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CHATTER IN THE HIZB: THE HIZB UT TAHRIR WEB FORUM:
AN IDEOLOGY OF VIOLENCE?

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Abstract: This paper explores the Hizb ut Tahrir web forum by developing a coding and counting methodology that seeks to split opinions on the forum into categories and to rate them by their quality and by how much they were viewed. This methodology is innovative and enables the identification not just of the most aired topic, but of the one that is most likely to have an influence. It finds that the strongest type of posting (as defined by the methodology employed) comes from those with extremely anti-Western opinion and that terrorism and other violence also feature. Explicit mention of violence is dwarfed by the amount of anti-western posting that does not include a call to violent action. However, the forum probably provides a rich seed-bed in which such violent conversations can occur. Whilst the forum does contain some alternative opinions, these are very minor voices on an otherwise quite extreme forum. Although the paper does not make policy recommendations, there are potential policy implications of this, especially in terms of ongoing discussions in the western world over whether or not to ban the movement.

Key Words: Anti-Western, Hizb ut Tahrir, Insurgency, Islamism, Jihad, Kufr, Methodology, Terrorism, Violence, Web Forum

Introduction

The key policy question on Hizb ut Tahrir (HuT) has been whether or not to ban it. This is a question that has vexed western governments for some years. The British Prime Minister, David Cameron, has talked of banning HuT, but nothing has been done at the time of writing. Indeed, a Conservative party blog, *Centre Right* (a natural ally of Cameron) has said that, on HuT, he is ‘frustratingly light on substantive policy’ despite repeated claims that he intends to ban it.¹ This could be because it is unclear just how dangerous it is as an organization. This paper attempts to go some way towards exploring this question by looking at as-yet unexamined data and by developing a methodology for analyzing that data. This research is important because it will be useful to discover just what (at least one section of) the HuT community are talking about. This may have implications for policy makers in terms of messaging and in terms of wider decisions about HuT’s continued permissibility within the UK and other Western countries.

This paper will begin with a brief overview of the official line of HuT on violence before moving on to the substance of the paper, an exploration of the issues being discussed on the official HuT-moderated web forum.² Thus, the research that this paper undertakes (as the title hopefully conveys) is an assessment of the ‘word on the street,’ of what is being ‘chattered’ about in a HuT-moderated space, rather than being an exploration of official HuT pronouncements. It is nevertheless useful to begin with official documents as awareness of terms and themes in these are displayed in the forum postings we will examine. The paper attempts to treat HuT a realistic way, by addressing it as an organization made up of many individuals with less or more commitment to it instead of seeing it as a monolithic organization with an official voice only. The paper tries to capture and quantify individuals’ thoughts, especially as they pertain to violence. The forum clearly states that it reflects the views of individuals and may not reflect those of HuT. Nevertheless it is moderated and occasionally items are removed (as we will see below) and it is also linked from one of two official URLs of HuT.³ The forum itself is open; anyone can view the forum and post to it, should they wish to do so.

This paper will proceed by first giving a brief introductory background on the history of the advocacy of violence by official HuT documents. This is based purely on previously researched materials. Then this paper outlines the methodology that will be used for the quantitative analysis of the forum. This methodology has been developed for this study, but may be applicable to other studies too. This description of method also includes a definition of terms such as ‘terrorism’ that will be used for the analysis conducted in this paper. There follows a general

discussion of the postings analyzed for the quantitative research. The aim of this section is to give a flavor of the forum, to point out where lines were drawn in designating codings for the quantitative analysis and to discuss interesting features of certain posts. After this comes the quantitative analysis itself, which does show that the preponderance of postings are anti-Western and violent, as measured by our methodology.

The hypothesis that this paper begins with is that “the views of terrorism and violent jihad on the HuT web forum will broadly mirror those found in the official literature of HuT.” The overall aim of the research is to test this hypothesis. This can be broken down into three parts. First, we aim to establish what opinions are being aired on the HuT web-forum. Second, we aim to approximate how influential any given opinion aired on the forum is likely to be for a reader of the forum. The point of this is to establish how dangerous a dangerous opinion actually is – if everyone reading the forum is likely to ignore it, it is not too problematic. It is true that someone might be so horrified by reading a post that they think the opposite. However, the important thing here is that we are trying to obtain a measure of how persuaded someone open to that persuasion is likely to be. Third, this paper aims to further methodological discussions around how web content should be analyzed for policy, security and other purposes. This paper is experimental in its use of methodology in so far as the method used has been developed for this research. A great deal of space has therefore been devoted to explaining the method. It is hoped that this may generate some discussion of how academics and policy makers analyze web fora, as well as discussion around the particulars of the HuT forum.

Brief Background: on Hizb Ut Tahrir and Jihad

Hizb ut Tahrir (HuT), Arabic for ‘Liberation Party,’ is an Islamist group and defines itself as ‘a political party whose ideology is Islam, so politics is its work and Islam is its ideology.’⁴ A lengthy excursus about its aims⁵ is summarized by Adamson as ‘radical political goals, including the unification of Central Asia and other Muslim states and the establishment of an Islamic caliphate and, eventually, an Islamic world order.’⁶ Some of the words and phrases that HuT uses can appear incendiary, especially its description of non-Muslims as ‘Kufr,’ which, although possibly translated merely as ‘unbeliever,’ carries far more weight in HuT rhetoric. The Kufr stand not only as ‘not Muslims’ but are conceptualized as actively against Muslims. HuT explicitly states that it has an ‘intellectual struggle against the Kufr creeds, systems and thoughts, the erroneous ideas and the fraudulent concepts by exposing their falsehood, defects and contradiction with Islam, in order to deliver the Ummah from them and from their effects.’⁷ This is clearly *all* Kufr (for which we can read ‘all westerners’), not just a particularly abhorrent subset. HuT also struggles

against rulers of Muslim countries who stray from HuT's interpretation of Shariah.⁸ This has led to HuT being banned in most Muslim majority countries whereas in the West it is free to operate, even if its operations are essentially to discourage participation in the 'Kufr' systems, such as democracy.⁹

Despite the prejudicial attitude to all non-Muslims, HuT has, for a long time at least, been explicit in renouncing violence to achieve its political ends in the West. Ayoob makes the point that there are actually many Islamisms. All share a few key features, such as the ahistoricisation of Islam and Islamic theology and that all are essentially political movements, but some seek local implementation of their politics whereas others, such as HuT, have more global ambitions.¹⁰ In addition to Ayoob's note about the shared key features, Aşık and Erdemir note the cultural trauma experienced by Egyptians that gave rise to Islamism and to a hatred of the West.¹¹ This is also an experience of the past now held in collective memory and mythology (which does not imply it is untrue) amongst Islamists in general today. Nevertheless, there is variety; not every group espouses violent action as a result of their philosophy. By the same token, given the variety of Islamisms, there should be no great surprise that some espouse violence in the West whilst others do not. Understanding the aversion to violence in the West in HuT's philosophy is important. It can be summarized as the belief that only the Caliph can declare an offensive war, the only political violence being permitted without such a declaration being where Muslim lands are being invaded. Without a Caliph, attacks within, for example, the UK, cannot be authorized because there is no method for their authorization. Restoration of the Caliphate is one of HuT's highest priorities.¹² Nevertheless, HuT is not pacifist. Although it 'does not use material power to defend itself or as a weapon against the rulers [this] is of no relevance to the subject of jihad... whenever the disbelieving enemies attack an Islamic country it becomes compulsory on its Muslim citizens to repel the enemy.'¹³ Thus, what may be termed 'defensive Jihad' is permitted by HuT.

It is important to note that the situation in the real world is more complex than that painted above. Israel is not accepted as a state, but is seen as an occupier of Muslim lands. Taji-Farouki notes that although mostly a peripheral issue, HuT 'has been calling with mounting intensity for the eradication of Israel by jihad since the early 1980s.'¹⁴ Furthermore, in recent years HuT's view on where and when Jihad is permissible has widened. Gruen points to a number of HuT press releases from 2010, explicitly condoning the use of violence in a wider context than defense.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the examples cited by Gruen may be construed as defense by HuT. For the most part, they talk about fighting the coalition forces in Afghanistan. For example, HuT in Denmark encouraged this whilst Danish troops were in Afghanistan; this may be construed as treasonous by the West, but HuT (presumably) view it as defense. Nevertheless, there has, in

recent years, been more talk of such violence. This is especially directed against Jews (not just those in Israel) but is wider too, especially when Western forces are undertaking peacekeeping in Muslim counties.¹⁶

Methodology

Introduction to Methodology

The raw data is drawn exclusively from postings on the forum itself and has been collected for this study. On the forum, there are four topics, each with a number of sub-topics. The topics are HuT Publications, Politics, General and Media. As of 16th March 2011, there were a total of 25,984 posts on the forum. This is too many to analyze in a single research paper, so the choice has been made to focus on one sub-topic of the Politics topic called 'War on Islam' and subtitled 'Discuss any developments on the war on "terror".' This sub-topic contains 262 threads with 2007 individual posts (7.7% of total postings). Two factors determined the choice of this particular sub-topic. First, intuitively the subject name suggests that there may well be a debate at this location around the topic of terrorism, the research question focused on in this paper. Second, it contains enough postings for it to have a high statistical significance in terms of the overall number of posts. In fact, for an error of +/- 3% at a confidence of 95%, only 1025 postings are required. Out of the total number of postings available, 1498 have been analyzed. They were chosen from the 2007 on the sub-topic strictly in the order in which the threads appear on the forum, which is in date order of the thread creation. The posts analyzed therefore have been chosen in an approximate, but not exact, date order (some threads may contain a very early post, only replied to some years later). Postings analyzed ranged in date from March 2011 as far back as 2005.

The manner in which these postings have been selected may cause one problem with the resulting data – because they have purposefully been selected from a subset of the forum thought most likely to yield evidence of support for terrorism should it exist at all. Therefore, any evidence of terrorism within this subset may be less representative of the entire forum than is suggested by the statistical significance. On the other hand, this subset provides a good scientific test of the presence of terrorist-related materials on the forum as it is a chance to falsify the hypothesis 'the Hizb ut Tahrir forum contains conversations encouraging terrorism.' In other words, if this research finds no evidence for such conversations in the sample, it seems likely that the forum does not contain any such conversations. On balance, the danger of over reporting the presence of terrorist conversations on the forum in general is compensated for by the opportunity to check this null-hypothesis more robustly. The importance of this is noted by Efron, who, through statistical study of scientific research has noted that the null-hypothesis is often

more widely distributed (in statistical terms) than had been theoretically supposed.¹⁷ In other words, in our current study, if we find that the null-hypothesis is true, we can be all the more certain that it is true in general too. So if we can be as certain as we can be that if we find evidence in our sample that the HuT forum advocates an ideology of violence, it is likely to be true of the forum in general.

Below, we outline the ways in which this data will be analyzed. First, we will examine the coding that will be applied to each post to indicate the opinion being expressed. Then we examine how scores will be assigned to each posting on a code by code basis.

Coding

In attempting to carry out analysis of the HuT forum, it is first necessary to decide how to classify each posting. It is possible to discern a number of different streams of opinion running through the posts. These have each been given a letter code and short description, as listed below. Such a methodology of coding presents some epistemological difficulties. Crittenden and Hill note variations in results carried out by assistants hired to code physiological research interviews.¹⁸ From their research, it is clear that wide variations in how an assistant codes answers can be present in the final results. Thus, the main warning given by their paper is about the careful selection of assistants for the process of attributing codes to results. However, it is also important to be clear about what each code represents. It is the sage advice of Robson to spend time in an initial exploratory stage, developing a coding to encompass the data and to ensure that codings are mutually exclusive, thus making for easier and more meaningful analysis.¹⁹ Given these concerns, it is worth noting that no assistants were used for the present research and that an initial 100 postings pulled in a pseudo-random manner from the dataset (one every approximately 20 posts) were initially used to develop the codings. After the codings were developed, they were not absolutely fixed, but were slightly further developed as the research progressed and new possibilities were observed in the data. However, the initial 100 postings survey formed the basis for the codes. The final codes used are tabulated below, followed by an explanation of terms that need expansion.

Codings

A	In favor of Islamist terrorist activity (does not include insurgency, see H).
B	Against violent Jihad; against views encapsulated by A and H.
C	Terrorist attacks are part of a Western conspiracy and are not carried out by Muslims.
D	Western activity in the world is essentially anti-Muslim, anti-Islam (Often expressed explicitly as being 'at war' with Islam or Muslims, sometimes with corollary that Western world should be ruled by Islam). This coding is not used to describe opinions advocating violence to achieve these ends.
E	Western activity in the world is not anti-Muslim.

F	Muslims are winning against the West.
G	Islamic ethics are incompatible with Western ethics.
H	Jihad, although not explicitly mentioning terrorism or terrorist groups, is primarily a physical activity and is a core part of Islam. This coding is used to describe opinions including those that killing troops in Afghanistan or Iraq is legitimate.
I	Against an Arab/ Muslim regime, but no specific mention of the West or in a separate comment from objections to the West.
X	No opinion expressed. (These will not be recorded in the results. The few threads composed entirely of X entries will not be recorded.)

The coding used contains a number of terms that require some expansion here, and coding X will also be discussed in more detail as it is important to understand what this research is not, as well as what it is, examining. The terms explored will not be explored fully as each really requires a paper on its own. However, they will be expanded to the extent that any ambiguity will be removed from their application in this study.

Definitions of ‘terrorism’ have had much effort expended up them and there is no agreement over what the term means, beyond it being a contested concept.²⁰ Here, it is tightly defined as violent activity to further the political goals of HuT (as perceived by those on the forum), which cannot be construed as insurgency. Some may have wanted attacks on coalition troops in Afghanistan to have been included as ‘terrorism,’ however, this is not clearly enough ‘terrorism’ as opposed to other violent activity. This is not to condone such violence, but it is to suggest that ‘terrorism’ is not the only category that should be used when describing it. By limiting our application of the term ‘terrorism’ as we do, it is hoped that the results will have more clarity. The reason that the counterpart to both terrorism and to other forms of violence is covered by one coding is simply that whilst contributors to the forum were generally specific about what type of violence they condoned (if they did so at all), when contributors were against violence, they were generally undiscerning about what they were discussing. This made it possible only to say what type of violence contributors were in favor of, but only that a particular contributor was arguing against violence *per se*, rather than violence in particular circumstances. It could be argued that it would have therefore been better to simply talk about those who were in favor of violence *per se* too. However, it may be that different forms of violence require different counter-measures to be taken (e.g. the type of counter-messaging or the location of such counter-messaging) and so, since it is possible to make a distinction between insurgency and terrorism it seems more helpful to do so than not.

The current study uses the terms ‘western’ and ‘the west’ to encapsulate an approximation of the forum members’ usage of these terms and their accusations against specific countries covered by these terms. The terms refer to America, Europe, Canada, Australia, New Zealand

and to the influence of these countries around the world. Israel is also included in this. This may surprise some as there is an argument for it to be a separate category, given the particular opprobrium in which Jews are sometimes held by HuT. Indeed, this is how the coding was originally envisaged prior to the data sample of 100 postings being analyzed. However, there is so little talk of Israel on the forum, that it made more sense to conflate it with the rest of our category 'the west.' When Israel is mentioned, it is in the context of it being a stooge for American policy and ultimately it is the USA that bears the brunt of any anger expressed against Israel on the forum.

Some posts express no opinion at all and as such will be coded with an X. These include, for example, requests to clarify what someone has already stated, without stating whether the poster is for or against the original posting. In addition, this research is not about opinions on religion as such. Posts that purely express religious points of view are also classified X. These fall into several categories. Some posts or even entire threads are against a particular form of Islam (mainly Sufism) or in favor of Sufism. Some arguments on a number of threads between an atheist and other contributors are purely about Islam's (and, indeed, religion's) validity as an abstract concept without any immediate applicability to the world. Occasionally there is also a debate between forum members on the correct way to pray or similar topic. All these are coded X.

One further point of importance with respect to the codings, is that we were striving for mutual exclusivity. This has been achieved, but not in such a complete manner as an ideal description of such a situation would portray. For example, code G is in a sense a specialized case of code D. Nevertheless, a posting can only be given either D or G, but not both. D is about being anti-western in an unfocussed way, whereas G is about having a very clear focus. However, one posting could be given G and, for example, A, although actual cases where any one post can be given multiple codings are very rare. Only 4% of the sample fell into this category of posting.

Counting Methodology - Indicative Influence Count (IIC)

Having coded the posting, it is not immediately obvious how it should be counted. Postings can be very simple single sentences (or even just fragments) or can be complex pieces of writing. IIC is a method developed for this paper that seeks to weight postings depending both on their quality and on how often they have been viewed. In other words, it seeks to count the number of postings of any given coding whilst also taking account of the potential impact of the postings on the forum readership as a whole, via an assessment of the quality of the post. Various methodologies exist to program a computer to look for key words within a forum and to establish what the literature usually calls 'sentiment analysis.'²¹ However, although these ideas are good for looking through

large volumes of data (indeed, using such a method we could quickly examine the entire HuT forum), they do lack appreciation of two factors we wish to include in this present research, first the number of times a posting has been viewed (which could be written into a program) and second the quality of the post (which is rather harder or impossible to program).

Each post containing an opinion coded as above will score once. Some posts are continuations of a lengthy copy of an article, sermon or the like and will not fit into a single code. Such postings will be treated as one post as this was the intention of the contributor.²² Additionally, each thread also has a 'views' column, giving the number of views that each thread has received. This number is an indication of how influential any individual thread is. All things being equal, and more on this below, it seems likely that a well expressed opinion with only a few views is less important than the same quality posting with many views. The number of views varies from less than one hundred to several thousand. The number of views offers the potential of being a multiplying factor when considering the relative importance of our coded postings, but exactly how it is to be used is not immediately clear. Several possibilities were tested on a small subset of data (40 posts) to observe the relative effects before finally testing what was settled on against the data sample of 100 posts. It was not considered sensible merely to use the number of views as a multiplier in its raw form. When tried, this led to some posts of relatively low persuasiveness in the context of a well-read thread being given apparently far too much weight. (We address issues of quality itself in another score, below). Using the views divided by 10 or 100 makes no difference to this fact as all it achieves is movement of the decimal place. A better way of using the viewing figures would be to divide the number of views by the number of days the thread has been running. This would give some feel for how influential the thread was over its lifetime. Although this sounds reasonable, two problems prevent the idea being useable. First, it is probable that the age of the thread in question makes a difference to how many views it has. For instance, it may be (and specifics would have to be researched separately) that a thread attracts more views in its first few weeks of existence than it does for the rest of its lifetime. This would skew results in favour of newer threads (or against if the viewing figures work the other way round). Second, there may be threads that are very old and which everyone on the forum has viewed, but years ago. It may be that these threads are actually very influential as they have instilled ideas in the members. It could be that these ideas are so influential that the members no longer need to look at the thread. Such a thread would be downgraded unnecessarily if the number of days in existence were taken into account. The lesson here is that the actual number of viewings, no matter when they occurred, are important, but also that the raw numbers themselves make too much difference to the outcome of the results for the

results to have synoptic meaning and coherence. In other words, in order to see the results for the different codings next to one another, it is necessary for them to be of a similar order of magnitude. To take this into account the viewing figures will be used, but in an adapted manner that will be referred to as the 'viewing quotient.' 1-99 views will have a multiplying factor of 1. Then 100-199 will have a multiplying factor of 1.1 and for every 100 views, 0.1 will be added to the multiplication factor. This lets the viewing figures have their proper, but not undue, influence.

The suggestion of views relating to importance in terms of influence on the forum readership relies on two assumptions. First, with this suggestion, each post is of equal weight. In other words, each post is assumed to have equal attractiveness and persuasiveness for the reader. Second, it assumes that the reader will indeed read all posts, rather than becoming bored part-way through and stop reading. Without additional research being conducted to question a statistically significant number of users of the forum, there is little that can be done about the second of these issues. The first issue, to do with the persuasiveness of the postings, can be addressed. However, although limited by rules set out here as far as possible, there is an unavoidable subjectivness present in addressing it. For this research, regardless of how attractive or abhorrent the ideas that are presented appear to be to the researcher, a score of between 1 and 3 will be given to each posting to indicate how persuasive the posting is thought to be. 1 will be awarded for those postings that state opinion with no or only very limited evidence to back it up, 2 will be given for a post that makes an argument and/ or presents some evidence and 3 will be awarded for a sustained argument with (apparently) several sources of evidence. Evidence here is broadly applied and its spuriousness or otherwise from an academic point of view is not relevant. If a contributor posts something they have copied from elsewhere without any comments, they are assumed to agree with the opinions stated and will be given a score of 1 against the appropriate coding(s) unless the context of the posting leaves this as a moot point, when a coding of X will be applied. Just quoting the opinion of another person is not enough to be given a score of 2 or 3, however persuasive that writer is. These scores are to indicate how persuasive forum members are being. The caveat remains that there is no way of telling from this research how much of the threads have actually been read by the readers.

For IIC, there are therefore three figures of importance. First, there are the number of postings coded in a particular way. Second, there is a consideration of how persuasive those postings are thought to be. Third, there is the viewing quotient. IIC will proceed on a coding per thread basis. It will be helpful here to give an example of how this will work. Imagine a thread called 'Example Thread' that has six posts and has been viewed 550 times, that is with a viewing quotient of 1.5. Three of Example Thread's posts are of code A, two of code B and one of code C and where

all the As are level 1 persuasiveness, the Bs are level 2 persuasiveness and the C is of level 3 persuasiveness. We would score as follows:

Example Thread IIC

Code	Persuasiveness Score	Viewing quotient	Number of posts of this code and Persuasiveness score	IIC result for Example Thread
A	1	1.5	3	4.5
B	2	1.5	2	6
C	3	1.5	1	4.5

Thus, in this example, A and C come out as being equally important, but B is the most important, despite being less persuasive than C and having less views posts of code B than code A. This data can be added to that of other threads to establish relative importance of the various codings across the whole data set.

Two further caveats with this analysis are necessary. First, members add posts to the thread over time, those who have read the thread earlier than the last posting will not have seen that posting unless they revisit. IIC does not take account of this as the data is not presented on the webpage to say how many people had viewed the thread when a particular post was put up. However, it is a choice between using the viewing figures in this state or not using them at all. It seems right to make use of them because they do indicate how many people are interested in the thread in question, although there can be no guarantee of how much of the thread they have read. Furthermore, neither is there any way of taking into account the number of other researchers, law enforcement officers and other who have viewed threads. Second, members are only identified by their screen names. It is possible that one person may have multiple identities and may post contradictory ideas to spark debate. Results would be effected by this and it also means it is not possible to say how many individuals actually contribute postings to the forum.

Despite the various caveats, it is likely (although not provable without extensive interviews) that all threads are effected in approximately the same way. Therefore, it is likely that IIC will provide useful data on how influential various attitudes presented on the forum are likely to be.

Research Results

Discussion of the Postings

The following represents a flavour of the postings, with methodological notes for their analysis. Some postings were found for each coding, but their proportions are not indicated by this discussion, which focuses disproportionately on the more extreme postings and

postings where the code was difficult to determine, as these are of greater interest. The results of the research in terms of the IIC data follow this discursive section. Before looking at the threads it has to be stated once more that we cannot know for certain who is posting and whether any contributors have more than one identity on the forum. Also, although it would be interesting to obtain more details about the users, this is not possible in this research. However, a few contributors did comment about where they lived, the only places mentioned being the USA and the UK, notably Birmingham, but again, there is no way of confirming this. Note that the quotations in this section of the paper are verbatim from the forum. No attempt has been made to improve their grammar or spelling.

By way of an introduction to this section, it is worth noting that the forum is moderated, but that the moderator has left up most comments, including those on terrorism. Of the postings examined in this research, only one posting had been removed by the moderator. They had left the posting in place, but changed the content to 'xxxxxxxxxxxxx' with a note stating that the moderator had removed this content. This is interesting for two reasons. First, it shows that the moderator does read the posts and therefore suggests that they have chosen to leave the posts concerning terrorism and the other extreme posts. Despite the note to say that the forum does not necessarily represent the views of HuT, it is arguable that allowing such views to remain is tantamount to tacit acceptance of those views. Second, if so much is left, it is unclear what could possibly be so offensive (or 'off message') that the moderator decided to remove it. This latter point cannot be answered, but that material supportive of terrorism is present on the forum with the knowledge of a moderator seems hard to deny.

There are a few atheists/ agnostics on the forum and they often challenge otherwise one-sided conversations, but sometimes the engagement from such actors steers the conversation away from political debate towards a purely religious debate. Common themes appear many times. (For reasons discussed above, it is not clear just how many people post to the forum as a member could have several identities. The exact numbers of atheists and others is therefore left undefined). One of these themes is the assertion that Islam provides the only answer to the difficulties of the world and that this can be proved by the Qur'an, the veracity of which (as God's speech) can be proved by its linguistic perfection, such as on the ostensibly 'political' thread 'Intolerant Kuffar (always picking on Muslims).' However, some threads that are set up apparently to discuss issues of religious practice contained posts that linked specific practices to an anti-western sentiment. Thus some posts within 'religious' threads were coded as other than X. One example of this was in the thread 'Sufism or Hinduism?' A post by user Abujamal stated that 'Sufism is the chosen ally by the Kafir west in the war on Islam.' The other important thing to note in the context of those contributors from

outside the Muslim community is that the majority of posts coded as E (in favour of the West) were probably in this group. Interestingly, the majority of those who posted responses coded as B, against terrorism, do not seem to come from this group. (In both instances, the caveat about indeterminate identities applies again. This research is not able to define exact numbers in terms of the beliefs or other personal traits of contributors.)

When it comes to talk of violence, some threads contain apparent threats, but never explicitly condone violent actions and thus cannot be given coding A or H. These can only be given coding D. One such posting can be found on the thread 'insight of Jewish behaviour towards Muslims in Palestine.' Here, Zico notes that various Israeli soldiers have admitted to the army committing 'cold blooded murder.' He also notes that Rabbis have described the conflict as a 'war' in religious terms – explicitly of Jew against Muslim. Towards the end of his posting, he notes that 'Muslims really need to wake up and realise that the KUFUR are our enemy and we should treat them as enemies! While they go on a killing rampage against Muslim civilian (*sic.*) (mainly women and children) the Muslims are too busy sending food and clothes over'. It is likely that Zico is advocating a more active response than the response he has observed. It is also likely that Zico hopes this response will be one of violence – his comments can be read as implying this. However, as there is no explicit call for violence, it can only be classified as a D posting.

Another theme that occurs a number of times within D postings is that the Western world is identified with the ideology of 'Capitalism.' For example, in the thread 'War on Islam: Ideology,' Abujamal notes that, despite words to the contrary from the West, 'America's war on the ideology of Islam is more important than the physical war on Jihadies! [There follows a lengthy excerpt from an American report, before continuing with Abujamal's analysis] In other words, kill the ideology of Islam which will automatically kill the threat of Islam to their decaying ideology, Capitalism.' Elsewhere, on thread 'Another US missile hits another school,' Unity notes that 'there is no doubt that the rulers in the Muslim world fear America for than Allah (swt). They would rather see Kufr (capitalism) prevail over the Muslim world than Islam.' A reason why the West is viewed as identical with capitalism can be suggested by an examination of other threads. Topman comments, in thread 'Democratizing Islam' that 'Islam is not a religion. Christianity and the like are good examples of how religion can be "modernized" as they have nothing to do with how one lives their life.' The reason that these posts are considered to be examples of D is that 'capitalism' is simply used as a 'throw-away' comment. No sustained argument is produced and as soon as has been mentioned the conversation moves on along other lines. It is just a shibboleth, another flag to say 'they are not like us.'

One other similar line in the sand is drawn in a very puerile way, and we will not waste much time on it. Many contributors to the forum resort to belittling those with whom they disagree, with no argument produced, relying on insulting language rather than intellect to win their battles. There are many examples of this, but the one that occurs most often (on many different threads) is the name 'Edwina' applied to Ed Husain. This is to belittle him for leaving HuT and for 'selling out' to the West and apparently helping them in their struggle against Islamism.²³

Although the previous three paragraphs have discussed particular aspects of coding D, the vast majority of postings given this code were somewhat banal, merely asserting a point of view. An example of this is the statement 'it is more of a call to resume the war on ISLAM with the hypocrites on board!' This appeared on the thread 'Obama Ramadan message (POLL)' and was posted by Rizzy2k8. It has little value other than to continue to repeat one of the central themes of HuT, namely that there is an essential state of war between Islam and the West. In so far as this goes, continued repetition, even though boring to read, may end up being persuasive by its steady pressure to think in a certain way. When we come to the results, we will see that D is the highest scoring coding by a large margin and, on the forum, it certainly exerts a huge pressure as an idea. To not think like this means to go against the peer pressure of the vast majority. In the context of terrorism, Crenshaw points out that 'group think' can take over a group of individuals. She points out that a 'basic research finding' of the study of terrorism 'is that terrorism is primarily a group activity. It is typically not the result of psychopathology or a single personality type. Shared ideological commitment and group solidarity are much more important determinants of terrorist behaviour than individual characteristics.'²⁴ Similarly, and post 9/11, Post comments that 'the concepts of abnormality or psychopathology are not useful in understanding terrorist psychology and behavior. Rather group, organizational, and social psychology, with a particular emphasis on "collective identity," provide the most constructive framework for understanding terrorist psychology and behavior.'²⁵ Although we cannot show that anyone who holds opinions coded D will espouse terrorism or violence (A or H codings), we can assert that the overriding collective identity of the forum consists of code D views. This is when looking at the behaviour of the site as a whole, in the terms Post and Crenshaw are speaking off. It is the group behaviour rather than (specifically) the behaviour of any one individual. Thus deeply anti-Western sentiment is at the heart of the forum and all the mainstream of its contributors stand for this, together as a group, at least whilst on the site. This does give reason for the West to be concerned about the forum – the group think on the site encourages users to be anti-Western and this message is clearly (from our IIC statistics) not balanced by anything like an equal amount of counter argument.

To return to talk of violence that can be coded A or H, Jihad was spoken of as a physical activity in positive terms a number of times, sometimes with overt terrorist overtones (coding A) and sometimes without (H). An example of the latter can be found in the thread 'Documentary on Islam as an ideology' where Neelu posted 'if only more MUSLIMS thought like this!!!!!!!!!!!!!!' in response to a quotation, 'jihad, while literally meaning "struggle," in fact denotes war fought against non-Muslims in order to bring the rule of Islamic law to the world.' Anwar al Awlaki, the AQAP ideologue and spokesman to the West, is occasionally mentioned. The thread 'a call to join the war' is an endorsement of a speech by Awlaki entitled 'constants on the path of Jihad,' which is linked from the thread.²⁶ The endorsement is that the poster Moresufithansalafi states that 'I personally think its awesome and the concepts within are plain and backed by concise evidence.' However, he does go on to say that 'I am trying to fit this into the hizb model. Maybe that is like trying to put a square peg into a round hole.' It seems likely that in this comment he is acknowledging that his understanding of HuT is that it is explicitly against violence, unless authorised by the Caliph, but that he nevertheless is persuaded by Awlaki's promotion of terrorism as a valid, indeed required, Islamic methodology.

Other postings also expressed explicit support for terrorism. On thread '9/11 over US still killing' Abdallah.ahmad13 called 9/11 the 'great event.' The same contributor also denied that there could be any division into 'civilian' and 'fighters' (meaning that there were no protected categories of individuals in the Kufr world) and went on to say 'concieving the great events as a maater of killing civillians is so silly. this event was the first attack inside usa borders. this revived alwala walbaraa in the nation. it exposed the hidden agents of alkofar in our world.' When he wrote about 'agents' of the Kufr, it seems that Abdallah.ahmad13 had those Muslims who objected to 9/11 in mind. The point is made very clearly (if a little incoherently) that this contributor believes that terrorist attacks by Muslims against the West are good, maybe noble acts. More targeted terrorism is also discussed, with the killers of Benazir Bhutto being lauded by Al-Muwahhid on the thread 'Bombings! Who benefits?' Al-Muwahhid's only criticism is that the bomb killed others too, whom he describes as 'innocent.' He says 'I don't personally agree with the method of assasinating benazir, it would be better to use a gun, similar to what Islambuli did then atleast you aren't killing people from general population who you need on your side. I don't think the killing of innoecent people can be justified even if the killing of an appostate ruler can.' There are therefore subtleties to the type of terrorism that finds support on this forum, from the totally indiscriminate to the highly selective.

Opposing the views of A an H are those of B. Not all contributors who espouse this view are friendly towards the West. In the thread 'Building

moderate Muslim networks,' Abdul-Ali commented '(if letting bombs is all you understand), then you have actual military and political targets on your doorstep, yet you go to the trouble of killing indiscriminately ordinary people traveling on trains and planes (including muslims) and think this is somehow leading closer to establishing the deen. Only in small minds, really small!' This comment is made after asserting that the West carried out terrorist attacks in order to attack Islam, which we will return to below. However, this demonstrates that contributors to the forum can be very anti-Western but not espouse violence, shunning the violent response apparently wherever it is to be found, and thus countering both A and H.

Coding C, the idea that Muslims are not responsible for the acts of terrorism usually attributed to them, also contained shades of opinion, or at least shades of expression. On the thread 'Building moderate Muslim networks,' (a thread in general decrying the concept 'moderate Islam') Peregrine_Falcon says 'the primary enabler of "moderate Islam" is the "terrorist" acts that are occurring around the world and the way the West is successfully associating these terrorist acts with the jihadis and takfiris.' Peregrine_Falcon here implicitly suggests that Muslims are not behind acts of terrorism without explicitly stating who is responsible. However, most C codings are rather more explicit in their assertion that the West carries out attacks against itself in order to have a pretext to attack the Muslim world. On the thread 'Crusade to murder Muslims and Islam,' Dawahcarrier25 repeated an allegation he claimed to have heard (and actually believed) that 'Rumsfeld was deliberately directing funds to BOTH shi'ite militias in Iraq (to kill Sunnis and weaken the insurgency) and Sunni/Wahabbi/al Qaeda groups in Lebanon (to kill Shi'ites, strengthen Israel, and weaken Hezbollah).' On other threads, notably '9/11 over US still killing,' the assertion is made even more explicit to the extent that the US is blamed for the attacks in 2001. In this context, it is of interest to observe that this is a minority view on the forum as it was this assertion that caused others to praise the terrorist attack, as we saw above for this thread.

Other codings were not of such great interest as those discussed here. Only a few postings discussed ethics as a specific issue and a remarkably low number emphasised the idea that Islam was already winning against the West. We will now turn to the IIC data itself.

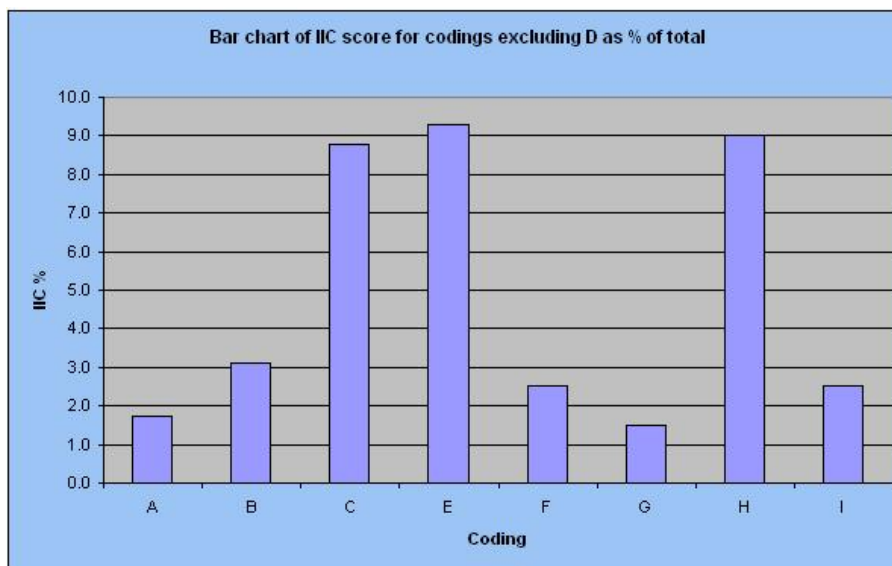
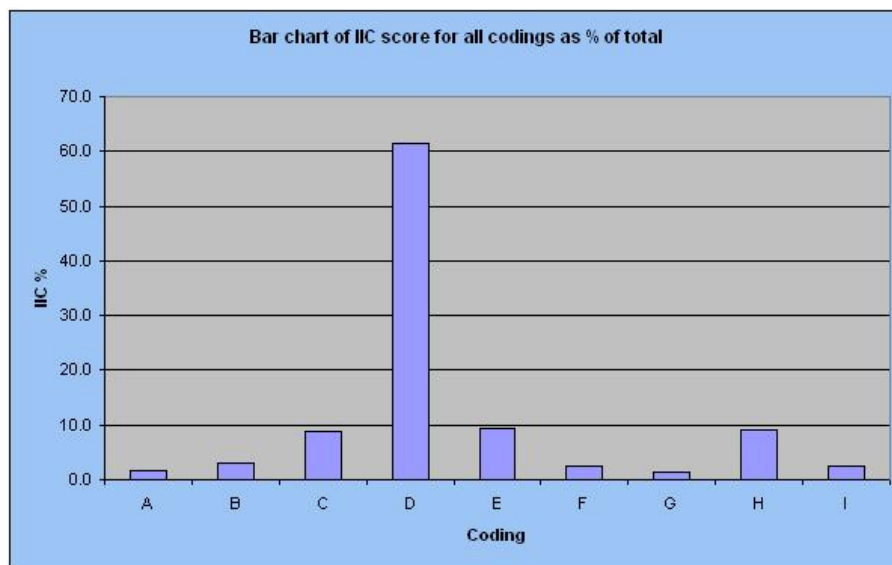
The IIC Results

The results of the survey are tabulated below. For the IIC, we listed on a thread-by-thread basis. The persuasiveness scores of individual postings were added together and multiplied by the viewing quotient to obtain a score per each code per thread. In the following table, the figures are summed per code and then each code's IIC percentage is stated (calculated

as a percentage of the total IIC for all codes). Two bar charts follow the table, visually representing the results.

IIC results table

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
TOTALS	27.4	48.9	138	966.5	145.9	39.6	23.3	141.4	39.6
Totals as a % of total score (1570.6) to 1dp	1.7	3.1	8.8	61.5	9.3	2.5	1.5	9.0	2.5



Comments on the IIC Results

IIC has revealed that by far the most common type of post on the HuT forum is that describing the 'Kufr West' in unfocussed negative terms, but without explicitly condoning violence (D, 61.5%). This is balanced by a noticeable minority opinion (E, 9.3%) opposing this view. Thus, although there is a debate about this, it is very one-sided. Furthermore, most E results are from avowedly non-Muslims. We can conclude that the general opinion on the forum is as described by code D, unfocussed anti-western sentiment. When the more focussed anti-western but non-violent attitudes are added to this figure (C, F, G), the total is raised to 74.3%. Very nearly three-quarters of the IIC for the forum is anti-western, but without explicitly condoning violence.

It may be suspected that such a ground-swell of opinion is fertile ground for explicit talk of terrorism, but this is not the case. Although 1.7% of the IIC was code A, 3.1% was explicitly against violence. This appears to be a far more balanced debate than that around the West in general. Despite the fact that terrorism is approved of on the forum, it is well balanced by those posting against terrorism. Nevertheless, when added to those in code H (many of whom stopped only just short being code A), the figures are rather more in favour of violence (10.7%) than against (3.1%). It seems reasonable to assert that those advocating violence have the upper hand in the debate on the forum in the debate about the use of violence.

HuT's forum illustrates that at least those HuT members who use the forum are extremely likely to display extreme dislike for the West and that their postings account for about 75% of the IIC. Some will also explicitly condone violence, accounting for 10.7% of IIC. Neither of these figures are significantly balanced by other opinions on this forum. The forum seems to serve as the basis for a group think based on extreme dislike for or hatred of the Western world. A significant proportion of this goes further in that it advocates violence (code H), sometimes explicitly condoning acts of terrorism (code A).

Conclusions

Towards the start of this paper, we briefly examined the official views of HuT with respect to violence and anti-western sentiment. Here, at the end of the paper, we will review how much the views on the forum chime with those official views. We will, prior to this, say a word about the IIC methodology and also draw together what we have learnt about the views on the forum.

In the first place, it is worth noting that even if no official views existed with which to compare and contrast the forum, the examination would still stand as an examination of web content, albeit in more relative isolation than is the case. In terms of the IIC methodology, it has certainly

enabled meaningful comparisons to be made between the various codings to which it was applied. It will be interesting in future to see if the same methodology can be successfully applied in other contexts. Clearly, the necessity of examining sub-sets of data will never go away because for every context, a sample will be needed to establish coding. Where it is possible also to conduct interviews with online participants, this would be a clear advantage as it would enable clarification over some of the caveats in the results.

From the IIC results and from the discussion of the postings on the HuT forum, it seems clear that this forum is an outlet of dangerous opinions. They are dangerous for the obvious (if occasional) way in which they advocate violence to achieve the political end the forum contributor seeks. Here, violence really is seen as ‘the answer.’ However, they are also dangerous in a rather more subtle and subversive way. It is clear that those participating in the debates on the forum are generally anti-western, even though most appear to have connections to the west. It is therefore a more generally corrosive force than the specific advocacy of violence. It may be possible to see such an outlet of hatred as some sort of ‘safety valve’ and this has not been explored within the present paper. However, from the postings examined, the suspicion is that far from being a safety valve, it is a boiler without one. The suspicion is that the sparse alternative voices on the forum, although making good points, are not there in sufficient numbers for it to be anything else. This would be a valuable topic for further work. Thus the general anti-western feeling is the ‘petri-dish’ in which the ideology of violence can grow.

We now turn to a brief word on how the views we have examined from the forum chime with the official ideology of HuT that we examined at the start of this paper. Firstly, we have seen that the language of the forum is reflective of that in the official documents. The pejorative and prejudicial use of “kufr” as a title for all non-Muslims is especially prevalent in both the literature and on the forum. Beyond this, there are many references to HuT and also sometimes forum contributors are keen to demonstrate how they are indeed in harmony with HuT’s ideas. However, the clearest way in which the forum is in accord with HuT is the unrelenting way in which it posits a very clearly divided world between the right way of life (Islam) and the wrong way of life (anything else). This is very obvious throughout and is clearly in accordance with HuT’s stated desire to provide an “intellectual struggle against the Kufr creeds, systems and thoughts, the erroneous ideas and the fraudulent concepts by exposing their falsehood, defects and contradiction with Islam, in order to deliver the Ummah from them and from their effects.”²⁷

Besides the general way in which the forum concurs with the official position of HuT, it is important to consider how it concurs with HuT’s view of violence. We noted how HuT thinks that “whenever the disbelieving enemies attack an Islamic country it becomes compulsory on its Muslim

citizens to repel the enemy.”²⁸ We also noted how recently the violence that is condoned by HuT has become more wide-ranging than the defense of Muslim lands, but that a good deal of examples cited as evidence of this were to do with fighting coalition forces in Afghanistan.²⁹ It is certainly the case that the majority of postings to the forum that condoned or encouraged violence were easy to fit into the violence explicitly condoned by HuT. Many of these posts were about fighting the coalition in Afghanistan. This is very important to note because not only does HuT make pronouncements on the permissibility of violence, but those writing the HuT forum also seem to adopt these views. It appears that people do listen to HuT’s pronouncements. It is thus also interesting to note that even as HuT is not explicit in calling for violence that cannot be firmly shown to be defensive Jihad, so too the talk of such violence on the forum is far more muted. IIC for terrorism (code A) was only 15% of that for other talk of violence (code H). Violence can become ubiquitous unless clear boundaries are set. It may be suspected that the fact that HuT does not clearly condemn terror means that some on the forum feel empowered to encourage it.

In summary, we can say that the hypothesis with which we began, that the views on the forum about violent jihad would mirror those of HuT, has been shown to be correct. This was by no means a forgone conclusion, for the forum does not purport to be in line with the views of HuT, but the fact that our hypothesis is correct shows that on this point, both the official documents of HuT and the forum are in agreement. It is fair to say that it is not possible to see the HuT forum as anything other than dangerous and as something that corrodes rather than enables both society and most of the individuals who use it. It appears broadly to follow HuT’s line on the permissibility of violence – attacking western troops in Muslim countries is encouraged and terrorist violence is contemplated by some.

Notes:

¹ <http://conservativehome.blogs.com/centreright/2010/03/cameron-reiterates-promise-to-ban-hizb-uttahrir.html> [accessed April 2011].

² The forum can be found at <http://forum.hizbuttahrir.org> [accessed April 2011].

³ <http://english.hizbuttahrir.org/> [accessed April 2011].

⁴ <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/index.php/EN/def> [accessed April 2011].

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Fiona B. Adamson, “Global Liberalism versus Political Islam: Competing Ideological Frameworks in International Politics”, *International Studies Review*, 7: 4 (2005): 547-69, 562.

⁷ <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/index.php/EN/def> [accessed April 2011].

⁸ <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/index.php/EN/def> [accessed April 2011].

⁹ Emmanuel Karagiannis, "Political Islam in Uzbekistan: Hizb Ut-Tahrir Al-Islami", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 58: 2 (2006), 261-80.

¹⁰ Mohammed Ayoob, "The Future of Political Islam: The Importance of External Variables", *International Affairs*, 81: 5, 951-61, 952f. On the ahistoricisation of Islam, also see Aziz al-Azmeh's articles "Postmodern Obscurantism and 'the Muslim Question'", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 2 Issue 5 (2003): 21-47 and his "Civilization, Culture and the New Barbarians." *International Sociology*, 16: 1 (2001): 75-94.

¹¹ See Mehmet Ozan Aşık, and Aykan Erdemir. "Westernization as Cultural Trauma: Egyptian Radical Islamist Discourse on Religious Education", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 9 Issue 25 (2010): 111-32.

¹² Zeyno Baran, *Hizb ut-Tahrir: Islam's Political Insurgency*, (Washington: Nixon Centre, 2004), 22.

¹³ <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/index.php/EN/def> [accessed April 2011].

¹⁴ Suha Taji-Farouki, "Islamists and the Threat of Jihad: Hizb al-Tahrir and al-Muhajiroun on Israel and the Jews", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 36: 4 (2000): 21-46, 29.

¹⁵ Madeleine Gruen, "The Violent Shift in Hizb al-Tahrir's Rhetoric", *CTC Sentinel*, 4: 2 (2011): 11-13, 12f.

¹⁶ Houriya Ahmed, Hannah Stuart, *Hizb ut-Tahrir: Ideology and Strategy*, (London: Centre for Social Cohesion, 2009), esp. part I.

¹⁷ Bradley Efron, "Large-Scale Simultaneous Hypothesis Testing: The Choice of a Null Hypothesis", *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 99: 465 (2004): 96-104.

¹⁸ Kathleen S. Crittenden, Richard J. Hill, "Coding Reliability and Validity of Interview Data", *American Sociological Review*, 36: 6 (1971): 1073-80.

¹⁹ Colin Robson, *Real World Research* (London: Blackwell, 2002), 329-39.

²⁰ For example, Leonard Weinberg, Ami Pedahzur, Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler, "The Challenges of Conceptualizing Terrorism", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 16: 4 (2004): 777 - 94.

²¹ For example, Lei Shi, Bai Sun, Liang Kong, Yan Zhang, "Web Forum Sentiment Analysis based on Topics", *Proceedings CIT09: 9th International Conference on Computer and Information Technology*, 2 (2009), 148-53 and Ahmed Abbasi, Hsinchun Chen, Arab Salem, "Sentiment Analysis in Multiple Languages: Feature Selection for Opinion Classification in Web Forums", *ACM Trans. Information Systems*, 26: 3 (2008): article 12.

²² Such posts counted as multiple posts when calculating the total number of postings on the forum. However, such 'continuation posts' are rare and as several hundred more posts were examined than were required, this will not adversely impact on the statistics.

²³ Ed Husain is author of *The Islamist*. It should be noted that he does not participate in the forum.

²⁴ Martha Crenshaw, "Psychology of Terrorism: An Agenda for the 21st Century", *Political Psychology*, 21: 2 (2000): 405-20, 409.

²⁵ Jerrold M. Post, "When Hatred Is Bred in the Bone: Psycho-Cultural Foundations of Contemporary Terrorism", *Political Psychology*, 26: 4 (2005): 615-36, 616.

²⁶ The link is given as <http://islambase.co.uk/index.php?opt...308&Itemid=181>

²⁷ <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/index.php/EN/def> [accessed April 2011].

²⁸ <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/index.php/EN/def> [accessed April 2011].

²⁹ Gruen, 'The Violent Shift in Hizb al-Tahrir's Rhetoric,' 12f.

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