The Construction of British Muslims as a "Suspect Community" and Their Identity Development in the Post-9/11 and 7/7 Era

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Abstract

The British Muslim minority group has lived a hard experience since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and July 7, 2005. The association of British Muslims with terrorism was the main reason behind the deterioration of their situation. The anti-terrorism legislation, political rhetoric and media led to the construction of British Muslims as a suspect community, leading increased discrimination and hate crimes against them. This construction of Muslims as a suspect community had an immense impact on their identity. This paper investigates the implications of the construction of Muslims as a 'suspect community' on their identity construction post-9/11. The representation of Muslims as terrorists led to reactive identity formation. The collected data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

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1. *Introduction*

In the post-9/11 era, the British government adopted new policies and passed new legislation to counter the threat of terrorism. The new laws contributed the further discrimination against the Muslim minority of Britain. Perhaps, the most well-known among the new legislation is the Prevent, one of the four strands of a broader strategy known as CONTEST. This anti-terrorism policy, along with a new political and media discourse which blames Muslims for the terrorist attacks led to the construction of Muslims as a "suspect community". As result, Islamophobic attacks, hate crimes and discrimination against Muslims increased dramatically. In fact, the process of rendering British Muslims suspects and its negative outcomes did not only alter their life but also affected their identity. This article investigates the impact of the construction of British Muslims as "suspect community" in the post 9/11 and 7/7 era on the British Muslim identity development.

2. *The New Legal Climate Post-9/11*

After the 9/11 events, the British government adopted a new strategy known as CONTEST to fight the terrorist threat. This counter-terrorismstrategywas developed by the Blair government in 2003 and revised several times years later (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2009, p. 3). The objective of this strategy is "to reduce the risk to the UK and its interests overseas from terrorism, so that people can go about their lives freely and with confidence" (Home Office, 2018). CONTEST considers "groups who claim to act in the name of Islam and who try to recruit people of Muslim faith to the cause of violent extremism" as the biggest terrorist threat (HM Government, 2010, p. 12). It consists of four strands known as the four Ps: Prevent, Pursue, Protect and Prepare. The aim of both Prevent and Pursue strands is to lessen the threats of terrorism while the aim of Protect and Prepare is to reduce the vulnerabilities (HM Government, 2018, p. 8).

Prevent is the key strand in contest and the most controversial one. It is developed to prevent people from joining terrorists or supporting any terrorist activity. Prevent also offers disengagement and rehabilitation programs for individuals involved in terrorist activities (HM Government, 2018, p. 31). The Office of Security and Counter Terrorism (OSCT), part of the Home Office, is responsible for the Prevent programme (HM government, 2011, p. 30). The British government stated three objectives of Prevent: "tackle the causes of radicalization […] support those most at risk of radicalisation through early intervention, identifying them and

offering support, [finally] enable those who have already engaged in terrorism to disengage and rehabilitate" (HM Government, 2018, p. 31).

The declared primary aim of Prevent is reducing the cause of terrorism and radicalization, through early intervention. Being a multi-agency program, the delivery of Prevent required large-scale partnerships with the public and private sectors and civil society organizations (HM Government, 2018, p. 32). Prevent became a legal duty under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015. According to this act, specified authorities, local government, criminal justice, education, police, health and social care, "must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism" (Counter-Terrorism and Security Act, 2015). These specified authorities are expected to act according to the statutory guidance in section 29 of the act, when performing their duty (Statutory Guidance, 2021).

The Prevent program targets first and foremost the Muslim community. It is declared explicitly in the CONTEST Project that "the most significant international terrorist threat to the UK continues to come from groups who claim to act in the name of Islam and who try to recruit people of Muslim faith to the cause

of violent extremism" (HM Government, 2010, p. 12).

Additionally, the former head of Britain's Office of Security and Counter-Terrorism, Charles Farr argued that members of the Muslim community have negative feelings towards the state and they can turn into terrorists or "create an environment in which terrorists can operate" (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2009). Theoretically, CONTEST and Prevent are declared to be aimed at tackling the different forms of 'radicalisation' and 'extremism', but in reality, the majority of those identified as being vulnerable to extremism and radicalization are Muslims (Coppock & McGovern, 2014, p. 6).

Hence, Prevent was criticized by many scholars, commentators, politicians, and Muslim organizations for its inefficiency and negative impacts. Eliza Manningham-Buller, former Director of the Security Service said that "Prevent is clearly not working[…] I am not convinced of the value of putting Prevent on a statutory footing" (MCB, 2016, p. 3). More than 140 academics, including Noam Chomsky, argued that Prevent programme depends on flawed science to identify radicalization (Ross, 2016). The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) argued that there is a lack of transparency and evidentiary base in Prevent which leads to

suspicion and false accusation (2016, p. 4). They added that this strategy is counter-productive as it restricted civil liberties and led to increased discrimination against Muslim communities (MCB, 2016, p. 5).

Yasmine Ahmed, the director of the NGO Rights Watch UK, warned that Prevent is violating the human rights of young children in schools (Grierson, 2019). Shami Chakrabarti, director of Liberty, described Prevent as "the biggest spying programme in Britain in modern times and an affront to civil liberties." (Dodd, 2009). The president of National Union of Students, Megan Dunn, pointed out that Prevent is not allowing students to feel free to explore and learn about social justice issues. She added that the lack of clarity in the guidelines that staff is required to follow in order to monitor students is ruining the academic relationships and the educational system (Ramesh & Halliday, 2015).

In one case, intelligence service agents resort to intimidating and threatening methods in an attempt to gather information. In May 2009, MI5 agents were accused of blackmailing Muslim community workers in order to recruit them as informers in Camden. Five Muslim men reported to the police, the Investigatory Powers Tribunal, and MP Frank Dobson that MI5 threatened them with detention and harassment in the UK and overseas if they do not work for the Security Service as informants. Three of them said MI5 officers ordered to detain them at foreign airports after leaving Britain on holidays. The officers said there would be neither travel restriction nor detention if they cooperate with them. The other two Muslims claim that they were intimidated by MI5 after an agent approached their homes with a police officer disguised as a postman. All five Muslims were threatened to be regarded as terror suspects if they would not help the security services (Verkaik, 2009).

Lord David Anderson of Ipswich, KBE, QC, the previous Independent reviewer of Terrorism Legislation in Britain, cautioned that Prevent is affecting negatively schools and universities, as it discourages Muslim students who can help fight extremism from engaging with the topic for fear of suspicion (Yezza, 2015). The case of Mohammed Umar Farooq who was wrongly accused of terrorism confirms what David Anderson said. Mohammed Umar Farooq, a master's student in counter-terrorism at Staffordshire University, was reported by a university official to security guards because he was just reading an academic textbook about Terrorism Studies in the library. Farooq was questioned about his views on homosexuality, Isis and al-Qaida. He said his answersemphasized his opposition to extremism yet he was reported. After three months of investigation, he was found innocent. Farooq decided not to return to

the university to complete his degree. The UK advocacy group Cage declared that "What this case displays is something we have seen frequently: most notably the over-reporting of normative behaviour, and a fear-based approach that alienates and antagonises communities" (Ramesh & Halliday, 2015).

The Prevent strategy subjected innocent Muslims to surveillance even at the level of university. In May 2008, Muslim students and staff members at Nottingham University were detained for seven days without charge as suspected terrorists. Rizwaan Sabir, an international relations student at the University of Nottingham, downloaded an al-Qaida training manual from a US government website which is available at the university library, for his research. He sent the document to Hicham Yezza, the editor of Ceasefire magazine and a university staff member, to advise him on his research. Both Sabir and Yezza were arrested under the Terrorism Act 2000 and held in solitary confinement for six days. They could not see their family or friends but only had contact with the detention officers and lawyers. Sabir stated that his home was raided and his friends and lecturers were questioned. Eventually, they were released without charge or apology. Sabir was warned not to use that terrorism document in his research. Yet, Yezza was rearrested again for immigration issues and was threatened to be deported to Algeria. (Yezza, 2011; Sabir, 2008).

The case of Rizwaan Sabir has raised many questions regarding the impact of Prevent on academic freedom. After Sabir's arrest, many lecturers faced a greater pressure concerning teaching terrorism. Some teachers as Rod Thornton, a terrorism expert at Nottingham University, felt teaching terrorism was too risky. Thornton decided not to teach terrorism, as he fears that he or his students could be arrested as suspected terrorists (Sabir, 2010). He published an article condemning the University for the false accusation and unfair arrest of Sabir. After the article publication, Nottingham University suspended Thornton. In response, an international group of professors and doctors, including Noam Chomsky, called for the "immediate reinstatement" of Rod Thornton (Townsend, 2012).

Not only students, social workers, and teachers were victims of the Prevent Program, but also innocent young children. Many cases confirm this horrifying aspect of the government strategy. A 13 year old boy was interrogated by school officials and asked if he was affiliated with Isis because he only said "eco-terrorist" in a classroom discussion. The boy and his

mother were left terrified (Grierson, 2019).

In another shocking case, a four year old child was referred to Prevent because of Fortnite game. In September 2019, after hearing the young boy talking about his father having guns and bombs, which turned out that he was referring to the online game Fortnite, the teacher referred him to Prevent. This incident has attracted the attention of several human rights organizations such as liberty. Rosalind Comyn, the manager of Liberty, stated that everyone should have the right to express their opinions and thoughts freely without being monitored. She added that "it's so worrying that hundreds of children barely old enough to tie their own shoelaces are being profiled as potential future criminals based on things like the video games they play or the perceived views of their families" (Stein & Townsend, 2021).

The previously mentioned cases affirm how Muslims are being viewed through the lens of security. The implementation of Prevent led to the victimization of the entire British Muslim community. Instead of fighting the threat of radicalization, Prevent contributed to the stigmatization of the Muslim minority and their construction as a "suspect community".

3. The New Suspect Community

Counter-terrorism strategies, mainly Prevent led to the construction of Muslims as a "suspect community". The term "suspect community" is mostly used in the fields of criminology and law, security studies, politics, international relations and terrorism studies (Breen-Smyth, 2014, p. 224). The notion of Suspect Community was first introduced in Paddy Hillyard's book "Suspect Community: People's Experience of the Prevention of Terrorism Acts in Britain", to depict the traumatic experiences of the Irish community in Britain as result of the 1974 Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). The PTA was passed a week after the Birmingham Pub bombings on November 21, 1974. The explosion caused the death of 21 people and injury of more than 180. Since the initiation of the PTA, more than 7000 Irish people were detained or arrested but most of them were released without any charges against them (Hillyard, 1993; Pantazis & Pemberton, 2009, p. 647).

Hillyard argued that the anti-terrorism legislation has led to the construction of the Irish as a suspect community. The PTA allowed examining, arresting, detaining, issuing exclusion and seizure orders, and investigating anyone who is Irish or has Irish background whether or not there was any evidence against them. In other words, this legislation gave the police the power to stop and investigate any person who is

Irish (Hillyard, 1993, pp. 257-8). Hillyard considered the PTA discriminatory since:

> a person who is drawn into the criminal justice system under the PTA is not a suspect in the normal sense of the word. In other words, they are not believed to be involved in or guilty of some illegal act […] people are suspect primarily because they are Irish and once they are in the police station they are often labelled an Irish suspect, presumably as part of some classification system. In practice, they are being held because they belong to a suspect community. (1993, p. 7)

Many Innocent Irish people had harrowing experiences under the PTAs. This is exemplified in the case of the Maguire Seven, an Irish family that was falsely convicted and imprisoned for IRA bombings. In December 1974, the mother, her husband, two sons aged 16 and 13 at that time and four other others were convicted and jailed for years for a crime they did not commit. One of the Maguire Seven died in prison before their convictions were quashed in 1991 (The Maguire Seven, 2018).

Although the suspect community thesis came originally to tackle the case of the Irish community, it has subsequently been applied to the Muslim community living in Britain in the wake of the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks (Ylitalo-James, 2020, p. 46). Pantazis and Pemberton (2009) explained how British Muslims came to replace the Irish and became the "new suspect community". Drawing upon Hillyard's (1993) notion of suspect community, Pantazis and Pemberton defined it as "… a sub-group of the population that is singled out for state attention as being 'problematic ' […] individuals may be targeted, not necessarily as a result of suspected wrong doing, but simply because of their presumed membership to that sub-group" (2009, p. 649). For them, the construction of a community as a suspect one is the product of counter-terrorism policies and security measures that identify them as threat. Consequently, the community members become suspects merely because they belong to that community.

In fact, there are many official statements which warned that the targeting of a whole minority community because of the deeds of few individuals can be counterproductive. In reality, the implementation of anti-terrorism laws involved many violations and led to the victimization of the whole Muslim Community. The laws of 2001, 2005, and 2006 along with the Prevent policy led to an extreme focus on the Muslim community. Muslims and anything related to Islam became the object of suspicion (Hickman, Thomas, Silvestri, & Nickels, 2011, pp. 14-15). Furthermore, the United Kingdom's anti-terrorism strategy identifies the Islamists as the new threat, in doing so, an explicit link between religion

and terrorism is established (Pantazis & Pemberton, 2009, p. 650).

Besides the anti-terrorism legislation, the political discourse played an important role in constructing Muslims as a suspect community. In concrete, many British politicians tend to blame the Muslim community for the terrorist attacks (Ali Zoui, 2022, p. 194). For instance, the former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher said that Muslims are the ones responsible for the 9/11 attacks, although they claim it has nothing to do with Muslims and Islam (McCue, Bale and Webster, 2001). Moreover, John Denham, Home Office Minister, claimed that the Muslim community supports terrorism activities "whether or not they condone violence they see terrorists are sharing their world view, part of the struggle to which they belong" (as cited in McGhee 2008, p. 69).

In the wake of the London July 2005 attacks, the term 'extremism' is commonly used in political discourses to define individuals associated with terrorism, particularly Muslims (Hickman, Thomas, Silvestri, & Nickels, 2011, p. 11). As Tony Blair claimed that "After all, extremism is not confined to Muslims […] but the reason we are having this debate is not generalised extremism it is a new and virulent form of ideology associated with a minority of our Muslim community" (as

cited in Hickman, Thomas, Silvestri, & Nickels, 2011, p. 11). In another speech, he stated that "What we are confronting here is an evil ideology […] This is a religious ideology, a strain within the world-wide religion of Islam" (Prime Minister Blair's Speech, 2005). The prime minister promote the idea that the London attacks were a result of an evil ideology that is linked to Islam.

Media as well played a part in constructing Muslims as suspect community. Hickman, Thomas, Silvestri and Nickels discourse analysis of British press coverage of events related to Muslim communities from 1974 till 2007 indicates that the press identifies Muslims and Islam as a cultural threat. Indeed, the massive coverage of the Muslim-related events, especially the July bombings and the focus on political and cultural issues questions the place of Muslims in Britain. Moreover, whenever headlines mention terrorism, the terms Muslim/s, Islam and Islamic occur more frequently in comparison to al-Qaeda that is rarely mentioned. This suggests that there is an entrenched and predominant construction of Muslims as threatening community in the British press (2011, pp. 16-17).

Furthermore, the idea of an enemy hidden within the Muslim community, thus within British society is a repeated rhetoric in the coverage. This can be seen through the recurring of phrases such as 'in our midst',

with its implication of 'a traitor in our midst' in headlines and articles. For instance, The Daily Mail wrote that "They (the British people) want their Muslim neighbours – the great majority of whom are decent, patriotic and law-abiding – actively to help find an antidote to the poison in our midst" (as cited in Hickman, Thomas, Silvestri, & Nickels, 2011, p. 17). It is important to note that the simple act of referring to some Muslims as innocent and moderate implies that other Muslims are guilty and extremist and therefore dangerous. Whereas the words that describe Muslims as "decent, patriotic and law-abiding" appear non-poisonous and sympathetic, they implicitly suggest that the Muslim community is harbouring extremists or terrorists. This constructs the Muslims as a potential threat to the British society, hence they are placed under suspicion (Hickman, Thomas, Silvestri, & Nickels, 2011, p. 17).

The anti-terrorism legislation and strategies post-9/11 and 7/7, the political discourse and the media all participated in constructing Muslims as a suspect community. Being put under the state suspicion and surveillance led to the targeting of the Muslim community in various ways ranging from the everyday harassment of Muslim individuals such as stop and search to high-profile police raids. This kind of discrimination affected negatively the relations between Muslim communities and the police and state institutions, as well as Muslims' trust in the government (Ali Zoui, 2022, p. 195).

Furthermore, there was a massive increase in the number of Islamophobic incidents and hate crimes against Muslims. The Muslim Council of Britain revealed that more than 76% of Muslims in Britain felt that the general public had a negative attitude towards Muslims since 2001. The MCB added that Islamophobia became a legitimate form of discrimination. It can be seen from Peace Maker's survey that young Muslims felt they were treated worse than prior to September 2001 (Home Affairs Committee, 2005). Muslims were being considered as suspects everywhere especially in international airports. Some reported being subject to extra checks at airports, for instance, they were being taken off flights; asked to remove clothing and being interrogated or accused of terrorism (Hickman, Thomas, Silvestri, & Nickels, 2011, p. 20).

According to the European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), there was significant increase in incidents directed against the Muslim community in the UK. The London Metropolitan Police noted a rise in faith hate crimes against British Muslims after the July attacks (2005, p. 5). British Muslims reported that they have suffered

verbal and physical abuse in everyday communication. They were being called names or told racist jokes and directly accused of terrorism (Hickman, Thomas, Silvestri, & Nickels, 2011, p. 19). Reports from different parts of the UK confirmed that members of the Muslim community had become targets of increased hostility in the wake of the London bombings (EUMC, 2005, p. 5). This had wide implications for Muslims' perception of their country and of themselves and affected their identity construction.

4. *British Muslims' Identity Development Post-9/11*

The construction of Muslims as suspect community by the anti-terrorism policies, the political discourse and the media, had an immense effect on their identity construction in the post-9/11 era. British Muslims responded to the anti-Muslim sentiments, discrimination, Islamophobia by reasserting their identity as a way of resistance. Muslims tended to show more attachment to the religious dimension of their identity. Instead of hiding their identification with Islam, they reasserted their identity as Muslims through various demonstrations.

This reassertion of Muslims identity can be explained through reactive identity theory. Baljit Nagra (2011) coined the term 'reactive identity formation' to describe the social process through which

marginalized individuals assert their identities. Her study suggests that people may experience 'reactive identities' when one of their aspects of identity are threatened (p.115). Nagra developed the notion of reactive identities by extending Portes and Rumbaut's (2001) theory of reactive ethnicity. This latter poses that people increase their identification with their ethnic group if they experience racism (2011, p. 426).

Portes and Rumbaut posit that second-generation immigrants experience reactive ethnicity when confronted with a hostile environment, in order to be able to cope with discrimination (2001, p.151). Nagra extended Portes and Rumbaut's theory through illustrating that religious identity can be reactive in the same way as ethnic identity in response to discrimination. Through her study, she highlighted that coping with discrimination, resisting the abuse and the growing societal interest in Islam that led to more self-learning about it are the main reasons for reactive identity formations among Muslims (2011, p. 429).

In reaction to the increased number of hate crimes, Islamophobia, and discrimination, British Muslims developed reactive identity. They affirmed their Muslim identity through learning more and being aware of Islam, establishing closer ties with the Muslim community and attempting to make the public more knowledgeable about Islam after 9/11

(Nagra, 2011, p. 431). One respondent in Nagra's study who noticed the changes in British Muslim identity after 9/11 events, said that Muslims "were being extra religious and wearing proper traditional clothes after 9/11. They were being more religious than before. You would think they would do the opposite because they did not want to be discriminated against, but they became more religious" (2011, p. 425).

Numerous studies and surveys showed the significance of religion as a marker of identity among Muslims after the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks. When Islam was under scrutiny, it became a prominent aspect of Muslims self-identification (Ali, 2013, p. 19). Many Muslims started identifying strongly with Islam since the 9/11 event. For instance, Mumtaz, a Muslim participant, stated that "Before 9/11, I knew I was Muslim, but it wasn't such a big deal with me. Now though, after what's happened to us, how we've been treated, […] you have to identify yourself as Muslim. It's almost your duty" (Khan, 2015, p. 175). Nusaiba, another respondent said: "when I read stuff in the paper about Muslims […], it's always something to do with being a terrorist[…] If it's not that then it's the new laws against Muslims, what happens then is you get angry and you want to be more Muslim ." (Khan, 2015, p. 167). In response to the anti-Muslim sentiments and the other

outcomes of the construction of Muslims as a suspect community, British-Muslims solidified their identity and asserted their Muslimness.

The targeting of Islam by the mainstream society prompted the British Muslim women to affirm their identity by wearing the Islamic dress (Hijab or headscarf). The Hijab represents deep Islamic commitment and visible manifestation of a Muslim identity for women. In the aftermath of 9/11, the number of British Muslim women wearing the Islamic dress increased. Young Muslim women and girls chose to wear the Islamic dress as a way to stand up for themselves and strengthened their sense of belonging. One participant in Khursheed Wadia and Danièle Joly study, noted that "When I was at school, nobody was wearing the hijab, but now [after 9/11], I went back recently to my old school, all the girls wear the hijab […]Young Muslim girls want to show that they are proud to be Muslim." (2017, pp. 239-241). British Muslim women wearing the Islamic dress as reaction to the 9/11 backlash signifies the reassertion and the pride of their religious identity.

According to Khadijah Elshayyal, the young generation of British Muslims regard Islamic identity as pertinent feature that should be preserved and promoted politically in a positive way (2013, p. 128). British Muslims asserted their religious

identity through participating more in the political life in order to fight the anti-Muslim propaganda. Participating in the anti-war movement in order to put pressure on the government to stop the war in Afghanistan and Iraq was the earliest political response of British Muslims to the post-9/11 anti-Muslim backlash. Muslims played a major role in the anti-war movement since the invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001. Just Peace and other Muslim Organizations supported the anti-war coalition and many Muslims joined the national anti-war demonstrations (Ali Zoui, 2022, pp. 261-262).

Participation in the anti-war movement led to the establishment of new Muslim organizations and empowered the already existing ones as well as founding a new political party Respect: The Unity Coalition which worked hard to get Muslims engaged in electoral politics. It also raised the visibility of Muslim community and helped them to regain trust in their political potential. Moreover, it is important to note that the number of elected Muslim members of parliament was growing since 9/11. In 2001, there were two Muslim MPs and in 2005, the number increased to four. The British Muslim community became a cohesive political force that opposed and resisted the post 9/11 backlash at home and outside

and make their voices heard (Ali Zoui, 2022, pp. 264-267). As a whole, British Muslims reaffirmed their Islamic identity through their active political participation.

Muslim media was another form of Muslim identity reassertion in the post-9/11 era. In response to the negative stereotyping and the misrepresentation of Muslims and Islam, British Muslims founded their own media that reflected how Muslim communities saw themselves. Examples of new Muslim newspaper at that time were the London Muslim, The Muslim Paper and The Muslim Weekly. All of these newspapers had large sections devoted to Muslim identity issues, politics, art, culture, sport and finance. Emel, a Muslim magazine was launched in 2003, provided honest image and perspective about Muslim community and Islam in Britain. Furthermore, the number of websites and blogs such as www.salaam.co.uk was growing rapidly. These types of media were mainly used by young Muslims to express themselves and provide information on British Muslim community (Elshayyal, 2013, p. 149). All in all, Muslim media served as a powerful means of resistance and self-expression that helped British Muslims not only to maintain their religious identity but also to improve their representation.

5. *Conclusion*

In the post-9/11 and 7/7 period, British Muslims faced an unprecedented wave of discrimination and Islamophobia that was partially the result of the construction of the Muslim community as a suspect community. The anti-terrorism legislation, mainly Prevent, the political discourse and the British press participated in rendering British Muslims the new suspects. The hate crimes, anti-Muslim campaigns, and Islamophobia attacks did not succeed in detaching Muslims from their religious identity, on the contrary Islam became a prominent marker of identity among British Muslims in the post 9/11 era. This paper examined the impact of the construction of British Muslim community as a suspect community on the development of their identity in the aftermath of the 9/11 event. There is evidence that Muslims asserted their religious identity and tended to show more pride in and belonging to Islam.

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