

## The Trust Deficit: Seven Steps Forward for U.S.—Arab Dialogue

“We are in an information war . . . and we are losing,” declared U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, describing U.S. efforts to counter extremists and engage Arab publics during this year’s unprecedented and historic change in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> She is right. In the decade since 9/11, thousands of American lives and more than a trillion dollars have been spent on wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, while millions of dollars have been spent on public diplomacy programs aimed at the Arab world. In 2009, President Barack Obama delivered a landmark speech in Cairo designed to seek “a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world.”<sup>2</sup> Two years on, according to the latest polling data in Egypt, unfavorable views of the United States outnumber favorable ones by nearly four to one.<sup>3</sup> With some exceptions, the United States likewise remains unpopular in most majority-Muslim countries from Morocco to Pakistan. Why? And what can be done about it?

The information war matters more than the war of bullets. Osama bin Laden is dead, but the real battle that must be won is against his ideas. In such a battle, public communications are key. As events in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere have shown, public opinion can shape the region in surprising ways—ways that affect the United States directly, as prices at the gasoline pumps are showing. For these practical reasons, even aside from motives of common humanity, the United States needs to be engaging with the Arab world more effectively.

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*The Washington Quarterly* • 34:3 pp. 151–163  
DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2011.588168

**Osama bin Laden is dead, but the battle that must be won is against his ideas.**

In this article, we draw on our experiences in government and journalism to set out seven ways in which the United States can win the war of ideas in the Middle East. Hundreds of articles have addressed this issue, but this article is unusual by addressing it from a practitioner's perspective. One of us has spent much of the past ten years explaining Western policies to Middle Eastern audiences,

including for two years as Tony Blair's spokesman to global Muslim audiences. The other has been reporting on them for the world's largest pan-Arab daily newspaper, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, and is now that newspaper's Washington correspondent.

Several officials and opinion formers that we spoke to for this article, including former U.S. diplomats, told us that the fundamental reason for America's unpopularity was the nature of its policies, not the way they were presented. They suggested that few Arabs would respect the United States while they remember photos of Abu Ghraib, read accounts of detentions at Guantanamo, and can see that peace has not been achieved between Israelis and Palestinians. Take the view of Jamal Khashoggi, the editor-in-chief of Al-Waleed, the Arab world's newest satellite TV station: "America must understand that the Middle East conflict is the mother of all problems. . . the other issue is the American military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan." Apart from anything else, the experience of colonization in the 20th century makes this military presence especially controversial: "it is insulting to (our) people's mind, the Americans thought we are like Japan or Germany after the Second World War, yet they didn't have the history we have."<sup>4</sup>

This view implies that public diplomacy and the information war don't matter. In our view, however, communicating with the Arab world should be a two-way process: aiming to influence Arab public opinion, but also learning from it to potentially shape the policies themselves.

## **Seven Principles for Progress**

### **It's Not About Religion, Stupid**

President Obama's June 4, 2009 speech in Cairo was a tour de force. It achieved a huge boost in America's popularity in the Middle East and beyond. And yet, it made a basic mistake. By focusing on religion—"Islam" was mentioned 26 times and "Muslim" 48 times—it re-emphasized a false dichotomy between Islam and the West, a view that assumes that the principal source of tension between the United States and the Middle East is religious.

Practical moves by the U.S. government have followed a similar pattern—appointing a Special Representative to Muslim Communities, for example. Choosing one person to link the United States to more than one billion Muslims in both Muslim-majority countries and non-majority countries (such as New Zealand and Canada) gives an indication that the United States sees Muslims as being different solely based on religion. No other religion has been assigned this status in U.S. foreign policy.

**C**ommunicating should be a two-way process, shaping Arab public opinion but also U.S. policies.

Of course, there are similarities in attitude between people in a range of Muslim-majority countries from Morocco to Pakistan, but these are not shared by all Muslims worldwide: attitudes in Indonesia and Malaysia, and indeed in Iran, remain somewhat different. Kosovar Muslims have erected a statue to Bill Clinton and named their children after Tony Blair. Embassies and desk officers in the State Department or U.S. intelligence agencies take great care to understand the differences between Middle Eastern countries (as was highlighted in the cables leaked by WikiLeaks in November 2010), but these are not sufficiently reflected in either public statements or outreach efforts.

Aiming outreach efforts at Muslims excludes citizens of those countries who are not Muslim, or whose primary identity is not their religion. Ali Asani, professor of Indo-Muslim and Islamic Religion and Cultures at Harvard University, regards the term “Muslim world” as “dehumanizing”: it reduces diverse human beings to the single common denominator of their religious beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

Religion is also a particularly sensitive issue, and easily mishandled. Iraq is a prime example. In the run-up to the 2003 invasion, and even to the present day, U.S. officials refer to Iraqis as Sunni, Shia, and Kurds. The first two are religious groups while the third is ethnic, so this is already an erroneous mix of religious and ethnic divisions. Furthermore, when the United States and its allies based their outreach to Iraqis on these labels, many Iraqis felt that they were being divided and conquered. Although U.S. officials quickly dismiss the notion, this was in fact a tactic used in colonial times and remains vivid in the collective memory of many people of the region.

Finally, it would be a mistake to assume that the most important motivators for anger at the United States are religious. Osama bin Laden’s propaganda focused on U.S. policies far more than theology. As journalist and al-Qaeda expert Peter Bergen told us: “It’s the politics, stupid.”<sup>6</sup>

### Drop “Moderates versus Extremists”

Along with the religious handle has come another false dichotomy: that between “moderates” and “extremists.” The way that these terms are used, it is often unclear what “moderates” are moderate about. Put the word in a different context, and it may be clearer: what is a moderate Christian? Does it mean someone who votes for mainstream political parties, or someone who accepts gay marriage, or just someone who rejects the use of violence against abortion clinics? The term when used about Muslims is similarly confusing.

**The Cairo speech was a tour de force, but made a basic mistake by focusing on religion.**

It is also detrimental to the alliances that the United States wants to forge. The term “moderate Muslims” has negative connotations when translated into Arabic, and therefore labeling leaders as such is problematic. It conveys the idea of their being weak in their

faith and not devoted to their religion, thus delegitimizing them in the eyes of their people. Moreover, moderate also holds connotations of being lukewarm in temperament and thus not committed to a certain belief. Surely, the United States does not want “moderate” support or alliances, rather than those built on strong beliefs and steadfast trust.

The implication of this use of language is that Muslims are assumed guilty until branded as moderate. This approach was largely born out of President George W. Bush’s statement that “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” But the people that the United States aims to win over are neither extremist nor moderate—they are the often silent majority that provides the oxygen to any ideology which will ferment into action, either positive or negative.

So the labels of extremism and moderation are incorrect and unhelpful. Instead, the United States should use the paradigm of confronting instability and crime. For example, Somalia suffers from organized crime and a lack of government which allows for criminal gangs to roam the streets of Mogadishu. Al-Qaeda has taken advantage of the situation as criminal gang leaders lure young, hopeless men by giving themselves the branding of religion through groupings like al-Shabab, the insurgent group fighting in Somalia. When U.S. officials echo this religious branding in their own public statements—referring to al-Shabab solely as religious extremists—they’re unwittingly legitimizing them.

Most officials in the Obama administration were cautious in using these controversial terms during the uprisings in the Middle East that kicked off in Tunisia and Egypt at the start of this year. Moreover, U.S. officials were rightly emphasizing the unique nature of each country in public statements. Yet, in

defining regional developments while addressing the pro-Israeli, pro-peace group J Street, President Obama’s special assistant Dennis Ross said “change in Egypt has created concern for many in the region; Egypt has been a pillar of Israel’s pursuit of peace. The last thing we want is to see extremists benefit from the situation.”<sup>7</sup> Ross, who is instrumental in planning the White House’s Middle East policies, raised the issue of “extremism,” rather than calling on whoever comes to power in Egypt to respect international agreements and secure peace for their people and beyond. Brandishing one grouping or another as extremist will only alienate them and embolden their supporters.

### **Engage with Regional Media**

As of the writing of this article, there has not yet been a single White House, National Security Agency, or State Department briefing specifically for Arab journalists on what the U.S. position is regarding the dramatic changes in the Middle East. In the last weekend of January, which witnessed the start of the revolution in Egypt, Secretary Clinton did six television interviews with U.S. news channels—but did not speak to a single Arab or African media outlet. This was followed much later by three short interviews Clinton conducted with three Arab-language television stations, but they focused in large part on Iran. As Joseph Nye argues, “the foreign press corps has to be the most important target for the first dimension of public diplomacy.”<sup>8</sup> In practice, the foreign press corps—specifically Arab, Afghan, and Pakistani journalists—is often forgotten.

There have been some exceptions. President Obama gave his first television interview as president to an Arab television channel, Al-Arabiya. After former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak stepped down from power, Secretary Clinton conducted an interview with Masrawy.com, one of the most popular Web portals in Egypt: 7,000 questions were collected online and from Tahrir Square. The United States did a great job after 2001 in setting up media hubs in Dubai, London, and Brussels to interact with media on the ground, with spokespeople who were fluent in Arabic. Its softer campaigns, designed to promote U.S. values or prove that the United States treats its own Muslim citizens well, had their place and their usefulness too. And its use of new media—from sending out instant SMS messages of President Obama’s Cairo speech to being active on Twitter and YouTube—has been exemplary. But none of this substitutes for what Arabs really want to see: policymakers engaging with them directly in public about U.S. policies in an honest and transparent manner. This is especially

**“Moderate” Muslim holds connotations of being lukewarm and not committed to one’s faith.**

relevant with the wave of uprisings in the Arab world that highlight the disconnect between public opinion and officialdom in many parts of the region. For issues where the United States is adopting policies that it knows will not sit well with Middle Eastern audiences, it should at least try to explain the reasoning behind those policies, or help others, such as Arab journalists, to do so.

The vast majority of high-level background briefings at the White House which tackle regional issues and explain the nuances of U.S. policy are open only to U.S. press—excluding journalists from the region. When the United States was working with UN Security Council members at the end of 2010 to end the bulk of Chapter VII resolutions on Iraq, which dealt with sanctions imposed under Saddam Hussein's regime, it was U.S. journalists who were briefed about these efforts—while Arab journalists, the very ones who were going to be explaining these developments and their positive impact on Iraq to Arab readers, were excluded.

The United States could also benefit from more informal engagement with newspaper and television editors, so that those opinion shapers can better understand the U.S. view on key regional issues over the long term—not just quick interviews whose impact only lasts as long as a headline remains relevant. An awareness of the regional media's more practical needs will also help: for example, paying more attention to deadlines and time zones in the region. A rebuttal given at 4:00 p.m. Washington time to a story that broke at 8:00 a.m. Beirut time means all the news cycles in the region have spent the day reporting a story without U.S. input or response.

We are making these points with specific reference to the Arab media, but similar circumstances apply in Afghanistan. The United States does have a small number of soldiers and officials who can communicate effectively in Dari and Pashto, but they appear rarely on Afghan television to communicate directly with the Afghan public (no Afghan of our acquaintance has ever seen this happen). That's a pity: a report in late 2010 issued by the Open Society Foundations highlighted the "trust deficit" between the Afghan public and the international community, bloodily demonstrated by anti-foreigner riots after the burning of a Qur'an by Pastor Terry Jones in Florida in March.<sup>9</sup> Said Tayeb Jawad, former Afghan ambassador to the United States, told us that the Afghan public's concern on issues such as a planned gradual drawdown of U.S. forces in July this year, and the prospect of talks with the Taliban, needed to be addressed with "a clear public statement . . . crafted for people in Kabul, rather than Brussels or Washington."<sup>10</sup>

### **Don't Get Lost in Translation**

Ambassador Ronald Neumann served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Now president of the American Academy of Diplomacy, he negotiated with tribal leaders in Fallujah in 2004, just before the Marines conducted operations there (an episode

known as the Second Battle of Fallujah). An Arabic speaker himself, he nonetheless borrowed an interpreter from the Marine Corps Commander in order to make sure that no mistakes were made. But as he listened to the interpreter translating what he had said, he realized that vital parts of the message were being missed. Three times he had to interrupt to correct the translation. Interviewed for this article, he told us, “I have no idea how many people we have killed because we think we have told them something they haven’t heard.”<sup>11</sup>

If he had not been an Arabic speaker, he might well never have known that his message had been mistranslated. In 2003 in Basra, a British brigadier, trying to establish a working relationship with the Iraqis on the newly-created city council, was perplexed that they seemed to want to raise the issue of religion, when he simply wanted to reassure them that British troops “had come to Basra in good faith.” He was not aware that the interpreter had translated his remark as “we have brought a good religion.” He was lucky that the city council didn’t consider this confused statement an attempt to convert them to Christianity.

As Neumann commented, interpreters frequently do not understand both Arabic and English with total fluency. Nor are many U.S. diplomats or soldiers trained in the use of interpreters (brief them beforehand on what you are going to say, use short sentences with no jargon, and pause often). Luckily, the United States has had a number of officials who were able to go on television and radio and give interviews in Arabic, especially after 2001. This gave opportunities for them to clarify issues where hostility to U.S. policies and behavior was founded on misunderstanding. Ana Escrogima, a State Department spokesperson in Dubai from 2007 to 2010, explains:

I would not have been able to do the job the way I did it without Arabic. Just having the language skills to follow the media and the nuances in statements by political figures, scholars and opinion formers—to basically follow the conversations taking place on all levels—and that fed into how I can address issues. . . you have to also listen and learn to listen, as there is a respect shown in listening. Establishing that kind of rapport, even before uttering a single word about policy, creates openness to the message.<sup>12</sup>

People with such linguistic ability are few in the State Department. They are few, too, in the media and think-tank community. The result is that policymaking is heavily influenced by English-language sources and English speakers, almost all of whom belong to the well-educated elite. All too often, embassies get to know a certain group of prominent members of society and will engage with that select group, without taking time to open up the possibilities of new interlocutors. This has worrying effects not only on U.S. relations in many countries, but also limits gathering accurate and full information about a certain country.

*The Ugly American*, written in 1958, asked its readers to “think, for a moment, what it costs us whenever an official American representative demands that the native speak English, or be not heard.”<sup>13</sup> When was the last time a political leader from the Middle East or Afghanistan who spoke no English got favorable attention in Washington or London? No wonder the popularity of fundamentalism and the discontents of the poor still pose a conundrum for policymakers in both capitals.

### **Be Persistent and Consistent**

President Obama’s 2009 Cairo speech about a “New Beginning” was a huge presentational success, articulating a number of positions of principle. But the implementation of those principles has been inconsistent, even down to revoking in effect the proposal to close the Guantanamo detention camp. The reason that the United States is polling so badly in much of the Muslim world may even be that the Cairo speech raised expectations—without the policy successes that its audience expected would follow. According to Gallup, the U.S. approval rating in Algeria, for example, in 2008 was 25 percent, went up to 43 percent at the end of 2009, only to drop to 30 percent by end of 2010. This pattern was noted by Gallup in all Middle East and North African countries where it carried out polling.<sup>14</sup> Shadi Hamid of the Brookings Doha Center told us that “The address seemed to promise a lot, but delivered very little in the subsequent months. . . which again underlined America’s problem: the rhetoric is often quite good, but the policy follow-up never comes even close to matching the rhetoric.”<sup>15</sup>

The United States faced a policy challenge this spring as popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere drove autocratic governments, which were also U.S. allies, out of office. The U.S. public generally supported the demonstrators, especially when their peaceful protests were met in several cases with violence. But U.S. policymakers were more cautious, upping their rhetoric on Egypt, for example, only after President Mubarak left office.

This is understandable: the United States was protecting its alliances and its national interests. Uniquely, however, the United States is expected by its own people and others around the world to promote universal values. Several U.S. diplomats and officials pointed out to us that other influential foreign powers in the region, like France or China, are not held up to the same standard as the United States and not scrutinized in the same manner. This is entirely true, but it is not unfair. The United States has set higher standards for itself; since its officials speak out for liberty and human rights and the United States claims to have “values-based” policies, they must in turn truly stand for these values. Otherwise, their slogans will fall on deaf ears.



Nevertheless, there is a middle way, and there have been signs this spring that the United States wishes to pursue it. It entails limiting the expectations that many people have developed in the Middle East—to deflate the image of an omnipotent United States. Some former ambassadors suggested that one task of U.S. communicators should be to explain clearly and repeatedly that the U.S. system is not ruled by one man, as so many Arab countries are, but instead has multiple competing power centers.

U.S. officials also need to watch for messages that are either delivered differently to the Middle East or are understood differently there. One example relates to the United States ending its military operations and withdrawing its troops in Iraq by the end of 2011. While U.S. officials explained to a U.S. audience that they are intent on sticking to the timetable set out by the Status of Forces agreement, these officials have not communicated as effectively to Iraqi and Arab audiences. The policy line is to withdraw all troops unless the Iraqi government asks the United States to remain (this policy is asserted without reference as to why the United States would want to maintain a military presence if asked). This leads to instant suspicions that the United States may decide to maintain a military presence after 2011. Instead, an effort should be made to explain U.S. interests in staying or leaving and how these relate to Iraq's interests in maintaining stability or supporting intelligence operations.

Taking a consistent and persistent approach might help dispel that bugbear of Westerners in the Middle East: the conspiracy theory. U.S. diplomats note that conspiracy theories will lay the blame on the United States for just about everything bad that happens. (If it's any consolation, Britain's been there too: in Iran to this day, Iranians accuse Britain of being the Ayatollahs' covert backer. In Afghanistan, Pashtuns say Britain is secretly sponsoring the drug trade. All of these stories, however unfounded they may seem today, often have a grain of historical truth.) Conspiracy theories aren't unique to the Middle East. As sociological studies show, they tend to flourish among people who are under stress, and who mistrust official news sources. They were common in the United States during World War II and at times of heightened racial tension in the 1960s.

The response that the authorities found worked best was to maintain a reputation for openness and truth-telling. Edward R. Murrow, the former Director of the U.S. Information Agency, explained in a May 1963 testimony before a congressional committee: "American traditions and the American ethic require us to be truthful, but the most important reason is that truth is the best propaganda

**The U.S. has correctly been deflating expectations and its image as omnipotent.**

and lies are the worst. To be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credible we must be truthful. It is as simple as that.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Don't Dodge the Issue**

At the beginning of 2011, Arab states worked to introduce a UN resolution condemning Israeli settlement activity. The resolution was worded in line with policies that the United States publicly has supported in the past. The Obama administration was quick, however, to veto the resolution. Secretary Clinton stated that “we don't see action in the United Nations or any other forum as being helpful in bringing about that desired outcome” of a two-state solution.<sup>17</sup> This was the principal policy line that was repeated day after day by U.S. officials throughout a week of heated debate on the contentious U.S. position.

This was a mistake. U.S. officials should at least have taken the time to explain their policy. Instead, they refused to engage in a discussion of the details in the resolution, limiting their position to literally repeating just a couple of policy lines sent out to journalists via email or from the spokesperson's podium. With such a contentious issue, this does not suffice.

As a result of not explaining itself, the United States risked looking evasive. In its editorial on January 23, 2011, the *National* newspaper, the leading English-language daily based in Abu Dhabi, posed the following question: “Has the U.S. policy changed... or was it not being truthful about its policy?”<sup>18</sup> The latter is a view that is often espoused in the Arab world.

It would be better, in fact, to explain the policy even if it is unpalatable. This was Alastair Campbell's approach, as Tony Blair's media supremo, when tasked by Blair post-9/11 to put British voices on the Arab airwaves:

When Labour won the 1997 election in Britain, we did it by reaching out to audiences that were traditionally suspicious or downright hostile. And that meant addressing their concerns head-on, and if we couldn't persuade them, at least make sure they knew what we had to say. 9/11 changed so much, and one thing it brought home to me is what a poor job all the main Western democracies had done in entering into a genuine dialogue with and about Islam. It meant that our opponents were able easily to get traction for hostile arguments against us and for conspiracy theories.<sup>19</sup>

Campbell wanted to put British faces on pan-Arab television, including the controversial Al-Jazeera channel, straight away:

The key to strategic communications is being clear about your messages and communicating them in a clear and disciplined way, understanding that it takes time to put over a major point or argument. This was a section of the world that was suspicious of Britain and the United States, or even hostile, and bin Laden and his supporters were to a large extent dominating the Arab satellite media without anyone from Western governments being there to rebut him. We needed our people speaking Arabic, in the Arab media, tackling the contentious issues—the ones that

were making people angry—even if that meant that they would take some heat themselves.<sup>20</sup>

In engaging with non-governmental groups or political journalists, U.S. officials cannot hope to dodge discussion of policy issues. Key appointments have been made to address outside discontent with U.S. policies, for example the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and the Special Representative for Muslim Communities. Yet, the remit of these posts specifically excludes decisionmaking on policy concerns of the same audiences they are meant to be addressing. They are often the main officials, and usually the only officials, sent to speak with civil-society groups that often have misgivings about the United States from a policy angle specifically. Thus, not addressing the issues directly often weakens the impact of the serious efforts U.S. public diplomacy officials exert and alienates potential allies or supporters in any given country.

### **Work through Allies**

Putting diplomats on television was the right thing to do; but it isn't the only, or even the best, way to change people's opinions. The best way that opinions can be changed in Middle Eastern societies is through their own internal debates—led, of course, by their own opinion-formers. Most experts that we talked to for this article suggested that their first priority would be to find, in Ambassador Neumann's words, "Who has credibility with the local audience and what is the best way to win understanding from them?"<sup>21</sup> Such people might be editors, journalists, playwrights, poets, or (most obviously, perhaps) politicians seen by the audience as sympathetic.

The United States cannot expect the people of the Middle East to echo its views and support its policies without reservation. It cannot put words in their mouths. This means, though, that the U.S. government's capacity to encourage democratic and liberal trends in Arab society is very limited. In Cairo in January 2011, both anti-government and pro-government protesters claimed that the other side was backed by the United States; as Stephen Grand of the Brookings Institution puts it, it is as if the United States has the reverse Midas touch.<sup>22</sup> What the United States can do, though, is encourage other governments to play a role in encouraging democracy and liberalism. For one thing, this means the European Union increasing its engagement with the region.

It also means that the United States can take comfort from the public relations successes of Turkey. Once mistrusted amongst most of the Arab world due to lingering resentment from the times of the Ottoman Empire and the era of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the last decade has witnessed an unprecedented improvement in Arab–Turkish relations. From lifting visa restrictions to exporting soap operas dubbed in Arabic, Turkey has infiltrated the homes and minds of millions of Arabs. This is coupled with a foreign policy that is directed

at securing Turkey's position in the region as king-maker and friend to all sides. While Turkey's historic alliance with Israel continues to be a significant aspect of its foreign policy, Ankara's open criticism of the Gaza and Lebanon wars earned it much support.

Of course, the United States cannot follow the exact same foreign policy, and Turkey's geographical location and majority-Muslim population means that it has certain advantages that the United States will never have. One lesson can be learned, however, from Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Chief Advisor Ibrahim Kalin, who is also the Chief Public Diplomacy Official. Kalin explains that "we have an increasing capacity for soft power...our policy is both principled and pragmatic," adding that "mutual empowerment" is key.<sup>23</sup> This means that people of the region know that when Turkey strengthens economic ties, it is to strengthen both Turkish business and local businesses; the same applies to forging political allegiances or giving aid.

### **The United States Still Uniquely Matters**

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This article has addressed itself entirely to the United States. That is because of its unparalleled ability to influence the Middle East for good or ill (although this unique status is not guaranteed, especially with the changes sweeping the region). Leaving aside its programs of assistance and military cooperation, there is a question here of moral leadership. For as long as the United States, the world's premier liberal democracy, remains unpopular, it has a chilling effect on those within the Middle East who favor democracy and liberal values. There is a compelling need to bridge the trust deficit in U.S. relations with the people of the region. If they do not see Americans defending or explaining their own policies, they are less likely to speak out themselves. The United States—its government and people—must therefore find its voice in the Middle East, and open its ears. If it starts by following these seven principles, it can move in that direction.

### **Notes**

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