

Miliband Lecture on Culture in the Age of Global Communications

London School of Economics

“Islam Under Siege: From Clash to Dialogue of Civilizations”^{*1}

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Chair: Professor David Held

¹ * This is the edited version of my LSE lecture.

David Held

Welcome to the final Miliband Lecture this academic year on the theme of Culture in the Age of Global Communications. The lecture this evening is as you already know "Islam Under Siege: From Clash to Dialogue of Civilizations" and I note there is no question mark after that title so I take it we will have an optimistic account and indeed look forward to it.

Our speaker is again known to all of you, Professor Akbar Ahmed. Professor Ahmed is Chair of Islamic Studies and Professor of International Relations at the American University in Washington DC. He is the former High Commissioner of Pakistan to Great Britain and has advised among other people, Prince Charles and has spoken with among others, President George W. Bush in a discussion about contemporary Islam. He's a distinguished anthropologist, writer and filmmaker; he's been actively involved in interfaith dialogue for a long time and is actively involved in the study of Islam, global Islam and its impact on contemporary society for many years as well.

Dr Ahmed jointed the Civil Service of Pakistan in 1966 and stayed there for a long period of time until he resigned in 2000. He's been a visiting professor at Harvard University, Cambridge University and the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton so I have to ask him "So what was wrong with the LSE?"

He's the author of many publications and numerous books and I shall mention just a few of these including *Discovering Islam*, which was the basis of a very significant BBC series, a six part TV series called *Living Islam*, his *Postmodernism and Islam* which was nominated for many awards including the Amalfi Award

and his “Jinnah Quartet”, a four part project on Pakistan's founding father which has won numerous international awards. His *Islam Today* was rated among the best non-fiction books of the year by the Los Angeles Times and his most recent book is *Islam Under Siege*. His books have been translated into many languages.

Now, among other things, apart from being a prolific writer he's a prolific communicator, an engaged communicator, has made many media appearances in the US and the UK and elsewhere, he's been interviewed on CNN, NBC and BBC, you've probably heard him, I hope you heard him yesterday on *Start the Week*, it was a fascinating discussion and he's even appeared several times on the Oprah Winfrey show. So among the things we need to know about later is how he managed all of this. But we'll leave that till later on and please join me now in welcoming our distinguished visitor.

Akbar Ahmed

My lords, excellencies, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, my first duty is to thank Professor David Held for inviting me here this evening and for that very warm and generous introduction. I also wish to thank his outstanding student – Ayse Kaya – for arranging the logistics so well. My own sister who is also Aisha – Dr. Aisha Ahmed -- is here with her husband Dr. Roger Boase and their son Muin who is at a student at the LSE. Dr. Amineh Ahmed my daughter who is a graduate of the LSE is also here with other members of my family.

For me this evening is indeed a great honor. The LSE has such a great name on the international stage. It is also an honor because of the name that has inspired the series – Sir Ralph Miliband. As a social scientist interested in translating ideas into action I have always looked up to him. He was not a scholar locked away in an ivory tower but a man of action. I am delighted that his lady wife is here with us this evening.

It is also an honor because so many friends who I have not seen for several years are here this evening, some of them sitting in front of me, and so many have come from outside London. I think you will appreciate my mentioning some of them like Dr. Tahir Abbas and Raja Khan from Birmingham, Imam Abdul Jalil Sajid from Brighton, Donald Welbourne from my old college in Cambridge, Selwyn College, and Ishaque from Edinburgh.

If you think that is impressive let me acknowledge the presence of a dear friend who has flown from Washington D.C. to be with us this evening, Ambassador Doug Holladay – and as we are at the LSE I am sure I will get a lot of questions about George Bush's foreign policy which I will be happy to divert to Doug.

With the acknowledgements out of the way let me introduce the three big questions that I will raise this evening in relation to the subject of my lecture.

The first question will ask: what are the main global theories that explain our world? I will very briefly try to highlight some of the influential ideas and point out their understanding of Islam. Secondly, why it is important for all of us in

this audience, Muslim and non-Muslim, to understand Islam? After all our focus will be on Islam and not some other world civilization equally deserving of attention and merit. And, finally, how do we move ahead? I wish to explore some of the paths that lie in front of us in the coming time. I hope you will assist me in exploring some of these questions.

So let's ask our first question: What are the main, the big, the influential, global theories explaining our world?

After September 11, 2001, people frequently said that the world had changed forever. Not only security but economics, politics and society across the world have directly or indirectly been affected by the events of that dreadful day. In an important sense they are right. But changes were already in motion as a result of the processes of what is called globalization. Different theories have explained our world.

Political scientists, historians, religious scholars, journalists, dramatists and social scientists are trying to help us understand the world we live in.

Samuel Huntington of Harvard University has written about the “Clash of Civilizations” (1993, 1996) and after September 11 this notion has gained global currency. Huntington argued that the clash in our times will be defined by cultural and religious civilizations. He identified Islam as a major global civilizational opponent to the West. Earlier Huntington had written a thesis about an imminent clash of civilizations between the West and Japan. A few months ago he wrote a widely read article in *Foreign Policy* in which he identified

the Latin-American population in the U.S. as a major threat to traditional American values.

The idea and term “clash of civilizations” came from the historian, Bernard Lewis at Princeton University. Lewis describes the spectacular rise and irreversible fall of Muslim civilization in his books. His recent bestseller *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (2002) is a rather gloomy and somewhat deterministic account of Muslim history.

Opposed to the idea of clash, President Khatami of Iran proposed a dialogue of civilizations at the United Nations a few years ago. He pointed to the strengths of Islam and its great tradition of scholarship, understanding and dialogue. Another religious scholar, Dr Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, in his book, *The Dignity of Difference* (2002), argues that the clash is really between Abrahamic values – which define Judaic, Christian and Islamic cultures – and our contemporary values which have little time for piety, modesty, humility, compassion and scholarship. He too advocates dialogue and understanding. He reminds us that 358 individuals are collectively richer than almost half the world’s total population.

Written with passion and eloquence Dr. Sacks lays out a forceful argument in his book. Here are his opening lines: “*The Dignity of Difference* is a plea – the most forceful I could make – for tolerance in an age of extremism. I see in the rising crescendo of ethnic tensions, civilizational clashes and the use of religious justification for acts of terror, a clear and present danger to humanity. For too long, the pages of history have been stained by blood shed in the name of God. Allied to weapons of mass destruction, extremist religious attitudes

threaten the very security of life on earth. In our interconnected world, we must learn to feel enlarged, not threatened, by difference.”

Tom Friedman writes of globalization to explain our world (*The Lexus and the Olive Tree* – 2000). For him globalization is equated to “Americanization” and at its heart is the concept and practice of democracy. Muslim states must respond to the challenge by adopting genuine democracy.

Other commentators focus on a less benign and idealistic image of the U.S. They see the emergence of the U.S. as the sole super-power and its role as the new global imperialist driven by greed, mendacity and stupidity. In this vision of international affairs the Ugly American becomes the Hulk and is on the rampage---in the words of Harold Pinter like a “beast in the jungle”. The Indian writer Arundhati Roy argues in the same vein. She notes that the “war on terror” is driven not by the need to get “Al Qaeda” but to get “al-faeda” which in Hindu and Urdu means “profit”. Analysts like these see a cabal of malicious gnome-like figures who live in the half light called Neo-Cons and drive the American engine. They argue that the savage cruelty and cynicism we see in examples like the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison is a consequence of the culture engendered by this leadership.

Mine is a social scientist’s perspective of what is happening in the world. I gave the title *Islam Under Siege* (2003) to my book from the notion of society being under siege. I pointed out that we are living at a critical and dangerous time in history because several world civilizations are feeling under siege simultaneously. Muslims feel under siege and point to the plight of the Palestinians, the Kashmiris and the Chechens. In spite of UN resolutions and

the suffering we see on television little has been done to settle the problem of these people. Muslims view the continuing instability and violence in Iraq and Afghanistan with growing anger. They talk of the cloud of Islamophobia – a hatred of things Islamic – that now hangs over them in Western countries. Americans too feel under siege after September 11. Indeed television channels after September 11 broadcast their news under the heading “America Under Siege”. Israelis have felt under siege for several decades believing that they are surrounded by Arabs determined on exterminating them.

Individuals living in societies under siege are thrown off balance. They fall back to notions of excessive group loyalty. In the heated climate there is little room for dialogue and the dominant ethos is one of group survival and security. Dishonorable acts including rape and murder are committed in the name of the group. Ironically these dishonorable acts are meant to proclaim the honor of the individuals committing them. That is why I suggest in my book that we may be living in a time which could be characterized by the notion of “post-honor”. The subtitle of my book *Islam Under Siege* is “Living Dangerously in a Post-Honor World”.

I have borrowed a concept to examine Muslim societies from the great Muslim historian and sociologist Ibn Khaldun who lived in the fourteenth century. His notion of *asabiyya* – group loyalty or social cohesion – explained how societies were bound together and passed on values, customs and behavior patterns from one generation to the other. I argue that *asabiyya* in our times is loosening and even disintegrating. But as societies don’t disappear into a black hole different expressions of *asabiyya* begin to form. In our times we are seeing excessive or exaggerated group loyalty. I call this hyper-*asabiyya*. Hyper-*asabiyya*

encourages a rigid drawing of boundaries around a group and can encourage violence. Many societies around the world are driven by hyper-*asabiyya* but I will focus on Muslim society. Let us see how we arrive at hyper-*asabiyya* in our world.

I have pointed to the rapid urbanization in Muslim society. Take Karachi – the city where I grew up. It had a population of a few hundred thousand when Pakistan was created in 1947 and has about 15 million people today – it is literally bursting at the seams and law and order, transport, health and civic facilities simply don't function in many parts of the city. Over the last decades something like 70% to 80% of a once rural population in the rest of Pakistan is now urbanized. These people are suspended between two ways of life and particularly vulnerable.

The gaps between the rich and the poor are growing dangerously wide. A visit to Cairo or Karachi will confirm the shiny new marble palaces erected in the midst of shanty towns. Anger is caused not only by the widening gap but also the fact that many of the rich have made their money through illegal means.

Muslim leaders need to worry about the social and demographic trends in their countries. Muslim population growth rates are among the highest in the world, the literacy rates are among the lowest, the figures for health facilities are unsatisfactory and the life expectancy below average. A large percentage of the population is young, jobless and restless for radical change and an aggressive Islam, which easily translates into violence, is the natural way out.

I also pointed out a little discussed but significant feature of Muslim society: The poor treatment of scholars. Scholars are chased out of the country, sometimes silenced and even killed. The climate of sycophancy surrounding the rulers and the widespread powers of the intelligence services make life a living hell for the scholars of conscience. Over the last decades there has been a brain drain from the Muslim world to the West which even the growing hatred of Islam has not prevented. In the absence of critical and intelligent scholarship neither objective analysis nor sensible predictions are possible in society. To make matters worse Muslims are aware that the word for knowledge or *ilm* is highly prized in Islam. It is the second most used word in the Quran after the word for God.

Muslims face another, greater, challenge, an internal one: They need to re-build an idea of Islam, which includes justice, integrity, tolerance and the quest for knowledge –the classic Islamic civilisation – not just the insistence on the rituals; not just the five pillars of Islam but also the entire building. Reducing a sophisticated civilisation to simple rituals encourages simple answers: reaching for guns and explosives, for instance. Today, piety and virtue are judged by political action – often equated to violence – not moral integrity or spirituality.

Unfortunately there is a lack of compassionate and wise leadership in Muslim society. Most of the leaders fall in one of two categories: they are either military dictators or tribal chiefs. Genuine elected leaders working in a democratic system which can remove them under the law are few and far between. It is however a hopeful sign that they do exist as in Malaysia and Bangladesh.

To make matters worse the West does not generally understand Islam and therefore does things which make the relationship worse. There is also after September 11 a growing Islamophobia. The West must learn to curb and control its Islamophobic tendencies. The West needs to discourage the knee-jerk “nuke ’em” response to Muslims and labeling of any Muslim act as “fundamentalist”. The international media and Western governments need to be more sensitive to Muslim society. The West needs to treat Islam in its reporting with the dignity due to a world religion. The Western media’s generalized and intense contempt of Islam provokes many Muslims into an anti-Western stance. It also makes the position of those who talk of dialogue and moderation more vulnerable.

Why is it important to understand Islam rather than any other world civilization?

The 21st century will be the century of Islam. The events of September 11 saw to that. The hijackers of the four American planes killed not only thousands of innocent people. Their terrible act also created one of the greatest paradoxes of the 21st century: Islam, which sees itself as a religion of peace, is now associated with murder and mayhem.

Consider Islam today: There are about 1.3 billion Muslims living in 57 states (one, for the time being, nuclear; about one-third of the world’s Muslims live in non-Muslim countries); about 25 million live in the West (including 7 million in the USA, 2 million in the UK); and Muslim nations are indispensable for American foreign policy (of the nine “pivotal” states on which the United States bases its foreign policy, five are Muslim – according to the experts: see

Robert Chase et al in *Foreign Affairs*, 1996). The main terrorists on America's wanted list are Muslim – Osama bin Laden, Al-Qaeda, Taliban leaders, such as Mullah Omar, but so are America's main allies in the “war on terror” – President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan, President Karzai of Afghanistan and King Abdullah of Jordan. Therefore if both implacable opponents and close allies are Muslims it is imperative for Americans to begin to understand Islam.

The Muslim world population is one of the fastest growing. And Islam is the one world religion which appears to be on a collision course with the other world religions. We know that for the first time in history, due to a unique geopolitical conjunction of factors, Islam is in confrontation with all of the major world religions: Judaism in the Middle East, Christianity in the Balkans, Chechnya, Nigeria, Sudan and sporadically in the Philippines and Indonesia; Hinduism in South Asia, and, after the Taliban blew up the statues in Bamiyan, Buddhism. The Chinese, whose culture represents an amalgam of the philosophy of Confucius, Tao and Communist ideology, are also on a collision course with Islam in China's western province.

It is this historic conjunction that both isolates Islam and creates the global argument that the 21st century will be a time of war between Islam and the other world civilizations. Of course, this neat conceptual equation is challenged because so many Muslim countries are clearly allied to non-Muslim ones. Besides, so many Muslims now live in non-Muslim nations. But it is true to say that the major world civilizations are experiencing problems in accommodating or even understanding Islam, both within their borders and outside them.

Whatever the economic, political and sometimes demographic causes of social transformations on this scale, simplistic ideas often capture the imagination and become the filter through which ordinary people understand them. One such idea has now firmly caught the imagination of people across the world – that there is an ongoing clash between Islam and Western civilization. The argument has been stoked by Harvard professors and by European prime ministers, but it has been around for a thousand years. Whether one adheres to the notion of the clash of civilizations, or whether one chooses dialogue, understanding Islam will be key.

Islamophobia or a generalized hatred or contempt of Islam and its civilization appears to be widespread and growing. This is the reality on the ground – however grand and noble even the best-written constitutions and charters. The result is pressure on the Muslim family and on social, political and even moral life. The consequence is anger, confusion and frustration; acts of violence result. *Fitna* and *shar*, chaos and conflict, become common. God's vision of a just and compassionate human society remains unfulfilled. Understanding Islam thus becomes important.

The consequences of what happens within Muslim society will be felt by societies everywhere. No one is immune from the debates that now rage around Islam. These issues concern scholars, policy-makers and ordinary citizens.

What should we be doing?

Solving “real problems”

The first and most important step is to help create a climate that will allow the real problems of the Muslim world to be solved – in Palestine, in Kashmir, in the Balkans and in Chechnya. Stability and security must come to Iraq and Afghanistan as soon as possible. So far the formal world bodies have failed miserably. Besides, more is needed than just the political resolution of the problems in the Muslim world. Muslim honor and dignity must be restored. No other people in our times can be so openly abused and humiliated with such impunity as the Muslims. Their God, their Prophet, their holy book, their women and their culture can be attacked openly and freely. This has resulted in a growing sense of powerlessness and despair which has fed into anger which in turn encourages violence. Muslims speaking of dialogue and understanding are dismissed as “Uncle Toms”.

Looking for answers objectively

I noted for example that after September 11 the answers in the media were not only incomplete; they were pushing the debate in the wrong directions. The social sciences could have provided answers. Yet in all the discussion of suicide attacks, I did not once hear the name Emile Durkheim, whose seminal work on suicide informs scholarly discussions (*Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, 1966 edition; also see Anthony Giddens 1978; for a contemporary overview of Durkheim see Gianfranco Poggi 2000).

Durkheim underlined that traditional explanations of suicide such as mental disturbance, race or climate, did not fully explain the act. He argued that

suicide was a consequence of a disturbed social order. Moral codes were disrupted in times of change and affected rich and poor, he wrote. The strain led to suicide and abnormal behavior, which he identified as “anomie” (*The Division of Labour in Society*, 1964 edition). Durkheim was echoing Ibn Khaldun’s *asabiyya*, “group loyalty”, “social cohesion”, or “social solidarity”. These two thinkers provide us with a useful central thesis to look at our times. We need to look for answers in the changing social order; in the sense of social breakdown; the feeling of the loss of honor and dignity. This is what I have tried to do in my book *Islam Under Siege*.

Starting dialogue

The shocking fact is that several polls confirm that something like 80% of Americans said they knew nothing about Islam or that they were hostile to Islam. This illustrates the extent of the problem.

The problem is made worse because the figures for the Muslim world are as alarming. Anti-Americanism is now rampant and widespread. Even Muslims living in America have little idea about American history or the great American figures like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. These founding fathers dreamt noble and grand dreams with universal appeal for their new nation. Unfortunately the poster child for America in the Muslim world is now Lynndie England. Her photograph pulling with obvious glee a cowering and naked Iraqi prisoner with a dog leash around his neck is now perhaps the best recruiting propaganda for those fighting Americans.

It is therefore suggested we create a process of mutual understanding and dialogue. This should be done through conferences, seminars etc. and dissemination of knowledge about each other.

(Examples of successful dialogue in U.S.: Ambassador Doug Holladay and myself co-host an on-going Christian-Muslim dialogue; Dr. Lachlan Reed and Mr. Nasser Kazeminy; Dr. Judea Pearl, father of murdered Danny Pearl, who worked for the *Wall Street Journal*; the Abrahamic Round Table based in the National Cathedral Washington D.C.).

With dialogue comes knowledge and understanding of each other. Many Americans would be pleasantly surprised to know that Islam is not a religion of idol-worshippers and Satan-worshippers as people have been saying but very much part of the Abrahamic faiths. In particular Muslims revere and love Jesus: Indeed Jesus is referred to as *Ruh-Allah* or “the Spirit of God” in Muslim literature. There is an entire chapter on Mary in the Muslim holy book, the Quran. The Prophet of Islam singled out Jesus among the most inspirational figures of history and a personal favorite. For theologians looking for what is common in Judaism, Christianity and Islam there is rich material: the idea of one invisible, omnipotent God; the angels; the messengers, the sacred texts; the revelations; the commandments; the notion of the afterlife; and many of the customs and values.

The idea of a common humanity is central to the Muslim perception of self. By knowing God as *Rahman* and *Rahim*, Beneficent and Merciful – the two most frequently repeated of God’s 99 names, those that God Himself has chosen in the Quran by using them to introduce the chapters – Muslims know they must

embrace even those who may not belong to their community, religion or nation. God tells us in the Quran to appreciate the variety He has created in human society: “And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of your languages and colors. Lo! Herein indeed are portents for men of knowledge” (Surah 30: Verse 22 in the Quran).

Verses about fighting Jews and Christians – or Muslims who are considered “hypocrites” – must be understood relative to a specific situation and time frame. What is important for Muslims is to stand up for their rights whoever the aggressor. “Fight against those who fight against you, but begin not hostilities”, the Quran tells Muslims (Surah 2: Verse 190). Men like bin Laden cite this verse and the next to justify their violence against Jews and Christians in general and in particular the United States, which represents the two religions for them. They give the impression that God wants Muslims to be in perpetual conflict with Jews and Christians. They are wrong. Not only are these verses taken out of context, as they relate to a specific situation at a certain time in the history of early Islam, but the verses that follow immediately after clearly convey God’s overarching command: “Make peace with them if they want peace; God is Forgiving, Merciful” (Surah 2: Verses 192-193).

Misguided Muslims and non-Muslims, especially the instant experts in the media, are both guilty of this kind of selective use of the holy text to support their arguments. In this case the Muslims would argue that violence against Jews and Christians is allowed; the non-Muslims would point to this line and say it confirms the hatred of Muslims against others. They imply that the idea of fighting against Islam is therefore justified.

Education and democracy

Encourage education and democracy in the Muslim world. Dialogue and seminars would encourage ideas of education and democracy in the Muslim world. It is commonly assumed that there is no democracy in the Muslim world. This is again based on ignorance of the Muslim world. The example of Muhammad Ali Jinnah confirms that as far back as the first half of the last century one of the most important political movements in the Muslim world, the Pakistan movement, resulted in the creation of what then was the largest democratic Muslim nation on earth: Pakistan in 1947. It was led by a man who embodied Westminster democracy. Jinnah believed in: respect and rights for women, minority rights, human rights and above all the constitution.

Americans in the Middle East propagate democracy and Arabs resist the idea as they see it being imposed by America as a new imperialist power. The argument would shift if they were told that democracy is very much part of the Muslim tradition and were given the example of Jinnah. That is why I spent over a decade of my life creating the Jinnah Quartet – a feature film, a documentary, an academic book and a comic book. Yet when I talk about Jinnah very few Americans have even heard the name. In full room after room of distinguished audiences when I ask people to put up their hands if they have not heard of Jinnah I get the entire room putting their hands up.

Over a decade ago while a Don at Cambridge University – and as someone who had been a senior field administrator in the Muslim world – I became aware of the coming storm around Islam. I asked myself two questions: how can I help to re-discover compassionate or tolerant Islam and where are the models of Muslim political leaders who could inspire us in the Muslim world? I therefore spent my time in developing and completing major projects around

the two questions. The first question was answered in my work on Islam which resulted in a BBC six-part television series shown on prime-time called “Living Islam”. The second resulted in the Jinnah Quartet.

Friendship

Encouraging friendship across religious and cultural boundaries will also help. The example of E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* is a relevant one. Forster dedicated his famous novel written in the 1920s to an Indian Muslim, Sir Ross Masood. He crossed imperial, religious and cultural boundaries. Forster was wise when his dedication in another novel read “Only Connect”. In our post-September world we truly need to connect with other people, with other cultures and with other civilizations. The presence this evening of my friend Doug Holladay who has taken the lead in interfaith dialogue in America is an affirmation of the idea of connecting. (I give my own example in which I dedicated my book *Islam Under Siege* to my friend Professor Lawrence Rosen of Princeton University). Without dialogue, knowledge and friendship human society – all of us, everywhere and at any time – in the 21st century will face a dangerous, violent and uncertain future. We must do everything to encourage understanding between cultures and societies.

In Conclusion: We have pointed out the links between globalization, the disintegration of society and radicalization on the one hand, and an aggressive, excessive group loyalty and ideas of honor on the other. There is cause and effect here. We have noted that victims of religious or ethnic intolerance in one part of the world are themselves aggressors in other parts, through the acts of those who share their religion or ethnicity. Every group appears to be susceptible to the virus. Ethnic cleansing, we suggest, ranges from the outright barbarity of death

and rape camps to more subtle but also traumatic cultural, political and economic pressures brought to bear on the minority.

We suggest a formula for the new millennium: If justice and compassion flourish – and are seen to flourish – in the Muslim world, if its rulers are people of integrity and if Muslims are allowed to practice their faith with honor, then Islam will be a good neighbor to non-Muslims living outside its borders and provide a benevolent and compassionate environment to those living inside them. It will continue to resist attempts to subvert its identity or dignity. Resistance can take the form of a Jinnah or a bin Laden.

The events of September 11 appeared to push the world towards the idea of the clash of civilizations, but they also conveyed the urgency of the call for dialogue. The creative participation in the dialogue of civilizations, to find an internal balance between the needs and traditions of local communities and the world increasingly dominated by international corporations, the committed search for global solutions to the common global problems confronting human society, and the quest for a just, compassionate and peaceful order will be the challenge human civilization faces in the 21st century.

Our session today has allowed me to explore some of these urgent and important global issues. I am grateful to you and especially grateful to Professor David Held for helping me explore ways that we can connect.

A Brief Reading List

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