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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Morocco

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

According to the constitution, Islam is the religion of the state, and the state guarantees freedom of thought, expression, and assembly. The constitution also says the state guarantees everyone the freedom to “practice their religious affairs.” The constitution states the King holds the title “Commander of the Faithful” and that he is the protector of Islam and the guarantor of the freedom of individuals “to practice their religious affairs” in the country. The constitution prohibits political parties founded on religion as well as political parties, parliamentarians, and constitutional amendments from denigrating or infringing on Islam. The law penalizes the use of enticements to convert a Muslim to another religion and prohibits criticism of Islam. It criminalizes acts and speech “undermining the Islamic religion.”

Although the law allows registration of religious groups as associations, some minority religious groups reported the government delayed or rejected their registration requests. The Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs (MEIA) continued to guide and monitor the content of sermons in mosques, Islamic religious education, and the dissemination of Islamic religious material by broadcast media – actions it said were intended to combat violent extremism. The government restricted the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials as well as Islamic materials it deemed inconsistent with the Maliki school of Sunni Islam. In February, the government extradited Shia Muslim Hassan al-Rabea, a Saudi citizen, to Saudi Arabia. Twenty-three human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International, raised concerns in their joint statement to the Head of Government regarding al-Rabea’s treatment in Saudi Arabia because of his religion. In August, the Qued-

Zem Court of First Instance (trial court) sentenced blogger Fatima Karim to two years in prison and fined her 50,000 dirhams (\$5,000) for insulting Islam. Police arrested her after she posted commentary on social media in which she reportedly made satirical comments about Quranic verses. On April 5, the Court of Appeals sentenced an individual arrested for attempting to convert his family to Shiism and other crimes to two years' imprisonment. The court also barred him from seeing those identified as victims in the criminal complaint for five years. According to the government, 84 persons were prosecuted for the offense of breaking the fast during the month of Ramadan, of which 74 were convicted, two acquitted, and eight were on trial at year's end.

Representatives of minority religious groups said they practiced their faiths discreetly principally out of fear of societal harassment, including ostracism by converts' families, social ridicule, and employment discrimination.

On May 10-12, the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism visited the country and met with Royal Advisor Andre Azoulay. During her visit, the Special Envoy also engaged other government leaders, members of the Jewish community, and civil society organizations on issues of religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue. The U.S. Ambassador, Consul General and other embassy and consulate general officials met with government officials, including from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the MEIA, to discuss religious freedom and tolerance, including the rights of minority communities. In regular meetings and discussions with members of religious minority and majority communities throughout the country, embassy and consulate general representatives highlighted the importance of the protection of religious minorities and interfaith dialogue. The Ambassador, Consul General, and other embassy officials regularly met with members of the Jewish community in Rabat and Casablanca as well as with Jewish leaders in other cities, including Marrakesh.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 37.4 million (midyear 2023). More than 99 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. Groups together constituting less than 1 percent of the population include Christians, Jews, Shia Muslims, and followers of the Baha'i Faith.

According to Jewish community leaders, there are an estimated 1,500 Jews in the country, although others place the estimate higher, approximately 1,000 of whom reside in Casablanca. Some Christian community leaders estimate there are between 1,500 and 12,000 Christian citizens distributed throughout the country; however, the Moroccan Association of Human Rights estimates there are 25,000 Christian citizens. According to some print and electronic media outlets, the number of Christian citizens

could exceed 30,000, although due to the absence of statistical data from official and research centers and the fact that some Christians practice in private, it is difficult to reach an accurate estimate.

Foreign-resident Christian leaders estimate there are at least 30,000 Roman Catholic and approximately 10,000 Protestant noncitizens, many of whom are recent migrants from sub-Saharan Africa or lifelong residents whose families have resided and worked in the country for generations but do not hold citizenship. There are small, foreign-resident Anglican communities in Rabat, Casablanca, and Tangier. There are an estimated 3,000 foreign residents who identify as Russian and Greek Orthodox, including a small Russian Orthodox community in Rabat and a small Greek Orthodox community in Casablanca. Most foreign-resident Christians live in the Casablanca, Marrakesh, Tangier, and Rabat urban areas, but small numbers are present throughout the country.

Shia Muslim leaders estimate there are several thousand Shia citizens, with the largest proportion in the north. In addition, there are an estimated 1,000 to 2,000 foreign-resident Shia from Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Tunisia in the country. Leaders of the Ahmadi Muslim community estimate their numbers at 750. Leaders of the Baha'i Faith community estimate there are 350 to 400 members throughout the country.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

According to the constitution, the country is a "sovereign Muslim state" and Islam is the religion of the state. The constitution guarantees freedom of thought, expression, and assembly, and the state guarantees every individual the freedom to practice their religion. The constitution states the King holds the title "Commander of the Faithful" and that he is the protector of Islam and the guarantor of the freedom to practice religious affairs in the country. The constitution prohibits the enactment of laws or constitutional amendments infringing upon its provisions relating to Islam, and it also recognizes the Jewish community as an integral component of society. According to the constitution, political parties may not be founded on religion and may not denigrate or infringe on Islam. A political party may not legally challenge Islam as the state religion. Religions other than Islam and Judaism are not recognized by the constitution or laws. The law prohibits basing a party on a religious, ethnic, or regional identity.

The constitution and the law governing media prohibit any individual, including members of parliament, who are normally immune from arrest while engaging in their parliamentary duties, from criticizing Islam on public platforms, such as print or online media, or in public speeches.

Such expressions are punishable by imprisonment of up to two years, a fine of up to 200,000 dirhams (\$20,300), or both. Punishment may be increased to five years' imprisonment or a fine of 50,000 to 500,000 dirhams (\$5,000 to \$50,000), or both, if the acts "are committed either by speech, scream, or threat made in public places or public meetings, or by poster publicly exhibited by sale, distribution, or any other means used for publicity, including online, paper, and audiovisual forms." Other provisions of the law state that online speech offenses related to Islam can carry prison sentences of two to six years.

The law penalizes anyone who "employs enticements to undermine the faith" or converts a Muslim to another faith by exploiting a weakness or need for assistance, or through the use of educational, health, or other institutions; it provides punishments of six months to three years' imprisonment and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams (\$20 to \$50). The same penalties apply to anyone who intentionally interferes with religious rites or celebrations where this causes disturbances or affects the dignity of such religious acts. It also provides the right to a court trial for anyone accused of such an offense. Voluntary conversion is not a crime under the law. The law permits the government to summarily expel any noncitizen resident it determines to be "a threat to public order," and the government has used this clause to expel foreigners suspected of proselytizing.

By law, impeding or preventing one or more persons from worshipping or from attending worship services of any religion is punishable by six months to three years' imprisonment and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams (\$20 to \$50). The penal code states any person known to be Muslim who breaks the fast in public during the month of Ramadan without an exception granted by religious authorities is liable to punishment of six months in prison and a fine of 200 to 500 dirhams (\$20 to \$50). Owners have discretion to keep their restaurants open during Ramadan.

The labor code prohibits discrimination against persons in employment and occupation based on race, religion, national origin, color, sex, ethnicity, or disability, including physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disability.

The penal code punishes anyone who "undermines the Islamic religion" with six months to two years in prison. The penalty is increased to five years if the offense is committed in public, including by electronic means.

The High Authority for Audiovisual Communications established by the constitution requires all eight public television stations to dedicate 5 percent of their airtime to Islamic religious content and to broadcast the Islamic call to prayer five times daily.

Sunni Muslims and Jews are the only religious groups recognized in the constitution as native to the country. A separate set of laws and special courts govern personal status matters for Jews, including functions such as marriage, inheritance, and other personal status matters. Rabbinical authorities, who are also court officials, administer Jewish family courts. Muslim judges trained in the country's Maliki Sunni interpretation of sharia administer the courts for personal status matters for all other religious groups. According to the law, a Muslim man may marry a Muslim, Christian, or Jewish woman; a Muslim woman may not marry a man of another religion unless he converts to Islam. Non-Muslims must formally convert to Islam and be permanent residents before they can become guardians of abandoned or orphaned children. Guardianship entails the caretaking of a child, which may last until the child reaches 18, but it does not allow changing the child's name or inheritance rights and requires maintaining the child's birth religion, according to orphanage directors.

Many foreign-resident Christian churches (churches run by and attended by foreign residents only) are registered as associations. The Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Protestant, and Anglican churches maintain different forms of official status. The Russian Orthodox and Anglican Churches are registered as branches of international associations through the embassies of Russia and the United Kingdom, respectively. Protestant and Catholic churches, whose existence as foreign-resident churches predates the country's independence in 1956, as well as the Russian and Greek Orthodox Churches, maintain a special status recognized by the government, which allows them to preserve houses of worship and assign foreign clergy.

Legal provisions outlined in the general tax code provide tax benefits, land and building grants, subsidies, and customs exemptions for imports necessary for the religious activities of recognized religious groups (Sunni Muslims and Jews) and religious groups registered as associations (some foreign-resident Christian churches). The law does not require religious groups to register to worship privately, but a nonrecognized religious group must register as an association to conduct business on behalf of the group (e.g., open and hold bank accounts, rent property, acquire land and building grants, and have access to customs exemptions for imports necessary for religious activities) or to hold public gatherings. Associations must register with local Ministry of Interior (MOI) officials in the jurisdiction of the association's headquarters. An individual representative of a religious group neither recognized nor registered as an association may be held liable for any of the group's public gatherings, transactions, bank accounts, property rentals, or petitions to the government. The registration application must contain the name and purpose of the association; the name, nationality, age, profession, and residential address of each founder; and the address of the association's headquarters. The constitution provides civil society associations and

nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) the right to organize themselves and exercise their activities freely within the scope of the constitution. The law on associations prohibits organizations that pursue activities the government regards as “illegal, contrary to good morals, or aimed at undermining the Islamic religion, the integrity of the national territory, or the monarchical regime, or which call for discrimination.”

The law does not allow Moroccan Christians to be buried in Christian cemeteries or to hold Christian names.

The Prison Administration authorized religious observances and services provided by religious leaders for all prisoners, including religious minorities. It also respected the religious dietary requirements for religious minorities.

By law, all publicly and privately funded national educational institutions must teach Sunni Islam in accordance with the teachings and traditions of the Maliki-Ashari school of Islamic jurisprudence, with the exception of private Jewish schools, which may teach Judaism without including Islamic education. Foreign-run schools have the choice of including or omitting Islamic religious instruction within the school's curriculum.

According to the constitution, only the High Council of Ulema, a group headed and appointed by the King with representatives from all regions of the country, is authorized to issue fatwas, which become legally binding only through the King's endorsement in a royal decree and a subsequent confirmation by parliamentary legislation. Such fatwas are considered binding only for Maliki Sunni Muslims. If the King or parliament declines to ratify a decision of the council, the decision remains nonbinding and unenforced.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

On January 5, press reported police arrested an individual for attempting to convert his family to Shiism, judicial authorities convicted him of physical and domestic abuse against his family and sentenced him to one year in prison, while fining him 3,000 dirhams (\$300). On April 5, at the discretion of the judge, the Court of Appeals increased the sentence to two years in prison and banned the individual for five years from seeing his family members identified as victims in the criminal complaint.

On February 6, the government extradited Saudi citizen Hassan al-Rabea based on a provisional arrest warrant issued by the Arab Interior Ministers Council at the request of Saudi Arabia. Al-Rabea belonged to a prominent Shia family that suffered persistent persecution by Saudi authorities according to HRW. Twenty-three international and domestic

human rights organizations, including HRW, Amnesty International, and the Moroccan Association of Human Rights, voiced strong concerns regarding al-Rabea's likely mistreatment upon arrival in Saudi Arabia. A February 13 joint statement issued by all 23 organizations addressed to Head of Government Aziz Akhannouch requested clarification of the government's decision to extradite al-Rabea to Saudi Arabia "where he faces credible risks of persecution and other serious harm, including risks of torture, for reasons related to his religious beliefs and his family's history of protests." They also asserted his extradition violated international agreements to which Morocco was a party, including UN refugee conventions, the Convention against Torture, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. At year's end, al-Rabea's family said they had not heard from him since his arrival in Saudi Arabia.

Blogger Fatima Karim remained in prison while appealing her 2022 sentence. On August 15, 2022, the Oued-Zem Court of First Instance sentenced Karim to two years in prison and fined her 50,000 dirhams (\$5,000) for insulting Islam online. Police arrested her after she posted commentary on Facebook in which, according to Amnesty International, she made satirical comments about Quranic verses that the authorities deemed insulting to Islam.

According to the government, authorities prosecuted 84 persons for the offense of breaking the fast during the month of Ramadan of which 74 were convicted, two were acquitted, and eight awaited trial. Of those arrested for breaking the fast, 26 were arrested for breaking the fast publicly and 58 were arrested in conjunction with other crimes.

Authorities continued to deny Christian organizations that are composed of Moroccan citizens the right to Christian or civil marriage and funeral services or the right to establish new churches. The government denied official recognition to NGOs that it considered to be advocating against Islam as the state religion.

The government continued to allow the operation of 44 registered, foreign-resident Christian churches, the same number as in previous years. Some foreign pastors reported Christian citizens generally did not attend their services out of fear of incurring government harassment. Foreign residents and visitors attended religious services without restriction at those churches.

The Justice and Charity Organization (JCO), a Sunni social movement that rejects the King's spiritual authority, remained banned but was still active. The government continued to monitor the JCO's activities, and it remained the largest social movement of its kind in the country, despite being unregistered. The JCO continued to release press statements on topics such as political events in the country; publish its monthly

magazine *Al Adwal Ihsan* that covered various religious and political topics, among other things; hold conferences; manage internet sites, and participate in peaceful political demonstrations, including those related to events in the Gaza Strip.

Several religious groups reported occasionally informing authorities of planned large gatherings, for which authorities at times assisted with security measures.

According to religious leaders and legal scholars, the government's refusal to allow Shia Muslim groups to register as associations continued to prevent the groups from gathering legally for public religious observations. There were no known Shia mosques or *housseiniyas* (Shia prayer halls) in the country. According to Shia community members, they were able to pray in Sunni mosques, but they risked criticism from other worshippers for their religious practices.

The Christian NGO Open Doors stated in its 2023 *Country Dossier Report* that the penal code, which criminalizes "shaking the faith" of a Muslim, put many Christians who talked to others about their faith at risk of criminal prosecution and arrest. The NGO also stated, "While all Christians from an Islamic background can, in practice, be denied their rights to inheritance or family affiliation, this is a particular risk for women. They [Christian women] are also more vulnerable to arbitrary divorce and the denial of access to their children." The NGO stated the personal status law follows the country's Maliki-Ashari Sunni interpretation of sharia.

A 2017 ban on the import, production, and sale of the burqa remained in effect. The MOI publicly cited security concerns as justification for the ban, as the garment could conceal the identity of the wearer. While the burqa is not widespread in Morocco, a small segment of the population viewed it as important. The ban did not prevent individuals from wearing burqas or making them at home for individual use. Authorities prohibited news anchors on national television and police and army personnel in uniform from wearing a hijab or burqa.

The MEIA's Mohamed VI Institute remained the principal government institution responsible for shaping the country's religious life and promoting its interpretation of Sunni Islam. The Mohammed VI Institute was responsible for the spiritual training of *morchidines* (imams) and women religious leaders called *morchidates* (similar to imams, except they do not lead communal prayers). The institute has operated since 2014 and has provided training to more than 6,350 religious officials, including approximately 4,200 foreigners. Non-Moroccan religious students came predominantly from sub-Saharan Africa. The training sessions fulfilled the requirement for Moroccan religious leaders to acquire a certificate issued by the High Council of Ulema to operate in the country.

The MEIA developed elementary school programs advocating moderation, coexistence, and tolerance in accordance with the Sunni Maliki school of jurisprudence followed by the country.

The Rabita Mohammadia des Oulema (Mohammadia League of Scholars, often referred to as the Rabita) continued its program, begun in 2021, dedicated to training Islamic social media influencers. At year's end, 100 persons had participated in the league's program. The program's three-day training sessions focused on countering online extremist messaging and ideology. Since its establishment in 2006, the Rabita has served as the government's lead institution in countering violent extremism and promoting interfaith dialogue.

The government required Muslim religious leaders who worked in the country to abide by the guidelines outlined in the MEIA-issued *Guide of the Imam, Khatib, and the Preacher*. The MEIA continued to guide and monitor the content of sermons in mosques, Islamic religious education, and the dissemination of Islamic religious material by broadcast media, actions it said were intended to combat violent extremism.

The MEIA continued to monitor Quranic schools to prevent what the ministry considered inflammatory or extremist rhetoric and to ensure teachings followed approved doctrine.

The government required mosques to close to the public shortly after daily prayer times to prevent use of the premises for what it termed "unauthorized activity," including gatherings authorities believed could foment extremism. MOI and MEIA authorization continued to be required for the renovation or construction of churches, synagogues, and mosques, including those using private funds.

The government continued to restrict the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials as well as some Islamic materials it deemed inconsistent with the Maliki school of Sunni Islam. Despite restrictions on the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials, the government permitted the display and sale of Bibles in French, English, and Spanish. A limited number of Arabic translations of the Bible were available for sale in a few bookshops for use in higher education courses.

Government policy prohibits the sale of all books, videotapes, and DVDs it considered religiously extremist.

The government continued drafting an educational charter mandating that traditional education be based on "values" and "respect for religious and legal studies." The Ministry of Education continued an ongoing review of the religion curriculum used in primary and secondary education and continued to make reforms based on universal values of liberty, empathy, solidarity, and honesty.

At the elementary school level, authorities implemented a fully standardized curriculum that places the teaching of Jewish culture within the context of both its contribution to Moroccan culture and as a global religion. The government continued to fund the study of Jewish culture and heritage at state-run universities.

The government continued to disseminate information about Islam and Judaism over dedicated state-funded television and radio channels. Television channel Assadissa (Six) programming was exclusively religious, consisting primarily of Quran and *hadith* (sayings or customs of Muhammad and his companions) readings and explanations highlighting the government's interpretation of Islam.

According to observers, the government permitted social and charitable activities consistent with Sunni Islam. For example, the Unity and Reform Movement, the country's largest registered Islamic social organization, continued its close relationship with the Party of Justice and Development, which HRW has described as an Islamist group viewed by the government as a political adversary, and continued to operate without restriction, according to media reports.

The monarchy continued to support the restoration of synagogues and Jewish cemeteries throughout the country, efforts it stated were necessary to preserve the country's religious and cultural heritage and to serve as a symbol of tolerance.

On March 16-17, the al-Mowafaqa Ecumenical Institute of Theological Art and Culture, a joint educational initiative between the Catholic Church's Archdiocese of Rabat and the Evangelical Church of Morocco, held a colloquium to mark its 10-year anniversary. During the opening ceremonies, Minister of Islamic Affairs and Religious Endowments Ahmed Toufiq provided brief remarks that highlighted the importance of human liberty in religious affairs and praised the interfaith mission of al-Mowafaqa.

On June 13-15, parliament hosted a conference titled "Interfaith Dialogue: Working Together for Our Common Future" in Marrakech that attracted local and international religious, civil society, parliamentary, academic, and government leaders.

On June 14, the National Human Rights Council hosted a delegation from the group Coordination of Moroccan Christians to hear concerns from the country's Christian community.

On July 5, the Royal Academy hosted an interreligious dialogue among the Rabita Mohammadia des Oulema, select members of the Royal Academy, and the Vatican's Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue. Discussions

focused on how to protect, renew, and expand the interreligious dialogue between Muslims and Christians.

On December 24, Casablanca's Anfa District Governor Aziz Dadas told attendees at an interfaith program that as the "Commander of Believers," King Mohammed VI's role extends to all members of Abrahamic faiths – Muslims, Jews, and Christians. The event was held at Casablanca's Notre Dame de Lourdes Catholic Church.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Representatives of minority religious groups said fear of societal harassment, including ostracism by converts' families, social ridicule, and employment discrimination were the main reasons for them to practice their faiths privately and away from public view.

Shia sources continued to state they observed Ashura in private to avoid societal harassment. Shia Muslims said many avoided disclosing their religious affiliation in areas where their numbers were smaller. Authorities allowed public Ashura processions for Sunni Muslims but forbade them for Shia Muslims.

There were reports from media outlets, activists, community leaders, and Christian converts that Christian citizens faced social pressure from Muslim family and friends to convert to Islam or renounce their Christian faith. Some young Christian converts who still lived with their Muslim families reportedly did not reveal their faith because they believed they might be expelled from their homes unless they renounced Christianity.

Jewish citizens continued to state they lived and could attend services in synagogues in safety but were increasingly concerned about antisemitism after the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel. They said they were able to visit religious sites regularly and to hold annual commemorations.

Members of the Baha'i Faith said they were open about their faith with family, friends, and neighbors.

Muslim citizen children and youths continued to study at private Christian and Jewish elementary and high schools, reportedly because these schools maintained a reputation for offering a high-quality education. According to school administrators, Muslim students constituted a significant portion of the students enrolled at Jewish schools in Casablanca.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

On May 10-12, the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism visited the country and met with Royal Advisor Azoulay. During her visit, the Special Envoy also engaged other government leaders, members of the Jewish community, and civil society organizations on issues of religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue. The Ambassador and other embassy and consulate general officials met with government officials, including from the MFA, MOI and MEIA, to promote religious freedom and tolerance, including the rights of minority communities.

In regular meetings and discussions with members of religious communities throughout the country, embassy and consulate general representatives highlighted the importance of protection of religious minorities and interfaith dialogue. The Ambassador and Consul General regularly met with members of the Jewish community in Rabat and Casablanca, as well as with Jewish leaders in other cities, including Marrakesh.

On April 15, the Chargé attended the Ffour Pluriel 2023, an interfaith event held during Ramadan that Royal Advisor Azoulay hosted and Muslim, Jewish, and Christian representatives attended. The Chargé gave a speech discussing the importance of religious diversity, tolerance, and freedom, stating "Tolerance implies no lack of commitment to one's own beliefs. Rather it condemns the oppression or persecution of others. This is important to remember, because every faith is in the minority somewhere in the world, and we can only fully realize the freedom we wish for ourselves by helping to ensure that liberty for everyone."

On September 18, the Consul General attended a Rosh Hoshana celebration at Neve Shalom Synagogue in Casablanca. Media sources quoted the Consul General stating, "This convergence of different communities, under one roof, is a living testimony to the harmonious coexistence and solidarity deeply rooted in Moroccan society."

On December 5, the Ambassador made a keynote speech about interfaith dialogue at the International Campus of Excellence Gala Dinner where he stated, "Coexistence is not just about occupying the same space, it is about coming together toward a common cause, a nuanced dance of mutual understanding, respect, and collaboration."

In December, the Ambassador and Consul General participated in a series of Hanukkah celebrations to demonstrate support for religious diversity and tolerance.

On December 24, the Consul General attended an interfaith program at Casablanca's Notre Dame de Lourdes Catholic Church to further underscore support for religious diversity.

The U.S. government continued its cooperative agreement with the Mimouna Association, a Moroccan-based NGO, to combat antisemitism, including anti-Zionism, the delegitimization of Israel, and other forms of intolerance and hatred, including hatred against Islam.

The embassy continued to provide funding for “Rebuilding Our Homes,” a program established in 2021 in partnership with the American Sephardi Federation and the Mimouna Association. The project’s main goal is to revive and preserve Jewish heritage contained within the Mellahs (the historic Jewish quarters) of Fez, Essaouira, and Rabat.

The embassy used social media engagement during the visit of the Special Envoy to highlight the importance of coexistence and religious tolerance. The embassy also used social media to highlight religious holidays to promote religious freedom and tolerance.

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