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# Architectures of Terror

Bridging the Gap between Critical Theory, Urbanism and *Realpolitik* in light of the IDF's  
Philosophy of Urban Warfare

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## Abstract

International Relations theory, in spite of having undergone several epistemic iterations, continues to analyze urban warfare via outdated perspectives. This is exemplified in the state-centric analyses that dominate the literature on the history of Israel-Palestine. There is an overwhelming concentration on policy and belligerent behaviors and little to no consideration of anthropocentric perspectives. This results in a near-total exclusion of human suffering from discussions of the conflict and its impacts on everyday civilian life, which in turn heavily alters the socio-political foundations. The academic domains of critical theory and human geography have, however, made good progress in capturing the severity of these discourses, enabling a nuanced understanding of the manner in which conflict management takes place. This paper aims to unify these perspectives and in so doing, expand the grammar of *realpolitik* – identifying it as a competent domain of IR that primarily focuses on conflict and its modalities. Making use of diffractive reading and analysis, this paper showcases the impact of *realpolitik* from the perspective of those affected. The aim is to inject empathy into contemporary mainstream discussions that deal with complex geopolitical situations such as Israel-Palestine. To that end, post-structuralist perspectives from continental philosophy, human and critical geography and affect theory are employed. Additionally, the philosophy of realism is theorized to be the epistemic foundation of *realpolitik*, and is subsequently dissected. The paper concludes by arguing for interdisciplinary approaches into the existing subject matter of *realpolitik*, a re-evaluation of the epistemic foundations and reflections on practical novelties. Note that this paper in no way aims to suggest political solutions, legal interventions or strategic shifts, but rather interprets the methods of urban warfare used by the Israeli Defense Forces, which defies traditional operational logic.

**Key words:** *urban warfare, realpolitik, critical theory, Israel-Palestine, spatiality*



### *A note on ongoing developments in Gaza:*

It is of paramount importance to note that the first draft of this paper was written in 2022, and the discourse surrounding Israel-Palestine has changed significantly since then, mainly owing to the events of October 7th, 2023. To that end, two things must be made clear. Firstly, this research focuses specifically on Operation Defensive Shield, which took place as a response to the Second Intifada, in 2002. Secondly, only events in the West Bank are taken into account. Although the conclusions and implications can also be seen in the ongoing iteration of the conflict in Gaza, making an explicit connection is the objective of further research that builds on the work presented here.

## Introduction

Traditional *realpolitik* describes how actors interact by allowing for the achievement of political objectives while simultaneously confirming self-preservation (Kelly, 2018; Haslam, 2002). Owing to the primacy of the state as the principal actor in the canon of International Relations (IR) theory there exists a demonstrated consensus that realism, as an ontological framework, fuels the practice of *realpolitik* (Dias, 2020; Korab-Karpowicz, 2017; Bew, 2014). Realism chalks out the psychology of a state as being in a situation of constant anarchy that presents a perpetual existential threat (Zahra, 2011; Wolfowitz, 2009). The state, therefore, in an effort to rise above this threat, employs both soft and hard power tools. Diplomacy and coercion are two state strategies that make themselves visible in accordance with circumstantial requirements (Mearsheimer, 2019).

When juxtaposed with other IR theories, it comes as no surprise that realism is taken to be the philosophical foundation that enables the legitimization of Weberian violence (Kunz, 2010; Turner & Mazur, 2009; Barkawi, 1998) as a rational action undertaken to prevent the withering away of the state (Sleat, 2014). It can thus be said that the manner in which states rationalize their approach to armed conflict of any kind is foundationally rooted in and informed by realism, and practiced through the method of *realpolitik* (Dias, 2020). While this complementarity between realism and *realpolitik* forms the political foundation of military sciences (Zahra, 2011), it does not account for how *realpolitik* operates in complex environments where the state

faces existential threats from within. The Israel-Palestine conflict is one such example owing to the complex socio-political hostilities that shape it. The hypothesis here is that such complex engagements do not necessarily denote the end of *realpolitik*'s theoretical dimension but rather warrant a multidisciplinary reinterpretation that accounts for the question of spatiality. This paper will employ a combination of Fox and Alldred's (2023) and Murriss and Bozalek's (2019) methodology of diffractive analysis to investigate the expansions of the idea of *realpolitik* through the lens of urban warfare studies, as adopted by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

The relevance of this study lies in the fact that while *realpolitik* explains how power is projected, there is a theoretical knowledge gap in the sociological nuances that accommodate this power projection. An anthropocentric vision of *realpolitik* is needed to better gauge the rationality of the IDF and their tactical approach, as it defies the logic of standard military procedures. In considering spaces that defy traditional borders and territories, such as in the case of the Israel-Palestine conflict, the structural diffusion associated with realism is exposed as an epistemic limitation of the theory (Rousseau, 2006; Acharya, 2004; Thomas, 2001; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Thus, the following research question has been formulated to guide the investigation: *how can the epistemology of realpolitik be expanded to explain the operational philosophy of the IDF?*

Having firmly established the main objective of expanding the existing knowledge of *realpolitik*, this paper will first justify why the case of the Israel-Palestine conflict has been chosen by

<sup>1</sup>The specification of which groups were the belligerents that the IDF engages with is not particularly important in regards to this project because there has been no hierarchy of treatment by the IDF when it comes to practicing their methodology of warfare (Weiz-



outlining the modalities of warfare that the IDF and the Palestinian resistance groups<sup>1</sup> use. Secondly, the realm of critical theory will be explored to build a foundation for the proposed multidisciplinary approach. The paper will conclude with the expanded theoretical framework on the sociological aspects of realism. This would not only showcase *realpolitik* in a new light but also encourage anthropocentric research that redefines the existing knowledge of how IR theory works beyond the subjectivity of the state.

Note must be taken of the fact that this paper will in no way deal with the question of statehood or the legalities of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Both of these actors, owing to their capacity to inflict violence, have been assumed to be subjects of *realpolitik* in the Machiavellian sense (Dias, 2020). This means that the analysis focuses entirely on interpreting and explaining the method of inflicting violence under conditions of flattened belligerency. Thus, deontological considerations on historicity, race, social inequality and morality, are beyond the scope of the paper.

### Of warfare, walls and walking: the new ether of engagement

Israel-Palestine has been chosen as a case study owing to the precarious nature of the political and geographic landscape within which the conflict exists, allowing for an extensive discussion on asymmetric warfare. Within the context of this case, the present analysis will focus on Operation Defensive Shield, which was the Israeli military response to the Second Intifada. Occurring in 2002, major offenses were carried out in seven locations across the West Bank, of which the hostilities in Jenin and Nablus have been extensively documented and studied, that too on a comparative basis. Eyal Weizman (2007) extensively documents and analyzes the revolutionary

manner in which the IDF navigates the urban topography of the West Bank. In his seminal paper titled *Lethal Theory* (2006), Weizman not only juxtaposes the tactical approaches to the campaigns in Jenin and Nablus but also begets the investigation that is being conducted by this paper. The Jenin campaign bore the mark of a standard IDF mission that involved air support, mechanized armor and overwhelming force in order to flush out ‘the enemy,’<sup>2</sup> a tactic that has also been witnessed in most other urban battlefields (Hoffmann, 2017). The Nablus campaign, however, is the fundamental arena of inquiry as it challenged the status quo of urban engagements.

Instead of using overwhelming force, the IDF units involved in the Nablus skirmish practiced mouse-holing<sup>3</sup> through civilian living quarters, with the aim of avoiding streets, thoroughfares and open spaces in order to reduce movement visibility. The dense urban environment of Nablus allowed the IDF units to converge upon targets from multiple directions from individual staging points, thereby creating a swarming effect to overwhelm the opposition (Edwards, 2005). Weizman (2006, 2007) describes this as ‘walking through walls’ referring to how the bulk of movement took place through vast residential areas which shared common walls. This movement has been termed as ‘rhizomatic maneuvering’ by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). In its original iteration, Deleuze and Guattari employ this term to describe a non-hierarchical, non-linear manner in which concepts and ideas are propagated. Originating in the field of semiotics and philosophy, they expand the application of the concept to the study of social movements, power propagation and economics. This was applied by the IDF in the case of Nablus through a radical re-imagination of spatiality which converts the city from an area of dwelling to a tool that could

man, 2007; 2006).

<sup>2</sup>It must be clarified that the usage of the term ‘enemy’ has been borrowed from the general vocabulary of War Studies so as to inject equivalence to the Palestinian resistance, putting it at par with Israel and thus legitimizing their belligerence. In critical theory, this term is also used to loosely denote the ontological opposition to the concept of the state itself (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), and has been employed as such. For a detailed socio-linguistic discussion on this, see Olsson (2019) and Nordin and Öberg (2015).

<sup>3</sup>Mouse-holing is a widely practiced tactic in urban warfare. To mouse-hole means to avoid traditional arteries such as roads, in favor of moving through hidden spaces, which are generally invisible to the public. This is preferred in urban spaces to reduce casualty, limit troop visibility and perform spatial domination. For a brief discussion on the origins, see Gooderson (2007-2008). Mouse-holing was a popular tactic used in 2004 by the US Marines during the Second Battle of Fallujah, in Iraq (Camp, 2009). Weizman (2006. p.53) alternatively calls this “walking through walls.”



be used against the enemy (Weizman, 2007). In metaphorical terms, it converts the home into a space where hostilities are violently negotiated, transforming safety into insecurity. This shift in the spatial ontology is a salient feature that became a standard operating procedure in future IDF operations and serves more than just a strategic purpose.

Within military tactics, rhizomatic maneuvering serves three purposes. Firstly, the inversion of interiority and exteriority abolishes the distinction between private and public space (Arendt, 1998). Secondly, this abolition taps into the fundamental purpose of the IDF ideology i.e., the maintenance of a regime of structural violence which complements Israeli dominance over Palestinian discourses<sup>4</sup> (Zalloua, 2012; Weizman, 2006). By unilaterally making the previously private-and-secure space ‘visible,’<sup>5</sup> civilian apartments are now assimilated into the geography of the battlefield. This brings civilians directly in confrontation with the IDF, and forces the former to be caught up in the violent spatial negotiations with the latter (Makdisi, 2010). Thus, the spectacle of Israeli operatives not only on Palestinian land but in Palestinian homes themselves paints an image of a perpetual occupation. This signals the message of political continuity that aims to destabilize the collective conscience of the Palestinian resistance. The rapid – and unilaterally implemented – ‘de-territorialization and re-territorialization’<sup>6</sup> of Israeli presence is a major factor that enhances the reminder of Israeli might. This leads to the third, most important, tactical purpose:

the insertion of IDF personnel at will and in any environment, to tackle any form of (perceived) militancy. This shifts the experience of hegemony from physical to psychological, and tactically avoids the need for consent and a constant occupation force (Weizman, 2006; Naveh, 2006).

Hence, rhizomatic maneuvering ultimately creates a permanent state of exception under which the IDF would be able to pursue and strategically eliminate targets of importance at will, while also maintaining a clandestine, vigilant presence in Palestinian territories. In theoretical terms, this denotes a post-structural extension of *realpolitik*, marking a demonstration of the classical Clausewitzian maxim of war being “the continuation of politics by other means” (Dimitru, 2018; Clausewitz, 1976). In particular, the framework of Fourth-Generation Warfare (4GW)<sup>7</sup> becomes a central feature as symbolic communication via strategic presence is the intended effect of such campaigns (Katoch, 2005). While a number of competing perspectives on the tenets of 4GW exist, the common denominator that can be found in the literature is the extended focus on the role of psychology, a lack of distinction between civil and military, and defining victory in terms of sociopolitical control (Wither, 2016; Gray, 2007; Katoch, 2005; Hammes, 2004). The emphasis thus shifts from the practice of active policing to passive signaling – indicating that the threat of brute force trumps the need for a continuous stationing of personnel. Ronen Bergman (2018), in his research on the culture of targeted assassinations by Israel, makes reference to this strategy

<sup>4</sup>A part of Zahi Zalloua’s (2012) seminal work on explaining the socio-political realities in Israel-Palestine through the lens of continental philosophy is heavily concerned with the aspect of discursive domination. For that purpose, the concept of perpetual-victimization (pp.19-43) and auto-immunity (pp.111-129) are introduced, which are argued to provide the IDF with operational legitimacy, thereby creating an environment of psychosomatic insecurity (Weizman, 2006).

<sup>5</sup>‘Visibility’ or ‘making visible’ is a praxiological concept operationalized by Donna Haraway (1988) which refers to the act of exposing the political consequences regarding matters deemed traditionally private (‘invisible’). For a thorough discussion on the epistemic foundations, see *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* (pp. 575-599).

<sup>6</sup>‘De-territorialization and re-territorialization’ is a concept which refers to the appearance, disappearance and reappearance of entities within specific contexts. In its original connotation, Eugene Holland (2013, p.7) refers to the manner in which Deleuze & Guattari (1987) operationalise the concept in explaining anti-capitalism: “The terms territorialization, de-territorialization, and re-territorialization link psychoanalysis and political economy by designating the investment of energy in specific areas of the body and the economy, the withdrawal of such investments, and their re-investment elsewhere.” Being concepts, they can be used to explain complex processes of change. Brent Adkins (2015, p.49) further elucidates this as “...the selection or extraction of some set of intensities in order to compose them or place them in a different relation to one another.”

<sup>7</sup>Katoch (2005, p.21) provides a holistic definition: “4GW is the antithesis of the traditional concept of war. In 4GW, the distinction between war and peace is blurred to the vanishing point. It is non-linear to an extreme point wherein there are no definable battlefields or fronts. The distinction between “civilian” and “military” disappears. Actions occur concurrently throughout the space in which all participants’ function, including in their society. It is [a] war where cultures can be in conflict. It uses a mix of political, social, military and economic means to defeat the enemy’s will to resist.”



as a means by which the threat of violence creates an atmosphere of uncertainty that impedes insurgent activity. The process of a tactical insertion, followed by the assassination and a quick exfiltration displays a higher level of operational efficiency while massively reducing IDF casualties – and maintaining the experience of psychological hegemony.

The reconfiguration of space plays an instrumental role in such a development and the next section will deal with the idea of urbanism and critical theory, both of which are strategically repurposed by the IDF so as to develop their very own sociology of *realpolitik*.

### **Of maps and territories: expanding the *realpolitik* epistemology**

The operational capacity of the IDF is indubitably enhanced by the decades of combat experience that it has garnered since the inception of Israel (Bresheeth-Žabner, 2020). Weizman (2006) notes that the culture of scientifically and methodically analyzing operational modalities is what leads to IDF's innovativeness. Its Operations Research Institute played a leading role in practically interpreting theoretical frameworks that could potentially further their understanding of the battlefield (Naveh, 2006). The noteworthy factor here is that the reading list of the IDF is not limited to the canon of classical warfare theorists such as Clausewitz, Martin van Creveld, Sun Tzu and other *realpolitik* theorists. A plethora of critical theory, ranging from the works of Guy Debord and Deleuze and Guattari in the sphere of continental philosophy and control theory, to Henri Lefebvre and Bernard Tschumi's contributions to critical geography and architecture, feature extensively among other material (Weizman, 2006). These four theorists, whose works critically engage with the philosophical foundations of modern capitalism, come from a Marxist tradition. This is as far as one can get from realism in a strictly theoretical sense. Yet, the IDF has been successful in synthesizing these dialectically opposing branches of theory, turning them into a foundation for modern warfare (Weizman, 2006). In other words, the IDF has 'de-

territorialized and re-territorialized' theory itself – a key takeaway from Weizman's research, the consequences of which will be elaborated upon in the forthcoming section. This subsumption and transformation of theoretical tools for ends other than those originally intended is a key feature of contemporary critical theory (Shaviro, 2015) and is featured heavily in the fields mentioned above. In keeping with the operational observations that have been mentioned in the previous section, three important ideas that are instrumental to the IDF's operational philosophy shall be touched upon: spatiality, the 'war machine' and affect.

In terms of spatiality, within the IDF a heavy emphasis is placed on the critical geography of Henri Lefebvre, whose concept of 'relational space' plays a vital role in their operational planning (Naveh, 2006). 'Relational space' was formulated by Lefebvre (1991) as an opposition to the traditional concepts of space as either static and unchanging i.e. 'absolute space,' or as a multiplicity of viewpoints readily available to actors i.e. 'relative space' (pp.48-49). For Lefebvre, space ought to be understood in a constructivist fashion wherein the actor defines what the space represents and not the other way round (Merrifield, 1993). This injects anarchy into the domain of spatiality and allows actors to alter spaces in accordance with their purposes. Weizman, in his study, recognizes this as a 'reorganization of the urban syntax' (2006, p.53). The breakdown of architecture and counter-intuitive manner of urban movement are concepts borrowed from the deconstructivism of Bernard Tschumi. For Tschumi, architecture is about spatial experience, movement and social dynamics, as opposed to the mere act of geometric planning (Charitonidou, 2020). The application of deconstructivism thus breaks with a long-standing architectural tradition of constructing spaces for the purpose of conducting events. Instead, events precede spaces, leading to space being "transformed by events" (Tschumi, 1996, p.30). The adaptation of Tschumi's work serves as an important blueprint for organizing micro tactics within this re-imagined urban syntax (Weizman, 2006).

These concepts are operationalized through





the metaphysical urbanism of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as ‘smooth’ and ‘striated’ space, and form the bulk of the IDF’s rhizomatic maneuver. Smooth space loosely refers to pathways that are unexplored, and by extension, actions that have not been performed. This can be thought of as a purposeful lack of organization so as to allow for creative potential in terms of social organization. Striated space, on the other hand, refers to captured and organized areas, where creative potential is lost and social relations are rigidly ordered. In fact, as mentioned previously, the term ‘rhizomatic maneuver’ itself is borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari’s approach to nonlinear networks (Weizman, 2007). Thus, the very concept of space for the IDF goes beyond the mere description of locations or paths. Space evolves from a set of static architectural entities into a continuously evolving arena that aids the moving force, operating both as a tool of reference as well as a mediator of social relations. To move through walls is thus to ‘smooth out striated space.’

The second idea, that of the ‘war machine’ was developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) to define forces that worked against the state apparatus. While the concept of a war machine is rather vague, it can be understood as the opposite of the state, formed in response to the existence of the state itself (Reid, 2003). The IDF, in a rather emblematic manner, paints their Palestinian opposition as the ‘Wahhabi War Machine:’ an ideological force that operates as a response to the existence of Israel (Naveh, 2006). Generally speaking, in contrast to a traditional, top-down command structure, the war machine is operated by ‘nomads’ who are decentralized entities that obey no hierarchy (Robinson, 2010). Thus, in order to tackle these ‘nomadic terrorists,’ the IDF had to develop their own version of ‘nomadology.’ The practical element of this counter-nomadic approach consisted of the formation of autarkic units that improvise every step instead of obeying a premeditated tactical route (Weizman, 2006). This enables the IDF

to not only cover more ground but also perform targeted strikes, thereby swiftly achieving objectives.

The third and final idea is that of affect, derived from affect theory. Brian Massumi,<sup>8</sup> in Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p.16), defines the concept as “...an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act.” While the domain of psychology approaches affect differently to post-structuralism, the IDF’s interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari (and by extension, Massumi) blurs this difference and treats affect as pure experience. What this means is that uprooting the Palestinian sense of belonging is key to the IDF strategy, as the solidification of socio-spatial relations would contribute to a stronger Palestinian resistance. Recalling the three purposes of rhizomatic maneuvering from the previous section, it is visible how affect theory ties into the discussion on not only maintaining dominance over physical space but also the psychosomatic dimension. This domination alters the ontology of the actor at the receiving end and forces a re-orientation in terms of the manners of interpreting political realities. One party’s hegemony over another’s bodily experience and the socio-psychological discourse can be thought of in terms of a strategy of propaganda, which 4GW makes use of (Vest, 2001).

### Of combinations and new horizons

Paraphrasing Korzybski (1933, p.750), it is amply visible that for the IDF, ‘the map is not the territory’ and ‘the world is not a thing.’ The critical theory angles employed by the IDF push the boundaries on how theory can be interpreted and put to use, beyond their original intentions. The co-opting of critical theory for military use displays the absolute counter-nomadism of the IDF, not only amidst their field operatives but also within the ranks of the bureaucracy. Linearity is done away with in every manner, be it

<sup>8</sup>The English translation of Deleuze & Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987) by Brian Massumi contains a section titled ‘Notes on Translation and Acknowledgements’ (pp. 16 – 20) which provides a glossary of concepts and addresses linguistic inconsistencies that had occurred during the translation process. For a discussion on the conceptual genealogy of affect, see Massumi (1995).



in terms of battlefield management and its educational content. While Clausewitzian warfare, and by extension the modern ramifications to Clausewitz's theory by Martin van Creveld make mention of this approach in passing, it does not fathom the depth which lies therein.

While *realpolitik* is philosophically rooted in realism and charts normative strategies for statecraft, it must be updated to match contemporary statecraft – and that of the future. It is clear that as a war strategy, *realpolitik* navigates spaces with the intention of injecting these spaces with force or apparent occupation. Critical geography allows for this formulation to hold water as it introduces the idea of spatiality into IR theory, by transforming space from a static to a dynamic entity. As urban warfare has been central to counter-insurgency engagements in Palestine, it is important that this trend be taken into account while interpreting topography which allows for the practice of *realpolitik*. Naveh's (2006) conceptualization of warfare as *psycho geography* makes prominent the philosophical dimension of affect, by further theorizing domination via the exercise of power – the empirical objective of *realpolitik*. Thus, it can be said that actors make their presence felt psychologically through unilaterally re-appropriating spaces that mediate politics and conflict. The result is a blurring of the line between combatants and non-combatants as urban spaces involving the everyday life of the citizenry are weaponized (Weizman, 2006).

In combining the modalities discussed in the second section with the theoretical frameworks in the third section, it can be said that the IDF do not invoke *realpolitik* as a linear sequence of actions but rather as a dialectic interaction that forcibly pushes tactical boundaries. They themselves expand the vocabulary of *realpolitik* without explicitly mentioning so. The manner in which social and belligerent relations are mediated by *realpolitik* is of paramount importance as it exposes the verticality of Israeli occupation, and by extension, a model of neocolonial expansion that can be imbibed by other states or entities in order to push their agendas. An anthropocentric analysis cannot discount the civilian casualties that occur due to such experimen-

tion (Manekin, 2020). While the collaterals of such operations are not outlined in briefings or educational sessions, extensive documentation of Palestinian lives that have been uprooted due to the negative treatment of their residential areas exist (Baroud, Christison, Christison, & Loewenstein, 2006). This treatment of civilian space as a living laboratory for experimentation in urban warfare (Weizman, 2006; 2007) forces an inquiry into the human toll that these theories ignore.

## Conclusion

In keeping with the agenda of the paper, a thorough discussion was conducted on the epistemic gap observed between *realpolitik*, urbanism and critical theory. The evolving processes of urban warfare espoused by the IDF draw attention to the need to rethink theory, not just from the syllabi of traditional military sciences but also other disciplines like continental philosophy, geography and critical theory – most of which may have nothing to do with warfare. This paper lays down an initial foundation for how *realpolitik* needs an update in light of the new horizons of modernity, inviting future research to build the claims put forward. The political spaces of the future, being more complex than ever, will force major epistemic shifts in our current understanding of how to conduct statecraft. To that end, this paper hopes to foster further curiosity for investigation into new methodologies required to make sense of future warfare, the costs of intentional civilian involvement and methods to avert it.

It must be recalled and restated that the objective of this paper was not to politically demand an abolition of rhizomatic maneuvering, or hint at policy-oriented transformations. The goal has been to highlight the inadequacies in the epistemology of modern warfare and problematize the lack of inter-disciplinary scrutiny. The human toll of warfare cannot be ignored and it would lie beyond the scope of this paper to suggest any form of political or military solution. Since *realpolitik* still places a heavy emphasis on state action and responsibility, approaching warfare from the perspective of human suffer-



ing is crucial to uncovering its blind spots. The implication being that a bottom-up strategy of theory-building may allow for alternative, empathetic strategies to emerge.

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