Mobilising to a Victorious Insurgency: Locating Identity, Grievance, and Greed in the Taliban's Strategy

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Introduction

In August 2021, the Taliban wrested control of Afghanistan, as the United States (US) was completing its withdrawal of troops from the country. Since then, observers have attempted to explain the Taliban's victory by drawing inferences on issues such as current geopolitical shifts,[1] domestic politics in the US,[2] Pakistan's support of the Taliban,[3] the inefficiency of the previous Afghan government,[4] and the Taliban's tactics, including psychological warfare.[5] There is a dearth, however, in scholarly efforts to understand the Taliban's internal mobilisation, its contribution to a successful insurgency, and its implications for the Taliban government and the rest of the global community.

This brief uses theories of identity, grievance, and greed to understand the mobilisation tactics that the Taliban had used throughout its insurgency.[a] These theories are all interlinked, and have been used primarily to assess the causes of internal conflicts and civil wars, and to understand their mobilisation and endurance.

The *identity* argument proffers that different identities or collectives lead to mobilisation of the 'Us' against a differentiated 'Them', thus contributing to a conflict outbreak and its sustenance.[b],[6] For its part, Keen's *grievance* theory says that grief caused by challenges such as inequalities, political exclusion, lack of economic alternatives, discrimination, human rights violations, denial of justice, mass victimisation, and loss of identity, power and culture can

mobilise the masses for a conflict.[c],[7] Collier and Hoeffler's *greed* framework, meanwhile, underlines how the presence of resources that can be plundered, economic opportunities, self-interested behaviours, and economic gains, can compel individuals to mobilise and rebel against the state.[d],[8] To be sure, there have been efforts to examine the Taliban's mobilisation.[9] However, the focus of these reports, books, and articles has been limited to certain themes, such as mobilisation in the northern regions of Afghanistan, gaining a stronghold in the rural areas, and their use of narratives to mobilise the Afghan population. Other scholarly work have also been devoted to analysing the correlation between theories of greed and grievance in the Afghan conflict.[10] These analyses have become outdated.

The rest of the brief outlines the organisation's ideological evolution and methods of dissemination; discusses the theories of identity, grievance, and greed, to explain the Taliban's insurgency mobilisation; and assesses the implications of these strategies for the Taliban government and the global community.

The Taliban's Ideological Evolution, Dissemination, and Mobilisation

Ideologically, the Taliban's roots are in Deobandism, Wahhabism, and the tribal legal codes of Pashtunwali.[11] Of these influences, the Deobandi school is at the core; this, in turn, determines the group's mobilisation strategies.

The Deobandi school emerged as a tactic of Islamic mobilisation after Britain suppressed the 1857 Indian war of independence. With hostilities running deep against Britain, the Deobandi school developed strong anti-colonial roots and opposed any kind of Western education and modernisation.[12] Its agenda had two central elements: to expel the British invaders; and to return to the fundamental tenets of Islam that existed during the time of the Prophet.

In the initial years of its inception in the early 1990s, the Taliban's battle was two-fold: ending the Afghan civil war, and bringing the Prophetic days back to the country. Their objective was to get rid of the rapacious warlords and establish a so-called, just Islamic Emirate.[13] Most of their recruits were trained in madrasas that promoted extremist interpretations of Islam and were supported by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The Taliban opposed common aspects of

"modern" society, including gender equality, human rights, and democracy, and the use of the internet.[14]

Soon after its collapse in 2001, the organisation reformed its narratives, governance systems, and mobilisation and recruitment tactics; some scholars would call the group, "neo-Taliban".[15] Its ideological component shifted from a "just and Islamic society" to "waging a defensive Jihad" and "establishing a legitimate Islamic government". They cited Islamic laws to justify jihad, and portrayed themselves as Islamic nationalists fighting against Western colonisers and their illegitimate and oppressive puppet government in Afghanistan. [16],[17] They used old and new methods to disseminate propaganda and mobilise their ranks: *Shabhnamah* (night letters), *taranas* (chants), poetry, sermons, social media, traditional media, magazines, online radio, DVDs, and the internet.[18]

They also manipulated the local population's trusted sources of information, such as family, television, radio, mosque, community *shura* (consultation meetings), friends, and the internet.[19] Keen on the importance of personal and religious networks in Afghan society, the Taliban used personal and general messaging to disseminate their ideology. They interacted with students in madrasas and convinced village elders, tribal leaders, and *Mullahs* (religious clerics) to preach in their name.[20],[21] Cadres also used personal interactions with friends, relatives, fellow tribal people, and civilians, to convince Afghans to fight the West and the government.[22]

Drivers of Mobilisation: Identity, Grievance, and Greed

The use of identity, grievance, and greed, and their interlinkages were vital to the Taliban's mobilisation and insurgency. Its efforts to build an Islamic 'us' identity—and set it in a dichotomy against the "Infidel 'them'"—succeeded partly because of governance failures that resulted in, among others, unemployment, poverty, lack of security, and loss of culture. In turn, these issues gave rise to legitimate grievances which, for some, were enough to drive them to join the Taliban for economic gains. Table 1 shows the different types of Taliban cadres and how they were mobilised for the insurgency.

Table 1: Taliban Cadres and Primary Mobilising Factors

Type	Reasons for joining	Mobilisation theme
Narzar (disaffected)	• Isolated, marginalised, and excluded from the political process. • Sense of fear, hatred, outrage, revenge. • Preserving the local way of life. • Group provides Physical security.	• grievance • identity
Khana Nehsin (sitting at home)	• Inactive and former Taliban members; admired leaders. • Sense of fear, hatred, outrage, revenge. • Intimidated by the Taliban for support.	• grievance
Mahali (local)	• The Taliban's ethnic, tribal, and local ties. • Voluntary fighters and blue-collar insurgents from the community. • The Taliban are seen as an indigenous group, preserving a local way of life. • Group fulfils the need for aggression. • Group provides physical security.	• identity • greed • grievance
Majburi (forced)	• Abused or harassed by the government; fighting for revenge. • Need for justice and morality • Honour, identity, self-esteem • Groups fulfil the need for aggression, and as security against others. • The Taliban are seen as an indigenous group, preserving a local way of life. • The Taliban has ethnic, tribal and local ties. • Sense of belonging and loyalty	• grievance • identity
Duzd (thief) or Zalam (cruel)	• Abusive and harassing the locals. • Paid by the group. • Resources and profits are shared from criminal activities. • Intimidated to cooperate.	• greed • grievance
Jangi (fighting)	• Front-line, full-time insurgents. • Friends or family influence. • Social status. • Religious justification and salvation. • Intimidation by Taliban	• identity • grievances
Asli (real) or Pak (clean)	• Uncorrupted and ideologically motivated. • Religious justification and salvation. • Social Status. • Intimidation by Taliban; provides physical security. • Need for Justice and morality. • The Taliban is seen as an indigenous group.	• identity • grievance
Makhtabi	• Ideologically schooled Taliban. • Religious justification and salvation. • Social Status. • Intimidation by Taliban; Provides physical security. • Need for Justice and morality. • The Taliban is seen as an indigenous group.	• identity • grievance

Sources: The Taliban Narratives; [23]

and Author's analysis

Identity

In 1996, Mary Kaldor provided a clear structure to studies on the significance of identity in internal conflicts.[24] The theory argues that the differentiation of 'us' and 'them' contributes to mobilisation, and the outbreak of conflict and its sustenance.[25]

The Taliban's strategy was to form an identity of 'us' amongst the Afghans; they created a 'them', in the form of the government, Western countries, and all else who were with them. In cases where the narrative of dichotomy was less effective, they aimed at making people indifferent. In other words, key to the Taliban's project was not only to create and sustain their support and cadre, but to also convince the "neutral" population to withhold support from the government and the West.

They defined the 'Us' part of the dichotomy with two core themes: religion and nationalism, i.e., "We are all Muslim Afghans." They used narratives that were religious, cultural, and political in nature, and which resonated with a population that was 99-percent Muslim and who took pride in their religion, culture, and history.[26] Storytelling traditions were utilised— poetry, night letters, and chants—to promote a singular identity. The stories were told orally, too, and in local languages, to spread the message even amongst those who cannot read or those with different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. The same poems and chants were used to induce feelings of shame and guilt in those who supported the US and the government, and are not part of the jihad. The night letters, in particular, according to some analysts, were intimidating—[27] they regulated the everyday lives of people, fostering a fear psychosis and distancing them from the government.[28],[29]

The group also used Afghanistan's history of foreign invasion to link it with the presence of Western forces in the country. They conjured themselves as heroes defending Islam and Afghanistan from the West and its "puppets".[30] They called themselves the *Mujahideen,* or holy warriors, in documents and propaganda material, and appealed to the people to join the jihad as their forebears did against Britain and the Soviet Union.[31] At the same time, they invoked elements of Afghan history in their narratives. The examples of historical figures who

had spread Islam and Afghan empires elsewhere, such as Ahmed Shah Abdali, Mohammad of Ghor, and Mohammad of Ghazni, were often used to motivate people for the jihad.[32]

Terms such as "infidels", "colonisers", and "puppets" were used to define the government and the West and their supporters. The failure of a succession of Afghan governments to improve the lives of the people, rampant corruption, and the impacts of counter-insurgency operations only provided more currency to the Taliban's narratives.

The group used these grievances to promote their propaganda across different regions and ethnicities, which they tailored based on the local population's support. In a region where locals were more sympathetic to the Taliban, the group prioritised keeping their morale high with an affirmation of the 'us' identity. The population was often exposed to information (or disinformation) on battleground victories and achievements, on one hand, and on the other, the government's failures. This helped them sustain support.[33]

Those opposing the Taliban, and employees and supporters of the government were approached with different tactics. At first, they were exposed to some propaganda on the religious justifications for fighting the government. The Taliban then used intimidating messages and tactics of violence, such as kidnapping and assassination.[34] For the undecided or "neutral" population, the Taliban dropped messages of both intimidation and propaganda. The aim was again to seek their support and become part of the 'us', or prevent them from supporting the government and the West.[35]

The 'us vs them' dichotomy helped the Taliban spread their tentacles in rural Afghanistan, too. The Taliban's propaganda resonated in the rural parts of the country for two reasons: inefficient governance, and people's conservative views.[36] These areas have had little benefits from government presence, or modernisation and democratic reforms—and were thus distanced from 'them'. Rural lives and polity also tend to centre around the village elders, religious scholars, mullahs, and madrasas. These influences easily drew them towards the narratives of 'us', 'jihad against the West', 'defending Afghanistan', and 'preserving religion and culture'.

Crafting an identity based on jihad also earned the Taliban a few friends and helped them expand to new geographies. It is largely believed that by 2010, local organisations such as Hizb-e-Islami Gulbuddin (HiG) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) had begun helping the Taliban to expand into North Afghanistan. They recruited for the Taliban on sub-contracts or established a common pool of recruits. The IMU's support base with the Turkic and Uzbeki speakers of the East and Northeast, and HiG's strong base with the Pashtuns of North were useful for the Taliban.[37],[38]

The Taliban's 'us' identification and jihad narratives had also built support for the organisation in the North, which was historically the citadel of resistance against the Taliban. By portraying themselves as an Islamic, pan-Afghan, and inclusive organisation, the Taliban attempted to re-write the history of their civil war and their treatment of minority communities. They appointed local non-Pashtuns to key military and civilian positions, such as commanders, shadow governors, judges, and heads of provincial committees. Unlike before, the Taliban also included local groups and commanders to lead the insurgency in the North.[39]

Grievance

The *grievance* theory lists many causes of grief that can result in conflict and its mobilisation: inequalities, political exclusion, lack of economic alternatives, discrimination, human rights violations, denial of justice, mass victimisation, and loss of identity, power and culture.[40] This theory was outlined by David Keen in 2012.

Among the Afghan people, perhaps one of the most common sources of grievance was foreign intervention. The Taliban effectively tapped this by using the narrative of 'Western occupation'. They emphasised that the counter-insurgency operations conducted by the West and the local forces ended up killing civilians, especially children and elders, and the operations have also disrespected Islam and destroyed mosques, and those soldiers have raped women and exploited the country's resources.[41]

Another point of grievance was how Western culture, governance systems, and values like democracy have eroded local culture, power, and customs. The Taliban used narratives of losing tribal independence to the West. They pointed to alcohol, pornography, and prostitution,

to substantiate the ill influences of Western modernity.[42] Similarly, the elders, religious scholars, and mullahs who had lost their authority and power began to support the Taliban.[43] The failure of successive governments to eradicate corruption, improve people's lives, guarantee economic security, and ensure a secure environment also triggered grievances. According to a 2019 Asia Foundation survey,[44] the public had been pessimistic since 2013, their fear of personal safety rose from 2012, their trust in state forces continued to decline, and corruption remained a grave concern. The respondents also believed that household health and well-being, access to clean drinking water, irrigation facilities, and their financial situation were either stagnant or had worsened over the years.

The Taliban also used localised stories and grievances for efficient targeting.[45] For instance, in the Pashtun-dominated areas, the Taliban brought up historical wounds, stressing how the government was corrupt and non-inclusive and denying the Pashtuns their rightful place in ruling the country.[46] They also reinvigorated Pashtun's memories of state oppression and exploitation by drawing parallels between the Islamic Republic's state structure and the traditional Pashtun expectations of a minimalist state.[47]

In the non-Pashtun regions where there were fewer investments and security deployment, the Taliban underlined the neglect of the region.[48] Other propaganda narratives were the lack of economic opportunities, corruption, and ethnic infightings.[49]

The organisation also used parallel governance to earn goodwill.   The Taliban gained a reputation for swift provision of justice based on local legal codes and customs; they also established a complaints mechanism to address people's grievances.[50],[51] They taxed the NGOs, allowed the functioning of health and humanitarian agencies, and took complete credit and benefit of their activities.[52],[53]

Greed

The *greed* theory asserts that economic opportunities and self-interested behaviours can compel individuals to mobilise and rebel against the state. It was proposed by Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler in 2004.

In its earlier phase (1994-2001) the Taliban earned revenue mainly from Saudi Arabia's and Pakistan's covert funding as well as donations from individual supporters.[54] Illicit trafficking,

smuggling, trading, extortions, taxing, and mining were also sources of revenue.[55] The US government had blocked the group's assets worth USD 264 million in 2001.[56] By 2011, the Taliban's revenue was recorded to have increased to USD 400 million,[57] and by 2020, they earned USD 1.6 billion from mining, illegal drugs, foreign donations, taxes, and real estate.[58] Other sources of funds in recent years included Russia and Iran.[59]

Although the actual revenue numbers may be disputed, what is clear is that the Taliban grew more financially independent and diverse. Over the years, the group had more resources to expand, recruit, bribe and mobilise individuals, while joining the organisation was also seen as a profitable activity by some Afghans.

The Taliban fighters had no regular salaries but were given money for regular expenses. They were, however, allowed to capture and retain spoils from their offensives, after giving up a small fixed portion of it.[60] Taliban cadres also made money through unofficial means: banditry, corruption, extortion, kidnappings, and looting.[61],[62]

The Taliban also used the lack of government presence to foster strong cooperation with criminal elements and mercenaries, especially in the northern regions.[63] This increased their mutual presence, revenues, activities, and capabilities.[64] They also weakened the opposition by bribing and encouraging disgruntled local commanders to defect.[65]

The lack of both, effective governance and economic opportunities drove individuals to seek economic security from the Taliban, too. The Taliban persuaded unemployed and poor civilians, including for instance students—to become part-time mercenaries.[66] They were often paid for spying and performing other insurgency-related tasks. Some were also asked to spread pro-Taliban propaganda on college campuses and hostels through debates and demonstrations.[67]

The organisation also bribed elders, mullahs, and tribal leaders to recruit youngsters, thus localising the insurgency and recruitment.[68] In some cases, the elders also played a role in convincing and sending youngsters to extremist madrasas.[69]

The greed and corruption of the Afghan authorities and Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) commanders also increased the Taliban's strength. The ANDSF commanders

stole payments meant for soldiers, sold fuel and ammunition to the black market, and bought low-quality food and equipment for its fighters. These grave differences also motivated troops to look for their own profits and benefits, compelling them to abandon outposts, weapons, and ammunition for money and amnesty.[70] These surrender deals gained more currency in 2019 with the Doha peace deal and accelerated with the US's subsequent withdrawal from the country.[71]

The Final Offensive

These mobilisation tactics changed the conflict dynamics in Afghanistan. By the time the US withdrew, the organisation possessed a strength of 100,000-200,000.[72] The Taliban's capabilities in deterring the government and the West from seeking legitimacy and support turned out to be a vital asset during the final offensive.

Primarily, the tactical use of 'Islam' and 'infidel' identities, as well as grievances and greed, helped the Taliban establish a stronghold in the North of Afghanistan, vis-à-vis its fighters, ideology and recruitment. This breathed a new energy and narrative of the Taliban now being a pan-Afghanistan organisation with broader legitimacy. It also helped the quick and organised capture of the North and prevented any kind of organised resistance and allies for the government as soon as the US began to withdraw.[73] This also damaged the morale of the government, armed forces, and civilians who expected resistance against the Taliban, at least in the North.

The mobilisation tactics also assisted the Taliban in infiltrating the rural areas, enabling them to encircle cities and provincial capitals and control trade and supplies. It helped the organisation launch coordinated attacks on well-guarded cities and covert assassinations against key state targets.[74].[75] However, these offensives were only possible with coordination from different Taliban fighters, including the village underground cadres, local fighters, and full-time fighters.[76] This efficiently shaped rural Afghanistan into a launchpad for targeted attacks against government and military officials, strategic infrastructure, and civil society leaders.[77] The district centres where Afghan security forces were deployed thus

became easy targets with no reinforcements and additional supplies, when the US began to withdraw.[78]

Similarly, over the years, the Taliban had used its mobilisation tactics to build contacts, goodwill, and sometimes financial and coercive relations with the elders, mullahs, family members, and tribal leaders. They were asked to convey messages, broker meetings and deals, and convince local and provincial armed units to surrender or join the Taliban, often with the promises of amnesty and economic incentives.[79] Thus, as these agreements happened and garrisons fell, it left the armed forces further divided and compelled them to look after their individual interests and profits.

The Taliban used various sources to promote the perception of the organisation's victory as inevitable. Pictures, videos, night letters, posts, televisions, social media, and other sources were used to create an image of the Taliban winning the war.[80] These persuaded released prisoners,[81] civilians, part-time fighters, and sometimes even security forces to join the Taliban. Capturing highways, lootings, key trade points and cities gave a new opportunity for these individuals to reap economic benefits. This attracted individuals to join the winning side and contribute to the Taliban's strength, and would ultimately lead to the collapse of ANDSF and the re-emergence of the Islamic Emirate.

Mobilisation and its Implications

As the Taliban transits to its governance phase, their priority has moved beyond insurgency mobilisation. However, its mobilisation tactics continue to have implications for its government as well as the international community.

Internal legitimacy and inclusive government

The Taliban's mobilisation tactics contest its claim of being a legitimate government. The Taliban's use of identity to mobilise and make people indifferent to the government and the West had left a large population indifferent to the erstwhile regime as well as the insurgent organisation. This can explain how the organisation's mere 100,000- 200,000 members were able to take control of a country with a population of 40 million.[82] Similarly, the greed factor played a reasonable role in the final offensive. The mass surrenders and greed partakers of the

conflict participated for their own gains rather than any ideological and organisational affiliation with the Taliban.

Second, with the war now won, the Taliban no longer have a 'them' to mobilise or declare a jihad against. This will eventually invite more discord for the organisation and weaken the existing support or legitimacy for the government, even from the sections that had earlier stayed neutral.

Similarly, as the Taliban mobilised through narratives of bad governance, foreign presence, poverty, and other grievances, they also portrayed themselves as responsible and benign rulers. With them now at the helm, they will have to solve these grievances rather than exploit them. So far, the Taliban have only failed in fulfilling the basic tasks of governance, exacerbated by international sanctions and lack of financial assistance. This will thus lead to more grievances, counter-mobilisation, and dissatisfaction against the Taliban.

Finally, the Taliban's insurgency needed mass participation and diversity to sustain themselves as an Islamic and inclusive 'us'. They had empowered minorities in some regions to increase their organisational strength, material power, and legitimacy. However, with the defeat of the Afghan government, the organisation is now focusing on less labour-intensive challenges such as governance and power-sharing. This has created larger scepticism of the Taliban's inclusive 'us' factor as the Pashtuns who dominate the organisation are dominating the government too—thereby, sidelining the minorities of their own organisation and intensifying internal rifts and delegitimisation.[83] The Taliban have failed to form an inclusive government even within its organisation.

This raises questions on the government's legitimacy, the Taliban's ability to govern Afghanistan uncontested, and the international community's need to woo or recognise the Taliban.

Terrorism

The Taliban's 'us' mobilisation and jihad narrative had won for it certain friends and benefits. Organisations such as Al-Qaeda, Lashkar-E-Taiba, Jaish-E-Muhammad, and Tehreek-E-

Taliban (TTP) cooperated with the Taliban, increasing its strength and offensives. In some cases, these organisations recruited cadres for the Taliban on sub-contracts or through a common pool of recruits.[84],[85] Most of these organisations have continued to consider themselves as part of the broader family of 'us' jihadist outfits, as seen in Al-Qaeda's continuing pledge or TTP's recent allegiance to the organisation.[86],[87]

At the same time, the Taliban lacks the intention and capability to distance itself from these terror outfits. The Taliban's use of grievance and identity to mobilise and wage a jihad against the government has radicalised its cadres and nurtured sympathy for other jihadi outfits, too. Harbouring terrorists and promoting jihad has thus become a vital part of the ideology of these cadres, besides the fact that most of the hardline Taliban fighters are determined to stay loyal to their jihadi kith and kin. Finally, the emergence of ISIS-K as an alternative to the Taliban has also compelled the organisation to harbour other terror outfits and seek their assistance, in order to maintain their internal cohesion and increase their coordination and material strength against the ISIS-K. This indicates that Afghanistan will remain a safe haven for certain terror outfits and their transnational objectives.

Transnational crimes

It is unlikely that the Taliban will be able to mitigate the threat of transnational crimes emanating from Afghanistan. The Taliban's composition of 'greed fighters' will continue to cause more harm to the organisation. As the humanitarian crisis deepens, the Taliban cadres are themselves facing economic and financial difficulties.

In the past, these cadres often used war booties and loots to earn their income. With the Taliban having won the war, they are resorting to other means of earning money such as kidnapping, contract killings, stealing, looting, and trafficking.[88] They have also started promoting human trafficking and smuggling in the borders of Iran for bribes.[89] The cadres also have rich experience in timber, human and drug trafficking, artisanal mining, and extortion.[90] They operate a vast cross-border network of criminals. Thus, as the crisis

prolongs, the Taliban cadres are more likely to involve in transnational crimes rather than limiting them.
International recognition

As the Taliban nears its sixth month of governance, no country has officially recognised it. The organisation has been asked to respect human rights, in particular for the women, to form an inclusive government, seek internal legitimacy, and mitigate transnational threats of terrorism and crime.[91]

However, as argued earlier, it is likely that the government's internal legitimacy and inclusiveness will only weaken while transnational terrorism and crimes emanating from the country will increase. This will further complicate the Taliban's aim to earn the recognition of the West as well as its rivals such as Russia and China.

Conclusion

Various factors contributed to the Taliban's victory in August 2021. This brief has evaluated the role of the Taliban's mobilisation through the lenses of identity, grievance, and greed.

The organisation's identity mobilisation was largely based on differentiating 'us' and 'them', and most importantly distancing the people from 'them'. Grievances were used to portray the government and the West as hostile and oppressive. And the Taliban's financial growth contributed to increasing participation from the fighters motivated by greed. These themes of mobilisation were interlinked, contributing to a successful insurgency and, eventually, to the fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Further, as this brief highlights, these mobilisation tactics have key implications for the Taliban government and the international community. There are questions for the future of Afghanistan, the legitimacy of the current government, its capability to hold on to power uncontested, and the international community's response.

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Endnotes

[a] With the end of the Cold War, several scholars attempted to understand the distinct nature and objectives of internal conflicts and civil wars in the developing world; categorised as 'new wars' by Mary Kaldor in 1996. The theories of identity, grievance, and greed are the core arguments of this 'new wars' thesis.

[b] Mary Kaldor emphasised on the importance of identity politics in internal conflicts and civil wars in the year 1996.

[c] The grievance theory was put forth by David Keen in 2012.

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