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Exploring the Refugee Experience through the Autobiographies of Yusra Mardini and Hassan Akkad

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Introduction

This paper examines the journeys of Yusra Mardini and Hassan Akkad, who fled Syria's civil war and rebuilt their lives against immense adversity. Mardini, a 2016 Refugee Olympian, and Akkad, a BAFTA-winning filmmaker and activist, challenge the homogenization of refugees, asserting individual identity beyond political labels. Their autobiographies highlight resilience, emphasizing humane resettlement and the dignity every displaced person deserves. Their stories transcend borders, illuminating resilience, hope, and determination while reinforcing our shared humanity. This study employs qualitative research, comparative analysis, and close reading of primary and secondary sources to explore the urgent refugee crisis and its implications.

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Leaving Home

In September 2015, three-year-old Alan Kurdi was fleeing Syria with his five-year-old brother and mother when their boat capsized in the Mediterranean Sea. A week later, his inconsolable father could be seen performing their funeral rites in their hometown of Kobani, Syria. Alan's story gained widespread global attention when a photogrpher captured the little boy washed onto the Turkish ashore, face down, with his little shoes still on. The three were a part of an estimated three thousand six hundred refugees who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea that year (Jones.)

Yusra Mardini and Hassan Akkad's autobiographies, *Butterfly: From Refugee to Olympian: My Story of Rescue, Hope, and Triumph* (2018) and *Hope Not Fear: Finding My Way from Refugee to Filmmaker to NHS Hospital Cleaner and Activist* (2021), tell similar stories of fleeing Syria. They happen to be the ones who could make it across the sea, unlike little Alan. Their voices are those that were heard by the world and became representative of the millions of people who have been fleeing their countries of origin in search of 'hope,' a term that interestingly occurs in the complete titles of both works.

Home Between Memory and Survival

In the initial pages of her autobiographical work, Yusra narrates stories from her childhood and her years of growing up in Damascus. One gets to know the way of life for families like hers, their religious beliefs, customs, family dynamics, and everything that makes us human, including the idiosyncrasies of some family member, the kindheartedness of another, some memorable get-together, or a bad day at swimming. She mentions enjoying American pop and Michael Jackson, having been introduced to them by her father, and obsessing over them just like any other young girl of her age.

Of all the laughter and tears of daily life, the one thing that assumed immense significance for her was swimming. As she writes, it had been a family passion, and every member was expected to share it. Her father, who had represented Syria in competitions before going for compulsory military service, began to teach his older daughter, Sara, how to swim even before she had learnt how to walk. Yusra also joined competitive swimming at a young age.

Watching Michael Phelps win the men's 100m butterfly final by one by four hundredth of a second at the 2004 Greece Olympics transformed little Yusra's initial reluctance to swim into a fiery and ambitious dream of "… following Phelps to the top. To the Olympics. To gold. Or die trying." (Mardini and Blond 14) Swimming clashed with traditional Syrian society in its requirements of gear, that is, a swimsuit, which was perceived to be more 'revealing' than was generally acceptable. However, her parents did not pay heed to such opposition. Yusra and her sister Sara's swimming training was rigorous under their father's discipline, and soon they were able to make it to teams and camps that would take Yusra closer to her dream of representing her country at the Olympics.

Subtle additions like the portrait of President Assad at the pool or Sara's visit to the Presidential palace as part of the national team, and the picture from the visit that was framed and given a 'pride-of place' in their living room do not appear to be as significant as they later became and which would, over the years, dictate the course of her life.

For Hassan Akkad, home meant the music of Fairuz in the mornings, the voices of family members, and the smell of his mother cooking delicious Syrian delicacies for warm family dinners that brought all of them together. They went for *serans* or picnics to the orchards near Damascus that were full of the sweetest fruits. There were also the souks, his father's pizza restaurant, and swimming lessons in summer.

Through his narrative, however, one gets to know how Syrian society, to quite an extent, still holds deeply patriarchal and prejudiced views concerning anyone different. Akkad himself subscribed to the notion of 'toxic masculinity' and was homophobic, xenophobic, and had grown up to believe that the only acceptable emotions that men could show were "different shades of anger" (Akkad and Ley 9). Brothers grew up with more freedom than sisters, and it did not even occur to them to question such discrimination.

What may be said to be Hassan's first act of rebellion was his eagerness to learn English by memorising the lyrics of the American band

Blink-182 and putting up English phrases on his walls over the years. This culminated in his decision to take up English Literature at university when he was nineteen, something that would drastically change his way of looking at and understanding life and the people around him. It was only then that he realised how faulty his previously held notions had been. While at university, he began to work as a teacher in a school, a profession that he stumbled upon accidentally, but one which would be immensely fulfilling for him and in which he would excel within a short period.

What appears to be ignorance and unintentional 'toxicity' of the Syrian society is, in reality, a microcosm of those in power in the country. The regime itself was discriminating, stifling, and 'toxic', a realisation that is integral to understanding the forces of power that dictated the lives of millions of people in the nation.

Disruptions and the decision to flee

The political developments in the Middle East and Syria form the crux of the context of Yusra and Hassan's stories. The Arab Spring of 2011, a series of revolutions in the area that until March had raged in Tunisia, Egypt, and then Libya, which was closer home to Syria, happened to be the catalyst that would set off a cascade of actions and reactions. It had already witnessed unprecedented death and destruction.

It was not long before unrest broke out in Syria as well. In February 2011, a group of schoolboys in Daraa had made graffiti on walls, calling for the ousting of the Assad regime. The slogans were similar to the ones that had been very recently heard in the countries where the Arab Spring had already arrived. In a final act of naivety, as Akkad calls it, the boys had also signed their names beneath. This confirmed the worst fears of the regime that felt threatened by even a hint of opposition, and the boys were taken to be brutally tortured in detention. Their families' pleas for release were inhumanely turned down by representatives of the regime.

For almost a decade until then, the Syrians had been "ruled by fear." The initial months of Bashar al-Assad's rule, which began in 2000, held promise of modernization and liberty that had been suppressed during his father's time. However, the 'Damascus Spring' was short-lived, and Assad followed in his father's footsteps, reinforcing Emergency provisions that suspended most constitutional freedoms. By 2011, there was widespread discontent among the people because of a lack of investments, mass unemployment, and overcrowding in the cities due to droughts in the villages, but no one dared to protest in fear of brutal suppression (Akkad and Ley 14). However, the treatment meted out to the schoolboys and their families inspired widespread protest and marked the beginning of unrest in Syria, which would involve a cycle of brutal suppression leading to death, peaceful protests against such mindlessness, which were again brutally suppressed, leading to more deaths.

Yusra was thirteen years old at the time. Her narrative notes that initially, not a lot of people, including the national television, were willing to address the growing unrest. However, soon enough, her mother, who worked at the hot-springs spa near Daraa, told her about the explosions and shooting she had heard in the city. The state television was still silent about it. By the end of May, the protests had reached Damascus and Latakia.

The Mardinis and most families like theirs decided to wait it out without taking any sides. Living had become unsafe, there were explosions and gunfire. Daily life began to have limitations that they had not known before, like not going out for dinner on Fridays or staying indoors after seven in the evening. The only thing that kept Yusra going and distracted during that time was swimming and the dream that she held so dear- of representing her nation, Syria, at the Olympics, which was unfortunately growing improbable with the escalating conflict and unrest.

On the other hand, Akkad, by then a young man, resolved to join the protest, eager to lead by example. Despite knowing the risks, he gathered the courage to make his way to his first protest at the historical Umayyad Mosque in the heart of Damascus. He managed to par-

ticipate in more protests without getting caught until one day, he was caught.

Akkad's time in detention, where he was taken not once but several times, would be a memory that would haunt him and leave him with lasting trauma for years to come. Even inhumane would be a mild term to describe the atrocities of the mukhabarat, the regime's repressive secret police. They did not spare anyone- innocent people who had only shown the courage to question cruel practices were killed, or in any place- the schools and hospitals that were supposed to be safe were no longer so. The entire country had become unsafe. Daily life had become unpredictable. For Yusra, going to school and swimming classes routinely had become challenging. The secret police even boarded school buses for surveillance. They were regularly required to produce IDs at arbitrary check posts. Gunfire in the streets woke them up at night, and there were reports of stray shrapnel killing children in bed. On several occasions, the Mardinis, too, had been very close to indiscriminate firing. Through the news, the regime blamed the violence on terrorists.

They realized that their home in Daraya had become too unsafe when one day, their father was grievously beaten up by a group of men and left on the road to crawl back home. They made their first move to a long-term hotel in Damascus, without even getting to bid a proper goodbye to what they had known as home for so long. Thus began their experience with displacement, of losing everything they held dear and of "a lifetime of memories being buried under rubble" (Mardini and Blond 40).

The news of their friend Ehab being dead due to the arbitrary violence left everyone in her family deeply shocked. Yusra was young, but she could sense that her country was descending into horror. (Mardini and Blond 43) An innumerable number of young people were disappearing, evidently losing their lives in the continuous fighting. Soon, the deaths became the new normal.

Yusra's narrative also highlights how war is also business, as the housing crisis meant landlords could charge exorbitant amounts for bare minimum spaces, knowing that people had no other option. It is

a testament to the absolute rejection of human values and empathy in times of crisis, as those in control of resources exploit those who are helpless and in desperate need of them. It is something that one comes across even in the context of people smuggling, which will be covered later in the paper.

When the lease ended on their first apartment in Damascus, the landlord refused to renew it, and they shifted to a small basement space in Baramkeh, where uniformed guards visited them in order to ascertain their identity and check whether they posed any threat of danger.
While returning from training one day, the sisters narrowly missed being hit by a mortar shell that blew out the windows of the athletes' hostels. As they drove away in their mother's car, another shell ripped apart Yusra's whole world. She continued swimming training, but in the absence of her father's support, who had shifted to Jordan for work, she felt rudderless and discontinued practice. Sara, too, had left competitive swimming by then due to her shoulder injury.
The girls and their mother made their next move from Baramkeh to Muhajireen when there was dangerous fighting in their neighbourhood, and many students were killed in the firing at the university across the street.

Mujahireen proved to be a peaceful and safe haven, but the war raged on in other places. As they began to slip into a sense of normalcy, it was again time for them to move for the fourth time in three years. Though only a little away from their previous place, they were again close to the fighting and drained of all good spirits. Death randomly fell "… from the sky in the street, in midday traffic, without warning," and they learnt to move on as if nothing had happened (Mardini and 64). Yusra had resumed swimming with a renewed determination when one day an RPG rocket ploughed through the roof and landed in their pool. Fortunately, it did not explode. She had escaped death by luck again.

Many of their friends were already leaving Syria for neighbouring Turkey and Lebanon or countries in Europe like Germany, Belgium, Sweden, and France. The sisters saw a future for themselves if they could make it out of the devastation. They did not know what the journey would entail, but after much thought and discussion amongst

themselves, the family decided that the two of them could leave for Germany and claim asylum so that their mother, father, and little sister Shahed could join them later. They planned a way out and began their goodbyes, filled with an uncertain hope.

Hassan Akkad had been left gravely physically injured after his first detention because of his participation in the protest. At the time of his release, he had been schooled by the authorities and even taken to meet the President, the main force behind the torment, to unquestioningly accept everything and not get himself involved in any more of the protests. The experience left him scarred physically as well as emotionally. The conditions inside the detention centre and the treatment meted out to those detained were inhumane to say the least. His mother had advised him to leave Syria, but leaving home was an unimaginably tough decision to make, and he took his time. Meanwhile, he took a trip to Turkey to recuperate from the horrors of the detention cell.

It turned out that his activities were being constantly monitored by the authorities. Immediately upon his return from Turkey, he was called by the detainers who suspected his involvement in anti-regime activities as the motivation behind his visit to the neighbouring country. It was not true, but he was detained again for several days, released only when a large amount of bribes had been paid to the concerned officials. This stay left a deep psychological impact on him. He had almost given up all hope of finding his way out. The cruel injustice and arbitrary actions of the regime shocked him to the core, as he witnessed and heard of the deaths of several innocent inmates in those centers. The survivor's guilt was acute in him. For years after, he felt extremely guilty of having survived and made it out of there while many died and would continue to die in detention and at protest sites (Akkad and Ley 27). Hassan knew he could not live in peace in his beloved country anymore. It was unsafe and uncertain. He had no other choice but to leave Syria.

Flight and life in a new 'home'

Flight

Hassan Akkad first lived in Dubai and Cairo for two years before he decided to move to Europe, where he hoped to rebuild his life and find some security. He writes, "How do you decide what to pack from a life? There were things I left behind that I wish I hadn't. Like the shoebox full of old mementoes in my wardrobe… Fragments of the life of a young man." (Akkad and Ley 22)

In the absence of a safe legal route, he had to pursue the route of illegal smuggling across the Aegean Sea from Turkey to Greece, as Yusra and Sara would do a few months later. The crossing across the sea was as dangerous as Yusra's, for theirs too was an overcrowded boat. In the first attempt, they were rescued by the Turkish coast guard. The next time, as they neared the Greek shore, they had to fight off violent intruders who appeared to be pirates or mafia but later turned out to be Greek marine forces, who kept thwarting their attempts to reach the Greek coast and at one point even stole their engine and drove off in their vessel. The violent 'pushbacks', in direct opposition to EU and international law, have never been acknowledged by Greek authorities, but they continue to happen even today, as Akkad claims.

It was 10 July 2015 when Hassan and his group made it to Europe. Hassan travelled through Europe for 89 days until he reached the UK, the place where he had dreamt of building life afresh. Once in Lesbos, they moved to Idomeni and then Macedonia. They crossed the dangerous Hungarian border and then reached Vienna. He spent some time in Frankfurt, Cologne, and Paris, and even some days at the Calais jungle, which is infamous for its unsanitary living conditions for refugees. He was caught by the police in France in the course of his failed attempts to cross over to the United Kingdom. He ultimately made it into Heathrow on a fake passport and then claimed asylum there. All along, the fear of being fingerprinted in some other European country was acute as, according to the Dublin Treaty, once fingerprinted, the individual has to seek asylum in that country itself and not any other. That was not a possibility for Akkad as he always felt that he would get the best shot at rebuilding his life in the United Kingdom, primarily because of his proficiency in the English Language. Therefore, it was indeed a moment of joy and relief when he could make it past the gates of Heathrow and step onto British soil.

From the very first chapter, Yusra Mardini's *Butterfly: From Refugee to Olympian: My Story of Rescue, Hope, and Triumph* challenges us to confront profound and pressing questions. She writes, "When did our lives become so cheap? Risking it all, paying a fortune to climb onto an overcrowded dinghy and take our chances on the sea. Is this really the only way out? The only way to escape the bombs at home?" (Mardini and Blond 7)

In August 2015, Sara and Yusra flew to Istanbul in Turkey, which did not require a visa. Many Syrians had already gone across and settled there. However, it was illegal for them to work there, and four years later, many were uncertain about what to do next.

The two sisters and the group that they formed with their cousin opted for the route across the sea to Greece instead of trying to walk across the Bulgarian border into Europe. It was being reported that a large fence was being put up to prevent the migrants from entering Bulgarian space, and those caught by the patrols were handled mercilessly.

The group had to contact smugglers who would help them along the way and paid a hefty sum for the passage in advance. They are taken to the coast in Izmir, where they wait for days in a forest without food or water for a boat that would take them across to Greece. The first attempt was unsuccessful as a Turkish coastguard arrived as soon as they were some distance away from the shore. The boat's engine had also stopped. They had to hurry back. A few hours later, they boarded an overcrowded dinghy and left by the smugglers to steer it themselves. Fifteen minutes later, the engine stopped working. The waves were high, and water began to collect in the boat. To ensure that the boat kept floating, some of the passengers began to haul themselves out and swim alongside it. Sara and Yusra were among them. They stayed in cold water for almost three hours until they reached Lesbos in Greece, pushing and pulling the boat when they had to.

The introductory chapter captures some of the moments of acute desperation, helplessness, and above all, strength, from the journey that Yusra and her sister took across the Aegean Sea in the overcrowded dinghy. The account of their struggle in the sea, as they swayed between life and death for hours, is a reminder of the desperation that

leads people to take up such perilous journeys in search of better lives.

From Greece, they continued their journey by bus and on foot, passing through Macedonia, Serbia, and Hungary in Europe. They finally reached Berlin in September 2015, where they applied for asylum and were later joined by their parents and sister.

Life in a new 'home'

In Berlin, Yusra resumed her swimming training. Her awe-inspiring story of crossing the sea with her sister to Greece gained attention through a couple of journalists she had met on her journey from Syria to Germany. She found a great mentor and friend in Sven, who used to train her. When the President of the International Olympic Committee, Thomas Bach, announced the possibility of the Refugee Olympic Team, Sven wrote to them recommending Yusra, and soon she was a part of the team along with athletes who, just like her, had had to leave their countries of origin.

Balancing the series of interviews that she had to engage in while training for the Olympics proved to be a challenge for Yusra. At times, she doubted whether she truly deserved a chance at the Olympics or if she was being handed it on a platter with pity at her status as a 'refugee'. Over time, she realized the importance of her presence in the team and her voice in the world. It did not matter if she won, but it mattered that she had shown up despite the hurdles. It was this message of hope and strength that she delivered as she participated in the events of the Rio Olympics in 2016 as a member of the Refugee Olympic Team.

Hassan Akkad had always harboured a passion for photography. Before making his journey across the sea, he had invested in a handy GoPro camera that recorded footage of his journey. He collaborated with the BBC to make the BAFTA award-winning documentary "Exodus: Our Journey to Europe", which played a significant role in highlighting the realities of the refugee crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he volunteered with the NHS as a hospital cleaner, working at his neighbourhood hospital alongside other migrant staff. He noticed the disparity between their enormous contribution and poor

protection under government laws in the event of a misfortune. He used his voice to successfully campaign for the rights of the workers and to make the government notice the gaps in their policy and take constructive steps to fill them. Akkad's narrative goes on to talk about the enormous contribution of refugees in host societies and how they must not be seen as a burden but given the opportunity to work, build lives, and live like other people. They too are human beings who must not have to prove themselves to be granted refuge, for they deserve so on humanitarian grounds. They must be given a chance to participate in the social systems. The attempt to break free from the homogenization and the wish to realize individuality is acutely evident.

The two autobiographies are individual stories of grit, determination, and a journey towards light in times of absolute darkness and despair. They shock readers into a painful awareness and make them ask pressing questions. Despite being individual stories of struggles, they represent the struggles of millions of people like them, not just from Syria but from around the world, who have had to face such ordeals in life. Below the paper explores how literary works, like these two autobiographies, can become spaces of activism and inspire positive action in people.

How literature awakens us to the ground realities of crisis

Displacement, according to the International Organization for Migration is "the movement of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters (IOM, 2019)." The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as someone who "is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion." (1951 Refugee Convention 6)

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there were 122.6 million people worldwide at the end of June 2024 who had been "forcibly displaced from their homes due to persecu-

tion, conflict, violence, human rights violations and events seriously disturbing public order" (UN Refugees). The numbers include those from Sudan, Congo, Palestine, Myanmar, Ukraine, and Syria. Around 40 per cent of the 43.4 million refugees are under the age of 18. Millions of stateless people have been denied a nationality and lack access to basic rights such as education, health care, employment, and freedom of movement. This amounts to more than 1 in every 69 people on Earth who have been forced to flee (UNHCR, 2024). There are also around 68.3 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who are displaced within their own country. The number of refugees internationally has tripled in the past decade, with only a small number able to return home.

These definitions, however, have been under constant review for years as formal categories do not cater to many forcibly displaced people around the world, whose rights and lives are in urgent need of protection (Oxford Refugee Studies Centre, 2024). These categories are, needless to say, limiting in their scope, for they fail to address the vast spectrum of experiences that millions of people face. However, they must suffice to ease relevant discourses.

In light of the fall of Syria's autocratic regime in December 2024 and many Syrians returning home, it is important to revisit the experiences of Syrians at the peak of the crisis and gauge the kind of struggles that refugees today keep facing. Yusra Mardini and Hassan Akkad's autobiographies are representative pieces of the plight of millions of Syrians and other people across the world, fleeing life-threatening living conditions, who get obscured behind mere numbers and whose stories do not find a voice.

The above figures are merely numbers for those who are fortunate enough not to have experienced such tragedies. However, each count is representative of a person who is supposed to be living a peaceful life, sending their children to school, and having a place to call home instead of spending years in camps and moving from one place to another. Apart from the physical discomfort, displacement entails intense psychological upheaval that leaves people with questions about belonging, identity, and the search for roots.

With immediate global challenges, especially with the conflict between Israel and Palestine in West Asia, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, internal turmoil in South Sudan, earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, drought in Ethiopia, and an oppressive government in Afghanistan, it becomes all the more important for the international community to be awakened to the crises at large, not limited only to governments and international agencies but also to the larger civil society, that would work as an impetus for organised, dedicated and large-scale interventions to facilitate relocation, integration and governance of displaced, stateless and other categories of such persons as well as those whose predicament cannot be categorised within limited official definitions.

As various contributing factors only compound the numbers, it becomes increasingly important to actively contribute to easing the experiences of refugees and migrants by making way for more inclusive policies and discourses. The migrants' quest for recognition as political, social, and cultural subjects of their new habitat and the need to integrate into a new society is a continuous struggle. Refugees and forced migration have a significant impact on several aspects of countries, intergovernmental agencies, and civil society groups. Understanding the causes and consequences of migration would equip them with the necessary policies and ideas that would effectively deal with the phenomenon of migration and assist those affected.

Conclusion

As Lionel Trilling writes in his book *Lights in the Distance: Exile and Refuge at the Borders of Europe* (2018), the primary obstacle to the safe passage of migrants is the closing down of borders, which ultimately does not prevent migration but feeds practices of illegal migration and human smuggling as a result of utter desperation. As one understands, it was exactly this predicament that both Mardini and Akkad had to go through.

The dehumanization that migrants face is evident in both their accounts, as they keep writing how they are not animals but human beings who deserve access to the bare necessities and dignity of life. Violent methods of resisting migrants' entry into Europe are not only

concerning but also confusing. When threatened by disruptive and destructive forces, is it not natural that they would want to move to safer places? What else should they do? Should they stay back in the spaces of suppression and persecution, knowing that death could come knocking any day? The way they are treated at certain places in the course of their journey is appalling. Their only crime is their will and wish to give themselves a chance to lead normal lives, where they get to go to school, run around in playgrounds instead of shuddering at the sound of shelling, and fulfil their dreams and ambitions. Is it not natural and innately human to do so? Why would they have to go through such unimaginable hurdles to claim the life of dignity that they deserve, just like any other human being? One wonders.

Homogenizing them under the label of 'migrants' or 'refugees' only leads to a wresting of their agency and the fact that, as human beings, they too have dreams and aspirations. Being a refugee or a migrant does not automatically imply that they are not allowed to dream, but they must be grateful for mere survival. Yusra proved her point when she used her platform as a member of the Refugee Olympic Team at the Rio Olympics 2016 to inspire people like her to dream and pursue their dreams, no matter what their circumstances were. As Akkad repeatedly claims, migrants can and do make a major contribution to host societies. If given more opportunities, they would be able to constructively help in the day-to-day affairs of their host societies, simultaneously giving back to the community that adopts them and finding fulfilment in individual contributions like Akkad did during the pandemic.

The gap between the need for action and actual steps taken becomes evident through such narratives. As countries, nations and continents swiftly move to secure their borders with high walls, electric fences and brutal patrolling guards, they must also keep in mind that most trying to cross over are human beings, just like the ones on the other side of the border and they too deserve safety and peace, that which is jeopardized in the wake of events that are largely out of control of the common man. Only a few enjoy the power to make decisions, and it is they who, to protect that power, go to unimaginable lengths when even slightly threatened. As the world continues its fight against harmful elements, it must not forget to remember the funda-

mental human values of kindness and empathy, and acknowledge the enduring human spirit that those who seek refuge in other countries display. Much remains to be done, and narratives like those of Yusra Mardini and Hassan Akkad push us to take notice, waking us from the inertia of complacency into constructive thought and action.

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