not politically active faced severe restrictions on their right to work, move or travel, which only the DB could allow. They were so disempowered that permission was required even for refugees in one camp to visit relatives or friends in another.[28]

Unsurprisingly, the DB had a notorious reputation among Palestinians. Fawaz Turki, a Palestinian refugee who grew up in Burj al-Barajneh camp in Beirut, recalls DB agents intruding into refugee shelters to terrorise the residents, often with drunken violence.[29] Years later, PLO leader and *fidaiyi* Abu Jihad described the situation thus:

> Our people in the camps [in the Arab host states] were totally isolated. They were not allowed any freedom of movement. They were not allowed to speak or write any word about our problem. They were not allowed to organise. They were not allowed to demonstrate. And those of us who did try to organise were treated as spies. I could tell you hundreds of stories about how all the Arab intelligence

"AS THIS ACCOUNT SHOWS, THE STATE SERVICES SUCCEEDED IN CREATING AN ATMOSPHERE OF TOTAL REPRESSION AND FEAR IN THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS."

> services intimidated and tortured our people in order to have their agents among us.[30]

As this account shows, the state services succeeded in creating an atmosphere of total repression and fear in the Palestinian refugee camps. While Abu Jihad spoke of the situation across the Arab host states, the denial of rights to Palestinians was most acute in Lebanon. This was in large part due to the activities of the DB, which Shafiq al-Hout described as an 'absolute ruler… [with] an iron fist';[31] its brutality was in turn driven by the political and demographic calculations outlined above.

However, the DB's strategy also had another effect. In depriving so many refugees of gainful employment and alienating them from the state and its structures, it also encouraged their collective identification as Palestinians and inadvertently facilitated their political radicalisation.[32] Similarly, its tight control and demarcation of the camps contributed to the latter's separateness, which enabled their subsequent transformation into political and militant hubs.[33] While the DB's strategy initially succeeded in deterring Palestinian political activism, this would not last forever. Two decades of political, social and economic repression

eventually generated a backlash. The spark that triggered it arrived in 1967, 19 years into the Palestinians' exile.

The Palestinian revolution

In June 1967, Israel achieved a stunning military defeat against its regional enemies. It took just six days to defeat the Arab coalition of Egypt, Syria and Jordan, taking territory from each of these states to almost quadruple its size.[34] In so doing it occupied the last remaining parts of historic Palestine that had remained under Arab control in 1948: the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. As many as 500,000 Palestinians became refugees as a result, around half for the second time.[35] Israel's victory sent shockwaves across the region and became known in the Arab world as *al-naksa*, meaning 'the setback'.[36] For the Palestinians, it engendered feelings of despondency, frustration, and renewed shame and humiliation, as the losses of the *Nakba* were extended and magnified. The refugees' resulting devastation and trauma was widespread and visceral, with the significance of 1967 continually emphasised in memoirs and testimonies.[37] The defeat would prove a turning point for the Middle East.

Despite Lebanon's formal non-involvement in the 1967 War, it was not exempt from its impact. Prior to 1967, the Arab states had insisted that they would win back Palestine for the refugees, using this to justify their repression of Palestinian political activism on the grounds that it was not needed. The Lebanese authorities had frequently told the Palestinians, 'all you have to do is eat and sleep… the Arab armies will get your country back for you.'[38] Yet the 1967 War showed decisively the hollowness of such promises. Jordan, Syria and Egypt had not only failed to win back Palestine but had essentially caused another *Nakba*, while Lebanon had not even participated in the offensive. The Palestinian refugees now no longer believed that the Arab states could or would bring about their longed-for return.[39] A Palestinian-centric form of politics led by the refugees themselves had been fledgling since the 1950s and had gained traction over the 1960s. After the defeat of the Arab states, it moved to the forefront. Palestinian politician and writer Ahmad Samih Khalidi would thus later observe, 'A central paradox of 1967 is that by defeating the Arabs, Israel resurrected the Palestinians'.[40]

The newly dominant 'Palestinianised' politics was dominated by the *fidaiyyin*. Literally meaning 'those who sacrifice themselves', the term was used to refer to Palestinian nationalist militants or guerrillas who undertook operations against Israel. Many came from refugee camps, although their leaders were usually from middle-class backgrounds. The fact that they operated outside the control of the Arab states, and often with little support from them, made

the *fidaiyyin* especially popular among Palestinians in the aftermath of the 1967 defeat. While groups of *fidaiyyin* had been active since the 1950s – Arafat's Fatah was founded in 1959 – the Naksa amplified their prominence and propelled them to a new status as leaders of the nationalist struggle. The rising number of attacks on Israel by non-state actors at this time signified the Palestinian nationalist movement's growing independence from the rest of the Arab world.[41]

This change was epitomized by the *fidaiyyin*'s takeover of the very structure that the Arab regimes had established to contain them: the PLO. Created in 1964, the PLO had initially functioned as a subordinate to pan-Arabist Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, but the Naksa undermined his previously unquestionable status as leader of the Arab world. Late in 1967, his favoured PLO Chairman Ahmed Shukeiri resigned. The following year, the *fidaiyyin* groups – chiefly Fatah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) – formally took control of the PLO and in doing so fully emancipated it from Nasser's grip. Thereafter, the PLO became exclusively Palestinian in its concerns and explicitly radical in its actions. In 1968, it adopted a new Charter calling on all Palestinians to fight for their rights.[42] Its communications thereafter became noticeably less dry and more revolutionary in their rhetoric.[43] This was a striking contrast with its prior strategy, when the PLO had been dominated by Arab states seeking to contain Palestinian activism for fear of it threatening their own positions.

As the 1967 defeat eroded the invincibility that Nasser had previously enjoyed in the eyes of many Arabs, his political decline created the space for a new Palestinian leader to seize the initiative. That space was quickly filled by the leader of the largest *fidaiyyin* organisation: Yasser Arafat, who was widely known by his *nom de guerre* Abu Ammar. Arafat's clandestine operations against Israel and his determined focus on Palestinian-centric activism made him an emerging star in the refugee camps, even though he himself had never lived in one. As the General Escort of the Lebanese Army Jonny Abdo later put it, 'before 1967 everyone wanted to be photographed with Abdel Nasser. After '67 Abdel Nasser wanted to be photographed with Abu Ammar.'[44]

Arafat's new status as 'Mr Palestine' was affirmed by one particular event in March 1968, known as the Battle of Karama.[45] When the Israeli army attacked Fatah's bases in the Jordanian village of al-Karama, they faced an unexpectedly fierce resistance and were left with surprisingly heavy casualties. The *fidaiyyin* were quick to claim this as a victory for their military campaign; the refugees, who had waited years for any good news, celebrated with a newly confident nationalist fervour in the camps. Photos of the Karama

martyrs were subsequently displayed throughout refugee shelters and thousands of Palestinians signed up to join Fatah, transforming it into a mass movement virtually overnight.[46] In his memoir, Fawaz Turki recalls that after Karama, 'we all wanted to be fighters. All of us [refugee camp] kids wanted to join the resistance and struggle for freedom. As it turned out, most of us did.'[47] As this shows, the impact of the Battle reached across the Palestinian diaspora, transcending host state borders. While scholars have debated the true military significance of Karama, its importance as a seminal moment in the Palestinian national narrative is universally acknowledged.[48]

The *fidaiyyin*'s increased prestige after Karama bought the PLO considerably more clout. With Arafat becoming the new PLO Chairman in 1969, the organisation was able to successfully pressure the Arab host states, including Lebanon, to allow the *fidaiyyin* greater freedom of action. Keen to share in the *fidaiyyin*'s new-found popularity across the Arab world, the Lebanese government lifted the press ban on reporting their operations, and allowed Palestinian groups to openly recruit and train.[49] The Lebanese army initially even offered the refugees some basic military training.[50] Its hope was that by offering limited support to the Palestinian nationalist movement, it could ultimately contain it. This quickly backfired. Instead of the movement being contained, it was empowered. In what is most frequently called the 'Palestinian revolution', 1969 saw the *fidaiyyin* take over the refugee camps and oust the Lebanese army and the DB from their previous position of control there.[51] While the *fidaiyyin* leaders largely came from outside the camps, they presented the takeover as an assertion of autonomy by the refugees themselves. This was not unreasonable; in many cases, the camp residents themselves took up arms to contest Lebanese authority, retaliating against years of being targeted.[52] State attempts to regain control were unsuccessful; when Lebanese police entered Nahr el-Bared camp in 1969 in a bid to demolish the Fatah office, the residents took them hostage. By October that year, refugees in all 17 camps in Lebanon had ejected the police, the army and the DB, with armed Palestinians taking control instead.[53] Residents could now move easily from their homes inside the camps to the exterior, and Lebanese officials could no longer enter at will.[54]

The impact was immediate and transformative. As the camps were released from state authority, internal activities became demonstrably 'Palestinianised'. The camps turned into hotbeds of nationalist expression, guarded by *fidaiyyin* rather than by Lebanese police, and dominated by displays of the Palestinian flag.[55]

Residents could now freely engage in political activity and openly express their national identity. The *fidaiyyin* established popular committees to organise defence, sports and cultural facilities, all with a strongly nationalist tilt. Out-of-school training programmes were set up to inculcate a nationalist political consciousness in children from a young age.[56] These programmes provided basic military training as well as education in Palestinian and political history. The PLO also successfully lobbied the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) to introduce Palestinian history into the syllabus at its camp schools in Lebanon.[57]

As these forms of cultural and intellectual expression thus flourished alongside political activism in the camps, the contrast with the pre-*thawra* era was striking. After two decades of continuous suppression at the hands of the DB, Palestinian refugees in the camps could now openly express their national identity, and even organise themselves politically. Such developments were particularly significant in the broader context, whereby the Palestinian people had endured the denial of their right to collective self-determination for decades - first in pre-1948 Palestine and then in exile. The *thawra* thus effectively turned the camps' spatial containment on its head, from being a feature that enabled state control to one that incubated political radicalisation and militarisation.

The Lebanese government was of course extremely unhappy about the camps' takeover, but its weakness and the *fidaiyyin*'s popularity gave it little choice but to accept the new reality.[58] At the end of 1969, Nasser brokered the Cairo Agreement, which formally recognised the PLO's control over the camps and parts of south Lebanon.[59] The PLO quickly began establishing the foundations of a Palestinian quasi-state in these areas. In addition to running the aforementioned services and institutions in the camps, it developed a government-style apparatus in the Fakhani district of Beirut.[60] This included an information department, a foreign office, a planning centre, trade unions, military headquarters, a cultural department and a Women's Association.[61] Highlighting its quasi-state nature, visitors to the Palestinian refugee camps now acquired permits not from the Lebanese government but from the PLO.[62] Its infrastructure was sufficiently entrenched for the south of the country to become known at this time as 'Fatahland', while the West Beirut district of the PLO's headquarters was dubbed the 'Fakhani republic'.

Lebanon thus became a site of central importance to the Palestinian nationalist struggle in exile. While the *thawra* was also felt in camps in Syria and Jordan, its impact there was more muted. As Fatah co-founder Abu Iyad said in a 1975 interview, 'Lebanon is the lung through which we breathe politically... and it is also the lung which sustains the existence of the Palestinian Revolution.'[63] There is something of an irony here; having gone further than any other Arab host state to suppress Palestinian political activism after the *Nakba*, Lebanon ended up as the central site of the Palestinian nationalist movement in exile. With the PLO conducting its business from Beirut – including its relations with foreign officials – Lebanon found itself home to the *de facto* Palestinian government-in-exile – the very opposite of what it had intended in its post-*Nakba* policies.

The country's centrality to Palestinian politics during this period was not merely figurative but had practical effects. Most notably, these years saw Palestinians from across the diaspora travel to Lebanon – or try to – in order to participate in nationalist activities there. Some took serious risks and travelled illegally to do so; in a relatively mild example, UNRWA reported in 1972 that around 500 Palestinians from Gaza had purchased fake Omani passports to facilitate their travel to Lebanon.[64] The country's importance only increased after Black September in 1970 saw the *fidaiyyin* defeated in Jordan and subsequently regroup in Lebanon. The Palestinian population there was boosted by many thousands as a result.[65] The camps, which were already seeing radical political change, were now decisively operating as 'factories of men for the Palestinian revolution'.[66] They were also functioning as a staging ground for the PLO's first attempts to create a Palestinian state.

Revolution or not?

The description of these events as 'revolutionary' is substantiated by the numerous characteristics they shared with more conventional revolutions: militancy and armed struggle; the idea of self-sacrifice for a greater cause; popular insurrection and widespread support among the people; the forcible replacement of authorities; the notion of liberation. Even the subsequent splintering of some of the *fidaiyyin* organisations is arguably typical of revolutionary times; the PFLP quickly spawned numerous breakaway groups. Yet there are also considerable grounds for questioning whether the *thawra* can be accurately described as a revolution, and if so how.

The most obvious line of argument against the *thawra* is that unlike most conventional revolutions, it did not involve the overthrow of a national government or any transformation at state level.[67] Skocpol famously defined revolutions as 'rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structures'.[68] It was on this basis that she categorised historical events in China, Russia and France as revolutionary. Other leading scholars of revolutions take a similar approach, using this baseline definition to assess revolutionary events in countries such as Iran, Nicaragua, Egypt, and Cuba. By contrast, the Palestinian *thawra* did not transform the Lebanese state or the country's

class structures. For many Lebanese citizens, it would have made little difference to their everyday lives.

However, the *thawra* did engender the ousting and replacement of the Lebanese state authorities from the Palestinian refugee camps. From the perspective of many refugees, it was therefore just as significant as a change in central government – and for them, it did meet Skocpol's definition of a 'rapid, basic transformation'. It also ushered in the establishment of a Palestinian 'state-within-a-state' in Lebanon, the significance of which is widely acknowledged.[69] While the PLO did not eclipse the Lebanese central government completely, and indeed the two retained relations, its assertion of partial sovereignty contributed to the weakness of the Lebanese state in the run-up to the civil war. On these grounds the *thawra* could in some ways be viewed not only as revolutionary but also as secessionist.

The status of the *thawra* is rendered more complicated by the fact that it was not a clearly demarcated event in spatial or temporal terms. While Lebanon was undeniably the hub of the *thawra*, broader definitions and studies could also encompass events in Jordan, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza. Political scientist Daniel Meier argues that in fact the *thawra*'s real importance lay in how it engendered a new closeness among the Palestinian diaspora, transcending the national borders that separated them. He writes that it was accordingly vital in the development of 'transnational Palestinianism'.[70] This is clear from the above-mentioned incidents of Palestinians undertaking international travel to Lebanon to join the *thawra* there. Even many of those who remained outside of Lebanon participated through remote acts of solidarity; the refugee camps in Gaza experienced a wave of agitation in the late 1969 in solidarity with their Palestinian brethren in Lebanon, and the *thawra* was a similar source of inspiration for many *fidaiyyin* in Jordan.[71]

Such transnationalism was especially significant as a way of countering the Palestinian people's widespread dispersal after the *Nakba*. In this regard, forging new links across state borders enabled Palestinian activists to defy the constraints of their dispossession. It also presaged the wave of transnational and international alliances that Palestinian nationalists would make in the coming decades, predominantly with other actors in the Global South, and marginalised minorities in the Global North.[72] Yet at the same time, this transnationalism can complicate definitions of what the Palestinian *thawra* actually refers to.

The chronology of the *thawra* has been similarly debated. Most scholars, including Rosemary Sayigh, Yezid Sayigh, Fuad Jabber and Rex Brynen, place it in the post-1967 period, highlighting the impact of the

"USING THIS CHRONOLOGY IS A WAY FOR FATAH TO HIGHLIGHT ITS OWN ROLE..."

War and tracing the 'revolutionary era' until the PLO's expulsion from Lebanon in 1982.[73] This reflects a tendency to perceive the revolution as a time period rather than a singular event – something which is arguably not uncommon even among more 'conventional' revolutions, such as the French and Iranian examples. Yet in the Palestinian case, even the span of this revolutionary period is heavily disputed. Under Fatah's leadership, the PLO has consistently named 1 January 1965 as the revolution's start date, and has celebrated anniversaries accordingly.[74] Using this chronology is a way for Fatah to highlight its own role, as 1 January 1965 was the date of its official launch. However, some scholars have applied the same chronology, with Laleh Khalili defining the *thawra* as the years 1965-82.[75] Karma Nabulsi and Abdel Razzaq Takriti take an even longer view, covering Palestinian 'revolutionary culture' from 1948-82 and thus locating its chronological origins in the *Nakba* itself.[76] While the roots and origins of all major historical movements are of course widely debated, the chronology and location of the *thawra* is disputed to an unusual degree – making it harder to identify as a clear revolutionary turning point.

The content of the *thawra* provokes further debate, given its unconventional military strategy. As Fuad Jabber points out, the

thawra involved neither conventional guerrilla warfare nor a mass war of liberation.[77] Yet militancy was undeniably its core feature. The Palestinian National Charter of 1968 declared that 'armed struggle is the only way to liberate Palestine' and that 'this is the overall strategy, not merely a tactical phase'.[78] Fatah's prevailing slogan was 'revolution until victory' (*thawra hata al-nasr*), suggesting tactics of attrition.[79] Political historian Yezid Sayigh argues that the notion of armed struggle was the central and 'defining dynamic' of the movement, which characterised its core and enabled it to mobilise both human and political resources.[80]

This emphasis on militancy was certainly evident in the post-*thawra* refugee camps, which were guarded and to some degree managed by armed fighters. Weapons were openly carried and military dress was commonplace.[81] Young men were recruited to join the *fidaiyyin*, with their military training celebrated with 'graduation' ceremonies on completion.[82] As the presence of the *fidaiyyin* gave the camps new levels of protection and defence against hostile agents like the DB, many refugees have spoken of this militarisation as liberating. Potentially, it provided a route by which they could assert their autonomy after decades of marginalisation and oppression. Accordingly, anthropologists Rosemary Sayigh and Julie Peteet both argue that it engendered self-esteem and pride among the refugees, with military training becoming a rite of passage and a means of national validation.[83] The latter was especially significant in view of Palestinian statelessness.

The *thawra*'s militancy thus played a key role in shifting the refugees' self-perception. Many now constructed their identity as that of fighters or revolutionaries rather than refugees. This was taken as a point of pride, highlighting their empowerment and agency.[84] By contrast, the term 'refugee' was seen as insulting in how it presented the Palestinians' problems as humanitarian rather than political, and positioned the people as passive victims.[85] In rejecting the term, the refugees asserted their political identity. Rosemary Sayigh argues that this was a key part of the revolutionary movement's appeal in the camps, as it offered the refugees a new identity to which they felt more sincerely affiliated.[86] The aforementioned cultural flourishing in the camps during the *thawra* further cultivated such developments, as they helped foster feelings of national pride and assertion among exiled Palestinian communities.

Similarly, the revolutionary discourse re-defined Palestinian national identity around political activism and agency. As Shafiq al-Hout put it, 'anyone who struggles is a Palestinian!'[87] In keeping with this, the early years of the *thawra* saw the idea take hold that every individual

working with the resistance – even in a non-military capacity – was a *fida'i*.[88] In one widely-promoted quote, Arafat proclaimed that 'this revolution is not merely a gun, but a scalpel of a surgeon, a brush of an artist, a pen of a writer, a plough of a farmer, an axe of a worker.'[89] This broad definition was highly effective in ensuring that the *thawra* remained universally popular among the refugees.

It was accordingly also central in designating the thawra as a true revolution with mass support, rather than simply a coup. For such reasons, the PLO endorsed and formalised the re-naming of refugees as 'revolutionaries'.[90] The Palestinian National Charter of 1968 reinforced the notion that everyone in the resistance was a *fida'i*, stating that each individual 'must be prepared for the armed struggle and ready to sacrifice his wealth and his life in order to win back his homeland and bring about its liberation.'[91] Three years later, Arafat described the importance of the thawra's impact thus: 'we create[d] a new people, instead of being refugees, to be fighters, freedom fighters. [sic] This is very important.'[92] Years later, he would speak of the revolution as an assertion of basic rights that needed to be protected at all costs, thus presenting it again as a movement for the people.[93]

The PLO's positioning is illuminated by the fact that the majority of its leaders were not from the camps. Arafat, PFLP leader George Habash, and leader of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) Nayef Hawatmeh were all university graduates from middle-class backgrounds. While still refugees, they had not been compelled to survive in the camps. Political scientist Laleh Khalili contends that this resulted in some detachment between those leading the thawra and those following it.[94] Rosemary Sayigh takes her analysis further, arguing that the *fidaiyyin* organisations continuously treated the camps with condescension. She points out that they all chose to set up their headquarters in the city rather than the camps.[95] However, while this may call into question the extent to which the thawra was driven by the camps, it is indisputable that the revolutionary movement enjoyed huge popular support therein. This, along with the high proportion of *fidaiyyin* who emerged from the camps, means that the case for depicting it as a popular insurrection is a strong one.

Perhaps the biggest question mark over the *thawra*'s revolutionary status comes in relation to its socio-economic impact – what Skocpol termed the 'transformation of class structures'.[96] While the resistance movement undeniably engendered changes in camp governance and increased militarisation and politicisation, its social effects are less clearly established. In 1972, leftist thinker Samir Franjieh argued in Journal of Palestine Studies that the *thawra* did not constitute a true revolution. He contended that it had failed

to mobilise the Arab masses across the region, and even more significantly, had 'failed even to fully revolutionize the Palestinians themselves'.[97] By Franjieh's thinking, the changes of the *thawra* were superficial, as the nature of the refugees' political economy remained the same and their false consciousness continued. The normative structures of their society were unchanged, meaning that the *thawra* could not in all seriousness be deemed revolutionary.

Franjieh's analysis is narrowed by his strictly Marxist approach, but he does raise some valid points. The societal change of this era was limited; the revolutionary discourse was cloaked in nationalist rhetoric that rarely concerned itself with the connections between politics and society. Social structures, norms and behaviours accordingly remained organised around the same notions of gender and age.[98] Emerging socio-political movements, such as the struggle for female emancipation, were subordinated to the nationalist struggle and at most instrumentalised according to their use in the political campaign. Thus Fatah feted the contribution of women to the nationalist struggle in raising future generations of *fidaiyyin*. Arafat famously said that the Palestinian woman's womb was the 'greatest weapon' in their struggle.[99] This was a way to champion the role of women as valuable without directly engaging with or challenging conventional social hierarchies.

In part, such limitations were due to the ideological emptiness of Fatah and by extension the PLO. Under Arafat's leadership, Fatah emphasised Palestinian political liberation and little else. It lacked ideological substance, and engaged only minimally with issues that did not directly involve the Palestinian cause as they saw it.[100] The same approach came to be the guiding principle of the PLO after Arafat took the chairmanship in 1969. Fatah's dominance of the umbrella organisation meant that its ideological haziness determined the PLO's strategy at this time.

This is not to say that all of the PLO's constituent groups concurred. Both the PFLP and the DFLP were extremely ideological and saw political change as contingent on challenging the socio-economic status quo. They favoured a universally radical approach that took the struggle beyond Palestine. PFLP leader George Habash, a declared Marxist, was openly committed to the overthrow of most Arab regimes.[101] DFLP leader Nayef Hawatmeh made his perspective clear in a 1969 essay that portrayed the archetypal *fida'i* in typically leftist terms, as a revolutionary from a poor social background, spurning bourgeois comforts in favour of a greater cause.[102] Both groups called for social as well as political revolution to bring workers to power across the entire Arab world, as a necessary precursor to the establishment of a Palestinian state.[103] Yet they were smaller, less powerful, and more divided than Fatah, which meant

"SOME WERE FURTHER CONCERNED THAT THE MORE OVERTLY LEFTIST GROUPS WERE INSUFFICIENTLY RESPECTFUL OF RELIGIOUS TRADITION..."

that their political philosophies remained on the margins.

As a result, the PLO consistently placed its emphasis on political struggle in Palestine rather than social revolution everywhere.[104] This was arguably a canny strategy, enabling the PLO to minimise its perceived threat to other states in the Middle East and accordingly court more financial support from them. Fuad Jabber argues that the Saudi government funded the Fatah-dominated PLO precisely because it was seen to be more moderate and less threatening than the PFLP and DFLP.[105] It was arguably also a factor in Fatah's dominance of Palestinian politics, as many Palestinians preferred to focus on their national cause rather than engaging with political struggles elsewhere. Some were further concerned that the more overtly leftist groups were insufficiently respectful of religious tradition; this concern was particularly prominent among older, more culturally conservative Palestinians.[106] By contrast, the cause of nationalist struggle was uncontroversial in Palestinian circles and enabled Fatah to easily rise to prominence. However, this also created something of an ideological vacuum, and as such could be seen to undermine its revolutionary credentials.

Finally, while Fatah, the PFLP and the DFLP disagreed ideologically

about the nature of the *thawra*, they all positioned it as a decidedly international movement – a characteristic underlined by historian Paul Chamberlin and legal scholar Noura Erakat.[107] In a 1969 public declaration, Fatah declared the Palestinian revolution 'a model of resistance to neo-imperialist domination', implicitly asserting its place within the wider world.[108] The statement would prove prescient, as the Palestinian issue went on to become central to wider international struggles against colonialism and its legacies.[109] Both Fatah and the PFLP regularly highlighted their commonalities with other revolutionary movements, printing posters to celebrate the emergence or victories of Castro, Che Guevara, and the Polisario Front, among others.[110] The Algerian revolution, and later the revolution in Iran, received particular attention, portrayed as fellow popular uprisings against Western-backed imperialist regimes in the same region.[111] In addition to celebrating these revolutions in its communications, the PLO also shared arms and training facilities with them.[112] In 1979, Arafat became the first foreign leader to formally visit the new revolutionary regime in Tehran.[113]

As Daniel Meier argues, the idea that the Palestinian struggle was part of a broader revolutionary movement was highly powerful in helping mobilise support for it.[114] It was also a key part of the myths around the *thawra*'s potency; the Palestinian revolution carried far more weight as an active component of a global movement than as a geographically contained campaign with limited means. In this way, there is a close connection between emphasising the *thawra*'s truly revolutionary nature, and presenting the narrative that it was part of a bigger global movement. Both are used to add weight and authenticity to the events in question, and to fortify their credentials. The PLO thus walked a tightrope in its international positioning, portraying itself as revolutionary enough to ally with other radical movements, but not so revolutionary that its financial backers in certain Arab regimes might consider it a threat.

The *thawra*'s internationalism has further significance in determining whether or not it should be considered a 'true' revolution. Put simply, such internationalism is a common characteristic of revolutions – observed clearly in the historical case studies of the 18th century 'Age of Revolutions'.[115] Other examples abound; the leftists and intellectuals behind the Iranian Revolution of 1979, for instance, rhetorically aligned their activism with the successful revolutionary movements in Cuba and Algeria, also referring to works by Che Guevera and Frantz Fanon.[116] Internationalist solidarity was also an essential element of the Arab revolutionary movements that subsumed the Middle East and North Africa in 2011, as activists in the region's various uprisings forced transnational links and shared tactics and resources.[117] In its connections to global political movements, the *thawra* was thus typical of many revolutions.

The significance of such internationalism again raises questions about how revolutions are understood and theorised. These aforementioned forms of international revolutionary solidarity have received relatively little attention in the scholarship on revolutions, as another casualty of the structural focus on outcomes. While this poses another potential challenge to classifying the *thawra* as a 'true' revolution, it arguably also shows how the Palestinian case study can enrich theories of revolution, in this case by demonstrating the need for more consideration of revolutions' ties beyond state borders. As it stands, the relevant scholarship tends to limit its considerations of internationalism to examining how revolutions are shaped by international conditions.[118] While this was certainly true of the *thawra* – which was shaped by international conditions such as decolonisation, the rise of Third Worldism, and the fallout from the 1967 War – it nevertheless disregards the importance of international solidarity. This in turn raises bigger questions around what the case study of the *thawra* means for scholarly understandings of revolutions.

Subjectivities of revolution

The *thawra* became a key part of the Palestinian nationalist lexicon. As is so often the case, competing factions claimed it as their own in order to emphasise their legitimacy and authenticity. The Fatah-dominated PLO referred to Chairman Arafat as 'General Commander of the forces of the Palestinian Revolution' in its communications.[119] Fatah described itself as 'the gun of the revolution, the maker of victory' and 'the glory of the revolution'.[120] Meanwhile the PFLP presented itself as leading the revolution in materials commemorating the anniversary of its establishment.[121] The DFLP highlighted Hawatmeh's role in the *thawra* and the experience he contributed from having participated in earlier revolutionary movements in Lebanon and Iraq.[122] The fact that every organisation was so keen to share in the glory shows the *thawra*'s popularity among the people.

This gives way to a bigger question. The discussion about whether or not the Palestinian *thawra* constituted a 'true revolution' can only go so far. There is arguably more to learn from asking what the *thawra*'s designation as a revolution reveals. In addition to the *fidaiyyin* groups claiming the *thawra* in the ways outlined above, the Palestinian refugees themselves also adopted it in popular narratives about camp politics. It became such an intrinsic part of the discourse that it was attached to both an era and a generation, with camp residents speaking of *ayyam al-thawra* ('the days of the revolution') and *jil al-thawra* ('the generation of the revolution').[123] Earlier Palestinian generations are designated as *jil al-filastin* ('the generation of Palestine') and *jil al-nakba* ('the generation of the *Nakba*'), among others; the placing of

the *thawra* alongside such seminal events as the *Nakba* is indicative of its significance for the Palestinian people and their national history.

The use of the term *thawra* also points to the magnitude of its psychological impact. As discussed, Palestinian self-rule in the camps was important in overcoming the feelings of powerlessness that had plagued many refugees since the *Nakba*. Interestingly, Rosemary Sayigh writes that the word was used in the camps in the 1970s not only to denote the revolutionary movement itself, but also as a synonym for armed struggle or return to Palestine – in other words, as a symbol of the national struggle and its aims.[124] Its intangible impact has survived years later; in her 2009 study of national commemoration in the camps, Laleh Khalili writes that the term *thawra* has now ceased to mean the 1969 revolution specifically, and is instead often used to denote the collective memory of Palestinian empowerment.[125] This is indicative of the nature of the revolution's importance for many refugees, as its positive impact on their morale and agency forms a key part of how it is remembered.

As a case study, the designation of the 'Palestinian revolution' contains wider lessons for revolutionary studies. The use of this term by both scholars and the general Palestinian population, and its multi-faceted significance in denoting political, military and even psychological change, all suggest a need to move away from stricter definitions of 'revolution'. The Palestinian example shows that fixating too narrowly on state structures and formal governance – in other words, the approach that has driven conventional scholarship on revolutions – risks excluding other forms of momentous change that can still be considered revolutionary. Moreover, the adoption of the *thawra* in popular narratives highlights the need to incorporate some consideration of collective memory into scholarly understanding of revolutions. In view of the emerging scholarly turn towards subjectivities, as espoused by Selbin and Lawson, the Palestinian *thawra* thus comprises an ideal case study for revising conventional structural approaches.

There is potential for further scholarly revisionism on the basis of the *thawra*'s significant long-term repercussions for Palestinian politics. For one thing, the experience that the PLO acquired in establishing and running a para-state in Lebanon would later inform the operations of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank and Gaza. At the same time, the fact that the Palestinian *thawra* only challenged state sovereignty in certain spaces was arguably also prescient. The *fidaiyyin*'s assertion of limited autonomy in certain areas foreshadowed what would later become a major feature of moves by PLO strategy in later years the Palestinian leadership. Since the

establishment of the PA in the early 1990s, the Palestinian would-be state has become increasingly fragmented, most obviously with the growing divergence between the West Bank and Gaza, but also with the legal division of the West Bank into three separate areas under the Oslo Agreement.[126] Palestinian territorial fragmentation has only become more acute in recent years, with the recent Trump 'peace proposal' seeking to embed it formally.[127] Thus just as the *thawra* saw authority parcelled out to different groups across the camps in Lebanon, so the Oslo era has seen the West Bank atomised and placed under differing structures of control.

Despite its ostensibly low stakes, the *thawra* also had a lasting impact on wider regional political dynamics in the Levant. Most obviously, the challenge that it posed to the status quo in Lebanon was one of many factors that ultimately precipitated the country's fifteen-year civil war. Even more importantly, the *thawra*'s initial success and ultimate failure had important lessons not only for the Palestinian national movement but also for other popular insurrections across the Middle East. The *thawra* is an example of a popular insurrection that declared the agency of a structurally powerless people, decades before the so-called 'Arab Spring' made this a trend across the region. When the latter occurred, many commentators discussed its impact on the Palestinian cause, and questioned when the 'Palestinian spring' would occur.[128] Yet few pointed out that the Palestinian version had already taken place. decades earlier. At most, scholars like Jean-Pierre Filiu made the point that many of the generation who led the 2011 Arab protests had grown up with the images of the first intifada on their television screens.[129] Yet he neglected to mention that there was also a much earlier precedent in Palestinian history for challenging state authority, mobilising popular support, and establishing new political ideals.

Despite such omissions, there is an obvious link between the earlier Palestinian *thawra* and the 2011 Arab Uprisings. During the former, Arafat spoke of revolution as a right (*haq*) to which the people must hold on at any cost. This notion – that in rising up, people are doing nothing more than enacting their rights – lay at the core of the 2011 Uprisings, which were both characterised and facilitated by the assertion of agency and the loss of fear.[130] The infamous slogan 'the people wants the fall of the regime' signified not only the embrace of the people's demands as entitlements, but also the declaration of their collective agency – a feature that had of course been central to the *thawra*.[131]

Many of the same concepts can accordingly be found in both the Palestinian *thawra* and the Arab Uprisings. This applies not only to the obvious rallying cries like tahrir (liberation) and *al-sha'ab* (the people), but also to more

nuanced concepts like *karama* (dignity). Karama, of course, was the site of the famous battle in 1968 that crystallised the *fidaiyyin*'s new role as popular heroes; it was also central in positioning the *thawra* as the antithesis of the *Nakba*. The notions of reclaiming agency and dignity – the importance of changing national morale and collective consciousness as well as government – were key driving forces in both the Palestinian *thawra* and the 2011 Arab Uprisings.

The place of the Palestinian *thawra* in narratives about Arab uprisings has declined for a range of possible reasons. These include the legacy of its ultimate failure in 1982; the 1990s relocation of the nationalist movement away from the diaspora and towards historic Palestine; and the *thawra*'s subsequent eclipse by the two intifadas as more recent examples of Palestinian insurrections. Yet the 1969 revolution has much to offer as a valuable case study of a momentous popular uprising in the modern Middle East. Its legacy shows that the more recent Arab Uprisings should not be taken as a departure point without looking at the greater history of the region and the lessons of earlier insurrections. Given the continuing entanglement of the Palestinian issue with the fate of the Middle East, it is particularly important not to lose sight of the *thawra*'s importance when studying revolutions today.

Yet the significance of the *thawra* transcends the Middle East and Arab world. As contended at the outset of this paper, studying the *thawra* has a broader value for contesting the restrictive nature of conventional structuralist theories of revolution, which focus on objective outcomes.[132] The *thawra* fails to meet many of these theories' criteria for what denotes 'revolutions', yet is nevertheless firmly conceptualised as such by those who experienced it and inherited its legacies. With this in mind, studies of the Palestinian *thawra* can contribute to the broader historiographical trend for juxtaposing structural top-down analysis with bottom-up subjectivities and experiences. Overall, then, scholarly examination of the Palestinian *thawra* in Lebanon serves multiple purposes. Not only does it enrich understandings of Levantine social and political history, but it also speaks to more general debates about the nature, content and criteria of what makes a revolution.

End notes

1 For the full text of the Cairo Agreement see: *Al Nahar*, 20 April 1970, Orient-Institut Beirut library [OIB] [Arabic].

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3 On these more well-known revolutions, see for example: Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Jack Gray, *Rebellions and Revolutions: China from the 1800s to the 1980s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); John Markoff and Gilbert Shapiro, 'Consensus and conflict at the onset of revolution: A quantitative study of France in 1789', *American Journal of Sociology*, 91, 1 (1985), 28-53; Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Charles Tilly, European Revolutions 1492-1992 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

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5 Eric Selbin, *Revolution, Resistance and Rebellion: The Power of Story* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

6 Eric Selbin, 'What was revolutionary about the Iranian revolution? The power of possibility', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 29, 1 (2009), 33-46. Eric Selbin, 'Revolution in the Real World: Bringing Agency Back In',

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7 George Lawson, 'Happy anniversary? States and social revolutions revisited', *International Studies*, 95, 5 (2019), 1149-1158. See also: George Lawson, *Anatomies of revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
8 William H. Sewell, 'Historical Events as Transformations of Structures: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille', *Theory and Society*, 25, 6 (1996), 841-881.
9 Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, 17.
10 Selbin, *Revolution, Resistance and Rebellion*.
11 The exact figure is disputed. This is an estimate by the United Nations Economic Survey Mission. See: Appendix A, First Interim Report of the UN Economic Survey Mission for the Middle East (No. 66979), 16 November 1949, https://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/648C3D9CF58AF0888525753C00746F31 (accessed 18 March 2020).
12 This term '*Nakba*' to describe the Palestinian dispossession was first coined by Syrian intellectual Constantine Zureik in his discussion of the 1948 War. See: Constantine Zureik, *Ma'ana al-Nakba*, in *Al-A'mal al-Fikriyya al-'Amma lil-Duktur Constantine Zureik* (Beirut: Dar al-'Ilm lil Milayan, 1948) [Arabic].
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27 Y. Sayigh, *Armed Struggle and the Search for State*, 41.
28 Hirst, *Beware of Small States*, 77-79.
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