

Israel's Revenge over Palestinian Reconciliation

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- What did Israel want to achieve in its latest assault on Gaza?
 - What does the Palestinian reconciliation reveal at this current stage of the Israeli Palestinian conflict?
 - Have the international and regional perceptions changed with this latest attack on Gaza?
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'IT'S A HELL OF A PINPOINT OPERATION'

On July 7 2014, under the code name "Operation Protective Edge" ("Operation Strong Cliff" in Hebrew, or *Mivtza' Tzuk Eitan*), Israel launched a military aggression on the Gaza Strip. Home to 1.8 million Palestinians, Gaza witnessed the third Israeli air aggression in the last 7 years, extending to a ground invasion on July 18, 2014.

Causing a greater volume of humanitarian disaster than the first two operations combined; the recent Israeli attack was described by US Secretary of State John Kerry as "a hell of a pinpoint operation."¹ According to the latest situation report published by United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Israeli assault has caused the death of 1,976 Palestinians and 67 Israelis (64 soldiers). In addition, 380,000 people have been displaced and 16,800 homes in the Gaza Strip have been destroyed or severely damaged.²

1. Philip Bump, "Fox confronts Kerry with hot-mike comment on Israel: 'Hell of a pinpoint operation'" July 20, 2014.

2. Occupied Palestinian Territory: Gaza Emergency Situation Report (as of 18 August 2014, 0800 hrs) -- http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_18_08_2014.pdf

Israel's official narrative holds that the operation was initiated as a revenge for 1) the kidnapping and subsequent killing of three Israeli settlers in Hebron attributed to Hamas and 2) the continuing launching of rockets by the resistance groups from Gaza. Convenient to its storyline, the Israeli timeline of recent events is leaving quite a bit of the story untold. At a very fundamental level, no footnote regarding the history of the Israeli government's expansionist and annexationist agenda is inserted, let alone hinted. While the space allocated here does not permit for an exhaustive overview of Israel's history of disposition of the Palestinian people, it is however worthy to rethink the point of departure of the most recent assault on the Palestinian people. The trigger for the latest operation was indeed the unity government emerging from the reconciliation of Hamas and Fatah. The reconciliation as a starting point provides a sober understanding of Israel's military and political objectives in its latest assault on Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.

On June 25th, Hamas and Fatah signed a reconciliation agreement, ending the 9 year schism between the political parties which had generated a damaging polit-

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ical rupture within Palestinian society since the last internationally-monitored Palestinian election in 2006. Soon after, Prime Minister Netanyahu condemned the move, accusing the Palestinian Authority, led by President Mahmoud Abbas, of attempting to subvert the peace talks initiated by Kerry in the summer of 2013. However, the Kerry talks were at a voluntarily deadlock due to Israel's constant power play both at the negotiations table and on the ground, namely, due to its increasing and continuing illegal settlement building in the West Bank. In fact, construction of Israeli settlements in the occupied territory rose sharply in 2013-14 as the U.S. brokered peace negotiations were ongoing. In 2013, according to Israel's Statistics Bureau, the Israeli-Jewish settlement building in the occupied West Bank doubled to 2,527, from 1,089 in 2012, excluding the settlements in East Jerusalem, reaching its all-time high since the Oslo Accords.³ Disregarding its clear failure to uphold its promise to "freeze" Israeli settlement construction for the duration of the talks, the Israeli cabinet focused on undermining the Palestinian reconciliation by imposing a pretext wrapped as an ultimatum to Abbas: choose between Israel and Hamas.⁴ Unlike previous years in power, this time around, under a great deal of internal pressure both from Fatah and other political fractions in Palestine, including Hamas, Abbas could not cancel the unity government initiative for the sake of consoling Israeli dissatisfaction of possibly losing control over key decisions concerning Palestinians, and thus, weaken its capitulation of Palestinian political sovereignty.

After inadequate lobbying for international pressure against the Palestinian unity government, Israeli hostility began two weeks later. On June 12, three Israeli teen settlers -- Eyal Yifrach, Naftali Fraenkel, and Gilad Shaer — were reported missing. On June 14, Israel launched "Operation Brother's Keeper" where Netanyahu clearly and univocally, without any evidence,

attributed the responsibility to Hamas.⁵ He made the association with the abduction and the reconciliation quite clear during a press conference, as he explained: "The dangers of that pact [Hamas-Fatah] should now be abundantly clear to all [...] Hamas is responsible, and Hamas will pay."⁶

On June 24, in an interview with Al Jazeera Arabic, Hamas leader Khaled Meshal explained to viewers that Hamas has never been self-effacing about its activities in the past, and this time was no different; when and if the group conducts an operation, it would gladly admit to it, but this time, it had not. Unapologetic for the episode, Hamas was not alone to disregard the accusation of Netanyahu; the Palestine Liberation Organization's executive committee "condemned Israel's 'racist' campaign, rejected Netanyahu's 'foul accusations' and referred to the kidnapping as 'alleged'."⁷ Meanwhile, unaccompanied, President Abbas, publically condemned the kidnapping. On July 25th, Israeli officials finally publically admitted that the kidnapping was "a lone cell" operation, and did not involve Hamas leaders.⁸

This tardy confirmation came after a saga of unwarranted collective punishment. Instead of launching an official investigation on the kidnapping and killing of the teens, Israeli forces in the West Bank ransacked houses in Hebron, Nablus, Bethlehem, making their way even in the streets of Israeli-restricted, Ramallah. The operation consisted of a massive push into the West Bank, and resulted in the arrest of top Hamas political leaders, former government ministers and members of Hamas' militant wing. Over 500 Palestinians were arrested without charge to be placed in administrative detention, most of which were Palestinians who had just been recently released from Israeli prisons in the

3. سياسة التخطيط والبناء والمستوطنات في http://www.btselem.org/arabic/planning_and_building/settlement_planning_policy

4. Raphael Ahren, "Netanyahu: Abbas must choose between Israel and Hamas", *The Times of Israel*, April 23, 2014.

5. William Booth, "Israel accuses Hamas of abducting 3 teens", *Washington Post*, June 15, 2014.

6. Barak David and Jonathan Lis, "Netanyahu on murders of three Israeli teens: Hamas is responsible and Hamas will pay", *Haaretz*, June 30, 2014.

7. Ibid.

8. Katie Zavadski, "It Turns Out Hamas May Not Have Kidnapped and Killed the 3 Israeli Teens After All [Updated]", *New York Magazine*, July 25, 2014.

latest deal with Tel Aviv over the abducted Israeli soldier. In 2011, Gilat Shalit was handed over by Hamas in an exchange for the release of 477 Palestinian prisoners in what was the first phase of an agreed swap deal.⁹ While Hamas honored their part of the deal, Israel used the latest developments to come back on its part of the bargain. During the operation, Israeli occupation forces killed two Palestinian teens by alleged firing of live ammunition: 15 year old Mohammed Dudin from Dura, a minor and 20 year old Ahmad Samada from Jalazoun. A third Palestinian civilian, 27 year old Ahmad Said Khalid from al-'Ein Refugee Camp, was reportedly shot dead by the Israeli military at close range. In fact, Israel went so far as to bomb the homes of two "suspects" of the kidnapping in Hebron.

AFTERMATH OF THE RECONCILIATION

It was on June 30, after the amplified military incursions, mass arrests and house raids that the bodies of the teens were found in Hebron. Before investigations began on the death of the teens, on the same day, Netanyahu tweeted a prose from a national Israeli poet Haim Bialik: "Vengeance for the blood of a small child, Satan has not yet created."¹⁰ With these lines by the Prime Minister of Israel, revenge for the kidnapping was used as a pretext to disrupt the Palestinian unity government process. The meetings taking place between Hamas and Fatah took a rigid pause as they began dealing with the public outcry generated from the collective punishment Israel had launched. In Jerusalem, on July 2, Palestinian teen Mohammed Abu Khdeir's body was found unanimated after being burned alive, crime attributed to Jewish extremists, leading to the condemnation of the killing from both the Israeli prime minister and the families of the slain Israeli teenagers. Protests over the death of Mohammed Abu Khdeir spread throughout Jerusalem. Israeli police exercised force to stop protesters which

lead to the famous story of the beating of 15 year-old Palestinian-American Tarek Abdul Khdeir, cousin of the teen who was killed. Holder of an American passport, Tarek, unlike others arrested with him, was released from prison on bail as the photos of his badly swollen face begin to circulate in international media, sentenced to house arrest until he returns to Florida. Meanwhile, in Gaza, Israeli bombs began falling on the 1.8 million Gazans living in one of the most densely populated areas in the world. The first rocket launched from Gaza was on June 30, a revenge for an Israeli airstrike that had killed one of its members. However, it was only on July 8th, more than a week after Israel had already started its attacks, that it officially announced the start of its assault on Gaza.

DEMORALIZATION AND DEMILITARIZATION

When Israel entered Gaza again, it set as a main goal to demilitarize Hamas. Since the Road Map Initiative, Israel has been able to dictate what type of weaponry and what type of policing the PA can practice, in coordination with Israel, in the West Bank. But this was not necessarily the case in Gaza. There was without a doubt a *de facto* line of communication between Hamas and Israeli officials regarding tunnel coordination and the usual ceasefire, but those were limited in character. Having Fatah and Hamas come together meant that these security arrangements with the PA under security coordination (*Tanseeq Amnee*) had to be reassessed and Israel knew that Hamas would never agree on the same prearrangements the PA held with Israel. In fact, during the reconciliation process between the two Palestinian political fractions, the greatest and most controversial aspect, which they failed to address fully due to the interruption by the kidnapping episode, was the security dossier. Israel, as an occupying force, categorically rejects the right of Palestinians to hold any type of military force, and the latest operation was an attempt to restrict any possible, though never reaching Israeli caliber, military capabilities for a Palestinian state. The Oslo Accords holds a clear agreement on the demilitarization of a future

9. la nahiJniessuH «غزة بين تأييد مطلق للخطف وقلق من الانتقام» <http://alhayat.com/Articles/3019938>

10. Melissa Etehad , "The dangerous influence of online hate speech in Gaza", *Al Jazeera America*, July 12, 2014.

Palestinian state, but Hamas rejects Oslo and a unity government entails a new type of compromise between Israel and a unified Palestinian government. In this sense, Israel wanted to destroy what it knew it could not settle politically with Hamas: the right for a nation to hold military capabilities.

That being said, since the start of the attack on Gaza, Israeli officials stated that Israel is targeting 'Hamas operatives' while most of the dead are civilians. Death toll rose to 1,976 Palestinians and 67 Israelis (64 soldiers). In addition, 35,000 people have been displaced and 16,800 homes in the Gaza Strip have been destroyed or severely damaged. 70 Palestinian families have been completely suppressed with all members killed by the Israeli military. Over 5,000 houses have been destroyed and public infrastructures are being targeted indiscriminately. For example, on July 21, the third floor of the Al-Aqsa hospital was struck by Israeli shelling, killing four people and wounding dozens. Deaths and injuries are not the only damage of the operation. Israeli army has hit six of UNRWA's 245 schools in Gaza as well and the Islamic University of Gaza. Currently, according to UNRWA, 100,000 people are seeking shelter in Gaza. The humanitarian condition should not be restricted to the numbers, but to the story of Gazans as well. Indeed, today, 80% of Gazans who live in the strip are actually refugees. They find themselves, during this operation, as with both previous ones, fleeing their houses again due to the same Israeli aggression that brought them to Gaza in the first place.

On a strategic level, despite their military inferiority, the various militant groups participating in the rocket and mortar operations from Gaza have shown a noteworthy level of resilience. They were able to launch rockets reaching Tel Aviv and also expose their homemade drones. The rockets fired by the Qassam brigades and company have killed three civilians (including one foreign national).¹¹ According to Khaled

Meshal, "the operationalization of rockets is political in nature... Hamas intended to disrupt the peace in Israel in order to send the message that Palestinians will continue to defend themselves despite their military inferiority."¹² In other words, the status quo that deems the Gaza Strip an open sky prison and the rest of the occupied territory under colonial rule, is unsustainable. The premise of the rocket launching holds that Israeli citizens should have a direct contact with the events in order to understand the costs of the military occupation that is being waged on a civilian population in the name of their security that cannot be guaranteed without ensuring the security of Palestinians as well.

The rockets have been controversial and the narrative used against Hamas by Israel has been problematic. While Israel has repeatedly claimed that Hamas is using Palestinians as human shield, important points are to be considered. Firstly, with the exception of the infographics published by the Israeli Defense Force via social media, there was never any concrete evidence that the houses, the hospitals, the schools or the disability centers bombed by Israel held any hidden rockets to begin with.¹³ Second, notwithstanding this possibility, Israel could have easily, with its highly sophisticated military grip, found an alternative way to put its hand on these rockets without bombing civilian facilities and killing nearly 2000 people. Third, unforgettably, numerous are the examples of Israeli hitting targets that clearly presented no harm. The school and the hospital bombings aside, the murdering of four Palestinian boys from the Bakr family who were playing football near the sea is a telling example of Israel's indiscriminate targeting tactics. The children were targeted by Israeli bombs, 3 killed, one injured, without having posed any evident threat. These loss of lives are topped with the ongoing reality of electricity outage, water cuts, and destructing of sewage systems.

11. Occupied Palestinian Territory: Gaza Emergency Situation Report (as of 18 August 2014, 0800 hrs) -- http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_sitrep_14_08_2014.pdf

12. Al Jazeera (July 2014) Talk To Al Jazeera "Khaled Meshal: 'Not a war of choice' " @<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/2014/08/khaled-meshaal-not-war-choice-201481516939516479.html>

13. Check <http://idfonline.tumblr.com/>

CEASEFIRE AND REGIONAL ACTORS

In light of these developments, a ceasefire was urgently needed, yet difficult to reach. The Obama administration was ready to revive the 2012 agreement put together by the United States and Egyptian president at the time, Mohammed Morsi, where both parties acted as mediators to push forward a ceasefire between Israel and the Palestinian resistance in the Gaza Strip.

However, Egypt under Sisi is quite different, manifesting a clear dislike and rigid policies against Hamas, preferring to push forward the Israeli narrative portraying Hamas as a terrorist organization that needs to be destabilized at best, obliterated at worse. This suffices to demonstrate that Egypt alone could not provide the right agora for the mediation of a fair and effective long-term ceasefire. Meanwhile, Qatar and Turkey entered the ceasefire initiatives in hopes to arrive to an agreement avoiding any exclusion of parties involved. While the United States welcomed the intervention by Qatar and Turkey, Israel and Egypt observed it as a meddling by two regional countries that “support the Muslim Brotherhood agenda in the region”. This of course ignores the fact that both countries kept in touch with the PA and see Palestinian reconciliation as the first step towards a viable peace.

On July 15, Egypt called on a “ceasefire proposal”, that was later found out to have been drafted in Washington, who entrusted Tony Blair to deliver the document to Cairo¹⁴. Israel quickly accepted the conditions, mainly because it partook in the drafting of the terms of the proposal. It spanned it off in the media as their willingness to make peace while the Palestinians, who were neither involved nor consulted, disregarded the initiative. Indeed, no Palestinian party was invited to the table for either the drafting of this ceasefire or later the negotiating of the ceasefire.¹⁵ Despite this exclusionary measure by Egypt and Israel, Abbas began to publically call on the need to accept what was being

forced on the Palestinian people, failing to mention that Hamas had clearly outlined its conditions for a ceasefire a week prior to the Egyptian intervention.

Hamas’ conditions are basic pillars to reinstall basic human integrity in the strip. They comprise the following 10 points: Withdrawal of Israeli tanks from the Gaza border; Freeing all the prisoners that were arrested after the killing of the three youths; Lifting the siege and opening the border crossings to commerce and people; Establishing an international seaport and airport which would be under U.N. supervision; Increasing the permitted fishing zone to 10 kilometers; Internationalizing the Rafah Crossing and placing it under the supervision of the U.N. and some Arab nations; International forces on the borders; Easing conditions for permits to pray at the Al Aqsa Mosque; Prohibition on Israeli interference in the reconciliation agreement and; Reestablishing an industrial zone and improvements in further economic development in the Gaza Strip. None of the parties consulted the demands proposed by Hamas, let alone consider them. Instead, Egypt decided to go on with its so called draft proposal. A media hysteria in Egypt targeted Hamas specifically and Palestinians, broadly, fuelled by the current position of Abdelfettah El-Sisi against the Palestinian resistance in the Gaza Strip.

In Washington, President Barack Obama failed to divorce himself from the Israeli rhetoric of self-defense. While the Obama cabinet was clearly outraged at the intensity and frequency of death of Palestinians, it failed to translate this into clear statements or policies against Israeli impunity. Instead, Obama went so far as to utilize a Ramadan Iftar dinner at the White House during the holy month to remind representatives of the American Muslim community of the “right of self-defense” of Israel.

Meanwhile, Qatar and Turkey have pushed their respective concerns on the table. They both stand with the principle that any deal should ensure the security and well-being of the people of Gaza. Qatar has vowed to send the required financial and material resources needed to help reconstruction efforts once the time

14. Blair drafted Egypt’s ceasefire initiative”, Middle East Monitor, July 17, 2014.

15. Barak David, “Secret call between Netanyahu, al-Sissi led to abortive cease-fire”, *Haaretz Online*, July 16, 2014.

is ripe. Turkey, while supplying humanitarian aid into Gaza, has been managing back and forth telephone calls between Abbas and Meshal in order to keep a line of communication between both political representatives. The Republic of Turkey Prime Ministry Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) has so far sent \$350,000 worth of humanitarian aid to the Strip and injured Palestinians are being treated in hospitals in Istanbul and Ankara. When asked about the Turkish position regarding the ceasefire, Foreign Minister Davutoglu explained that: “There is one thing that we know: a ceasefire can be enduring only if it is agreed by the real parties of the conflict.”¹⁶

That being said, a more serious attempt at mediation between the Palestinian and the Israeli delegations went into effect with a truce on Monday, August 11th, 2014 through indirect talks in Cairo. Musa Abu Marzouk from Hamas and Azzam al-Ahmed of Fatah are the senior delegation member for the Palestinians in Cairo as the delegation include members of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Former chief negotiator Saeb Erekat also landed in Cairo to speak to the delegation on behalf of Mahmoud Abbas. The delegation is pushing the conditions drafted by Hamas with a clear objective of ending the complete siege on Gaza, not just entering a crisis management mode as has been the case for the past 7 years. The Israeli delegation, on the other hand, has called on the decommissioning of cross border tunnels, terminating hostile fire and ending the arming of Palestinian militant groups in Gaza, which entails the demilitarization of Hamas.

In other words, while Hamas is interested in discussing how to end the siege on Gaza and the Israeli occupation, the Israeli delegation is interested in negotiating the degree to which it will exercise its control over the Gaza Strip, namely, by ensuring a demilitarized resistance in the Strip. The ceasefire negotiations are ongoing this week and Israeli media reports that tensions are high with no significant breakthrough as of yet. Tzipi Livni was quoted saying that “We have the

16. “Turkish FM calls for ‘two-sided’ Gaza ceasefire”, *Anadolu Agency*, 27 July, 2014.

opportunity for a political change, not with Hamas but against Hamas” despite the Palestinian delegation in Cairo being comprised by all political fractions of Palestine.¹⁷ As of August 18, the truce between the Palestinian delegation and Israel will have been extended twice due to Israel’s pressure to add a clause forbidding the resistance to be militarized in the Gaza Strip. On August 19th, Palestinian negotiators declared the ceasefire talks over, and said they would leave Egypt the next day. During a press conference, al-Ahmad explained: “We told the Egyptians we are ready to return to the talks once they find the proper atmosphere.” According to him, Israelis were not interested in a ceasefire because they failed to respond to the final ceasefire proposal submitted by the Palestinian delegation. “We did not hear from them. We were willing to, but we did not hear from them,” he told reporters.¹⁸

THE TIPPING POINT FOR A PIN-POINT OPERATION

At a broader level, civil societies around the world have already done a tremendous amount of solidarity work towards the Palestinian cause. Namely, under the banner of the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions campaign (BDS). Initiated by Palestinian civil society 10 years ago already, the BDS was able to capture momentum worldwide. Protests of solidarity, calling for the end of the siege took place in South Africa, England, Ireland, United States and Canada and beyond, gathering thousands calling not only for the end of the siege, but the Israeli occupation more broadly. However, as the third assault on Gaza has disclosed, there needs to be a clear and univocal action from state actors and international organizations that echo the political sentiment of people and unfortunately, the moment is not quite there. Though, some developments are noteworthy.

For example, Amnesty international has called on the UN to implement an arms embargo in order

17. Dalia Hatuqa and Gregg Carlstrom, “Gaza truce diplomacy: The ever-changing mess”, *Aljazeera*, August 3, 2014.

18. “Israel: Rockets making talks ‘impossible’”, *Aljazeera*, August 20, 2014.

to end, once and for all, Israeli impunity.¹⁹ The British parliament held a heated question period on the collective punishment of Palestinian and the idea of a potential military embargo on Israel during the first week of the assault on Gaza.²⁰ In fact, British Minister Sayeeda Warsi resigned over government's Gaza policy on August 5th. In Denmark and in Ireland, government representatives have also voiced their discontent with Israel's impunity. Amnesty International also has called on the Palestinian government to sign the Rome Statute which will allow Palestine to join the International Criminal Court as a full member to be able to prosecute Israel for its crimes against humanity. While both Hamas and Fatah delegates are ready to take on this crucial step, Mahmoud Abbas is refusing at fear of destroying the failing Oslo agreements to internationalization of the struggle. Nonetheless, there is lobbying inside the Palestinian Authority, including the strong criticism by Saeb Erekat who is pushing for Abbas to sign the statute to be able to find justice for the Palestinian cause away from the Oslo accords who have proved to be a voluntarily extension of the Israeli occupation at the expense of Palestinian nationhood and right to self-determination.

It should be noted here as well that the off-air criticism by John Kerry, "it's a hell of a pint-point operation", has confirmed that the White House does believe Israel is attacking with disproportionality and impunity but it is failing, albeit due to a lack of will, to translate this into meaningful foreign policy in the region. Indeed, it goes without saying that statements by certain state leaders and international organizations have been timid at best, supportive of Israeli impunity, at worse. Mouin Rabbani argues that there is indeed an "institutional disregard of Palestinian life" appropriated by many state leaders who deny any sense of

urgency for the loss of Palestinian life.²¹ Germany's Merkel, along with Obama, and Sisi argued that Israel had the right to defend itself. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon waited for a UN school to be bombed by Israel on 3 August 2014, almost one month into the Israeli attack on Gaza, before expressing a clear outrage for the civilian targeting of Israeli forces.²²

As such, the Palestinian unity government was a moment of clarity at different levels. First, it confirmed that Israel prefers to deal with a ruptured Palestinian political leadership. Indeed, Israel is not only interested to conquer Palestinians militarily, but even more, capitulate the political sovereignty of Palestinians. This is achievable for Tel Aviv when the PA is under Oslo power dynamics in the West Bank and Hamas is in a crisis management mode in Gaza. But a unity government entails a conversation with all parties to highlight the real source of the problem and Israel refrains from arriving to that point at all cost. The reconciliation also reemphasized that the US cannot be an effective broker for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as it has failed to offer a respectful and fair voice to all parties involved. In fact, what the Palestinian reconciliation and Israel's antagonistic reaction to it has highlighted that this conflict cannot be solved unless it is internationalized and dealt with under the principles of the Geneva Conventions and International law that condemns the action of Israel on the Palestinian people.

19. "Israel/Gaza: UN must impose arms embargo and mandate an international investigation as civilian death toll rises", *Amnesty International News*, July 11, 2014.

20. "Commons Chamber Meeting started on Monday 14 July at 2.33pm" at <http://www.parliamentlive.tv/Main/Player.aspx?meetingId=15703&st=15:35:15>

21. Mouin Rabbani. "An Institutionalized Disregard for Palestinian Life", *Jadaliyya*, July 10, 2014.

22. Kim Sengupta. "Israel-Gaza conflict: Ban ki-Moon declares Israeli attack on UN school 'a criminal act'", *The Independent*, August 3, 2014.



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