LANGUAGES AS BRIDGES, LANGUAGES AS WEAPONS: REFLECTIONS AND PROPOSALS ON THE TURKISH-SYRIAN BORDER

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SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION IN SYRIA AND ON THE SYRIA-TURKEY BORDER

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2012

JUNE 22TH

shooting down of a Phantom F-4 fighter bomber of the Turkish Air Force by the Syrian anti-aircraft

2011

DECEMBER 5TH

trespassing of Syrian soldiers in Turkish territory

2011

MARCH 6TH

casus belli of the Arab Spring in Syria

2012

JANUARY

from this moment mass murders take place

2011

MARCH 15TH

beginning of the protests in Syria

Turkey moves against Syrian also because the West doesn't take an interest. It perceives this political vaccum left by the EU and the NATO and sees it as an opportunity.

RECEPTION OF SYRIAN REFUGEES

Turkey was one of the first countries to take a stand on the Syrian civil war.

We can delineate three phases of the reception of Syrian refugees in Turkey:

- ► 2011-2014: «open door» policy: the Syrian presence was generally perceived as provisional;
- ► 2015-2016: an actual registration policy and a more structured reception;
- ► 2017-2018: long-term assimilation plan

EDUCATION POLICY

Regarding the education policies in Turkey, we can divide them in three phases:

▶ 2011-2012: provisional solutions to the education problem. The Syrian community, which supports the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), adopts a school program in Arabic.

▶ November 2014: the first formal regulation in the educational field determines that any educational activity for foreigners under protection shall be supervised by the Turkish Ministry of Education. This is a transitional period in which Arabic-language programs are also allowed, although they require the Turkish authorisation.

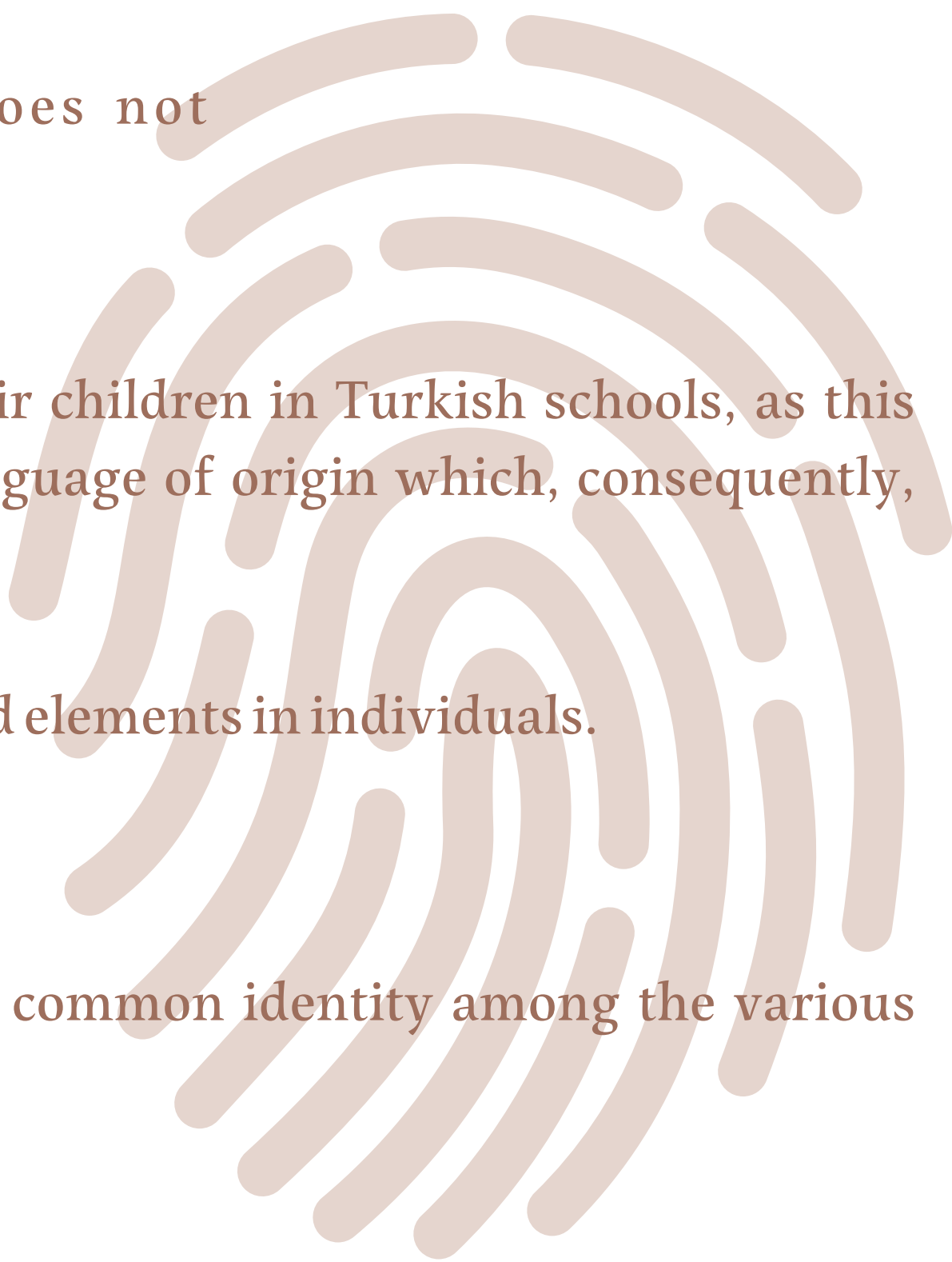▶ 2016 onwards: beginning of a plan for the inclusion of Syrian refugee children in Turkish schools.

THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY

Children and adolescents enter the Turkish school system, which does not include the compulsory teaching of Arabic.

For this reason, Syrian families often find it difficult to enroll their children in Turkish schools, as this system neutralises them, preventing them from studying their language of origin which, consequently, reduces their cultural and linguistic identity.

Indeed, linguistics has long argued that language and identity are inextricably linked elements in individuals.

In the specific case of Arabic, this language is also connected to a common identity among the various peoples of the Arabic World, despite their diversity.
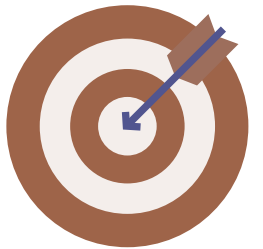
Amal for Education

AMAL FOR EDUCATION

Founder: Isabella Chiari, Professor of Linguistics at Sapienza University of Rome.

Objective: to give centrality to the educational dimension, to offer a plan B both to preserve the sense of identity and to give greater possibilities for the future in the current uncertainty.

Structure: 4 centres (1 in Italy and 3 in Turkey). About 40 people work at any given time. There are usually 10-12 people involved in each project. The staff is almost entirely made up of Syrians who themselves arrived as refugees, nearly all of whom have obtained Turkish citizenship. The mother tongue of most of the staff is Arabic.

Activities: almost entirely conducted in Arabic; there are also activities in Turkish and English.

Teachers: already teachers in Syria and selected according to strict criteria. They graduated in Arabic or English in Turkey.

Public: children between the ages of 6 and 14, women (of any age), and young people (15-25/30 years old), whose mother tongue is the Arabic dialect and all of whom maintain its use in the family context.

AMAL AS AN EXAMPLE OF ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

➤ Projects with local public and private partners (local associations)

➤ Projects with international partners (EU, IOM – International Organization for Migration)

➤ Awareness-raising activities in Italian schools on inclusion and migration issues

OUR PROPOSAL

FOR THE ASSOCIATION

One of the reasons why the association has set up Arabic language courses is to give these people the ability – in the event of their return to Syria – to readily reintegrate into the school system and continue their studies.

Thus, we wanted to propose one of the existing Arabic proficiency tests based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), so that Syrians refugees' language skills will be formally recognized.

MODERN STANDARD ARABIC PROFICIENCY TESTS

CIMA (Certificat International de Maîtrise en Arabe)
- Institut du Monde Arabe (Paris)
- Exam centres in most countries of the Arab World, as well as some European countries
- Levels from A1 to C2 (CEFR)
- Listening, reading, writing, speaking

ILA
- Centro Studi ILA' (Milan)
- Only one exam centre, in Milan
- Levels from A1 to B2 (CEFR)
- Speaking

Al-Arabiyya Test
- University of Leipzig
- Online test
- Levels from A1 to C2
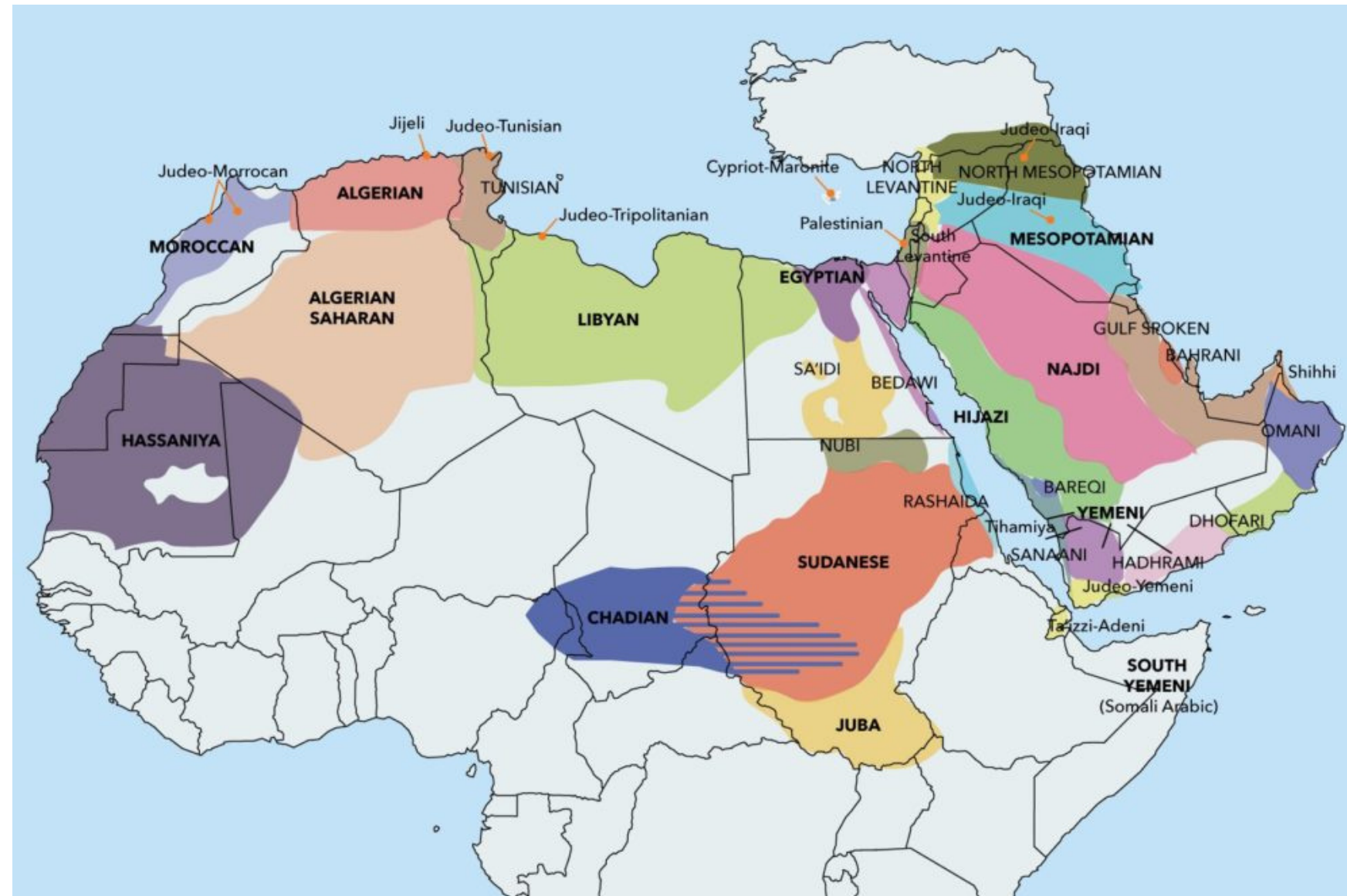- Listening, reading, writing, speaking

CRITICAL ISSUES OF MODERN STANDARD ARABIC PROFICIENCY TESTING

Lack of a single 'Modern Standard Arabic" – a standardized language shared by all the 22 countries of the Arabic World.

Lack of an academy responsible for standardizing the language on a supranational level (similar to the Académie française for French or the Accademia della Crusca for Italian). Instead, there are several centres linked to the single states, such as the Arabic Language Academy in Cairo.

Living **DIGLOSSIA**
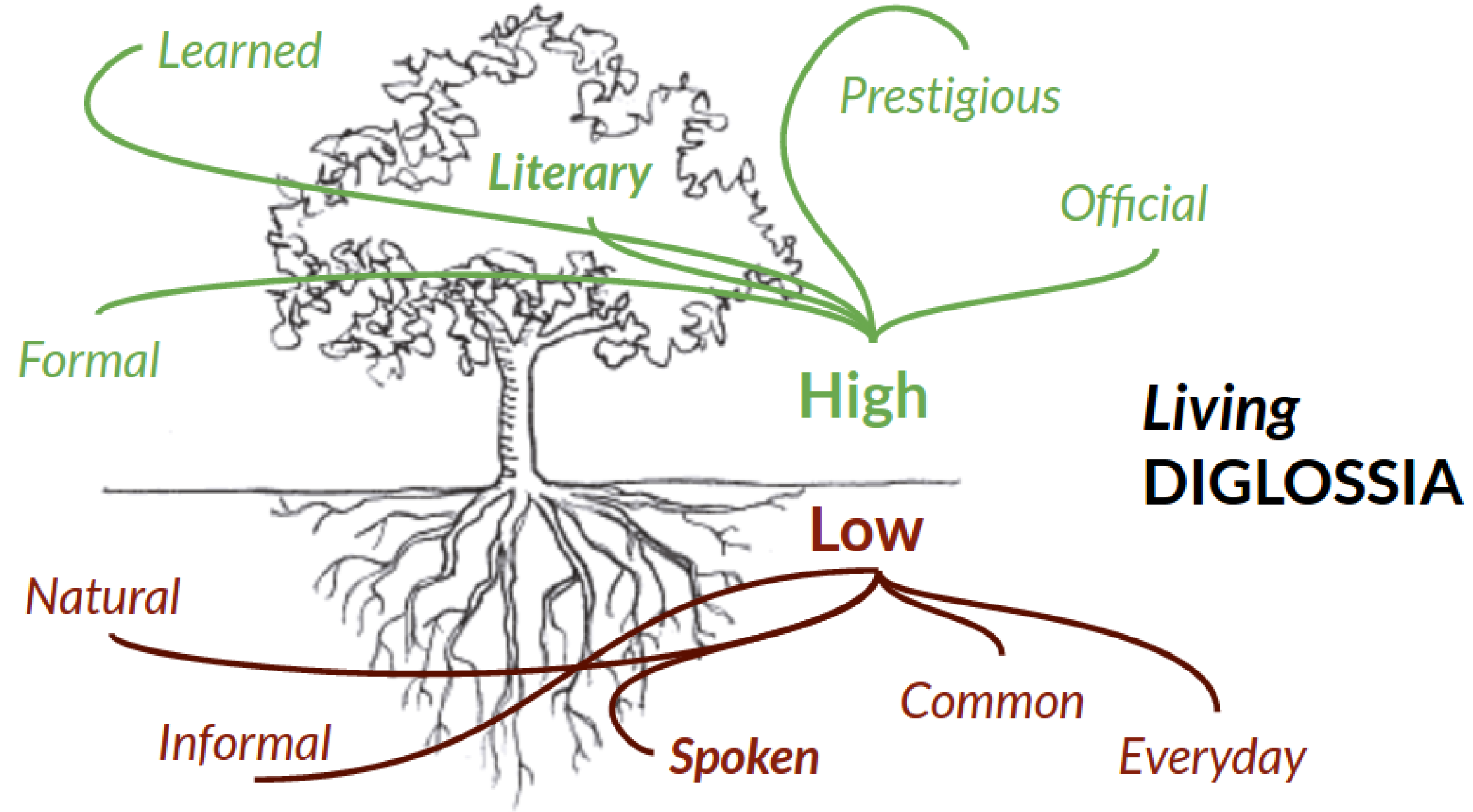
Arab countries are characterised by a situation of diglossia, i.e. the co-presence within a community of speakers of two languages, which are used in different contexts of communication: usually one is used in formal (or 'high') contexts, whereas the other one is used in informal (or 'low') contexts. In high contexts we find Modern Standard Arabic, in low contexts the local dialect. By 'dialects' we mean varieties of Arabic that have developed over the centuries, becoming very different from each other and moving away from the language of origin.

CEFR levels are not suitable for Standard Arabic, because for each level precise guidelines about the contexts of language use are given (A = being able to use the language in everyday and informal contexts; B = linguistic autonomy, being able to survive in a society by using the language; C = linguistic mastery).

In the case of A-levels, Standard Arabic is not the language used in the required contexts (but the different dialects are, due to the diglossia situation characteristic of these countries).

In the case of C-levels, an all-round mastery of the language cannot be assessed because in reality its contexts of use are limited.

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Possession of a Modern Standard Arabic certificate is not required in the Arab world, neither for access to university (where only the humanities are taught in Arabic, while scientific subjects are taught in 'foreign' languages such as English and French, depending on the country) nor for professional life.

ANSWERS TO THE CRITICAL ISSUES

Standard Arabic does, in fact, exist: it is studied and it can be found in the Arab society through various means (newspapers, films, newscasts, books, cartoons...). It is subject to variation and changing, as any natural language.

In Syria, specifically, its use is pervasive: in universities all disciplines are taught in Arabic, not just the humanities.

Instead of a proficiency test, we could propose a tool modeled after of the INVALSI tests.
These are annual tests Italian students take at different stages of their education; its objective is to measure the skills acquired by the students by indicating levels (from 1 to 5) of competence in reading comprehension and in grammatical and semantic-lexical knowledge.
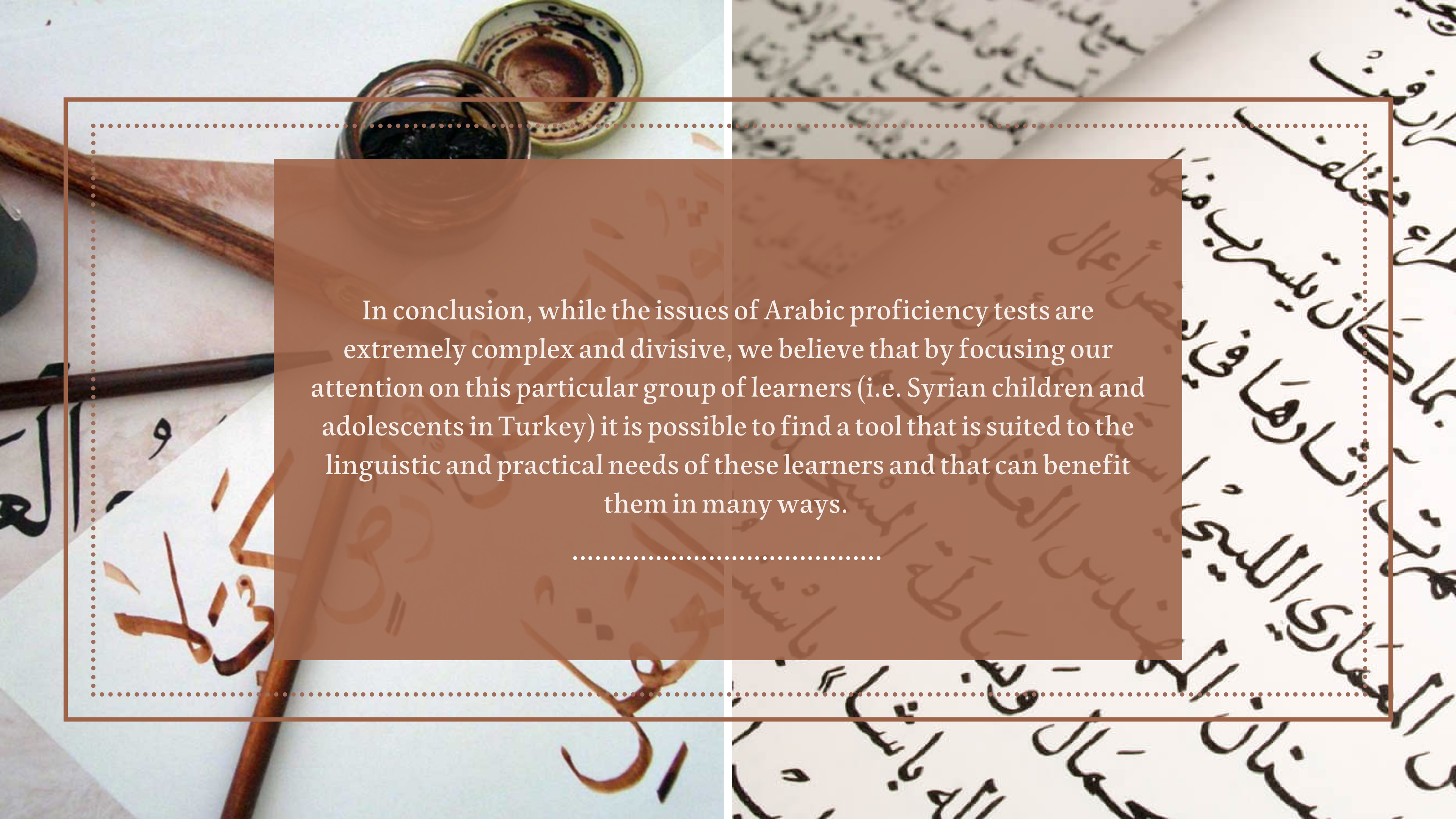
Advantages:

- these levels can be applied to all languages, compared to the CEFR which was designed mainly for Indo-European languages.
- the descriptors are less specific than those of the CEFR; there are no specific indications on situations of language use; it only refers to skills that are acquired through schooling.

A further solution could be the APT (Arabic Proficiency Test), developed by AVANT (a private US institution), which has native Arabic speakers as its target public and it's subdivided by age. It refers to the ACTFL levels, which are less specific than the CEFR ones and can, therefore, better fit the situation of Arabic.

The language policy of Arabization that took place in Syria is considered the most pervasive and effective one in the Arab world. This process involved all disciplines, and it deeply permeated schools and universities. Therefore, with this specific public in mind, a language certification could be useful and spendable in a hypothetical return to the homeland.

Another advantage may occur for those who will decide to move to EU countries, where an Arabic language certification could likely turn out to be an added value in looking for a job or career advancement.

In conclusion, while the issues of Arabic proficiency tests are extremely complex and divisive, we believe that by focusing our attention on this particular group of learners (i.e. Syrian children and adolescents in Turkey) it is possible to find a tool that is suited to the linguistic and practical needs of these learners and that can benefit them in many ways.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Quando un popolo ha perduto patria e libertà e va disperso pel mondo, la lingua gli tiene luogo di patria e di tutto

Tullio De Mauro

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