

Democracy, Terrorism, and Nuclear Weapons

By Stephen Zunes | July 25, 2005

The election of the hard-line Teheran mayor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, over former President Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani as the new head of Iran is undeniably a setback for those hoping to advance greater social and political freedom in that country. It should not necessarily be seen as a turn to the right by the Iranian electorate, however. The 70-year old Rafsanjani—a cleric and penultimate wheeler-dealer from the political establishment—was portrayed as the more moderate conservative. The fact that he had become a millionaire while in government was apparently seen as less important than his modest reform agenda. By contrast, the young Teheran mayor focused on the plight of the poor and cleaning up corruption.

In Iran, real political power rests with unelected military, economic, and right-wing ideologues, and in the June 25 runoff election, Iranian voters were forced to choose between two flawed candidates. The relatively liberal contender came across as an out-of-touch elitist, and his ultraconservative opponent was able to assemble a coalition of rural, less-educated, and fundamentalist voters to conduct a pseudopopulist campaign based on promoting morality and value-centered leadership. Such a political climate should not be unfamiliar to American voters.

Of course, Washington did not provide the Iranians with much incentive to elect another relative progressive to lead their country. Since the 1997 election of the outgoing reformist President Mohammed Khatami, the United States has strengthened its economic sanctions against Iran and has even threatened military attack. Although most Iranians would like improved relations with the United States, they apparently got the message that U.S. hostility toward their country would continue whomever they chose as president.

Washington's primary criticisms of Teheran focus on the Iranian government's suppression of political freedom, its support for terrorism and subversion, and its nuclear program. Though all three of these are legitimate areas of concern for the international community, the double standards exhibited by both the Bush administration and the bipartisan congressional leadership in pressing these issues have done little to promote

individual liberty, counterterrorism, and nonproliferation in Iran or the region as a whole.

U.S. Criticism of the Electoral Process

The Bush administration has attempted to use the flawed election process in the Islamic Republic of Iran to further isolate that country and discredit its government. Yet, despite a call by some U.S.-based exiles for a boycott, more than two-thirds of Iran's eligible voters went to the polls during the first round, a higher percentage than in recent U.S. presidential elections.

Many, though not all, reform-minded candidates were prevented from running, and since President Khatami was unable to significantly liberalize the political system, unelected ultraconservative clerics are still capable of dominating Iran. Despite these very real limitations, however, the election campaign was utilized by the growing pro-democracy movement to encourage greater political discourse and to deepen popular involvement in the civic process.

For the first time since Iran became a republic a quarter century ago, a presidential election was forced into a second round. The disappointment with the choices offered led to a much lower voter turnout during the runoff, but the majority of Iranians apparently considered the outcome significant enough to warrant their involvement in the electoral process. Most Iranians felt they had at least some stake in the system.

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Still, President Bush insisted that the Iranian vote failed to meet “the basic requirements of democracy” and that the “oppressive record” of the country’s rulers made the election illegitimate.¹ Such comments appear to have actually catalyzed Iranian voters from across the political spectrum, many of whom recall how the United States engineered the overthrow of their country’s last genuinely democratic government in 1953 and backed the repressive regime of the unelected shah until his ouster in a popular revolution in 1979.

Efforts by the Bush administration to portray the political situation in neighboring Iraq and Afghanistan as superior to Iran’s similarly failed to convince Iranian voters. Although those countries recently experienced relatively fair electoral processes, both are suffering from bloody insurgency campaigns led by Islamic extremists and even bloodier counterinsurgency campaigns orchestrated by the United States. Moreover, Baghdad and Kabul exercise little direct control over much of their respective countries, and neither of these elected governments has thus far been able to demonstrate any real independence from U.S. military and economic domination.

A look at most other U.S. allies in the region does not offer much inspiration for those desiring greater freedom and democracy, either. There are no competitive elections for president, for prime minister, or for any kind of legislature that can initiate and pass meaningful laws and make real policy in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, or Azerbaijan, even though these autocratic governments are bolstered by U.S. military and economic aid. Indeed, the majority of U.S.-allied governments in the region are even less democratic than Iran.

At least the ruling Iranian government does not massacre demonstrators by the hundreds or boil dissidents to death, as does the U.S.-backed Karimov regime in Uzbekistan. Nor do current Iranian leaders usurp most of the nation’s riches and restrict political power to a single extended family, like the U.S.-backed family dictatorships in Saudi Arabia and the other sheikdoms of the Arabian Peninsula. And Iranian voters were spared election day brutalities like those in Egypt under the U.S.-backed Mubarak dictatorship, where police recently escorted pro-government thugs to attack a

group of women who dared to hold a nonviolent protest in support of greater political freedom.

Yet only Iran, not these U.S.-backed dictatorships, endures President Bush’s complaints that power is in the hands of “an unelected few.”² Echoing his selective criticism, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice challenges the legitimacy of the Iranian elections, because female candidates were barred from the presidential race, but she praises the far more restrictive local council elections in Saudi Arabia, where women, unlike in Iran, were not even allowed to vote.³

Such double standards in no way justify the repression, the lack of real choices in the election process, and the many other failures by Iranian leaders to conform to international standards of human rights and representative government. They do, however, indicate that Washington’s bipartisan emphasis on the lack of democracy and human rights in Iran stems not out of a desire to enhance these ideals but rather from an urge to punish, isolate, and militarily threaten an oil-rich country that refuses to sufficiently cooperate with U.S. economic and strategic designs in the Middle East.

Subversion and Terrorism

U.S. hostility toward Iran often follows accusations of subversion and terrorism beyond its borders. For example, Washington tried to blame Teheran for the popular anti-government resistance movement in the Arab island state of Bahrain in the Persian Gulf, where the Shiite Muslim majority began to resist the autocratic rule of a Sunni Muslim monarchy during the 1980s. The United States also sought to link Iran with acts of terrorism—both through its own agents and through local groups—and accused Teheran of military threats and acts of subversion against Arab monarchies in the region. Even Arab states suspicious of Iran’s intentions, however, have expressed concern about the U.S. tendency to define “Iranian-backed terrorist groups” so broadly as to include, for example, Lebanese guerrillas fighting Israeli occupation forces prior to Israel’s withdrawal in May 2000.

Although Iranian agents have trained, financed, and funneled arms to a number of extremist Islamic groups, U.S. charges of direct Iranian responsibility for specific terrorist acts against Israeli or American targets remain

dubious. For example, Washington exerted enormous pressure on the Saudi government to implicate Iran in the 1996 terrorist bombing of the Khobar Towers in Dharan, which killed 19 U.S. soldiers, even though Saudi investigators found no such link. Iran has challenged the United States to present evidence in an international judicial forum to prove its allegations, but Washington has refused.⁴ Many now believe this terrorist attack may have been one of the first strikes by Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network.

U.S. State Department investigations reveal that Iranian support for terrorism emanates almost exclusively from the Revolutionary Guards and the Intelligence services, both of which are beyond the control of Iran's president and legislature. Furthermore, most acts of international terrorism clearly linked to Teheran have been directed at exiled Iranian dissidents, not against the United States.⁵ Iran's immediate post-revolutionary zeal to export its ideology was short-lived, as internal problems and outside threats deflected the attention of its leadership. In addition, Iranians are culturally and religiously distinct from the Sunni Arabs who dominate most of the Middle East. The hierarchical structure of the Shiite Islam practiced in Iran limits the revolution's appeal as a model for other Middle Eastern states.

There is little evidence to support Washington's warnings of aggressive Iranian designs in the Persian Gulf, either. Iran has not threatened—nor does it have any reason for provoking—a confrontation over sea lanes, as several U.S. analysts have feared. Iran is at least as reliant as its Arab neighbors on unrestricted navigation, so if it closed the Straits of Hormuz, Iran would be primarily hurting itself. With few pipelines servicing its southern oil fields, Iran is far more dependent on tanker shipping than any other country on the Persian Gulf coast.

Iran has dramatically reduced its military spending due to chronic economic problems. Indeed, in constant dollars, Iranian military spending is barely one-third what it was during the 1980s, when Washington was clandestinely sending arms to the Islamic Republic.⁶ Mirroring increased Iranian procurement of sophisticated missiles, the Arab sheikdoms along the Persian Gulf have similar missile capabilities, serving (along with the U.S. Navy) as an effective deterrent force.

The United States has also cited Iran's occupation of three small islands claimed by the United Arab Emirates as evidence of aggressive Iranian designs in the Persian Gulf.⁷ However, Iran originally seized the islands—Abu Musa, Greater Tunbs, and Lesser Tunbs—in 1971 under the shah and with U.S. and British encouragement.⁸

One litmus test of a country's aggressive designs on its neighbors is military procurement. As a country amasses arms, bolsters troops, and acquires training, the chance that it may initiate war escalates, because the probability of success rises. On this front, Iran also seems *less* of a threat. Iran's military procurement relative to the Gulf States is far less than it was during the 1970s under the shah, when the United States was actually promoting arms sales to Iran. In addition, much of Iran's naval capability was destroyed by the United States in the 1987-88 tanker war, and Iran lost much of its ground weaponry during Iraq's 1988 offensive. As much as half of Iran's inventory of major land-force weapons were destroyed in the course of the war with Iraq.⁹ Although Iran's defensive capabilities have improved somewhat, there is little to suggest that Teheran poses any kind of realistic offensive threat to the region. Indeed, Iranian tanks and planes actually number less than in 1980.¹⁰

Regarding potential conflicts on the country's eastern border, Iran came close to declaring war against Afghanistan's Taliban government in 1998 in response to repression against the country's Shiite minority and the killings of nine Iranian diplomats in the Northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif. Iran accepted nearly two million Afghan refugees during more than 20 years of war in Afghanistan, a country with which the Iranians have close ethnic ties. Iran also provided military support for the Northern Alliance in its fight against the Taliban. Despite all this, the Bush administration has warned Iran not to interfere in Afghanistan's internal affairs, an ironic admonition coming as it did after months of U.S. interference in Afghanistan that included heavy bombing, ground combat, the ouster of one government, and the installation of another.

The Bush administration has also claimed that Teheran allowed al-Qaida members to seek sanctuary in Iran, though it has been unable to present much in the way of evidence to that effect. In reality, Iran has

strongly opposed al-Qaida and welcomed their ouster from Afghanistan. Likewise, al-Qaida has been antagonistic toward Iran, in part due to its Shia Islam, which Osama bin Laden and his Sunni followers view as heretical.

U.S. claims of Iranian support for the Iraqi insurgency are particularly ludicrous, given the close ties with the Iraqi president, prime minister, and leaders of the majority Shiite coalition in the national assembly. Iran has absolutely no interest in supporting the Sunni-led insurgency, though—like most Iraqis—it would like the United States to withdraw its forces as soon as possible and allow the elected Iraqi government greater sovereignty.

Nor, despite claims by the Bush administration and congressional leaders of both parties, is Iran a serious threat to Israel. Israel is separated from Iran by over 600 miles, and the Israeli air force is more than capable of shooting down any Iranian aircraft long before it could reach Israel's borders. Israel also possesses a strong defense system against medium-range missiles. It is highly unlikely that Israel would have clandestinely armed the Ayatollah Khomeini's government throughout the 1980s if the Islamic Republic was considered a threat, particularly since hard-line anti-Israel elements were more prominent in the Iranian government during that period than they are now.

Iran's Nuclear Program

Having already successfully fooled most of Congress and the American public into believing that Saddam Hussein's Iraq had an active nuclear weapons program, the Bush administration and congressional leaders of both parties are now claiming that it is Iran that has an active nuclear weapons program. As with Iraq, the administration does not look too kindly on those who question its assumptions. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is the United Nations body legally responsible for monitoring compliance with the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), to which Iran, the United States, and all but a handful of countries are members. When the IAEA published a detailed report in November 2004 concluding that its extensive inspections had revealed no evidence of Iran pursuing a

nuclear weapons program, the Bush administration responded by attempting to oust the IAEA director.

For the time being, the Iranians have been able to avert a crisis through negotiations with representatives of the European Union (EU). Iran agreed to suspend its uranium enrichment and processing programs until a permanent deal is reached, which the Iranians hope will also include political and economic concessions from the Europeans.

The Bush administration has not been supportive of the European negotiating efforts, however. John Bolton, the former undersecretary of state for arms control and international security and currently the UN ambassador-designate, declared that the EU's strategy of negotiating with Iran was "doomed to fail."¹¹ Washington has instead advocated a more confrontational approach of UN sanctions in response to Iran's apparent earlier violations of IAEA agreements. Bolton has argued for "robust" military action by the United States, if the UN Security Council fails to impose the sanctions that Washington demands.¹²

The Bush administration's efforts have not received much support, however, in part because of U.S. double standards. The United States has blocked enforcement of a previous UN Security Council resolution calling on Israel to place its nuclear facilities under IAEA trusteeship. Washington has also quashed resolutions calling on Pakistan and India to eliminate their nuclear weapons and long-range missiles.¹³

Despite accusations from U.S. officials that "there is no doubt that Iran has a secret nuclear weapons production program,"¹⁴ no one has been able to cite any evidence supporting such a charge. As with the lead-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, however, Democratic congressional leaders have contributed to the Bush administration's alarmist rhetoric about a supposed nuclear threat from Iran and have defended White House double standards that focus on the alleged nuclear weapons program of an adversary while ignoring the obvious and proven nuclear weapons arsenals of U.S. allies like Israel, Pakistan, and India. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, widely seen as the front-runner for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, declared that the prospect of Iran also developing nuclear weapons "must be unacceptable to the entire world," since it would

“shake the foundation of global security to its very core.”¹⁵ Similarly, House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi called for the establishment of “an international coalition against proliferation” modeled on the multi-lateral effort to combat terrorism. She suggested that instead of organizing against nuclear proliferation in general, such a coalition should focus on Iran, despite the Islamic Republic’s apparent current cooperation with its NPT obligations.¹⁶ As with the run-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, congressional Democratic leaders appear willing to blindly support the Bush administration in its exaggerated and highly selective accusations of an imminent threat from a distant country that just happens to sit on a lot of oil.

It is important to recognize that even if Iran’s nuclear program is entirely peaceful, the enormous expense and environmental risks from nuclear power production make it a poor choice for developing countries, especially those with generous energy resources. And the risk of it being used as a cover for a secret nuclear weapons program is certainly real.

However, the United States is still obligated under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty to allow signatory states in good standing to have access to peaceful nuclear technology. Ironically, this provision promoting the use of nuclear energy was originally included in the NPT in large part because of Washington’s desire to promote the nuclear power industry. In any case, whatever the extent of Iran’s nuclear ambitions and whatever the outcome of the ongoing EU talks, the United States is in a poor position to assume much leadership in the cause of nonproliferation.

Lost in Bush’s current obsession with Iran’s nuclear intentions is the fact that the United States—from the Eisenhower administration through the Carter years—played a major role in the development of Iran’s nuclear program. In 1957, Washington and Teheran signed their first civil nuclear cooperation agreement. Over the next two decades, the United States provided Iran not only with technical assistance but with its first experimental nuclear reactor, complete with enriched uranium and plutonium with fissile isotopes. Despite the refusal of the shah to rule out the possibility of Iran developing nuclear weapons, the Ford administration approved the sale to Iran of up to eight nuclear reactors (with fuel) and later cleared the sale of lasers believed

to be capable of enriching uranium. Surpassing any danger from the mullahs now in power, the shah’s megalomania led arms control advocates to fear a diversion of the technology for military purposes.

The *Washington Post* reported that an initially hesitant President Ford was assured by his advisers that Iran was only interested in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy despite the country’s enormous reserves of oil and natural gas.¹⁷ Ironically, Ford’s secretary of defense was Donald Rumsfeld, his chief of staff was Dick Cheney, and his head of nonproliferation efforts at the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency was Paul Wolfowitz, all of whom—as officials in the current administration—have insisted that Iran’s nuclear program must be assumed to have military applications.

Iranian Perceptions of Defense Needs

Concerned about the proliferation of nuclear weapons in a volatile region, Teheran has called for the establishment of a nuclear weapons-free zone for the entire Middle East. All nations in the region would be required to give up their nuclear weapons and open up their programs to strict international inspections. Iran has been joined in its proposal by Syria, by U.S. allies Jordan and Egypt, and by other Middle Eastern states. Such nuclear weapons-free zones have already been established for Latin America, the South Pacific, Africa, and Southeast Asia.

The Bush administration has rejected the proposition, however. A draft UN Security Council resolution in December 2003 calling for a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East was withdrawn when the United States threatened to veto it. The Bush administration, with bipartisan support on Capitol Hill, insists that the United States has the right to decide which countries get to have nuclear weapons and which ones do not, effectively demanding a kind of nuclear apartheid. Not only are such double standards unethical, they are simply unworkable: any effort to impose a regime of haves and have nots from the outside will simply make the have nots try even harder.

Since Iranian efforts to establish a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East have been unsuccessful, it is certainly possible that Iran may someday develop nuclear weapons. However, Washington errs in assuming that

the Islamic Republic would use them for aggressive designs. Indeed, the Iranians may have good reasons to desire a nuclear deterrent.

In early 2002, Iran was listed with Iraq and North Korea by President Bush as part of “the axis of evil.” Iraq, which had given up its nuclear program over a decade earlier and allowed IAEA inspectors to verify this, was invaded and occupied by the United States. By contrast, North Korea—which reneged on its agreement and has apparently resumed production of nuclear weapons—has not been invaded. The Iranians may see a lesson in that.

In addition, soon after coming to office, President Bush decided to unfreeze America’s nuclear weapons production and launch a program to develop smaller tactical nuclear weapons for battlefield use. It is important to remember that the only country to actually use nuclear weapons in combat is the United States, in the 1945 bombings of two Japanese cities, a decision that most American political leaders still defend to this day.

Furthermore, the United States is allied with Pakistan, which borders Iran on the east and possesses nuclear weapons and sophisticated delivery systems. The United States is also a strong ally of Israel, located 600 miles to the west and capable of launching a nuclear strike against Iran with its long-range missiles in a matter of minutes. Unlike Iran, neither of these countries has signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and both are in violation of UN Security Council resolutions regarding their nuclear weapons programs. However, the Bush administration’s view is that rather than focusing on countries that actually do have an acknowledged nuclear weapons program, actually do possess nuclear weapons, and are in defiance of UN Security Council resolutions, the focus should instead be on a country that does not have a confirmed nuclear weapons program, does not yet have nuclear weapons, and is not in defiance of UN Security Council resolutions.

The only realistic means of curbing the threat of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East is to establish a law-based, nationwide program for disarmament encompassing all countries regardless of their relations with the United States. Ultimately, the only way to make the world safe from the threat of nuclear weapons

is by establishing a nuclear-free planet. And the United States—as the largest nuclear power—must take the lead. Polls show that a sizable majority of Americans do not believe any country, including the United States, should possess nuclear weapons.¹⁸ Neither the Bush administration nor the leaders of the Democratic Party, however, appear willing to even broach the subject.

The Issue Is U.S. Hegemony

Iranians are convinced that U.S. hostility toward Iran is not really about nuclear weapons, terrorism, or anything other than opposition to the very existence of an Islamic republic in a country once ruled by a compliant, U.S.-installed, absolute monarch. This is why both “conservative” and “reformist” elements in Iranian politics support their country’s right to develop a nuclear energy and research program under IAEA supervision.¹⁹

Besides Iraq, Iran is the only Middle Eastern country with a sizable educated population, enormous oil resources, and an adequate water supply. Among Middle Eastern nations, only Iraq and Iran have shown the potential for pursuing domestic and foreign policies independent of the dictates of powerful Western governments or the international financial institutions dominated by these governments. In order to control Iraq, the Bush administration decided it had to take over the country by military force.

There is little question that there were similar plans in store for Iran, until U.S. difficulties in stabilizing and managing Iran’s once-powerful Arab neighbor made it apparent that an additional occupation would be unwise. Pentagon troop strength is already severely stretched, and the financial and political costs of the ongoing war in Iraq are becoming difficult for the Bush administration to manage.

Iran would also be far more difficult to invade and occupy than Iraq. Iran has more than three times Iraq’s population and land mass, and the country has far more mountains and other geographical hindrances to invasion and occupation. Unlike Iraq in the dozen years prior to the U.S. invasion, Iran has not been under a strictly enforced international arms embargo and has been able to build up its military defenses.

And as problematic as Iran's political system may be, Iranians enjoy far more political pluralism than did Iraqis under the totalitarian regime of Saddam Hussein. As a result, Iranians harbor more hope that change is possible from within. Although Iran's population consists of several different ethno-linguistic groups, there is a very strong sense of nationalism that would likely result in far more Iranians rushing to defend their country from foreign conquest and occupation than was the case with the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.

The legal case for military action against Iran is even weaker than it was in regard to Iraq. Great Britain, Poland, and other allies that supported the United States in invading Iraq have made it clear they would not take part in a conquest of Iran.

An outright invasion of Iran is therefore unlikely, but this does not mean that military action is not forthcoming, either directly or through Washington's client state Israel. The most likely scenario might resemble the half decade prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq complete with periodic bombing raids and missile attacks against suspected military, industrial, and government targets. Though not as calamitous as a full-scale invasion, such military action would nevertheless constitute a tragic blunder.

Iranians would probably find ways to retaliate against such attacks, including a refusal to cooperate with the IAEA and an increase in support for terrorist groups. Reaction to such attacks would almost certainly fan anti-American and anti-Israeli extremism in the region, even within the pro-Western and anti-Iranian Arab sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf.

Furthermore, as Iranian human rights lawyer and Islamic feminist Shirin Ebadi observed, "Respect for human rights ... can never be imposed by foreign military might and coercion—an approach that abounds in contradictions." The 2003 Nobel Peace Prize winner, jailed by the Iranian government for her dissident activities, went on to observe that not only would an attack on Iran "vitiate popular support for human rights activism, but by destroying civilian lives, institutions, and infrastructure, war would also usher in chaos and instability. Respect for human rights is likely to be among the first casualties."²⁰

Up to this point, U.S. pressure on Iran has primarily been through strict unilateral economic sanction. Unlike international sanctions against the former apartheid government of South Africa or the current military junta in Burma, Washington's sanctions against Iran are not predicated on significant legal or moral imperatives. As with similar extraterritorial efforts regarding Cuba, U.S. attempts to pressure other nations to get tough with Iran have alienated even America's strongest allies, who consider such measures to be in violation of World Trade Organization principles.

Similarly, U.S. efforts to subvert the Iranian government are contrary to international legal conventions that recognize sovereign rights and principles of nonintervention. They also directly counter the Algiers Declaration of 1981, under which the United States unequivocally pledged not to intervene politically or militarily in the internal affairs of Iran. Still, even while acknowledging that Iran is a sovereign government, the Bush administration insists that it has the right to attack governments that do not "exercise their sovereignty responsibly."²¹

What neither the Bush administration nor Congress seems to appreciate is that even if Iranians were free from clerical domination and the electoral process in Iran were completely fair and open, the result would almost certainly be a government that—though presumably not as fanatically anti-American as the current hard-line clerics in power—would never consent to the role of a compliant ally. In Washington's eyes, Iran's most serious offense lies not in the area of human rights, terrorism, nuclear ambitions, subversion, or conquest but rather in daring to challenge U.S. hegemony in the Middle East. Iran is the most important country in the Middle East actively opposing U.S. ambitions for strategic, economic, and political domination over the region. By arranging for the Iranian government to be overthrown or crippled, American policymakers hope to acquire unprecedented leverage in shaping the future direction of the Middle East.

And this brings us to the final irony. Serving as an impediment to Washington's ambitions gives Teheran a degree of credibility and legitimacy that it would not otherwise receive from large numbers of Middle Eastern peoples resentful of such foreign domination.

This strengthens the current Iranian government's grip at home as well as its influence throughout the Middle East and beyond.

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END NOTES

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