



Normalisation of brutality: A theoretical framework for understanding contemporary war and the architecture of domination

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Abstract

The present paper is an exploration of how brutality is being normalised in modern armed conflicts, with specific emphasis being laid on the Iran-America-Israel war. It claims that when several systems of power intersect (political, economic, cultural and technological), systematic violence creates an environment where it becomes ambient, routine and eventually banal. Based on a synthesised theoretical framework which involves political theory, sociology, postcolonial studies and critical legal studies, the paper argues that the biggest threat of the present moment is not any weapon or bellicosity but the gradual demise of moral surprise. The beast which William Golding was afraid of becomes not the name of a nation in particular but the architecture of domination itself; when atrocity has become content, when broken mirrors and buildings have become algorithmically optimised images, when the erasure of cultural memory has become a mere collateral damage.

Keywords: Normalisation of brutality, spectacle, biopower, state of exception, cultural genocide, just war, banality of evil, Iran-America-Israel war, Gaza

Introduction

“*Maybe there is a beast... maybe it's only us.*” – William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*

Human history is not a progressive development but a trudging, swarming back and forth between barbarity and a flaky, fragile peace. It can rest nowhere in a steadfast virtue. Wars, from the Peloponnesian to Gaza, show us a fateful regularity: the abrupt downward spiral into systematic brutality, a sort of painstaking building up of order, which thrives on duplicity, and then the plunge again. The groups are more vicious than individuals, according to Reinhold Niebuhr, who wrote in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) [21] that collective fear and collective honour prevail over individual restraint. Evil, in contrast to liberal optimism, is not a vacuum but a more Draconian, more enviable force, which is also relatively more difficult to reverse. The most infamous warning sounded at the Eichmann trial, issued by Hannah Arendt, was her admonition of the banality of evil: the very terrifying banality, the monstrousness with which horrific deeds were perpetuated by men who had ceased to think. But Nietzsche provides an awful opposite: evil is not necessarily banal. It may be, in his sense, the aggressive power of an assertion of a will to power. Each of Iran, America, and Israel triangle feels that the other is the beast, and their mobilisation of power as some higher necessity. What Golding leaves us with is not who the victor is, but whether the beast is ever really outside of us or not.

War is a seemingly inherent desire to control. It uses almost all social facts, modesty, morality, education, religion, and technology as tools of control. This is what we are observing in the current war between Iran, America and Israel. The war is not fought on one axis, but on the border of different systems of dominance, which are

interconnected. It is in this cross-section that a more sinister process occurs: the gradual normalisation of murdering, cruelty, destruction, and senselessness over one or more countries. When drone attacks are common, when the videos of captives have become the algorithms to be fed to users, when the killings of children are reported like the news of a rugby game between isotropic and anaerobic bursts, then something deep in the human soul is changing. In his book *Frames of War* (2009) [7], the American philosopher and gender studies scholar Judith Butler argues that some lives are more grievable than others (Butler, 2009) [7]. The Iran-America-Israel war follows this logic to its logical conclusion in a permanent global theatre, whereby brutality is no longer an exception in need of justification but rather a default position that does not need justification at all. It is the very worst evil of all, perhaps, that, not the first murder, but that at which we cease to be shocked by the thousandth.

Theoretical Framework: Intersecting Architectures of Domination

The twenty-first-century war is not fought on a single line of enmity but on a broader intersecting plane. The intersectionality theory of race and gender, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is surprisingly applicable here (Crenshaw, 1989) [9]. The Iran-America-Israel war is neither a simple clash of civilisations as thoroughly discussed by the American political scientist Samuel Huntington in his book *The Clash of Civilisations and the Rethinking of World Order* (1996), nor is it a simple territorial fight. It is a battle of intersections - a brutal laboratory in which the various regimes of power intersect, support each other, and generate a complete environment of power.

Hegemony and Manufactured Consent

The idea of hegemony by Antonio Gramsci clears up the manner in which power is rendered invisible. The dominant achieve their dominance not by coercion itself but by the production of an illusion claiming their dominance as common sense. This logic can be observed in the context of the Iran-America-Israel conflict, with both factions, Tel Aviv/Washington and Tehran, justifying their violence as necessary and even just. Exceptional brutality can be rationalised as survival, and the language of supreme emergency, as explored by the American political theorist and public intellectual Michael Walzer in *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977), permits it (Walzer, 1977) ^[31]. When interpreted as responses to existential threats, however, the Walzer framework has been largely criticised, allowing indiscriminate attacks on non-combatants. The supreme emergency exemption proposed by Walzer, as one commentator, Michael Neu, observes, allows what the law of war otherwise proscribes, and it places a very dangerous loophole whereby premeditated violence could be justified in the face of others ad infinitum (Neu, 2014) ^[20].

The Dark Twin of Enlightenment

The dialectic of enlightenment, proposed by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, enlightens us to the fact that reason, progress, science and technology, the means to emancipation, strangely turn into means of control. Precision drones, AI killing machines, and cyberwar are the dark brothers of enlightenment. A machine gun has been replaced by an algorithm, a bomb by a precision strike. The technical rationality language makes killing appear as a sanitised act at the expense of moral judgment.

Biopower and Docile Bodies

According to the concept of biopower by the French philosopher Michel Foucault, contemporary social institutions create and establish docile bodies (Foucault, 1975) ^[11]. This can be seen in the morality police in Iran and the system of administrative detention in Israel, which are both ways of disciplining populations, controlling them, and making them politically passive. As illustrated in the Foucault framework, power does not just exist in the form of spectacular violence, but also in the interaction of the day-to-day practices of the control of life itself.

The State of Exception and Bare Life

The idea of the state of exception by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben can be seen as perhaps the most chilling prism through which to cast the contemporary conflict. According to Agamben, the rule of law is put on hold by the sovereign authority in the name of crisis, and this, in turn, forms a domain of so-called bare life (homo sacer)- the life which has lost its right to be covered by law, and hence, is killable without any consequences (Agamben, 1998) ^[1]. This is a textbook case of Gaza since 2007, and intermittently, the West Bank. One of the scholars, Derek Gregory, has pointed out that the degradation of the Palestinian people into (so many homines sacri) describes exactly the state of those people whose lives can be taken away with impunity (Gregory, 2004) ^[14]. The horrific vision of Agamben is that the state of exception is rather than being the unspoken rule of the modern state.

Cultural Capital and Symbolic Violence

Symbolic violence and cultural capital, the ideas of the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, demonstrate how

domination is replicated due to allegedly neutral cultural processes. The ways, speech and signs of success popularised by the ruling class are brought out as universal standards of merit. The failure to fit in this pattern by the subaltern is reshaped to the incompetence of the subaltern as opposed to the exclusion enforced by the structure. Neither an Iranian scientist nor a Palestinian refugee is dumb - what he/she lacks is the right type of capital. Symbolic violence, as Bourdieu states, can be more effective and even more cruel than actual coercion, and that is because it can be easily unnoticed; symbolic violence is perceived as being legitimate (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) ^[6].

The Power Elite

The power elite thesis originated in 1956^[18] with the American sociologist C. Wright Mills, but has aged very oddly prophetic. According to Mills, the political, military and company spheres in the United States have become one united sphere connected by the interests, which are largely served by the constant military mobilisation (Mills, 1956) ^[18]. In Washington, today, this revolving door that exists between the Pentagon, the defence contractors (Lockheed Martin and Raytheon) and lobbying groups (AIPAC) assures us that war is not an aberration of the tragic continuity it is. In its post-war analysis, therefore, as modern analysis confirms, Mills pointed out the threats of growing concentrations of wealth and power in the United States, in terminologies that are all too urgent.

The Society of the Spectacle

The Society of the Spectacle (1967) by the French theorist Guy Debord is a diagnosis of a state whereby the lived experience is ousted by represented experience. The illusion that our disunified, alienated life is whole, true and authentic is the spectacle (Debord, 1967) ^[10]. This, in the context of war, signifies that media images of the precision strikes, martyrs, overshadow the sloppy, ugly truth of dismembered children. The spectacle has scored its ultimate triumph when the atrocity is consummated, having lost its power to provoke a reaction.

Ideological Interpellation

This state is further depicted in the theory of ideological state apparatus proposed by the French philosopher Louis Althusser, which states how people are interpellated and hailed into obedient subjectivity by the powerful institutions like family, the media, the schools, the mosques, the synagogues and so on (Althusser, 1970) ^[2]. Be it an Israeli conscript, an Iranian Basij volunteer, or an American drone operator, they are all called good, or necessary, or natural, all by their respective state's ideological apparatus. Both of them think they are acting freely, but in reality, they are part of the ideology-scripted play.

Orientalism and Construction of the Enemy

In his celebrated book *Orientalism* (1978) ^[24], the Palestinian-American literary critic and academic Edward Said illustrates how historical development has portrayed the creation of a whole group of people as being barbaric, irrational, and backwards, whereas the West has been portrayed as racially, culturally and intellectually superior. Said believed that Orientalism was not just an academically harmless course but a mode of coming to terms with the Orient that is rooted in the special status of the Orient in European Western Experience - a discourse closely related to imperialism and colonialism (Said, 1978) ^[24]. In the

modern war, Iran is a member of the axis of evil, Palestinians are irrationally violent, and Israelis are colonial crusaders. Each of us orientalises the other; each is mobilising centuries of discursive construction to present the other as less than human.

Empire and Global Apartheid

The idea of empire from the book *Empire* (2000) ^[16], by the autonomist philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, is the concept that describes the decentralised, networked character of global power in modern times. Empire is not so much a unitary entity but rather a network of corporations, financial nodes, military coalitions and NGOs. The US-Israel-Iran conflict is not about three-party actors but rather a supply chain network, cyber orders, Gulf cash, Russian and Chinese hedging, and UN powerlessness (Hardt and Negri, 2000) ^[16]. This grid solidifies into what others have described as global apartheid - a world order of class and racial dominance where an Iranian nuclear scientist and a Gazan child are subject to completely divergent rules, to different estimations of life. The war is not a battle of civilisations but a battle of intersections, where each of the theorists above can find new confirmation, and where the monster William Golding predicted is not a particular nation, but the building of domination itself.

The Normalisation of Brutality

The very spectacle of war, seen again and again, produces a feeling of banality of the spectacle. Human suffering doesn't mean much to this hegemonic world order, and therefore, humans tend to gradually become used to their helplessness under the onslaught of brutality on others. Seeing a video of a levelled building, a ruined university, a ruined school, and the subsequent deaths and devastation every single day on the phone makes it appear as though it is just another bit of fake spectacle: mundane and uninspiring. The increasing consumption of this content has become so common that it seems no longer shocking to kill a leader, to blow up heritage sites, to kill hundreds of people. Devastation is normalised. This is what Debord had diagnosed in *The Society of the Spectacle*. In case lived experience trades with represented experience, even an atrocity will become a commodified image whose power to demand a response is totally removed. The banality of evil, the term coined by Arendt, who observed the trials of Adolf Eichmann, to describe the face of horrible crimes by completely mundane individuals who could no longer think or observe what they did. We are not his judges, as Eichmann is no longer with us; we are his listeners. We scroll through a destroyed Gaza school, then a video of a recipe, then a dead child, then a sneaker advertisement. The algorithm does not learn anything about the whiplash. Another relevant argument in this context comes from the French philosopher, Paul Virilio. In his book, *War and Cinema* (1989) ^[30], he suggested that we now experience war more as a "logistics of perception" (Virilio, 1989) ^[30]. And the actual front line is not the dropping of bombs but the appearance of images. Suppose that is the case, then the supreme triumph of the power-hungry government is not territorial but psychological. They bore the very tired subjects to insignificance or death through the very represented theatrics of war. And when that time comes that the behemoth should come to our own door, we might find out that we have lost all it means to be outraged, because the

outrage, as all other things, has already been made a contentment.

Grievable Lives and the Boundaries of Sympathy

The astonishing question posed in *Frames of War* by Judith Butler (2009) ^[7] is when is life grievable? According to Butler, some lives are wrought as life itself, whereas some are not. We are not ready to mourn about the people whom we did not even view as a life to start with (Butler, 2009) ^[7]. The Iran–America-Israel war, as any other modern war, has its framework in the global context, which systematically draws the distinction between grievable and ungrievable populations. A person or child killed in Israel or Iran or America by rocket fire makes international headlines and political outcry; an airstrike on a Palestinian child is a figure, a statistic, a little footnote. Susan Sontag also cautioned in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) ^[25] that being close to suffering in a certain state does not mean one will act. In many cases, it is just a mass of images that paralyse and do not move (Sontag, 2003) ^[25]. Sontag raised a question about whether an excessive amount of images of suffering would desensitise the viewer to the pain of others, and the argument has received even stronger support with age. Yuval Noah Harari, an Israeli historian, has said that the biggest menace in our age is not a specific weapon but rather the accustomability to disaster, the gradual decline of the habit of saying never again (Harari, 2018) ^[15]. Indifference becomes the order of the day when war is the order of the day. Indifference, of which Elie Wiesel so persuasively reminded us, is not the contrary of action but the silent accomplice of evil (Wiesel, 1999) ^[32].

Infrastructure as Weapon

Among many woeful consequences of the war between Iran, America and Israel that cannot be justified even by the dubious argument that in war everything is fair, the intentional or hasty destruction of infrastructure and civilian facilities cannot be justified by some spurious military motive. The tradition of just war that stretches through Augustine to Aquinas to the modern theorists, such as Michael Walzer, has long believed in the principle of distinction: those who engage in war are obliged to identify military objects and non-military objects, and the latter (non-military objects) must not be targeted directly at all (Walzer, 1977) ^[31]. But what we daily observe in Gaza, the West Bank, southern Lebanon, and in office strikes within Iran, is the gradual erosion of just that, replaced by what Walzer himself has christened as the rhetoric of supreme emergency, a perilous doctrine which justifies any action when the danger is depicted as existential.

This process of absolute destruction of infrastructure could be identified as the incremental genocide, as suggested by the Israeli historian Ilan Pappé. Pappé has applied this term to refer to Israeli policy towards Gaza since 2006^[22]: blockade, bombing, cutting off water, cutting off electricity, cutting off food - policies that are driving a whole people to gradual but systematic destruction. Pappé contends that what Israel has done in the Gaza Strip can be called genocide according to all legal definitions of this term (Pappé, 2024) ^[23]. To him, it is not an account of a single military operation but a set of structural violence: a complex of policies that combine to form a project of progressive destruction.

The ethical calculation of this war is also unbalanced. The still more highly-developed language always justifies the

violent deeds of the powerful, and the powerless always perish in greater numbers. The empire projects through the language of the law, but writes, as the Kenyan writer and activist Ngugi wa Thiong'o once said, in the language of blood (Thiong'o, 1986) ^[27]. Ngugugi refers to imperialism as a cultural bomb, which dismantles the belief of a people in their names, their languages, the world they know, the cause of their struggle, unity, their abilities and eventually their own selves. To drop a bomb on a child is not a policy; it is the crying of a bully who has fallen in a fight and cannot endure disgrace.

The Destruction of Memory: Cultural Heritage as Target

In the present war, what are the mighty braggarts doing? The Golestan Palace, a monument and a work of architecture, is not just a building or an architectural marvel, but a museum, a repository of the memories of generations, of civilisations. In the case of its Hall of Mirrors (Talar-e Ayaneh) being destroyed by debris due to an airstrike in March 2026, it was not collateral damage but symbolic. Those Iranian artisans who originally invented the art of ayaneh-kari in the sixteenth century got the broken Venetian mirrors and converted them into sparkling mosaics of light, creating beauty by chance. And now, the same mirrors lie shattered on the palace floor. The Iranian officials say that it will take a minimum of fifteen years to restore this palace. The professional examination proved that the Hall of Mirrors, with the consequent Kamal-ol-Molk painting, was also severely damaged, including the ceiling and its classic decorations (Mokhtari-Taleqani, 2026). The director of the palace, Afarin Emami, cried to the reporters: "The objects in this palace are like my children; years of labour went into this place. The unique floors and ceiling decorations have been ruined, and we had completed renovations in the Mirror Hall just a week ago".

The destruction spread way out of Golestan. Iranian authorities said that as of mid-April 2026^[8], 149 historic locations had been destroyed in the twenty provinces, including five World Heritage locations, seven historic districts and fifty-four museums. Out of these, seventy-four were destroyed by blast shockwaves, forty-two by buffer-zone strikes and thirty-three by direct hits. Hassan Fartousi, the Iranian UNESCO official, said that the attack has completely destroyed some of these buildings that had never had to be repaired in the course of hundreds of years of history. An International panel of scholars had sounded a warning that it would be like destroying a part of the memory of humankind to bomb Iran, and this would be a great danger to the global scientific study, as "The Tehran Times" has reported (Tehran Times, 2026) ^[26]. UNESCO also verified to have given all sides of the dispute the latest geographical information of heritage areas in advance, warning them to employ every possible necessary measure to prevent harm (UNESCO, 2026). These warnings were disregarded. The destruction of Golestan Palace, of a seven-hundred-year-old Chehel Sotoun palace in Isfahan, whose twenty wooden columns are reflected in the long pool to make it appear there are forty, and of Masjed-e Jame, the oldest Friday mosque in Iran, with its turquoise tiles falling to the ground; none of it can be defended as collateral damage. No victory in war would bring anything more valuable than these places of artistic and cultural prosperity. The Hague Convention of the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954) ^[28] very

expressly safeguards cultural heritage in the event of warfare. It opens with a preamble stating "that damage to cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind, since each people makes its contribution to the culture of the world" (UNESCO, 1954). International legal authorities mention that the 1954 Hague Convention is the most popular international agreement that is solely devoted to the protection of cultural heritage during armed conflicts. The fact that these protections were systematically disregarded in the 2026 strikes reveals a lot about the modern architecture of impunity. Robert Bevan, an architectural critic, writes in *The Destruction of Memory*, "War is about killing cultures, identities and memories as much as it is about killing people and occupying territory" (Bevan, 2006) ^[5]. Through such destruction, Bevan defends his arguments: the wars destroy not only a nation's culture and morale, but also the memory of that culture and, eventually, its very existence. He controversially argues for "the fatally intertwined experience of genocide and cultural genocide," proposing the elevation of cultural genocide from "collateral damage" to a crime punishable by international law.

The Iranian academic Mojtaba Najafi, who witnessed his nation's heritage being burnt, described it more emotionally as follows: "For me, ancient monuments are as important as human lives, because they connect me to my past. Their destruction means my memory is being demolished" (Common Dreams, 2026) ^[8]. The mighty braggarts, it turns out, have not acquired either the lessons of the Taliban at Bamiyan or the lessons of the ISIS at Palmyra - or perhaps they have acquired all the lessons: that to destroy the memory of a nation is to destroy the nation, bit by bit, with every shattered mirror.

Civilisational Disconnect

In addition, no amount of repair or reconstruction of such sites can ever restore the reservoir of memories and associations that people have of tradition, architecture and values. When a mosque of seven centuries of whispered prayers falls on rubble, rebuilding it in glass and steel does not restore the sound of those prayers but only the shape of the building. This creates a civilisational disconnect: a rupture not merely in stone but in the lived, inherited sense of who we are and where we belong. We live in a period of liquid modernity, in which everything solid melts into air, not because of the vanishing of the solid in itself, but due to what Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish-born British sociologist, has called in *Liquid Modernity* (2000) ^[4]: the free-flowing liquid that absorbs everything at once. But war brings about that melting into a weapon: efface the past, and you have a future of a floating, rootless terror. Bauman's work has been extended to conceptualise "liquid warfare" - a form of conflict that rejects territorial confinement and its associated responsibilities, focusing instead on the destruction of infrastructure and the avoidance of direct control (Mutschler, 2016) ^[19]. This is the nosedive into barbarity that William Golding warned about in his masterpiece *Lord of the Flies*. The hard work that Ralph had put into making order: the conch, the assemblies, the signal fire, etc., the fragile rule of reason all become futile as hungry Jack starts to make even stronger claims. First whispering of freedom, and then in shrieks of power. The conch, once broken, can never be pasted back together; nor can a civilisation that has made it the habit of normalisation to drop the bomb on its own history.

Discussion: The Beast Within

We can feel secure observing war that is thousands of miles away, behind the screens and news alerts. But such a sense of remote security conceals an even bitterer, more prosaic truth: war is gradually turning into a normal thing for all of us. The giant of war stalks and wonders everywhere at will, which indeed frightens, yet it is how it has been prowling the globe; from Ukraine to Gaza, the Red Sea to the interior of Iran, that it can, and will soon be able to prowl, anywhere.

The issue is that a process where this state of normalcy is enhanced, where brutality becomes ambient and not exceptional, will become truly hard to stop on the part of any person. We (now watching it from a safe distance) will be the object of this same monster tomorrow, when we too are massacred, our children will be massacred, our lives will be flies to wanton boys, and others will be observing, with shaking heads, and putting up their sympathies and doing nothing to prevent it. The monster, though, does not have to feast upon them all at once. It just requires us to no longer be surprised at the time it captures its prey.

A New Dimension: The Amplification of Indifference

The present paper introduces a fresh aspect of the existing frameworks: the contribution of social media algorithms in accelerating and enhancing the process of normalisation of brutality. Although the society of the spectacle was identified by Debord in the era of television and cinema, modernity presents a new dimension of the algorithmic spectacle, a state of affairs where content is broadcast but tailored, optimised, and amplified by engagement metrics, endorsing outrage but not response. The algorithm knows nothing about the values of what it presents. A school that has been torn down will produce the same responses that are as common as a video of gossiping celebrities produces. The outcome is that the moral significance is flattened into a flow of homogenous content wherein atrocity and advertisement are accorded the same position in the scroll. This is not just the spectacle as Debord had suggested, but it is Debord's spectacle accelerated, automated, and weaponised. Such a state of affairs was also predicted by Paul Virilio in his idea of the "logistics of perception". Virilio believed that war was gradually fought over what we could see and how we could see. The logistics of perception become fully automated in the age of algorithms. Such an algorithm predetermines what we watch, when, and how many times and, thereby, which lives will become real to us and which will be figures of statistics.

The other New Dimension: The Environmental Assault

A second new dimension relates to the environmental infrastructure of war. The Iran-America-Israel war has involved an organised and systematic attacks on water treatment plants, electrical grids, agricultural acreage, and medical facilities - attacks that may be referred to as *ecocide as a method*. Bombs on a water treatment plant have a combined, not an immediate, impact: outbreaks, crop failure, child fatalities months after the surrender. This gradual killer disease is more difficult to notice than the sudden destruction of a palace, exactly due to the fact that the results of this can be realised with time and are readily ascribed to natural causes. This aspect can be understood through the idea of "incremental genocide" as conceptualised by Ilan Pappé. The attrition process is not a one-time event but a continual one, a process of attrition,

sustained by blockade, bombardment and destruction of infrastructure, and as Pappé argues, is not a single event but a process sustained over time, a gradual, grinding-down of the preconditions of life itself (Pappé, 2006) ^[22].

Conclusion: The Conch and the Mirror

The beast is left with us. Or maybe it was always us, who failed to make the mightier abide by the weaker, got ourselves addicted to the amusements of revenge, ran slowly and snugly into the suicidal complacency of the prosaic credence of atrocity. The theoretical frameworks examined in this paper, from Gramsci's hegemony to Agamben's bare life, from Foucault's biopower to Butler's grievable lives, all converge on a single unsettling conclusion: the architecture of domination is not external to us. It is constructed out of our obedience, our consumption, our scroll. Yet, maybe, Golding had granted us at least one small hope, in that his acknowledgement of the beast within is the initial step to keeping it closed. Whether this realisation will be too late, whether it will happen at all this is the question, as the bombs drop on civil infrastructure in Iran and flattened classrooms of Gaza. When a rich and influential person loses a duel to a poor common man, his ego is wounded; revenge follows by attacking the powerless where he is most helpless – his home, his family, his relations, everything that forces him to surrender. In applying this same reasoning to war, heartlessness can have no excuse in the valour that hides behind the so-called valour. Is it not disgraceful to kill off a poor child, just so that his father should give in? Does it not amount to an admission of moral bankruptcy when a state with nuclear weapons or having significantly expensive military blocs is seen dropping bombs on a hospital, a school, a water treatment plant or a residential high-rise and then declares it collateral damage?

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