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The America Muslim Community Guide: Shut Up and Speak Up

Sami A. Al-Arian

Center for Islam and Global Affairs

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Center for Islam and Global Affairs,
Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University, Halkalı, Küçükçekmece, 34303

Tel.: +90-212-692-9689

Fax.: +90-212-693-8229

E-mail: ciga@izu.edu.tr

Web: ciga.izu.edu.tr

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The America Muslim Community Guide: Shut Up and Speak Up*

Prof. Sami A. Al-Arian

Introduction

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, political leaders in the United States had to explain to the American public the reason for the atrocious and tragic attacks that had taken place. There were really only two possible answers. The first was that the country was attacked as a consequence of the government's policies.¹ Admitting to this would have meant that politicians and decision makers were also complicit and partly to blame. The other answer, which was almost universally adopted by the political class and power elites, was that America was attacked because of its freedom and democracy, and because of "who we are." And, since we cannot change who "we" are, then we have to change who "they" are. This was reflected in what followed: invasions, occupations, torture, Bagram, Gitmo, Abu Ghraib, black sites, secret detentions, renditions, drones, assassinations, the PATRIOT Act, mass surveillance, the establishment of the national security state, CVE programs targeting vulnerable minority communities, setting up incompetent and corrupt regimes abroad in Afghanistan and Iraq, and more.

These aggressive programs and policies have fundamentally transformed the United States both domestically and internationally. Within a short

* This study was also published as a chapter in the *Terror Trap* (eds. Sami Al-Arian, Asim Qureshi, and Leena Al-Arian), American Educational Trust, Washington DC., USA, 2021.

¹ Such as occupying the birth place of Islam after the first gulf war in the early nineties; imposing devastating and crippling sanctions on Iraq during the 1990s that killed over half million Iraqis; providing blind support to Israel's brutal occupation of Palestine, which continues to expand its unimpeded settlement policies while denying Palestinian rights; by being the main power that supports dictatorships and totalitarian regimes throughout the Arab world, which deny their people democracy, freedom, and basic human rights.

period of time, the United States invaded nations and toppled regimes in Afghanistan, then Iraq, and took “revenge” against thousands of innocent Muslims around the world. Domestically, the government empowered its security agencies and unleashed them on the vulnerable American Muslim community under the pretense of “preventing the next 9/11.” Even though not a single perpetrator of the September 11 attacks was an indigenous person or American Muslim, the country’s local community became the primary target of the national security state and its massive surveillance programs.

In such a state of affairs where the safety, security, and future of the American Muslim community are at stake, one of the most pertinent questions that has been intensely debated is the relationship between the community and the national security establishment, particularly the FBI. To answer this question, one must understand the new mission and tactics the FBI has adopted since 9/11.

Theoretically, the FBI is a law enforcement agency that was supposed to pursue criminals after federal crimes have been committed. But often times, as discussed in several essays in this volume, the FBI engaged in political repression by targeting political activists and utilizing its massive resources in order to disrupt constitutional and first amendment activities that it disfavored—evident, for example, in its involvement in the COINTELPRO operations between 1956-1971. After 9/11, the FBI, the newly established Department of Homeland Security (DHS), as well as other agencies and task forces such as the JTTF (Joint Terrorism Task Force), have focused their efforts against politically disfavored communities, and employed many underhanded tactics for the purpose of disrupting, dividing, and discrediting the American Muslim community. All of this was done on the basis of perpetuating the belief that such tactics are needed to fight terrorism.

Albury Revelations

This article is an unusual piece as it quotes extensively from other articles in order to show uncontested evidence needed to prove all the allegations

that have been levelled against the FBI and U.S. government, especially that they have been relentlessly and unfairly targeting the American Muslim community for over two decades. Former FBI veteran, Terry Albury, spent seventeen years working on national security affairs and pursuing the American Muslim community. His explosive story was featured and published in *The New York Times* on September 1, 2021 (Reitman, 2021).

During his time with the FBI, Albury had a change of heart and felt uneasy about his role in destroying innocent Muslim lives as an agent in the so-called War on Terror. He leaked many documents to *The Intercept*, which exposed much of the aggressive tactics used by the FBI in targeting the American Muslim community. He was eventually arrested for these leaks, pled guilty, and served over three years in prison for his actions. He told the *Times* that he saw his role in telling his story “as providing context.” He continues, “You had all these organizations that were suing the federal government over abuse of authority or racial or religious profiling, based solely on anecdotal information. I was there to say, OK, here you go, *this is proof* - now go forward and take action and help your people.”

Albury’s account is chilling in its details, as it exposes the racist and dangerous policies that have been adopted and used by the FBI, JTTF, and other agencies as they targeted the American Muslim community to infiltrate and unsettle it. In his narrative, the targets were not just some bad apples, but the ideology and religion of Islam itself, and its adherents have become targets. Albury recalls that “[t]he indoctrination was immediate”. He explains that the attitude of the FBI was that “[w]e’re at war, we need to respond, we need to use every tool at our disposal. [I]t was made very clear from Day 1 that the enemy was not just a tiny group of disaffected Muslims,” he says, but “Islam itself was the enemy.” According to him even though “there was no existential threat from Islam, as [he] was *taught as a surveillance trainee* [shortly after 9/11], just an endless list of people who were being targeted because they were Muslim.” It had taken him a decade to reach this conclusion.

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize some of the techniques and tools mentioned by Albury that have been used by the FBI against the American Muslim community. “Albury’s revelations confirm what communities — primarily Muslims and communities of color — and rights groups had long known or thought to be true,” Hina Shamsi, director of the National Security Project at the American Civil Liberties Union told the *Times*. “For years we’ve been hearing from people who were surveilled or investigated or watch listed with no apparent basis for the FBI to suspect wrongdoing, but based primarily on their race or religion or political organizing and beliefs,” she added.

The primary objectives of the FBI operations and tactics used against the American Muslim community have been (a) to infiltrate this community with thousands of informants and spies in order to keep them under constant surveillance and control, as well as distrustful of each other, and (b) to cultivate a new breed of American Muslim “leaders”, who would demonstrate loyalty and fealty to U.S. hegemonic policies by being co-opted by the U.S. security establishment. Michael German, another former FBI agent, told the *Times* that the FBI mandate that was adopted after 9/11 has “exposed a vast number of people who were not suspected of breaking the law, to some of the same intrusive techniques the bureau had long used against people it suspected were criminals. As it turned out, spying on innocent people doesn’t help catch guilty people, so it was a flawed approach.”

Racism and Islamophobia

It is not far-fetched to conclude that the FBI is an institution that has deeply seated racist views against Muslims and other minorities. Albury worked in the FBI office in Washington D.C. as well as several field offices across the country, as he witnessed first-hand the racism that permeated this institution. In one incident, a superior at the Minnesota field office described to Albury the Somali Muslim community by calling them “dirty, smelly, disgusting, worthless pieces of [expletive]”, as she excruciated him because he did not “get the problem,” meaning their

culture and faith. He said that as agents needed to develop sources within Minneapolis' Muslim community, a large number of whom were Somali immigrants, they used to call them "skinnies." In all his years as an FBI agent, Albury had never heard "the sort of unabashed hatred for any group of people as he did for the Somalis, whom agents denigrated for their poverty, or their food, or the habit some Somali immigrant women had of tucking their cell phones inside their hijabs while shopping at Walmart or driving a car."

According to Albury "[t]oo many members of the JTTF seemed to be driven by personal animus, describing Islam as a religion of violence, a message that was still being promulgated in FBI. That was what happened when you worked in counterterrorism too long," Albury thought. "You lose perspective. You invest years in it and begin to believe it's your duty to find evidence, no matter how small, confirming your suspicions."

Ruining peoples' lives

Albury contends that the real consequence of his work against American Muslims in several communities as well as that of his colleagues as FBI agents were, to put it simply, "ruining people's lives," without any real reason except suspicion, pure hatred, and sustaining a biased institutional culture. In one instance, he pursued a person under suspicion as well as his little brother for years. Even though both were innocent, he noted that the brother, who was targeted because he was his sibling was "screwed for life." He says, "there was nothing connecting the kid to terrorism." He knew this after spending months completing a process known as "baseline collection" – scouring his social media, checking his phone records, running his name through the DMV database as well as myriad other secret and top-secret government databases. But now his name was in the system. That meant any number of government agencies — the FBI, the CIA, the DEA, ICE — could have access to his file. This file will forever stay in the system staining him for life without the ability to expunge it." He says that he had realized that by simply looking at the brother of a

suspect he was “opening him up to future harassment or, at best, put an asterisk next to his name that would be with him forever.”

The article also notes that “at any time he applied for a passport, or a job that required a background check, or a driver’s license, or simply had his name run through any sort of government database, for the rest of his life, it would show up that he’d been looked at by the FBI, which would inevitably be viewed as suspicious.” That was what was so insidious about the process, Albury thought. And it wasn’t just this kid — there were thousands of Minneapolis Muslims in the system just like him and untold millions elsewhere in the country.” He continues by observing how the reality of what he was a part of hit him in a way that just shattered his belief in the system. “There is this mythology surrounding the war on terrorism, and the FBI, that has given agents the power to ruin the lives of completely innocent people based solely on what part of the world they came from, or what religion they practice, or the color of their skin. And I did that,” he adds. “I helped destroy people. For 17 years.”

FBI Tool Kit: The Use of Informants and Infiltrating Muslim Communities, Surveillance, National Security Letters, Databases, Airport Profiling, No Fly Lists, CVE Programs, Mosque Outreach, Disruption, Manufacturing Crimes

The FBI and other law enforcement agencies have a long history of using informants that are deployed against criminal syndicates and gangs, as well as political dissent. But since 9/11, the FBI has made it its principal policy to infiltrate mosques and Muslim communities across the nation as if they are inherently criminal. According to an *Intercept* article published in 2016, the FBI had recruited informants against the American Muslim community that numbered at least 15,000 domestically a few years after 9/11 (Currier and Hussain, 2016). That figure, which was revealed in a 2008 budget request (Aftergood, 2007), is roughly 10 times the number of informants that were active during the era of J. Edgar Hoover and COINTELPRO (Aaronson, 2015). According to Albury, there were many tactics used by the FBI for the sole purpose of recruiting informants and

turning them into spies against their communities. He says, “Every encounter was exploitable either domestically, via the FBI, or internationally, through the CIA or another intelligence partner.” He continues, “We take people from foreign countries where they have secret police and recruit them as informants and capitalize on their fear to ensure there is compliance.”

Another leaked FBI document published by the *Intercept* recommends that “agents scour Facebook ‘to find individuals who are dramatically increasing their levels of piety — that’s the demographic you want.’” It further states, “Since we’re looking for young people re-engaging with their Islamic faith,” it continues, “the local MSA [Muslim Student Association] is a great place to start” (Currier, 2016). In 2012, the American Civil Liberties Union obtained (ACLU, 2011) documents showing that the FBI had used “mosque outreach” programs ostensibly meant to build relationships with Islamic communities in order to collect intelligence. A similar program by the NYPD spied on Muslim student associations and communities for years before it was eventually exposed and disbanded after it admitted that it had never generated a lead (Apuzzo and Goldstein, 2014).

Tactics Used in Recruiting Informants

As early as 2002 the FBI issued guidelines (OIG, 2005) that allowed it to investigate anyone without an indication of criminal activity. By 2011 another report by *The New York Times* stated that the FBI opened nearly 43,000 counterterrorism-related assessments with very little leading to further investigations, let alone full-fledged criminal charges (Savage, 2011). Based on Albury’s experience, the entire purpose of these assessments, he told the *Times*, was “to create a database of American Muslims.”

According to Albury, “Assessments were the opening salvo to the informant-recruitment process. It was a delicate art of manipulation, persuading a person to work for the federal government against his or her own community, but with access to the person’s criminal history, or

immigration status, it was much easier. There were different techniques agents were allowed to use. They could assist a person who lacked legal status to be given it, a tactic known as the ‘immigration-relief dangle.’ Conversely, agents could also work with immigration officials to deport those people if and when they’d exhausted their usefulness as confidential sources. Fear was a prominent driver. “You love America and want to protect this country, right?” Albury would ask his targets, many of whom were recent immigrants, or permanent residents, or maybe they were in the United States on a visa or had no documentation at all, and so what were they going to do, say no? He was standing before them with a gun on his hip. Most of the time, people would say yes. Those who refused might get put under even more pressure.”

Another tactic mentioned by Albury is “the FBI’s abuse of the no-fly list to coerce Muslims into spying on their communities, an intimidation tactic [he] says was not uncommon” during his tenure. Another common tactic he mentioned was “to threaten uncooperative sources with spreading disinformation unless they agreed to cooperate.” He explains, “The script was, ‘Everyone in your community already thinks you’re a source, so you might as well work with us.’” He would further say, “Another was, ‘Everyone tells us you’re a good guy,’” which was used to both butter up someone who wanted to be perceived as a good American and plant a seed of doubt as to what it might be like to be viewed as not a ‘good guy’ by the FBI.” He knew how devastating such practices are on the targeted members of the American Muslim community. In retrospect, he reflects by stating, “I don’t think anyone fully appreciates how demoralizing it is to be sitting across the table from a peace-loving man or woman from a foreign country, insinuating all kinds of baseless BS, attempting to coerce them to spy on their equally peaceful community,” he continues, “but it was also my job.” He recalls how at one point, he knocked on the door of a woman, a young Syrian refugee, who looked so terrified that she was visibly shaking, “You should be scared,” he thought. “Open that door, I will ruin your life.”

According to Albury the purpose of these tactics by the FBI is to instill fear and mistrust in the community. He told the *Times* reporter, “What the FBI was directing us to do was to go into these communities and instill fear and then generate this paranoia within these people so that they know that they’re under suspicion perpetually.”

Another customary tactic used by the FBI is the use of the so-called National Security Letters or NSLs. The FBI issues thousands of NSLs each year, including nearly 13,000 in 2015 (IC, 2016). Even though a series of Inspector General reports found significant problems (Doyle, 2015) with their use over the years, the FBI is currently pushing to expand the types of information it can demand with an NSL (McLaughlin, 2016). According to the *Intercept*, the FBI had made a habit of asking companies to hand over more revealing data on internet usage (Currier, 2016b).

Another common course of action used by the FBI is to target Muslim travelers at airports. Since a significant number of American Muslims are immigrants or come from immigrant communities, traveling to other countries is ordinary. Albury observed that “Federal agents from ICE or U.S. Customs and Border Protection could, at the behest of the FBI or another intelligence agency, pull a person out of the customs line and interrogate him or her based solely on being from Pakistan, or Syria, or Somalia, or another country in which the U.S. government had an interest.” He further mentioned that “Border agents administer a program known as Placement, Access and Willingness, or PAWS, a nationwide assessment program that screened foreign travelers from specific countries for their intelligence value.”

But more significantly, Albury explains how the FBI has been manipulating airport investigations as it used them as recruiting grounds for informants and spies against the American Muslim community. He explains, “Anyone could become a suspected terrorist given the right data collection. But this was *how the F.B.I. recruited informants at nearly every international airport in the country.*” The *Times* article expounded on how for years Muslims being interrogated by border agents, who

pulled them out of line, were subjected to rigorous questioning, where, “at times [they] took them into separate interrogation rooms where an agent like Albury would play the good cop while border agents searched through their luggage and computers and cell phones. Later, they might receive a visit from an FBI agent who was interested in their recent trip abroad.”

Albury spent hours “driving around and jotting down the comings and goings of various Muslims who for one reason or another had fallen into the post-Sept. 11 dragnet.” In one instance he recalls how a Palestinian-born engineer was put under round-the-clock surveillance by the local JTTF, which “searched through his garbage, placed GPS devices in his car, listened to his phone calls, searched his electronic communications and sent undercover informants into his personal, professional and religious circles,” without finding much evidence of wrongdoing, let alone terrorist-related activities. “I’d say most of our investigations were based on very thin leads from questionable sources,” one former agent on the local JTTF had once confided in Albury.

The *Times* article also stated that Albury “had a wealth of resources at his disposal: top-secret databases, informants, electronic surveillance tools.” Albury noted that, “It was easy, as a member of the JTTF, to send a national-security letter to an internet or phone company or another commercial entity and obtain information about a customer. It had also become routine to obtain a FISA warrant for more elaborate operations like wiretaps. Tremendous pressure was put on agents to bolster their squad’s numbers on open or active investigations and informants, which boosted the office’s statistics, resulting in more funding for agents, analysts, surveillance teams and other aspects of the JTTF, which in turn would open more investigations.”

CVE and Mosque Outreach programs

Since 2015, the U.S. government including the FBI have been promoting a dangerous program called: “Countering Violent Extremism” or CVE. The purpose of this program as advertised was to help communities with

grants for education and other social benefits, particularly geared towards the youth. “The idea was to bring together local and federal law enforcement with various members of the community - imams, teachers, psychologists, coaches, social workers - to come up with intervention strategies to help ‘off-ramp’ young people they feared might be radicalizing.” However, Albury exposed the program as a recruitment tool devised by the FBI. After a bad start where many Muslim communities shunned CVE programs (with notable exceptions of those who have already been cultivated by the FBI within the American Muslim community), it was rebranded and renamed as Shared Responsibility Committees, or SRCs.²

Albury observed that “the SRCs were simply a way to grow the FBI’s informant network under the guise of countering violent extremism.” It was simply a thinly veiled effort at intelligence gathering. Albury says that “[m]embers of the committees were asked to sign confidentiality agreements, which swore them to secrecy even from other members of the committee.” In other words, those who received grants from the government under the pretext of helping the community could not even share what they were actually doing in their communities. He adds, “The FBI was entitled to pursue prosecution, or share information with other agencies in the government or foreign governments.” The program comes down to the fact that “the FBI knew what they were doing, and everyone else was kept in the dark,” Albury adds. “Swearing everyone to secrecy is part of how these programs work operationally.”

Another trick in the FBI’s bag was the so-called Mosque or community outreach programs.

Albury says that one of his main tasks was “Mosque Outreach.” He said that he took a list of all the Islamic centers in a 10-mile radius, as his assignment was “to sit down with the leaders and *play* the role of your

² This program has been rebranded several times. Under Biden it has been renamed Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships or CP3.

friendly neighborhood FBI agent while building profiles on anyone who might make a good confidential source.” Once inside a mosque he’d use a standard pitch, which according to him goes as follows, “We’ve been hearing some things about your mosque [...] That always put them on the defensive,” he reflects. Sometimes he’d throw a few Arabic phrases into his conversation, mentioning the good work the FBI was doing to help ‘counter violent extremism’ and expressing concern about the continued harassment of Muslims. His job was “to protect them, the ‘honest, decent Muslims,’ which was why he needed their help.” He’d then say, “We’re here to work with you, not against you, so if you hear anything that worries you [contact us]. ...” In one instance, his task was to investigate the imam of the local mosque, so he recruited an informant who’d be “praying at the mosque, slowly making his way into the imam’s inner circle. He recorded every conversation.”

Manufacturing Crimes

Albury argues that the FBI has built the entire apparatus and convinced the world that “there is a terrorist in every mosque,” and that every newly arrived Muslim immigrant is secretly anti-American. He stated that “because we have promoted that false notion, we have to validate it. So we catch some kid who doesn’t know his ear from his [expletive] for building a bomb fed to them by the FBI.” Trevor Aaronson, an investigative reporter, investigated hundreds of terrorist plots and showed that a substantial number of the terrorist plots were being manufactured by the FBI, which planned, financed, executed, and directed the fake plots to convince the public and the political class that it is catching real terrorists (Aaronson and Williams, 2016).

Disruption

Perhaps similar to the infamous COINTELPRO, which was deployed against political activists during the civil rights struggle of the 1960s, one of the major undertakings of the FBI after 9/11 is its constant disruption of the American Muslim community (Currier, 2017). According to an

important investigative piece by *The Intercept*, “[w]hen the FBI puts a halt to criminal or terrorist activity without bringing anyone to court, it claims to have achieved a disruption.” The FBI guide defines a disruption “as an action that neutralizes a threat by impeding the activities of an individual or group of suspects. Some of the tactics the FBI uses to this end are familiar: interviewing the subject, for instance, or seizing financial assets. Others were not previously known: deportation, media campaigns, and feeding suspects disinformation.” *The Intercept* article shows that disruption operations included “sting operations, recruitment of informants, and arresting suspects on lesser charges.” It further concludes that the FBI uses disruptions as means to target people it suspects and wants to eliminate, instead of working on cases that are likely to fail in court because of the absence of evidence.

Another disruptive tactic in the FBI guidelines uncovered in *The Intercept* article is to incite a “media campaign” against its target by “publicizing a suspect’s activities, even when there is no legal action pending against the suspect.” Other disruption tactics used by the FBI take place outside criminal courts or the legal system because of lack of evidence, but could still have profound impact on a person’s or family’s life, such as facing deportations or throwing the vulnerable target into immigration limbo. In the same 2017 article *The Intercept* argues that “[t]he FBI uses disruption statistics to help justify spending \$5.3 billion — more than half its budget — on counterterrorism” (Currier, 2017, p.12).

Bottom Line: Shut Up when Questioned by Security Agents and Speak Up to the Political Establishment

When FBI agents knock on your door, your office, your place of work, or your mosque, it is important to note that there is nothing good that can come from talking to them. Their mission is either to collect evidence against you, turn you into an informant, or to disrupt your life. Talking with them could also put you in legal jeopardy since they could claim that you had lied to them when talking with you, which is a criminal charge,

and in the course of a terrorism investigation might add dozens of years behind bars.

In reviewing the leaked FBI documents published by *The Intercept*, it was clear that “FBI agents will say one thing, but the DIOG, unredacted [reveals the opposite]”³ – acronym for the FBI’s Domestic Investigations and Operations Guide. A legal expert, who reviewed the leaked documents told *The Intercept* that the DIOG “shows us the truth. Frankly, FBI agents can lie to attorneys and their clients. We remind people of this when we do seminars to teach people about their rights.”

In the *Times* article, when Albury, a veteran FBI agent was confronted with other agents suspecting him of leaking classified information, he immediately asserted his fifth amendment rights, refused to speak to them, and asked to talk to his attorney. He then stood up and said, “By law, you can only detain a person for the purposes of identifying them. You know who I am. Therefore, you cannot detain me.” He later told the *Times* about whether or not agents lie, stating that, “[o]f course they lie – I lied to people all the time as an agent.”

What the American Muslim community needs from its imams, leaders, intellectuals, activists, and community organizers is to demand accountability from their political leaders for the excesses of the so-called Global War on Terror. The Muslim community has been for over two decades securitized and pathologized. For too long it has been scapegoated because of the 9/11 attacks. The community must resist and reject this approach by *shutting up* when questioned by security agents, who want to disrupt and unsettle their communities, and *speaking up* to the political leaders demanding accountability, transparency, equality, and respect.

³ <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/3416775-DIOG-Redactions-Marked-Redacted>

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Biography of Contributor



Sami A. Al-Arian is the Director of the Center for Islam and Global Affairs (CIGA) and public affairs professor at Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University. He received his PhD in 1986 and was a tenured academic in the US for many years. During his four decades in the US (1975-2015), Dr. Al- Arian founded numerous institutions and publications in the fields of education, research, religion and interfaith, as well as civil and human rights. He was a prolific speaker across many US campuses, especially on Palestine, Islam and the West, and Civil Rights. In 2001, he was named by Newsweek the “premiere civil rights activist” in the US for his efforts to repeal the use of Secret Evidence in immigration courts. In 2012, he was profiled by historians of the Encyclopedia of American Dissidents as one of only three Muslims in the US out of 152 US dissidents and prisoners of conscience in the past century included in the two- volume series (along with Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali). His US story was featured in 2007 in the award-winning documentary “US vs. Al-Arian,” and in 2016 in the book “Being Palestinian.” Dr. Al-Arian has written dozens of articles that were translated to many languages focusing on US foreign policy, Palestine, and the Arab Spring phenomena. He has written several books and edited volumes.

The Center for Islam and Global Affairs (CIGA)
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To be a premiere research institution for ideas, analysis, and policy recommendations on global affairs impacting the Muslim World, and to foster future relations with world powers based on shared principles, common interests, and mutual respect.

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