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IRAN AND THE ARAB WORLD: A VIEW FROM RIYADH
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An earlier version of this paper was presented at the June 8-9, 2009 conference entitled "Israel and the Arab States: Parallel Interests, Relations, and Strategies," jointly held in Jerusalem by the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. Members of the new Israeli government have entertained the notion of an Israeli-Arab realignment vis-à-vis Iran. This article argues that such hopes are bound to be disappointed. They rest on a Realist understanding of Middle East international politics that fails to take into account the role domestic considerations and identity politics play in foreign policy decisionmaking. While Riyadh is undisputedly concerned about Iranian power projection in the region, improved relations with a U.S. administration that is more open to its concerns and an increasingly diverse set of international security links mean that it does not feel the need to endanger domestic and regional legitimacy by openly engaging Israel without any perceived progress along the parameters outlined in the Abdallah initiative of 2002.

THE IMAGE OF A SHI'A THREAT

Expectations about a broad regional realignment vis-à-vis Iran are very much rooted in Neo-Realist assumptions about the self-help nature of international politics and the irrelevance of domestic politics. In the case of Saudi Arabia, such a perspective could therefore assume a natural tendency to align with Israel. Set apart from other actors in the region by specific (complementary) military and economic strengths and weaknesses, both countries share a common link with the United States and a concern about revisionist regional powers like Egypt under Nasser, revolutionary Iran, or Iraq under Saddam Hussein.[1]

It is thus no coincidence that the image of a moderate, i.e. pro-Western, block that transcends the issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict has been reemerging for the last couple of decades. Washington policymakers toyed with that idea of a "strategic consensus" during the presidency of Ronald Reagan and suggested an "informal alliance" against "radical regimes" and "extremism" in the context of the President Clinton's "dual containment."[2]

In the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, U.S. politicians and some academic observers had begun to differentiate between supposedly apolitical Sunni societies on the one hand and the supposedly violent, fanatic, and revolutionary feature of Shi'a Islam on the other. This allowed the autocratic governments in predominantly Sunni countries to portray the rising influence of militant Islamist groups as being the result of "foreign," in particular "Shi'i" influences.[3]

While Riyadh obviously had much cause for concern in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War when Saudi security clashed with Iranian participants of the annual *hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca,[4] the most prominent case of Iranian support for Shi'i terrorist groups operating in Saudi Arabia constituted an attack not on Saudi targets, but on the U.S. airbase in Dahran in 1996. With the attacks occurring in a time of Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, the leadership in Riyadh was even concerned about the negative repercussions possible U.S. military reprisals against Tehran might have. Nowadays, the idea of a "Shi'a threat" is more of a rhetorical device to express concerns linked to Saudi-Iranian competition over the direction of

domestic politics in Iraq and Lebanon as well as Iran's nuclear program.[5]

In fact, the violent Islamist threat to Saudi internal security appears limited to Sunni groups. This does not mean, however, that Iran does not feature in Saudi perceptions of domestic stability at all. Concerns about Iranian support for al-Qa'ida have been noticeable ever since Riyadh began to take seriously its domestic violent Islamist opposition. At various stages of the current struggle, reports have surfaced suggesting links to Iran. For instance, in February 2003, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who would later become al-Qa'ida's leader in Iraq, was reported to have met al-Qai'da's then military commander Sayf al-Adil in Iran to plan not only the Islamist infiltration of Iraq after Saddam Hussein's fall from power, but also to plot the terrorist attacks on Western housing compounds in Riyadh in May 2003.[6] In February 2009, Saudi Arabia released a list of 85 most wanted terrorists. Thirty-five of them were last seen in Iran with Saudi officials accusing one of them, Abdallah al-Qarawi, of being closely involved in much of the radical Islamist unrest in Saudi Arabia of recent years. According to the same report, al-Qa'ida cells in Iraq and Lebanon are directed by al-Qa'ida members residing in Iran.[7]

Iran's ability to use Saudi Arabia's Shi'i population as leverage against Riyadh is curtailed by the fact that the Shi'a in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia seek spiritual guidance from Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Iraq (Najaf), and not from Iran.[8] In fact, the religious leadership in Iran is increasingly concerned about Iraqi Shi'i centers of learning reasserting their traditional predominance in Shi'i Islam. Ironically, despite the current talk about Iran as the main beneficiary of Saddam Hussein's fall from power, its strategic position might therefore still weaken over the long run. This would be the case in the event of a successful democratic experiment in Iraq, which could serve as an effective shield against Iranian "soft power" by providing a more attractive role model for Saudi and Bahraini Shi'a who share Arab ethnicity with their Iraqi coreligionists.

At the same time, however, the scenario of Shi'i groups seeking to emulate peacefully their moderate coreligionists' success in adapting to Iraq's democratization poses another kind of challenge for authoritarian Arab regimes like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The image of a "Shi'a threat" and the specter of an "Iranian-dominated" opposition make it easier to justify vis-à-vis the West in general, and the United States in particular, slower progress with political reform or even a return to repression.

This calculation played a role in the post-2003 relationship between the House of Sa'ud and the Eastern province. In line with neoconservative ideas about the regional effects of Saddam Hussein's fall, the political resurgence of Iraq's Shi'a inspired their Saudi coreligionists. At a time when a number of other Arab Gulf countries began to engage with heavily controlled political reform measures intended--to some extent--to present themselves as stable, forward-looking bases for the U.S. strategic presence in the region, the political leadership in Riyadh saw itself confronted with the choice between greater repression or the accommodation of the expected increase in Shi'i demands for political autonomy.[9] The widespread fear that Saudi Arabia itself could become a target of the "war on terror" and thus suffer the breakaway of the oil-rich Eastern province heavily populated by the country's Shi'a minority meant that the latter were suddenly in danger of becoming the "fifth column" not of Iran, but possibly of the United States.[10] Then Crown Prince Abdallah thus decided to launch the so-called National Dialogue, which had as one of its aims the unprecedented discussion of religious differences.[11] When Saudi Arabia took the historic step of holding its first municipal elections in more than 40 years in the context of free elections being held in Iraq in early 2005, voter participation in the Eastern provinces was--at only 40 percent--twice as high as in Riyadh.

For Michael Doran, these developments are linked with Abdallah's belief in the notion of *taqarub*, i.e. the peaceful coexistence between Muslims and "non-Muslims," a category that

in the strict Wahhabi interpretation covers the Shi'a as well. He contrasts this with the notion of *tawhid*, which denotes the call to focus on the oneness of God and informs the preferred self-description of those who follow the teachings of the religious reformer Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab as ahl-tawhid or al-muwahidun ("those who profess the oneness of God").[12] This sets them apart from those Sunnis and Shi'a whom they regard as engaging in religious practices, which put them outside of the strict monotheism prescribed by the Wahhabi understanding of Islam and whom they condemn as Ahl al-shirk or al-mushrikun (those who believe in more than one God) or even Ahl al-ridda (apostates).[13] The hostility toward Shi'i religious thought and practice among some members of Saudi Arabia's religious elite also meant that they did not follow the lead of Egypt's al-Azhar when it officially accepted Shi'i Islam as the fifth school of law in Islam in addition to the four Sunni schools in 1959.[14] King Abdallah's announcement in spring 2008 to hold an interreligious summit of the three monotheistic religions was therefore as favorably received abroad as it raised concerns at home.[15]

It is against this historical background that those Saudi religious scholars skeptical about the idea of reconciliation with Shi'i Islam or other faiths felt emboldened by the return of the idea of a Shi'a threat. Two clerics, in particular, have recently received attention for the fact that their anti-Shi'a views nicely dovetailed with a general Saudi interest in delegitimizing Iranian power projection attempts in the Arab world.

While Shaykh Safar al-Hawali supports the Saudi regime against the domestic Islamist terrorist threat, he is also known for his radical views on the West, which have earned him a place in Samuel P. Huntington's original article about a purported "clash of civilizations" and an honorable mentioning in Usama bin Ladin's declaration of war in 1996.[16] Based on his belief in the inescapability of a war between Islam and the West, he rejected the 1991 Madrid peace conference as a thinly veiled Israeli attempt to

dominate the region and stressed the need to educate Muslim youth about the threat posed by "evil Jews." In the context of the 1991 Shi'a uprising in Southern Iraq, al-Hawali published his book, *Kissinger's Promise and the American Aims in the Gulf*, in which he elaborated on the threat posed by the al-qaws al-rafidi (the arc of "those who reject legitimate authority," i.e. the Shi'a), to which he also counted the ruling Alawites of Syria.[17]

Al-Hawali's animosity toward the Shi'a came in very handy when Riyadh was felt forced to stem the tide of rising approval for Hizballah among the broader Arab public in the context of the 2006 war with Israel. Not only was Saudi Arabia the first Arab country to condemn Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah; the increasing concern of Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia over Iran's role in the region became apparent when these countries--over the objections of Yemen, Syria, Algeria, Lebanon, and Qatar--jointly denounced Hizballah's "adventurism" for threatening "Arab interests."[18] At this point, Safar al-Hawali chipped in with a *fatwa* (religious edict) in which he declared it a sin to support or pray for Hizballah. He thereby echoed a similar fatwa issued by Shaykh Ibn Jibrin who described the Shi'a as "enemies of Islam." Ibn Jibrin had earlier issued fatwas that stated that the Shi'a could not become butchers because the meat they cut was not halal and that they should not be allowed to marry Sunnis. He also claimed that because the Shi'a posed a greater threat to Islam than Christians and Jews, killing a Shi'a would bring greater reward in heaven than killing a Christian or Jew.[19]

Such statements were not without impact. Data contained in annual polls of Arab public opinion undertaken by Prof. Shibley Telhami at the University of Maryland show that the Saudi government and its allies have been able to curb the enthusiasm for Hizballah and Iran. When asked to name two "world leaders you admire most," the percentage of Saudi citizens who named either Mahmoud Ahmadinejad or Hassan Nasrallah dropped considerably from 16 to 4 percent and 22 to 9 percent respectively from 2008 to 2009. This mirrors

similar developments in Egypt where support for Nasrallah dropped rather dramatically from 33 to 6 percent and for Ahmadinejad from 16 to 3 percent.[20]

These successes in shoring up support for the current order at the expense of alternative ideologies, however, come with a price. From the perspective of Western security interests, domestic support for anti-Shi'a rhetoric diverts attention from the fact that Sunni extremists constitute a greater threat to governments and civilians in the Arab and Western world alike.

In fact, as seen above, it even emboldens those who provide the underlying ideology. This raises questions about the utility of Realist-inspired Cold War analogies when it comes to the Arab world's relationship with Iran. As Vali Nasr and Ray Takeyh observe, in the Cold War, containing Communism "meant promoting capitalism and democracy. Containing Iran today would mean promoting Sunni extremism--a self-defeating proposition for Washington."[21]

The second problem stems from the fact that reformers in Saudi Arabia within the ruling family and outside fear that the image of a Shi'a threat plays into the hands of the Wahhabi hardliners and thus help preempt chances of political reform. For instance, the rhetorical emboldening of religious conservatives makes it harder to push through the kind of reforms King Abdallah deems necessary, especially in the field of education, which has suffered from a history of indoctrinating young Saudis with images of perceived foreign enemies whether Jewish, Christian, or Shi'a.[22] In January 2004, for example, Safar al-Hawali and Abdallah bin Jibrin were among 156 religious scholars and university professors who declared that a curriculum reform would "take the kingdom along the path of infidels" and that "any omission or mutilation of what was written by the Islamic scholars… contradicts the national unity the state is calling for, as this unity is based on our religious creed."[23]

In the end, some conservative political and religious elites in Saudi Arabia and Iran share--either at the level of reinforcing domestic authoritarian structures or at the level of gathering of support for their foreign policy interests--a common interest in upholding and further politicizing the Shi'i-Sunni divide. As other observers have already pointed out, the long-term beneficiary of any such short-term rhetorical escalation will be Iran. They maintain that the worsening political climate between Shi'a and Sunnis in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain has mostly been the result of decreased U.S. pressure to liberalize their political systems in the face of U.S. preoccupation with the perceived Iranian threat.[24] It is only through the marginalization of their Shi'a subjects that Arab rulers help lay the groundwork for possible Iranian influence. Otherwise, Tehran suffers from the low attractiveness of a political and social model, which was further put into question by the harsh crackdown on peaceful opposition in the context of the disputed Iranian presidential elections in June 2009.

Iran's Nuclear Program

In 2003, the British Guardian newspaper reported that Saudi Arabia had produced an internal strategy document that outlined three possible scenarios on nuclear weapons: to maintain or enter into an alliance with an existing nuclear power that would offer protection; to try to reach a regional agreement on having a nuclear-free Middle East; to acquire a nuclear capability as a deterrent.[25]

The first option hinges on the trust the Saudi leadership puts into U.S. nuclear deterrence. In fact, a report presented to Senate Foreign Relations Committee in February 2008 stated that only a marked improvement in its bilateral relationship with the United States could prevent Saudi Arabia from obtaining its own nuclear device in response to a possible Iranian weapon.[26] It remains to be seen whether President Obama's efforts to reach out to Saudi Arabia as exemplified by his decision to grant his first interview as a sitting president to the Saudi owned al-Arabiyya TV news channel can offer sufficient reassurance. The decision to nominate James B. Smith, a retired air force brigadier general who flew combat sorties

during Desert Storm and worked for major U.S. defense contractors Raytheon and Lockheed Martin, to be President Obama's first ambassador to Saudi Arabia can be interpreted as another attempt to solidify the security links between Washington and Riyadh.[27]

While former Secretary of State James A. Baker III recently suggested that the United States should extend its nuclear umbrella to Israel, Turkey, and its Arab allies--an idea Secretary of State Hillary Clinton openly endorsed in July 2009--others have already pointed to a perceived lack of U.S. credibility with regard to nuclear deterrence. They point out that during the Cold War, the forward positioning of U.S. nuclear weapons served to make deterrence credible since their use would become inevitable in times of conflict to prevent them from falling into the hands of the Soviet Union. In the Gulf, a similar posture is hardly conceivable given the strong popular resentment against U.S. military presence, which that would entail.[28]

The second option would thus appear to be a push for a regional nuclear-weapons-free zone. Here, the clear escalation in the official oratory of a number of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) leaders seems to indicate a growing skepticism toward this approach. In December 2005, GCC Secretary-General Abd al-Rahman al-Attiya had announced an initiative to declare the Gulf--including Iran, Iraq, and Yemen--to be a nuclear-weapons-free zone.[29] Yet, at this point, the GCC states failed to mention Iran's nuclear ambitions as a main concern in their final statement and followed Amr Musa, the Secretary General of the Arab League, in focusing their condemnation on Israel's nuclear arsenal. Only in May 2006 did the GCC leaders issue a relatively tough statement after an extraordinary summit on the situation in Iraq and Iran. In 2007, a GCC summit finally sponsored a joint resolution to study the nuclear issue in "all its dimensions."[30]

From a Saudi perspective, an easier way to address adequately the perceived need to contain and ultimately deter Iran while protecting its domestic legitimacy would be the acquisition of nuclear weapons. In case Israel reacted to Iranian nuclear weapons production by officially declaring its nuclear weapons status, it would become a matter of national pride and regional influence for Saudi Arabia to be the first Arab state to achieve the same nuclear weapons capacity as the two non-Arab regional nuclear powers. This might explain why, for instance, in December 2007, 52 percent of Saudis indicated that they would favor their country developing nuclear weapons.[31]

It would not be the first time Saudi Arabia has demonstrated the willingness to defy Washington's proliferation concerns. In the late 1980s, Riyadh procured Chinese CSS-2 missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons nearly everywhere in the immediate neighborhood. There are now reports that Saudi Arabia might obtain either the 600 km range CSS-6 or the 1800 km range CSS-5 from China or a new intermediate-range missile, Ghauri, from Pakistan.[32] In this context, developments in the neighboring United Arab Emirates are noteworthy. The Obama administration is set to implement a nuclear deal with the UAE, which was negotiated in the final stages of the Bush administration. It would see Washington sharing expertise, technology, and fuel in exchange for the promise to abide by international safeguards and to refrain from uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing. The prospect of U.S. businesses receiving a major share of the eventual $41 billion project meant that even the emergence of a video showing Shaykh Issa bin Zayid al-Nahyan torturing an Afghan grain merchant would not derail Congressional ratification.[33] This deal, the first of its kind between a GCC member country and the United States, has found political support on both sides of Washington's political divide as a role model of what is possible with regard to the peaceful use of nuclear energy by a Muslim country. As diverse commentators as Elliott Abrams--who served as deputy assistant to the president and deputy national security adviser in President George W. Bush's administration--and Jon Wolfsthal--special adviser on WMD and non-

proliferation issues to Vice President Biden-- hailed the agreement with the UAE as providing an Arab counterexample to Iran's position.[34] It could also serve as a template for a similar agreement between the United States and Saudi Arabia, whose lobby in Washington can point to Riyadh's reported intention to spend $400 billion on a general upgrading of the country's infrastructure and technological capabilities.[35]

Criticism of what some deem as neglect of the military dimension of the Arab world's sudden interest in nuclear energy comes from John Cirincione, formerly Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Center for American Progress and now president of Ploughshare Fund that campaigns for a nuclear weapons free world: "I have a hard time believing that Middle East leaders got together to watch Al Gore's movie and decided to reduce their carbon footprint. This is not about energy. It is about Iran."[36] Against the background of the black market activities of A.Q. Khan, the father of Pakistan's nuclear program, in Dubai, the fact that the UAE's commitment not to engage in sensitive nuclear activities such as nuclear-fuel production is not based on legally binding language is of concern to other non-proliferation experts as well.[37]

Again, surveys of public opinion in Saudi Arabia offer noteworthy insights. In general, the Saudi public has grown increasingly concerned about the nature of Iran's nuclear program and pluralities are even prepared to condone military attacks on Iranian nuclear installations. The 2009 annual public opinion poll conducted by Shibley Telhami's team at the University of Maryland shows that the public in Saudi Arabia (52 percent) sides with those in Egypt (63 percent) and Morocco (62 percent) who are convinced that Iran is aiming for nuclear weapons. This contrasts with the UAE (36 percent), Lebanon (31 percent), and Jordan (19 percent), where only minorities hold this view. From 2008 to 2009, the percentage of Saudis who thought that Iran should be pressured to give up its nuclear program jumped from 27 to 41 percent, following a similar pattern as in the UAE

(from 34 to 62 percent), Egypt (17 to 43 percent), and Morocco (31 to 40 percent). This goes hand in hand with an increase in the number of those who worry in Saudi Arabia (26 to 48 percent), the UAE (42 to 60 percent), but also in Egypt (28 to 48 percent) and Morocco (35 to 49 percent) that an Iranian nuclear weapons status could have negative consequences for the Middle East.[38] Even before this anti-Iranian hardening of public opinion, 38 percent of Saudis interviewed in a 2007 poll favored "the United States and other countries" to take military action against Iran in case diplomatic means failed to stop a possible nuclear weapons program.[39]

In essence, one could read these numbers as an early indication that these pro-Western regimes have managed to initiate a process that could see a reframing of the Iranian challenge. Iran is now less often seen as a Muslim nation standing up to perceived Western imperialism and more often as an irresponsible threat to the regional order. This means that countries in the region, and the GCC in particular, might be able to weather the domestic political fallout from an Israeli attack on Iranian installations if they cannot be accused of complicity. The July 2009 reports claiming that Mossad director Meir Dagan received the tacit Saudi agreement to Israeli warplanes flying over its territory on the way to attacking Iranian nuclear sites, therefore, do not come as a surprise.[40]

The Role of the United States

U.S.-Saudi relations are based on the exchange of Western access to reasonably cheap oil for the protection of the Saudi kingdom against domestic and external foes. This makes the status of the Arab-Israeli conflict less of a factor in the bilateral relationship than is the case with regard to the relations between Washington and Cairo, where it very much forms the essence.

However, Israel's role is not unimportant. King Abdallah's 2002 peace initiative was not only motivated by genuine concern about the Arab-Israeli conflict, but also the interest in putting the relationship with Washington on a

more secure post September 11 footing.[41] However, Riyadh is also concerned about the conflict in its own right. Following a general pattern observable in the Middle East,[42] Saudi Arabian foreign policy is not solely determined by external threat perceptions, but also by calculations about how best to preserve the pan-Arab and pan-Islamic legitimacy. Since much of it rests to a not negligible extent on the al-Sa'ud's role as "guardians" of the two holy places in Mecca and Medina, Riyadh has to demonstrate particular concern about the status of Islam's third holiest site, the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.[43]

The increasing skill with which Iran has shown to be able to "play the Arab street" resembles the threat to domestic legitimacy posed by Nasser to the conservative monarchies of his time. Some argue therefore that the main threat from Iran to Saudi Arabia is not through direct confrontation but through undermining its domestic legitimacy through the Arab-Israeli conflict.[44] Saudi foreign minister Prince Sa'ud al-Faysal admitted as much when he claimed that "Israel is the key for Iran to enter the Arab world. If Iran threatens the Arab world, it is threatening it through problems that arise out of the Arab-Israeli conflict."[45] Thus, any overt realignment with Israel against Iran could further exacerbate the al-Sa'ud's domestic legitimacy problem if they cannot show some kind of movement on issues relating to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians.

At this point, the irony of a hypothetical Israeli-Saudi cooperation on the Iranian issue becomes obvious. Observers on each side hope that the mutual concern over Tehran and the shared link with Washington are enough to nudge the respective other into a direction more in line with the own preferred strategic outlook, be it greater U.S. pressure on Saudi Arabia to confront Iran or initiate Arab normalization with Israel or greater U.S. pressure on Israel regarding the conflict with the Palestinians. Here, the early steps taken by the new U.S. administration indicate that its regional outlook is much closer to Arab claims about the supposed interconnectedness of

regional conflicts than was the case with the Bush administration, which always rejected such links. The fact that Ray Takeyh just became the special adviser for the Gulf and Southwest Asia at the U.S. Department of State is important because he has been an early proponent of engagement with Iran and argued explicitly against a new version of Cold War in Middle East. His views are similar to those of National Security Adviser General Jim Jones and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates whose understanding of Middle East politics is very much in line with the views expressed in the Iraq Study Group report of 2006, which Gates helped coauthor. There, its authors stressed that "[t]he United States cannot achieve its goals in the Middle East unless it deals directly with the Arab-Israeli conflict and regional instability."[46] In October 2008, General Jones told a Department of Defense newsletter that "nothing is more important" to regional security than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.[47] By granting his first interview as a sitting president to the Saudi owned pan-Arab satellite TV station al-Arabiyya, President Obama already indicated that the Middle East would feature prominently on his foreign policy agenda. In the interview, Obama praised the peace plan, which then Crown Prince Abdallah had launched in 2002.

CONCLUSION

The strong influence of domestic calculations puts distinct limitations on the establishment of a broader cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis the perceived Iranian threat aside from tactical behind-the-scenes military and intelligence coordination. The fact that, at the moment, Iran's threat to pro-Western regimes is more on the level of domestic legitimacy than national security for Saudi-Arabia makes it less attractive for them to realign with Israel overtly. For Western policymakers, the overt emphasis on the perceived Shi'a threat is worrisome because it plays into the hands of the Sunni extremists who currently pose a more direct threat to Western countries and regional security and weakens those reformers

whose influence is needed to counter radical Islamist narratives.

With regard to the threat posed by Iran's possible development of nuclear weapons, the usually cautious leadership in Riyadh can count on the fact that the diversification of security arrangements with outside factors, the reliance on the protection offered by the United States or, ultimately, free-riding on unilateral Israeli military action present safer options than a dramatic move with regard to Israel. The specter of increasing domestic support for the acquisition of nuclear weapons thus serves as an additional Saudi leverage in pressuring international actors with a broader range of political and military tools at their disposal to find a solution in line with Saudi concerns.

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