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# *Democracy, Elections and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood*

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**T**HE AMERICAN-LED MIDDLE EAST REFORM AND DEMOCRATIZATION campaign of the last two years has helped shape a new political reality in Egypt. Opportunities have opened up for dissent. With U.S. and European support, local opposition groups have been able to take the initiative, advance their causes, and extract concessions from the state. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood movement (MB), which has been officially outlawed as a political organization, is now among the groups facing both new opportunities and new risks.

Western governments, including the government of the United States, are considering the MB and other “moderate Islamist” groups as potential partners in helping to advance democracy in their countries, and perhaps also in eradicating Islamist terrorism. Could the Egyptian MB fill that role? Could it follow the track of the Turkish Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Indonesian Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), two Islamist parties that, according to some analysts, are successfully adapting themselves to the rules of liberal democracy and leading their countries toward greater integration with, respectively, Europe and a “pagan” Asia?

This article examines how the MB has responded to emerging realities in Egypt, and particularly how it has handled the ideological and practical challenges and dilemmas that have arisen during the past two years. To what extent has the MB movement accommodated its outlook to these new circumstances? What are its objectives and its vision of the future political order? How has it reacted to U.S. overtures and to the U.S.-led reform and democratization campaign? How did it navigate its relations with, on the one hand, the Egyptian regime, and on the other, opposition forces, as the country as a whole headed toward the two dramatic elections of Autumn 2005? And finally, to what extent can the MB be considered a force that might lead Egypt toward liberal democracy?

## The Founding Vision

Five documents constantly posted on the Muslim Brotherhood's official site ([www.ikhwanonline.com](http://www.ikhwanonline.com)), and attributed to the movement's founder, Shaykh Hasan al-Banna, clearly state the movement's key tenets and goals. The documents define the MB as a community of Muslims dedicated to the rule of Allah's law who seek to revive Islam globally. The MB aims to fulfill two primary goals: liberating "the Islamic homeland" from any foreign rule, and establishing in that free homeland an Islamic state that will follow Islam's rules, implement its social order, and propagate its principles. To achieve these ultimate goals, however, the MB must first implement seven intermediary stages, prescribed by al-Banna and arranged hierarchically.

At the bottom of the hierarchy is the formation of the Muslim person; the next step up focuses on the formation of the Muslim family, which leads to a Muslim society that will select a Muslim government. Adhering fully to Allah's law, the Muslim government will establish an Islamic state—a Caliphate—that, in turn, will liberate all occupied Muslim lands and draw together all other Muslim states in a union. The goal of that union will be to spread Islam around the world. Al-Banna declares that only Islam can solve all of the problems—political, economic, social, domestic, and external—that currently afflict the Muslim Nation, and that working to establish an Islamic government is a religious duty (*faridhah*).

## Brother v. Brother

On May 5, 2005, Muhammad Mahdi 'Akif, the MB's General Guide and its supreme leader, issued a missive (*risalah*) titled "The Muslim Brotherhood: Dotting the I's—Clear Positions on Specific Issues."<sup>1</sup> Starting with the question "Who are we and what do we want?" 'Akif reiterated verbatim the MB goals and principles set out in the al-Banna documents mentioned above. Two months later, he repeated some of the points made in that *risalah*.<sup>2</sup>

Why did 'Akif issue such a missive? Why should the Muslim Brethren be reminded of their identity and goals? At the time, the MB's unprecedented street demonstrations seemed to signal a dramatic change in the movement's strategy and raised questions, inside as well as outside the MB, about the objectives and implications of the demonstrations. But while these events may have influenced 'Akif's timing, the *risalah* must also be considered in its wider context. For almost two decades, two distinctive age groups within the MB have been waging an internal ideological struggle.

The first group—the “old guard”—was formed during the harsh experience of the MB’s repression under the former Egyptian ruler Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasser. For example, ‘Akif, who had joined the MB before al-Banna’s assassination in 1949, was sentenced to death after the failed 1954 assassination attempt on ‘Abd al-Nasser and was imprisoned until 1974. He and others of his generation are generally more zealous, conservative, and committed primarily to long-term religious missionary work (*dawa*) and to preserving the movement’s unity.

By contrast, the second or middle generation is made up largely of the student leaders of the 1970s, when Anwar al-Sadat allowed the MB to take over the university campuses. Several of its representatives are more open to change. They assign greater importance to the political work of the MB, rather than its missionary activities. They also see Egypt—rather than the Muslim world—as the MB’s real frame of reference, and show interest in building alliances with other political organizations. The old guard, meanwhile, remains deeply suspicious of other political groups and unforgiving toward such former political rivals as the Nasserists, Arab-Nationalists and Marxists.

The dominance of the old guard in the MB leadership caused some second-generation members to leave the movement and form the al-Wasat Party, often described as the “Center Party,” in 1995. But others stayed, including ‘Abd al-Mun’im Abu al-Futuh, one of the most dynamic and articulate spokesmen of the second-generation reformist faction and a member of the MB’s supreme decision-making body, the Guidance Bureau (Maktab al-Irshad). He asserts that Islamic discourse is not holy; rather, it is based on human judgment (*ijtihad*) and can be revised and updated. The Islamists’ arguments are therefore the products of their human understanding, not of Islam. And unlike traditional Islamists, Abu al-Futuh sees democracy as more than just an unavoidable means of reaching power: It is a unique fruit of human experience that has intrinsic value. He rejects, moreover, the religious component of democracy. To him, democracy simply means rule by the people, not “the people ruling by Allah’s law.”<sup>3</sup>

Abu al-Futuh considers the Caliphate to be a purely political, nonreligious matter. In modern times it is akin to other types of political unity, such as the European Union. This view clearly contradicts the traditional MB understanding of itself as a Sunni source of religious authority (*marja’iyyah*) to fill the vacuum left after the abolition of the Caliphate. To mainstream MB thinkers, the relative weakness of Sunni establishments compared to Shiite ones makes this a critical issue. They still argue forcefully that the movement’s main goal is to reestablish the sovereignty of the religious source of authority.<sup>4</sup>

In a radical departure from this vision, Abu al-Futuh and his allies advocate true political pluralism, equal citizenship for all the country's nationals, regardless of religion, and rotation of power in accord with the people's choice. It would even be acceptable to them if a Christian were elected to power in a Muslim-majority country.<sup>5</sup> Abu al-Futuh seeks, furthermore, to eliminate the MB in its present form and to terminate all its covert and external activities, including its involvement with the International Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood. He wants it to become instead an Egyptian political party, fully open to public scrutiny. Abu al-Futuh asserts that resistance to this change comes not only from the MB's old guard, but also from the regime itself. He also claims that government repression of MB activists has been directed primarily against potential reformers, suggesting that the regime is colluding with MB hardliners to block the movement's evolution in a more democratic direction.<sup>6</sup>

Muhammad Mahdi 'Akif, for his part, upholds in his statements the old line that the MB's guiding purpose is to liberate the Islamic homeland and to establish a free Islamic state. The MB firmly believes, he insists, that Islam's precepts and rules provide the one true and indivisible way of organizing people's affairs in this world and the next. The total nature of Islam as an immutable principle cannot be overemphasized:

This great religion must be taken as one integrated whole, each part of which can function only with the other. The faith (*'aqidah*), the law (*sharia*) and the acts of devotion (*'ibadat*) are one integral whole, and it is absolutely impossible to separate religion from politics, or religion from the state, or the acts of devotion from (political) leadership. This is the MB's faith.<sup>7</sup>

Mahmud 'Izzat, the MB's Secretary General, also speaks for this approach.<sup>8</sup> Freedom, according to 'Akif, entails a commitment to *sharia*, and the people's right to rule themselves must not contradict Islamic laws. Human beings cannot pass laws forbidding what is permitted or permitting what is forbidden, such as adultery or alcohol.<sup>9</sup> When asked how many Egyptians he thought would want to live under *sharia*, 'Akif replied that the Egyptian people as a whole want to be ruled by Islamic religious law.<sup>10</sup>

### Change or No Change

**D**espite their defense of the MB's founding principles, however, the old guard has not been immune to the pressures and opportunities produced by the American-led Greater Middle East Initiative. On March 3, 2004,

in a formal attempt to accommodate the MB's ideology to the new challenge of democracy, 'Akif dramatically unveiled the movement's Reform Initiative shortly after his accession to leadership.<sup>11</sup> The section on political reform confirms the MB's support for "a republican, parliamentary, constitutional and democratic political order, in the framework of the principles of Islam" and affirms that "the people are the source of all powers, so that no individual, party, community or society can claim the right to power, unless it is derived from a free and true popular will." The Reform Initiative also affirms the MB's commitment to the principle of the alternation of power through general, free and fair elections.

These formulations were designed to refute critics who contend that the MB's belief in the inseparability of politics and religion proves that its true goal is to establish a theocracy, and that its declared acceptance of political pluralism and the alternation of power is insincere. Because the MB claims to represent Islam, these critics conclude, it must view its political rivals as Islam's rivals. The MB would never allow another free election once it won power, as an electoral defeat would mean taking government away from Islam and handing it to non-Islamic forces.<sup>12</sup> In response to such criticisms, Abu al-Futuh made the previously mentioned assertion that Islamist discourse was not holy, but a mere product of human judgment or *ijtihad*. This position, however, has not been adopted by the movement as a whole.

The MB has stipulated that it does not seek to set up a religious state or a religious government; rather, it says that its goal is to establish a civil government and a civil state in which Islam is the source of authority. Accordingly, *sharia* has a supreme, divine form of authority, while the government derives its authority from the people it rules.<sup>13</sup>

These formulations obviously skirt the core problem. The Islamic state, which according to the MB's stated goals should implement *sharia* and propagate Islam, can be nothing but a religious state.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the MB's March 2004 Reform Initiative declares in its introductory section that the ultimate goal of reform is the implementation of *sharia*. It goes on to say:

Our only hope to achieve progress in all the aspects of life is by returning to our religion and implementing our *sharia*... We have a clear mission—working to put in place Allah's law, on the basis of our belief that it is the real, effective way out of all of our problems—domestic or external, political, economic, social or cultural. This is to be achieved by forming the Muslim individual, the Muslim home, the Muslim government, and the state which will lead the Islamic states, reunite the scattered Muslims, restore their glory, retrieve for

them their lost lands and stolen homelands, and carry the banner of the call to Allah in order to make the world happy with Islam's blessing and instructions.<sup>15</sup>

This unambiguous restatement of the MB's traditional goals within the Reform Initiative makes it clear that these goals remain a central part of the MB's current formal position. No document of similar importance to the Reform Initiative has been published since the Initiative was announced.

### The MB Political Party

After years of internal debate, the Egyptian MB has more or less accepted the strategy of setting itself up as a political party. To overcome the legal prohibition against religious parties, the MB leadership has accepted the idea that it should present the MB as a civil party with an Islamic source of authority. But unlike Abu al-Futuh's vision of the MB party as a *substitute* for the present movement, 'Akif accepts its formation only as an *addition* to the movement. He insists that the MB should remain fundamentally a broader Islamic movement and that the party should serve only as the movement's political organ in Egypt. He holds that a political party can never perform all the movement's missionary, educational and social tasks. Only by maintaining its non-party structure can the Egyptian MB continue the international aspect of its missionary work and its alliance with the International Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood<sup>16</sup> (It should be mentioned that 'Akif had once served as director of the MB's Islamic Center in Munich—the movement's first stronghold in Europe—from 1980 to 1986, and is very close to the MB international branches).

Despite internal disagreements, and although new reformists like Abu al-Futuh reject the international dimension of the MB as well as other key elements of its ideology, the essential unity of the movement is preserved at the end of the day. When asked, during a live dialogue on an Islamist site, about disagreements concerning political reform inside the Guidance Bureau, Abu al-Futuh responded:

There are no disagreements, in the sense some may imagine, in the Guidance Bureau concerning the nature of reform. Our vision as the Muslim Brotherhood regarding reform, on which we all agree, was presented in the Initiative announced by the General Guide, hence it defines the positions of us all, and there is no room for any disagreement over political reform.<sup>17</sup>

## The Unifying Hostility to the United States

In contrast to other matters, the Muslim Brotherhood's position regarding the United States and its Middle East reform and democratization program has generated little open debate. 'Akif's statements over the last two years make it clear that the MB rejects the notion that the United States is seeking real reform or democracy in the region. Rather, the American project is seen as an attempt to rob the countries of the region, to enfeeble the faith of Arabs and Muslims, and to strip them of their identity.<sup>18</sup> According to 'Akif, the crisis in Darfur is an American-Zionist plot designed to create internal friction in Sudan, divide it into small fragments, and steal its wealth.<sup>19</sup> Other MB spokesmen have declared that the U.S. reform campaign is part of a religious war against Islam. Its real purpose, they say, is to achieve control over Arab and Muslim hearts and minds, which is illustrated by the pressure exerted on Middle Eastern governments to change school curricula.<sup>20</sup>

'Akif viewed reports of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom that discussed the state of religious freedom in Egypt as yet another demonstration of blatant American interference in internal Egyptian affairs.<sup>21</sup> He was especially offended by the commission's demand that the Egyptian constitution be changed "so that it will guarantee the right of every person to adopt any religion or principles whenever he so chooses, which means the abolition of the divinely ordained punishment for apostasy (*hadd al-riddah*)."<sup>22</sup> (That punishment, one recalls, is death).

In another missive to his followers, 'Akif placed the new American initiative in an historical context, describing it as merely the most recent framework for managing U.S. regional interests.<sup>23</sup> Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States, now the only superpower, has been able—with its Western allies—to specifically target the Muslim World. Under the cover of the War on Terror, they have occupied Afghanistan and Iraq, given "the Zionist entity" a free hand to oppress the Palestinians, and increased their interference in Muslim countries in order to influence their identity and culture.

Globalization, furthermore, has enabled the West to dominate the economies of the Muslim states, 'Akif argues. The United States is promoting secularism, political liberalism and economic freedom throughout the world so as to solidify its power. Some economic growth in developing countries will foster global commercial exchange in a way that will secure U.S. superiority and "soft domination." American policy seeks not only to change governments, but also and more importantly to change the culture and identity of Middle Eastern societies. The struggle, then, is between two cultural projects: the Western one and the Islamic one.

### Common Ground?

Given this attitude, is there any room for meaningful dialogue between the MB and the American government? MB meetings with representatives of foreign governments can be construed as illegal unless they are also attended by Egyptian officials. Reports of a meeting between several MB figures and representatives of European embassies in Cairo led to a wave of arrests of MB members.<sup>24</sup> Aware of the risk, MB spokesmen have systematically denied having contact with U.S. officials, even though such meetings have indeed taken place.

Beyond the MB's fundamental animosity toward the United States, then, this risk poses a major obstacle to dialogue at the present time. 'Akif has stated that, if the MB were to become the government or a part of it, it would open a dialogue with the United States were the United States willing to change its current agenda vis-à-vis Islam and the Middle East.<sup>25</sup> For his part Abu al-Futuh has argued that, in principle, conflict with the United States need not be a barrier to a dialogue; after all, the Prophet Muhammad met with infidels and apostates. He says the MB does not conduct such a dialogue for a different reason—namely, because it is futile. Egypt cannot benefit from it. Any possible dialogue in the future, moreover, must not infringe on Egypt's independence, or its major economic and political interests, or its “culture, civilization, concepts and values.”<sup>26</sup>

The view that no good can be served by dialogue has been echoed by another second-generation spokesman, 'Issam al-'Aryan. He rejects the American government's overtures as entirely insincere, asking, “Will the West accept a different model of democracy in Islamic countries, a model which uses Islam as source of authority [*marja'iyyah*], where religion is a fundamental core of politics, where the people have the power to appoint, observe and dismiss [the ruler], yet sovereignty [*hakimiyyah*] belongs to the *sharia*?” And will the West accept an Islamic model that gives peoples the right to elect parliaments, state councils and local bodies to make laws “in the framework of the Islamic source of authority, so that these legislative bodies will neither permit that which is forbidden [by *sharia*] nor forbid that which is permitted [by it]?”<sup>27</sup>

### Practical Politics

On March 27, 2005, the Muslim Brotherhood organized a street demonstration in Cairo to call for political reforms. It was the first demonstration on domestic issues since President Mubarak came to power, and it



triggered a series of other protests in both Cairo and the countryside that led to the arrest of as many as 1500 MB members, including senior ones. This development broke a long-standing informal truce between the regime and the MB—a truce that allowed the movement to practice its missionary or *dawa* activities as long as it refrained from challenging the regime in the political arena. The demonstrations indicated to many that the MB was abandoning its traditional strategy of avoiding outright confrontation with the state.<sup>28</sup>

Yet by the summer of 2005, the MB demonstrations were over. Why were they held in the first place, and why were they stopped? Right from the start, there were signs that the MB did not want a full confrontation with the regime: the demonstrations condemned Mubarak's policies rather than the president personally, and they did not involve massive numbers of demonstrators. As the first demonstrations were taking place, moreover, both 'Akif and his deputy Muhammad Habib announced—on March 29 and 30, respectively—that the MB would support the presidential candidacy of Mubarak or his son Gamal, provided that the elections were free, fair and unhindered by the Emergency Laws (which were implemented in 1967, lifted in 1980, and re-imposed in 1981, following Anwar al-Sadat's assassination. These laws grant authorities power to detain people considered a threat to national security without charge and practically indefinitely, to try people before military tribunals, and to ban public demonstrations).

According to an account attributed to a former senior MB official, the MB leadership organized the demonstrations only to mollify their lower ranks who, impressed by the impact of the Kifaya movement's demonstrations, were dismayed by the MB's absence from what was perceived as a wide popular movement. According to the MB leadership, it had notified the authorities in advance about the time, place and number of participants in all but one of the demonstrations. Nevertheless, the authorities suppressed them, making mass arrests that included Mahmud 'Izzat and 'Issam al-'Aryan. The MB then allegedly reached a deal with the regime in which MB prisoners would be gradually released (lower-ranking members first, as a cover); the MB would continue to hold small-scale protests to appease its rank and file, but would coordinate these demonstrations with the authorities and not with other opposition groups; and the MB would not support any of the opposition presidential candidates.<sup>29</sup>

MB leaders have denied the existence of such a deal, but they have failed to explain why they abruptly ended the demonstrations. The MB prisoners, in any case, have been duly released, the highest-ranking ones last. With the release of 'Issam al-'Aryan on October 16, 2005, there were no MB members

in prison for the first time since 1995.<sup>30</sup> The MB's younger, more radical grassroots activists reportedly supported continuation of the demonstrations, as did others who are more closely affiliated with the International Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>31</sup>

### Election Maneuvers

The MB's muddled handling of its demonstrations is linked to its maneuvers regarding the September 2005 presidential election. It first agreed—along with such other opposition groups as Kifaya, the al-Tagammu' Party and the Nasserist Party—to boycott the election, just as it had boycotted the referendum on changing the clause of the Constitution that regulated elections (clause 76). Not surprisingly, Abu al-Futuh served as the MB coordinator with the other opposition organizations. But subsequently, on August 21, the MB issued a statement overturning this agreement and urging its members, as well as the Egyptian people at large, to take part in the election. While the statement said that MB members were free to choose their own candidates, its call on them not to support repression and corruption was clearly meant to discourage voting for Mubarak.

Because the participation rate was more important to the regime than Mubarak's margin of victory—that victory never being in doubt—this policy shift actually served the regime rather well.<sup>32</sup> MB leaders explained their revised stance on the election in pragmatic terms. While they had opposed the way clause 76 was amended and boycotted the referendum that approved it, once it had passed, it made no sense to let the ruling party monopolize the election.<sup>33</sup>

Their decision was widely criticized by the membership, however, particularly at the grassroots level.<sup>34</sup> Many argued that, by breaking the boycott upheld by most of Egypt's opposition political parties and groups, the MB afforded the election, and indeed the regime itself, undeserved legitimacy.<sup>35</sup> According to one report, about two-thirds of the MB membership advocated adherence to the boycott.<sup>36</sup>

The MB's policy shift on the presidential election demonstrates yet again the movement's continuing oscillation between two competing orientations: its political orientation that led it, at least temporarily, to join other opposition groups in an attempt to force political change; and its *dawa* orientation that makes it unwilling to risk the long-term endeavor of Islamizing society for short-term political gains. The September election revealed that, as in other instances, the *dawa* side represented by the General Guide 'Akif was able to overrule the political side represented by Abu al-Futuh.

As the November 2005 parliamentary elections approached, the MB announced that its candidates would now identify themselves as representing the MB rather than “the Islamic Trend,” as they had for fifteen years. University campus activists were also instructed to identify themselves as belonging to the MB. These measures seemed to be an effort by the movement to gain official recognition as a legitimate political organization, posing a challenge to the Mubarak regime. Yet just as it launched that challenge, the MB declared that it would not nominate candidates in electoral districts where senior government figures would be running, as a gesture to the government.<sup>37</sup>

### Conclusions

So far, the MB leadership’s decisions and formal pronouncements reflect continuing adherence to the organization’s *dawa* orientation. Nervous about sliding into a fatal confrontation with the regime, the old-guard leaders have undercut repeated attempts by second-generation leaders and their impatient younger supporters to confront the regime directly. In securing the movement’s survival, the MB’s missionary endeavor and its commitment to the Islamic state and implementation of *sharia* take preference.

Although the second-generation leaders clearly offer a more pragmatic approach than the older generation, one should not assume that the MB will become a liberal-democratic movement once the old guard leaves the scene. Second-generation leaders have not abandoned key MB tenets; neither have they left the movement nor joined the reformist al-Wasat Party, which according to some, is the Egyptian ideological equivalent of Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Indeed, while commenting on the AKP as a potential model for Egypt and for the MB, ‘Issam al-‘Aryan has argued that the AKP is no longer an Islamist party. While AKP may have begun as an Islamist party, al-‘Aryan says it has since shed its Islamism in favor of a so-called “believing secularism.” He says that Turkey differs fundamentally from Arab societies, which consider Islam to be a “religion, life and state” all rolled into one. In these societies, Islamic culture is so deeply entrenched that it cannot be uprooted even by the billions of dollars spent on *Radio Sawa*, *Al-Hurrah* television, or similar American-backed media operations.<sup>38</sup> The MB, in sum, is not a force for liberal-democratic change.

The ideological conservatism of the Egyptian MB has helped the movement preserve its organizational unity and secure funds from rich Islamist benefactors abroad. Yet it has also contributed to its loss of influence over MB branches outside Egypt. The Syrian MB, for example, has adopted a more practical approach. And the International Organization of the Muslim

Brotherhood has been gradually transformed, in a sense, by Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi and his recently established World Association of Muslim Clerics, which now claims to be the preeminent source (the *marja'iyyah*) of fundamentalist Sunni authority—a role long claimed by the Egyptian MB.<sup>39</sup>

Back in Egypt, however, the MB's gains in the parliamentary elections, held during November and December 2005, vindicate its tactics in the preceding year. Its withdrawal from participation in street demonstrations, and from confrontation with the government on the presidential election, made possible the release of its activists from prison, and allowed it to concentrate on the parliamentary elections.

It is difficult to assess whether these gains reflect a real rise in the MB's popularity, its campaigning capabilities, or the declining capacities of the ruling National Democratic Party to mobilize support; or whether they are primarily the product of reduced governmental manipulation of election results in the first two rounds, compared to past elections, resulting from external, primarily American, pressures on the regime to allow free and fair elections. It is clear, however, that the regime's decision in the third round to physically prevent MB supporters from voting by the use of brute force, which led to bloodshed, reflected its frustration at the way the MB had benefited from the relative freedom prevailing in the first two rounds. At any rate, the MB is seen in Egypt and elsewhere as the clear victors, which is likely to further increase their popularity and encourage other Islamists around the world.

It remains to be seen how much longer the government will be able to deny the movement legal and political status. Once the MB is recognized as a party, and with its wins in parliament, it will be able to nominate a candidate for the next presidential election. In free elections, the MB winning the presidency can not be ruled out. Another open question is how the outcome of the parliamentary elections will influence the MB internal debate and future direction on key issues: Will it now determine what it wants to be: a political party or a religious society? Will it decide to adapt its orientation to its new position as an alternative to the present regime? And will it rethink its attitude towards the US and enter into a dialog with it both about itself and the future of Egypt?

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