

GHOST TRAIL **A FILM BY JONATHAN MILLET OFFICIAL WEBSITE OFFICIAL STILLS**

108 mins. / Thriller / France, Belgium, Germany / Arabic, French, English / 2024

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LOGLINE

After being detained by the Assad regime in Syria, Hamid now works undercover as part of a secret group pursuing their leaders — including the guard he suspects was responsible for his torture — in this tense espionage thriller.

SUMMARY

Justice knows no border for Hamid (Adam Bessa), who has taken refuge in France after being detained and tortured by the Assad regime in Syria. Exiled and undercover, the mild-mannered literature professor now works as part of a secret group pursuing Assad's enforcers, who have fled Syria and assumed new identities in Europe – including the guard responsible for inflicting unspeakable abuse upon him. Covertly communicating their life-or-death decrees through a multiplayer video game, the undercover cell operates in broad daylight but wrestles with how far they can push their retribution in a land that only faintly recalls Assad's atrocities. With his mother now living in a refugee camp in Beirut, Hamid puts on a brave face and extols his new life, but the cracks begin to show as he becomes consumed by the hunt. Hot on the trail of a man at his local university (Tawfeek Barhom) who bears a striking resemblance to his torturer, Hamid is sure that he's identified the culprit, but can he convince his compatriots that his intuition is dead certain? Sensitively reckoning with recent history, director Jonathan Millet delivers a tense espionage thriller that explores the opaque relationship between justice and vengeance.





INTERVIEW WITH JONATHAN MILLET

Your career path is quite uncommon. Did you learn to film through travelling?

At 18, I picked up a camera and set off on a trip with no particular destination in mind. I went from one country to another and, following a chance encounter – on a boat sailing upstream on the Jamuna River in Bangladesh – I was hired to film content for an image bank, on my own and with virtually no restrictions. I found myself travelling the world with my camera and was encouraged to go to the most remote regions. I ventured through, and filmed: Iran, Sudan, Pakistan, all South America, Africa, and the Middle East. Through this, I began to learn how to capture faces and spaces and convey an atmosphere in only a few shots. In a way, this is how I learned to film and how I became a filmmaker.

Was it during one of these trips that you lived in Syria?

Yes. When I was about twenty, I moved to Aleppo, where I began to learn Arabic and made many friends. A few years later, the war broke out and some of my friends in Aleppo sent me photos and videos of the conflict, and of the neighbourhood where I used to live, which had been completely destroyed during the war. They went into exile in Istanbul, where I met up with them again on several occasions — in the heart of the Syrian community in Turkey — and then in Germany. This was the beginning of their long exile, which I followed every step of the way.

At that point, I completed my first documentary on the Ceuta border detention camp in northern Morocco. I then made a short fiction film about the arrival of a Cameroonian exile in Paris, inspired by one of the characters in the documentary. My approach has always been the same: to try to capture singular, individual lives and tell the story of exile through stories on a human scale.

All my years of research and encounters have shown me the inner wounds and memories of pain these men carry around with them. This is the story I wanted to tell.

I thought of making a documentary about this and spent several weeks in a treatment centre for victims of war and torture. I met a large number of Syrians and listened to their stories of war, imprisonment, and torture.

Their words were so incredibly powerful – but I could never find the right place for my camera. When I write, without ever omitting the harshness of their reality, I look for some sort of light, for a possible hope. Whether that hope materializes or not, that becomes the movement of the film. I don't believe in desperate dramas or tragedies where there's no possible way out.



Is that when you heard about secret cells, like the one shown in *Ghost Trail*?

As I did my research, I gradually heard more and more about underground networks, evidence hunters, and groups that would track down war criminals in Europe for months on end. I sensed there was something powerful here, and I was immediately drawn to it. This discovery coincided with the publication of two articles in April 2019, in Libération, on the Yaqaza cell and the hunt for the "Chemist" in Germany. From that moment on, I wanted to follow this trail. I suddenly sensed that all my documentary prep was going to find a form in this dynamic narrative. (Learn more about the inspiration for the film here and starting on page 10. A refugee in Germany since 2015, Kais Al-Abdallah was unmasked three years later by a mysterious group of Syrian activists, convinced that he was an ISIS official infiltrated in Europe. The trial in France has concluded as of March 21.)

What made you switch from documentary to fiction?

The trigger was point-of-view. Through fiction and choosing a genre, I found a means to speak about reality in a way that was fulfilling for me.

I spent a year documenting these cells, meeting some of their members and listening to accounts of how they would tail people. Thanks to all this data, my knowledge of the subject enabled me to create my characters, which were inspired by these encounters.

Although there was never a Hamid chasing a Harfaz, most of the characters' actions, deeds, and traits are based on concrete facts. The issues driving the film are completely authentic: the creation of a secret cell, the tracking down of war criminals in Germany and France, the months of silent observation, tailing, and doubts, the meeting in Beirut to authenticate the photo, the group's split over the consequences of an arrest on migration policy...

By documenting the situation as accurately as possible, I finally found the emotional angle of my film, where the theme of trauma could fit in with a plot based on bereavement and the different futures available to my character. First and foremost, I wanted to use intimacy to capture the madness of all these breathtaking contemporary adventure stories, these geostrategic issues experienced by the real heroes of our time who are never mentioned by the media.

It was a real challenge for me to turn my characters into heroes – tragic heroes, perhaps, but definitely cinematic ones.



Why did you choose to make a spy film?

The spy genre was an obvious choice. The exiled people I drew inspiration from needed a legend. Depending on their native country or their age, they could be deported, so they learned to have a fake name, and a fake homeland. They were forced to lie, to be careful about everything they did, to fool people with their identities — with everything this entails, in terms of risk, arrest, and deportation. On the other hand, what I like about the spy genre is when the characters are not trained spies. Among the members of the cells I met, one was a cab driver, the other a lawyer. But above all, espionage is about observing others and lying about oneself. These have been my two driving forces in writing and directing. This genre allows me to bring cinematic qualities, intensity, and high stakes to my work, and a chance to get away from the flat realism of a basic political film which interests me less as a viewer.

Why did you opt for a subjective, sensorial approach?

Like selecting a genre, the sensorial approach offered certain realistic choices that could produce something cinematic. I wanted to film sound, touch, and smell, while leaving all the overly-connotative images – like those of war or torture, which are only present as recordings – off-screen. The mise-en-scène immerses us in Hamid's inner self and the heart of his doubts. Sensations are given centrestage in this film, like amplified or distorted sounds, the smell of sweat, the power of touch in the sequence where Yara bandages him, or in the kaleidoscope of colours in the Beirut market stalls.

The film's own theatre of operations is the very whirlwind of Hamid's thoughts. I wanted to explore history through the eyes of one character.

Did you have to work hard on the soundtrack to achieve this?

The soundtrack offers us access to Hamid's inner turmoil, to the intensity of his thoughts when he can't let anything show. This is the most baroque aspect of the film. The process of sound design was long, and it involved sonic close-ups, hyperacuity, whispers, feedback, and powerful tones. But, yet again, this is the result of privileging realism. The Syrian prisoners are immersed in total darkness for months on end. This heightens other senses. One of the most frequent tortures they undergo is to have their heads held under water, which has the effect of damaging their eardrums, causing hyperacusis. I didn't choose to make a sensory thriller simply for aesthetic purposes, but because certain elements of realism demanded it.

Why do the members of the cell choose to communicate via a war video game?

Real reasons are always more fascinating than fictional ones: whether you're a terrorist or the member of a cell, you have to be able to communicate. And what's the only place online where you can repeat words like "bombs", "attacks", "death", and "kill" over and over again without being spotted by algorithms?



What was the casting process like?

It took over a year. I met as many Arabic-speaking actors as I could, between the ages of 20 and 40, in over 15 countries. And then I met Adam Bessa, who exudes an intensity and interiority like no one else. He has an air of gravity about him that makes you believe he has been through the worst events. Something is weighing on him. When you see him simply sitting there, you can feel the whirlwinds of his tormented mind. You're afraid for him – and of him, of what he might do. That's what I was looking for in Hamid. Coming from a documentary background, and having met real Syrian prisoners, all it takes is one sentence or one moment of silence to feel the absolute power of such a terrible experience. And Adam was able to capture this.

How long did it take to prepare Adam Bessa?

Prep for the shoot — which lasted forty days between Strasbourg, Jordan and Berlin — involved a lot of work on his gestures, his gait, how he sits, how he behaves with his mother, etc. The members of this cell would sometimes spend nine months stalking their target. What happens to your body when you've got the man who tortured you within your sights for so long? To understand this, we had to work a lot on gestures with Adam, as if he were mute. What I like about him is that he's never completely unruffled; no matter how calm or pained he is, I feel that at any moment he can surprise me, stab his enemy, or throw him in front of a streetcar. The unusual and unexpected is always possible with him. He embodies the dilemma at the heart of the film: that of reason versus impulse. Is it still possible to live after enduring everything he has gone through?

There was also the question of his accent. I didn't want to make yet another Western film where characters spoke in broken Arabic. So Adam had to work for weeks to get the best possible Syrian accent.

Did you first see Tawfeek Barhom in *Cairo Conspiracy*?

It's funny, because I did see him, but I thought he was still too young and too naïve. In short, he had nothing in common with the aura of mystery surrounding Harfaz. If you look closely, at the beginning of the film, Harfaz is just a silhouette. So when I met Tawfeek, I asked him to move around, to get a cup of coffee and observe him. And that's when I sensed the fascination he could exert, which is the same kind exuded by the character. He has a real magnetism about him. Tawfeek is Palestinian and, when I met him, he didn't speak a word of French. Yet he was going to have to shoot a scene that would be filmed in one twelve-minute shot in this language. He, too, had a lot of work to do, as did Julia Franz Richter, who didn't speak French either.

What struck you most about this story?

What struck me most about their quest was its urgency, and how absolutely contemporary it is. These executioners exist in this life, today, in France and Germany. The migration issues they discuss are current issues. Their story is not a mirror of our world, it is our world.



ABOUT JONATHAN MILLET

After studying philosophy, Jonathan Millet spent many years filming distant or inaccessible countries for image databases. Alone with his camera, he traveled through and filmed about fifty countries (Iran, Sudan, Pakistan, all of South America, the Middle East, and extensively throughout Africa). He was encouraged especially to go to the most remote regions. This is where he began to learn to capture faces, spaces, to convey an atmosphere in a few shots.

After this experience, he directed the feature-length documentary *Ceuta, Douce Prison* selected in over 60 international festivals, followed by *Tell Me About the Stars* filmed in Antarctica, and *La Disparition* filmed in the Amazon. He then directed several short films selected in numerous festivals (Clermont-Ferrand, Pantin, Palm Springs, Brest...), including *Et Toujours Nous Marcherons* selected for the César Awards in 2018, and the medium-length film *The Wake* which had a theatrical release. That same year, he was nominated as a "Talent in Short Films."

Ghost Trail is his first fiction feature film.





AT THE TRIAL OF THE ISLAMIC STATE JAILERS, "ABU HAMZA THE CHEMIST," FROM SPY FILM TO CRIMINAL COURT by soren seelow, from <u>Le Monde</u>

A REFUGEE IN GERMANY SINCE 2015, KAIS AL-ABDALLAH WAS UNMASKED THREE YEARS LATER BY A MYSTERIOUS GROUP OF SYRIAN ACTIVISTS, CONVINCED THAT HE WAS AN ISIS OFFICIAL INFILTRATED IN EUROPE. THIS 41-YEAR-OLD CHEMISTRY GRADUATE IS ALSO SUSPECTED OF HAVING PLAYED A ROLE IN THE KIDNAPPING OF TWO FRENCH JOURNALISTS IN RAQQA IN 2013.

Who, in reality, is Kaïs Al-Abdallah? A Syrian asylum seeker who found refuge in Germany to escape persecution by the Islamic State (ISIS)? Or a senior member of the jihadist group who infiltrated Europe to form sleeper cells? The mysterious trajectory of this 41-year-old Syrian chemistry graduate is worthy of a spy novel. His hunt loosely inspired the film, "Ghost Trail", released in July 2024.

While Kaïs Al-Abdallah's elusive journey fueled the screenwriters' imagination, it also fueled an improbable legal saga. The German justice system, which investigated his case for over a year, ultimately closed its investigation into "suspicion of terrorist activities" in November 2016 due to lack of evidence. And it was ultimately the work carried out behind the scenes by a group of Syrian activists in Germany, the "Yaqaza cell," that brought him before Criminal Court in Paris, where he has been on trial since February 17 in the trial of ISIS jailers.

In this trial, after French jihadists Mehdi Nemmouche and Abdelmalek Tanem were dismissed for their role as guards during the kidnapping of Western hostages by ISIS, Kaïs Al-Abdallah is the third and final defendant to have been questioned, on Thursday, March 13 and Friday March, 14. He is not accused of having served as a jailer: he is suspected of being an ISIS leader, possibly involved in the kidnapping of two French journalists, Nicolas Hénin and Pierre Torres, held hostages in Syria between June 2013 and April 2014.

"Abu Hamza TNT"

After completing a chemistry course in Raqqa, Kais Al-Abdallah arrived in Germany during the migrant crisis in the summer of 2015. He was living a peaceful life in Lower Saxony and had enrolled at the prestigious Georg-August University in Göttingen to continue his chemistry studies, when a Syrian refugee presented himself at a Dortmund police station on September 7, 2015, to denounce him. Under the kunya (war name) of "Abu Hamza Kemawi" ("Abu Hamza the chemist"), or "Abu Hamza TNT," Kais Al-Abdallah is in reality a member of ISIS' security services specializing in vehicle bombs.



The German justice system opened an investigation and questioned him on October 2015, which did not prevent him from obtaining a residence permit two months later. On January 17, 2016, Kaïs Al-Abdallah was questioned again upon his return from a scheming trip to Turkey. He was found in possession of a computer containing a 4,200-page ISIS-produced tutorial on making explosives. Despite the testimony of another Syrian asylum seeker claiming that the chemist had been sent to Europe to train terrorists in bomb making, the German investigation was closed on November 7, 2016.

During his two days of interrogation before the Paris Criminal Court, the defendant denied belonging to ISIS. But, faced with the cloud of troubling evidence presented by the presiding judge, Laurent Raviot, he could only muster grossly insufficient answers. The tutorial on making explosives that he brought back from Turkey? It was his uncle who gave it to him for a cousin. The ISIS flag that appears on his Twitter profile? It was to avoid problems in Syria. The Facebook comment posted under a photo of his son, hoping the child would support the caliphate "like his father"? He doesn't know who wrote it. "It's a bit short," responded the judge who, by then, had become irritated.

A secret meeting in Lebanon

A year after the German case was closed, the hunt for the chemistry student took a spectacular turn in early 2018. The "Yaqaza cell," whose mission is to unmask former loyalists of Bashar al-Assad's regime and ISIS sympathizers who had taken refuge in Europe, contacted former hostage Pierre Torres via the secure messaging service Signal. The journalist and a member of this mysterious cell agreed to meet in secret a few months later, in May 2018, in the suburbs of Beirut, Lebanon.

The "Yaqaza cell," which investigated Kaïs Al-Abdallah for many months in Germany, identified him as a senior ISIS official in Raqqa, specializing in explosives and kidnappings, and suspected him of having played a role in the kidnapping of [journalists] Pierre Torres and Nicolas Hénin. "On Signal, they didn't tell me why they wanted to see me," Pierre Torres explained in court. "The individual I met in Lebanon didn't tell me anything either. He simply showed me a photo of Kaïs Al-Abdallah, whom I immediately recognized. A few months later, they emailed me a file about him."

In January 2019, Pierre Torres's lawyer submitted this information to the French courts. Interviewed by investigators, the two journalists described the circumstances in which they met the chemistry student in Raqqa, a week before their kidnapping. Shortly after their arrival in Syria, in June 2013, their identity papers and equipment had been confiscated by members of ISIS. They then approached a local public figure whom they knew, to ask for help in recovering their belongings.



The latter organized a meeting that same evening at his home with a certain "Abu Hamza the Chemist," who was presented as a senior ISIS official in Rakka. According to all participants, the meeting had gone badly. "Abu Hamza the Chemist" had become angry while praising the merits of ISIS and allegedly made threats before slamming the door. A few days later, Pierre Torres and Nicolas Hénin were kidnapped by armed jihadists.

"I'm pretty convinced there's a connection."

The two journalists are adamant: during this stormy meeting, Kaïs Al-Abdallah was introduced to them as an "important member" of ISIS. "Did you make the connection between this meeting and your kidnapping?" [presiding judge] Laurent Raviot asked each one of them. "At first, not particularly. But from the moment I learned of his presence in Europe, I began to imagine the role he could have played," Nicolas Hénin explained. "There are no elements, in my opinion, that allow me to be absolutely certain," Pierre Torres replied. "But I am pretty convinced there's a connection."

It is, in fact, difficult to establish with certainty that Kaïs Al-Abdallah was indeed involved in the kidnapping of the two journalists, as was demonstrated during the charging procedure. While the investigating judges had requested that he be tried for "complicity in terrorist kidnapping," a crime punishable by a life sentence, the investigating chamber dismissed the charges against him for that offense, and he was only charged with "terrorist criminal association," a crime punishable by a twenty year prison term.

While the defendant acknowledged that his nickname was "Abu Hamza the Chemist," and that he had been present at the meeting [in Raqqa], he insisted that he, in no way, represented ISIS and had never threatened the two journalists. His explanations were rarely convincing, but evidence of his involvement in the kidnapping of Pierre Torres and Nicolas Hénin was not presented at the hearing. However, if the court is convinced of his membership in ISIS, as is supported by numerous testimonies and material evidence, it will be sufficient to convict him.



CANNES REGULAR ADAM BESSA WAS DROPPED BY THEATER SCHOOL BEFORE HE BECAME A FEST FAVORITE by Mia Galuppo, from <u>the Hollywood Reporter</u>

Adam Bessa finds himself in the unique position of being both a <u>Cannes</u> Un Certain Regard award winner and a frequent collaborator with Hollywood's best-known blockbuster brothers, Anthony and Joe Russo — two spheres with marginal overlap. Nonetheless, a decade after Bessa began acting in earnest, he is a regular on the festival circuit and streaming services alike.

But the French-Tunisian actor began his professional career not in performance but as a law student in Paris. In his free time, Bessa would watch movies, fill out a diary with his favorite films, and keep track of the connections among the collaborations of actors, directors, writers, and cinematographers until he had a personal movie matrix, like a pen-and-paper IMDb. "Then," he says, "I discovered Joaquin Phoenix, and I was gone."

When it came to his law career studies, however, there was a bit less enthusiasm. "There were always subjects that interested me — in particular, justice, social rights, politics. I was really into that, but it never clicked."

Still, he attacked his new presumed profession with an academic approach that could be expected of a former law student. Bessa read books from the modern greats, such as Stella Adler and Konstantin Stanislavski, as well as biographies on performers like Marlon Brando and James Dean. "I believe in both theoretical and practical [approaches to acting]" says Bessa.

So, he went to see a few theater schools, but "it didn't really talk to me. The things they did, it's really detached from reality." He eventually attended the Jean Périmony-founded theater school in Paris for a time. "I did maybe one month or two months of classes, and then they fired me because I didn't understand," he recalls.

Deciding to learn on the job, Bessa set out on auditions, where roles in short films and independent features eventually netted him Sofia Djama's Algerian Civil War drama *The Blessed*, which premiered at the 2017 Venice Film Festival. He was back on the Lido two years later with his American debut, the <u>Russos-produced *Mosul*</u> that was later <u>acquired by Netflix</u>.

Asked when he knew he had made a true career out of acting, Bessa recalls with a laugh, "When my bank card started working, I said, 'I guess I'm doing OK."



In the past couple of years, Bessa, 32, has ping-ponged back and forth between French-produced festival fodder (in 2022, he picked up an Un Certain Regard best performance award for Tunisian drama Harka) and roles in high-concept American offerings like Netflix's flagship action franchise *Extraction*. It was while filming one of the latter films that his agent sent him the script for *Ghost Trail*.

The based-on-true-events dramatic thriller, which will screen in the Cannes Critics' Week lineup, follows a secret group that pursues disappeared Syrian war criminals who have fled to Europe. In the film, from director Jonathan Millet, Bessa plays Hamid, a one-time professor of literature turned prisoner of war, who, after losing both his wife and daughter in the conflict, finds himself as a refugee in France and tracking a man who could be his former torturer.

Bessa was attracted to the quiet heroes at the center of the film's action, who ask for nothing in return but a chance at justice. "It's just you and your morals and what you believe in and what you've been through," he says.

To prepare for the role, Millet had Bessa watch documentaries on Syrian state prisons and listen to testimonials of former prisoners. The actor asked Syrian friends about life in Aleppo before the civil war and read Arab poetry, the subject his character taught in college before the conflict.

After a long career in feature documentary filmmaking that has taken him from Antarctica to the Amazon, Millet is making his feature debut with Ghost Trail. Bessa says the director meticulously planned for the thriller and wanted an ultra-grounded performance.

"It has to be as good as if it was a documentary and add little things that make it cinema, but it has to be so light that we don't see it," says Bessa of the filmmaking process. "I think artistically that's very interesting for an actor to try to do because that takes off all the ego and all the performance."

The actor is honest in admitting that the production of the film, which has Bessa in every scene, was not always easy. "It was quite a rock 'n' roll relationship together," says Bessa of his working relationship with Millet. "We had some intense moments, some arguments, some really tough discussion about the film itself, the subject [and] the way we work together. We both wanted to do a great film, but we both had different ways of achieving that or thinking how to achieve that. So, we had to find a common way together. I loved it. It was hard, but we did it."

Despite his continued success, Bessa is still open to a future outside of acting. "Maybe there's a moment in my life where I won't do it anymore," he says. "I'm just doing it because I love it and I'm passionate about it right now."





CAST

DIRECTED	ADAM BESSA	HAMID
PRODUCED	TAWFEEK BARHOM	HARFAZ
SCREENPLAY	JULIA FRANZ RICHTER	NINA
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAP	HALA RAJAB	YARA
EDITI	SHAFIQA EL TILL	HAMID'S MOTHER
SOU	SYLVAIN SAMSON	FOREMAN
	MOHAMMAD SABOOR RASOOLI	AFGHAN VENDOR
ORIGINAL MUSIC	FAISAL ALIA	OLD MAN AT SHELTER
SET DESI		
COSTU	PASCAL CERVO	ADVISOR AT THE PREFECTURE
CO-PRODUCED	MUDAR RAMADAN	TRANSLATOR AT THE PREFECTURE
	MARIE RÉMOND	PSYCHOLOGIST
ASSOCIATE PRODUC	DORADO JADIDA	JALAL
	FAKHER ALDEEN FAYAD	HERTHA BERLIN
	JANTY OMAT	VOLUNTEER
	JACQUE FOLLOROU	JOURNALIST

CREW

- **D BY** JONATHAN MILLET
- **ED BY** PAULINE SEIGLAND FILMS GRAND HUIT
- **AY BY** JONATHAN MILLET, FLORENCE ROCHAT
- **APHY** OLIVIER BOONJING
- TING LAURENT SÉNÉCHAL
- **DUND** NICOLAS WASCHKOWSKI, TOBIAS FLEIG, SIMON APOSTOLOU
- IC BY YUKSEK
- **SIGN** ESTHER MYSIUS
- **UME**ANNE-SOPHIE GLEDHILL
- **ED BY** NICOLE GERHARDS NIKO FILM, JULIE ESPARBES HÉLICOTRONC, VOO, BETV,
- UCER SHELTER PROD
 - LIONEL MASSOL





ABOUT MUSIC BOX FILMS

Music Box Films is the prestigious North American distributor of acclaimed international, independent, and documentary feature films. Recent releases include Mountains, the debut feature from Monica Sorelle, who took home the Independent Spirit Awards "Someone to Watch" Award, and In the Summers, Alessandra Lacorazza's heartfelt and subtly powerful coming-of-age directorial debut that won the two top prizes in the U.S. Dramatic Competition at Sundance. Upcoming releases include the Cannes Directors' Fortnight baseball comedy *Eephus* by Carson Lund, and *Ghost Trail*, Jonathan Millet's tense and haunting revenge thriller that premiered at **Cannes Film Festival.**

Since its formation in 2007, Music Box Films has distributed award-winning films and art-house favorites that include Academy Award winner Ida, Meru (from Oscarwinning filmmakers Jimmy Chin and E. Chai Vaserhelyi), Christian Petzold's Transit, the popular Swedish comedy A Man Called Ove, and the original The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo. Music Box Films is independently owned and operated by the Southport Music Box Corporation, which also owns and operates the Music Box Theatre, Chicago's premier venue for independent and foreign films. For more information, visit <u>www.musicboxfilms.com</u>.

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