

Towards a New Strategic Alliance between Turkey and Israel?

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Abstract: This paper discusses the start of a new chapter in Turkish-Israeli relations in the context of the new Middle Eastern strategic landscape. The growing regional influence of Iran since 2003, the failure of the Arab democratization process, the projection of Russian military power in the Middle East, the possibility of a unified Kurdish political entity in northern Iraq and Syria, and the transformation of US strategic calculations in the region have all altered the basic foreign policy paradigms of regional powers. For Turkey, all these factors have led to a strategic re-interpretation that, coupled with political and economic incentives, not only compels Turkish leaders to normalize the country's diplomatic relationship with Israel, but also to deepen it to a status of a new regional alliance. This is in fact a major departure from the foreign policy perspective followed by Justice and Development Party governments since 2002, as well as from Turkey's traditional strategic perspective. With the brief exception of the period of instability after the military attempted to intervene in civilian politics on February 28, 1997, Turkey has traditionally approached Israel as a strategically significant regional power merely because it provided access to the American policy-making process. Hence, the possible formation of a new alliance with Israel outside of the US strategic paradigm is an interesting development that will have repercussions for the entire region.

THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE MIDDLE EAST HAS changed in recent years, first as a result of 2003 Iraq War and again due to the 2011 Arab Spring. Turkey has felt obliged to react to these changes but its reactions appeared to lack a long-term strategic orientation. Over the last eight years, Turkish relations with Syria and Israel have oscillated between enmity and friendship multiple times. In 1998, for example, Turkey and Syria were on the brink of a war resulting from their long feud over Turkey's hydropower and irrigation projects on the Euphrates and Syrian support for Turkey's Kurdish insurgency. At that time, Israel was a strategic and military ally of Turkey. A decade later, the situation was reversed. Turkey and Syria were now enjoying good relations, enjoying mutual visa-free travel, moving towards a free trade zone, and holding joint cabinet meetings. In contrast, Turkish-Israeli relations had soured to the extent that they accused each other of hostility, of engaging in acts of state terrorism, and of sponsoring terrorism. At the peak of these tensions came the Mavi Marmara flotilla incident in 2010. For the first time in Turkish history since World War I, civilian Turkish citizens lost their lives to gunfire by the armed forces of another country. In yet another reversal, Turkish-Syrian relations soured dramatically as a result of the Syrian uprising and Turkey's decision to support the Syrian opposition in 2011. This was the first time in recent history when Turkey had tense relations with Israel and Syria at the same time. Despite the initiation of a process of diplomatic normalization with Israel in 2013, it did not produce any results until last month. In a surprise move on June 27th, the Prime Ministers of Israel and Turkey made a simultaneous declaration to announce an agreement for a return to normal diplomatic ties.

This paper tackles the question of the explanation for the successful completion of this process now, in contrast to many previous attempts over the last six years. In offering an answer, this article focuses on changes in regional geostrategic dynamics that have created new incentives for both Turkey and Israel not only to mend ties but also to build a new strategic alliance. Regional geostrategic dimensions for Turkey are closely linked to its domestic political landscape, and particularly the Kurdish issue. The end of the peace process and the resurgence of violent confrontation with the PKK has changed Turkey's strategic calculations in dealing with the Kurdish issue, particularly in the context of the Syrian conflict. In northern Syria, PKK-linked Kurdish groups have expanded their territorial control thanks to the international support and recognition they have obtained as a formidable force against the ISIS.

Historical Background

Turkey became the first Muslim nation to recognize Israel in 1949, while Arab nations refused to accept the partition plan and declared war on Israel instead, ending in Israeli victory. During the Cold War years, Israel and Turkey remained close allies of the United States. In reaction to Israel's close ties with the United States, nationalist Arab regimes including Egypt and Syria sought alliances with the Soviet Union. It should also be mentioned that the Arab regimes' choice of the Soviet Union was based more on strategic than ideological reasons. The US decision to cancel its offer to finance the Aswan Dam, for example, played a major role in Nasser's decision to nationalize the Suez Canal and move towards the Soviets in 1956.¹

During this time, Turkey's primary motivation was to curtail the expansion of Soviet influence in the region and thus it took the initiative in trying to expand the anti-Soviet Baghdad Pact to include more Arab countries. This attempt was strongly opposed by Israel,

which wanted to include Turkey as part of its alliance in the periphery system which Israel aimed to build with Turkey, Iran and Ethiopia, as well as non-Arab minorities in Arab countries such as the Iraqi Kurds. The creation of an alternative alliance system between Turkey and the Arab states under the rubric of the Baghdad Pact directly contradicted Israeli strategic objectives. In turn, Menderes considered Israel's attempts to forge close economic and military ties with Turkey as detrimental to his own strategic initiatives in the Arab world.² However, Menderes' goal to expand the pact failed when Iraq joined the revisionist Arab states after a military coup in 1958. The subsequent formation of CENTO included only the Northern Tier states, and thus did not directly contradict the Israeli objective of keeping Turkey isolated from the region.

The 1967 war was a decisive victory for Israel against the nationalist Arab camp led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, who did not survive this frustrating defeat. Anwar El Sadat signed the Camp David Accords with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin in 1978, radically changing the strategic orientation of Egypt and ending its revisionist ambitions. So far the Arab-Israeli question had remained a confrontation between Arab states and Israel, but after 1967, as Israel refused to withdraw from its occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, Palestinian organizations, and chiefly the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), became major actors in the conflict in and of themselves. Turkey did not have a consolidated approach to the Palestinian question in the 1970s due to its fractured domestic politics. Conservative Turkish governments preferred to deal with the issue in the framework the Organization of Islamic Conference, established in 1969 by conservative, oil-rich Arab monarchies. Following the recognition of the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people by the Arab League in 1974, Turkey recognized it and announced its



decision to allow the opening of a PLO office in Ankara: it was the leftist-nationalist Bülent Ecevit who allowed the bureau to be opened. During these years the leftist camp in the Turkish political spectrum was more strongly interested in the Palestinian question than the conservatives, with many leading leftist activists training in PLO camps in Syria and Lebanon.³ Despite Western categorization of Yasser Arafat as a terrorist leader, Prime Minister Ecevit hosted him as a state guest in Ankara in 1979 and expressed his support for building a Palestinian state.

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For Turkey, Israel's significance was largely limited to its powerful influence over American politics thanks to the Israeli lobby in the United States. The support of this lobby was a particularly significant weapon against the influence of the anti-Turkish Greek lobby, which played a major role in the American decision to impose an arms embargo on Turkey following its intervention into Cyprus in 1974. Furthermore, the Armenian lobby also increased its efforts, lobbying Congress to pass a resolution that would accept the events of 1915 as a genocide. In response, Israel obtained Turkey's participation in the alliance of the periphery system which Israel aimed to build with Turkey, Iran and Ethiopia, as well as non-Arab minorities in Arab countries such as Iraqi Kurds. Turkey's significance for Israel further increased in 1979 following the Iranian Islamic revolution even though, as Trita Parsi argues, Israeli-Iranian cooperation continued throughout the 1980s in the context of the Iran-Iraq War.⁴

This functionalist approach to Israel changed in the new political context in the aftermath

of the 1991 Gulf War. With the departure of Turgut Özal, who forced the military to keep a relatively low profile in politics, the military gained new power in Turkish domestic politics and obtained control over policies regarding the Kurdish insurgency. Israel gained new meaning in the eyes of the Turkish security establishment as a possible military ally against the Kurdish insurgency, which was being supported by Syria. The PKK had now obtained a new operational arena in Northern Iraq, benefiting from the power vacuum that emerged after the war. Turkey was also worried about a new security alliance between Syria and Greece. This situation prompted senior Turkish diplomat Şükrü Elekdağ to develop a new security doctrine, the "two and a half war strategy". Turkey would design a new security strategy that would enable it to fight against three enemies at the same time (Syria, Greece and the PKK).⁵ Israel emerged as a counter-balance against these potential enemies. The coming to power of the Islamist Welfare Party led by Necmettin Erbakan in a coalition government in 1996 appeared to endanger this relationship. Yet the military made it clear to Erbakan that it would not allow Israeli-Turkish military relations to be jeopardized.⁶ It then slowly increased its pressure on Erbakan, forcing him to sign significant military cooperation agreements with Israel and finally to resign as Prime Minister in 1997. The military continued to exert pressure on subsequent governments. In the same year, the Turkish military successfully pressured Syria to close down the PKK camps on its soil and expel the group's leader, Abdullah Ocalan. Turkey's military cooperation with Israel is assumed to have played a key role in convincing Syria of the seriousness of Turkish military. One key feature of the foreign policy mentality as during the period of instability after the military attempted to intervene in civilian politics on February 28, 1997 was its cold approach to the EU membership process, which the generals saw as detrimental for



the country's territorial integration.⁷ In other words, the European integration process was then replaced by a deeper security cooperation with Israel.

The February 28 process resulted in a massive public reaction compounded by the deep economic crisis and a string of artificial, weak coalition governments. In the midst of this political fragmentation, the newly established Justice and Development Party (JDP) won the 2002 elections. Despite coming from an Islamist background, the new party combined liberal and democratic perspectives with conservative values. Accordingly, the foreign policy vision of the JDP emphasized the EU integration process as being at the core of its foreign policy perspective. Avoiding any confrontational discourse in relation to Israel, the new government also aimed to forge warm ties with powerful Israeli lobby groups in the United States. Yet the government gradually changed this neutral stance in reaction to a series of events: the 2003 Iraq War; Israel's alleged support for the Iraqi Kurds and the PKK; Israel's targeted assassination of disabled Hamas leader Shaikh Ahmad Yassin and later Abdulaziz Rantisi; and Israel's military offensive on Gaza in December 2008-January 2009 in which more than one thousand civilians lost their lives. All these events created a strong wave of anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiments in Turkish public opinion. Prime Minister Erdoğan, in one unprecedentedly harsh speech, labelled Israel a "terrorist state" that "massacres innocent children."⁸ In 2009, at the Davos Summit, Erdogan walked away from a panel discussion in which he participated with Israeli President Shimon Peres, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon and the chief of the Arab League Amr Moussa. In turn, the Israeli government became upset at Turkey for building formal diplomatic ties with Hamas and for allowing anti-Israeli films to be aired on the state-owned TV channel TRT. In January 2010, Israeli Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon staged a televised

meeting with Turkey's Tel Aviv Ambassador, in which he made him sit on a lower sofa and verbally rebuked him in Hebrew facing the cameras. Turkey considered this event an insult and obtained a written apology from Israel. Shortly afterwards, Erdogan described Israel as a threat to regional peace on the occasion of the inauguration of TRT's Arabic channel, warning that Turkey would not sit idle in the case of another attack on Gaza.

The Mavi Marmara Incident as a Major Turning Point

Despite all these tensions in relations, Turkey did not end its diplomatic ties with Israel. However, on May 31, 2010, Turkish-Israeli relations suffered a major blow due to an Israeli attack on a Turkish ship carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza, which caused the death of nine Turkish citizens. Having declared Gaza under its naval blockade, Israel had warned that any vessel approaching Gaza would be attacked. In response, Turkey reduced its diplomatic representation in Israel to the minimum level and presented three conditions for the resumption of normal diplomatic ties: an apology, compensation to the families of the victims, and the removal of the blockade on Gaza. Erdoğan accepted Netanyahu's apology which he conveyed in a phone conversation, while a process of negotiations has started over the other two conditions. However, this process did not yield any result because Turkey firmly insisted that all of its conditions be met.

Yet on June 27th, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his Turkish counterpart Binali Yıldırım made a simultaneous statement in which they announced that their governments had reached an agreement of normalization. According to this agreement, Israel would provide a compensation fund totaling 20 million US dollars to the families of victims. Turkey would be allowed to send humanitarian aid to Gaza through the port of Ashdod in



Israel subject to Israeli control. Turkey would also construct a hospital and housing projects. Furthermore, according to Haaretz, Israel agreed that Turkey would be able to maintain Hamas diplomatic representation on the condition that “Hamas will not carry out any terrorist or military activity against Israel from Turkish territory.”⁹

Prior to the agreement, Turkish Economy Minister Nihat Zeybekçi had described Israel as a significant ally, saying that the two countries would normalize their relations on the condition that Israel guaranteed the basic necessities of Gazans.¹⁰ In other words, Turkey scaled back its condition of the removal of the blockade to permission for Turkish aid to pass through in order to provide for the basic necessities of Gazans. The question that comes first to mind is what changed in Turkish and Israeli calculations to facilitate and speed the normalization process that has been ongoing for the last six years. The answer to this question requires an examination of the changing geostrategic landscape in the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the Syrian civil war.

Strategic Background of the Agreement

Following the 2003 Iraq War, Turkey entered into stiff geostrategic competition with Iran. This competition required Turkey to build soft power for itself in the Arab world. Turkey made some attempts to build close ties with various Arab communities and organizations that were considered as having close ties with Iran, including Hamas. Several members of the American political establishment also believed that Turkish-Hamas relations were strategically important and “should be viewed as part of a broader effort to diminish the influence of Iran in the region.”¹¹

Yet, the start of the Arab Spring changed Turkey’s strategic calculations. The ensuing civil war in Syria and Turkey’s decision to support the armed opposition created an

unprecedented situation of dual tensions with Damascus and Tel Aviv. These tensions also complicated Turkey’s relations with the Iran-Russia orbit on the one hand and the West on the other. Adding to these tensions, Turkey cut its diplomatic relationship with Egypt following the coup that toppled the democratically elected President Muhammed Mursi in 2013. Hence Turkey ended up in a situation in which it lacked ambassador-level representation in three key Middle East countries: Syria, Israel and Egypt. Moreover, its relationship with Saudi Arabia became tense as a result of Turkey’s clear support for the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization which Saudi Arabia considers as a terrorist movement. This tension with Saudi Arabia resulted in a more fragmented Syrian opposition as the two countries gave support to rival Sunni groups.

The sectarian policies followed by the central government in Iraq and the extended civil war in Syria paved the way for the rise and expansion of ISIS

The sectarian policies followed by the central government in Iraq and the extended civil war in Syria paved the way for the rise and expansion of ISIS. Gradually ISIS terror activities gained global reach as suicide bombers staged attacks in Europe and the United States. ISIS terrorism damaged Turkey’s position in the region. Even though the Obama Administration’s diplomatic initiative on Iran had already started, growing ISIS terrorism also contributed to the image that Iran likes to propagate of itself as a key element of regional stability, paving the way for Iran’s expansion of its sphere of influence through sectarian policies.¹² The nuclear deal that Iran signed with the West in 2015 boosted Iran’s prestige, allowing it to be integrated into the Western economic system and providing it with a massive amount of diplomatic legitimacy to



help it build its regional hegemony. David Samuels asserts that Washington's passive stance in Syria is largely assumed to be the result of its willingness to compromise in order not to harm the nuclear deal that would allow the United States to disentangle itself from the Middle East:

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"By eliminating the fuss about Iran's nuclear program, the administration hoped to eliminate a source of structural tension between the two countries, which would create the space for America to disentangle itself from its established system of alliances with countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel, and Turkey. With one bold move, the administration would effectively begin the process of large-scale disentanglement from the Middle East."¹³

Clearly the United States is disengaging from the Middle East and returning back to its classical offshore balancing strategy, this time leaving Iran in a much stronger position. American realists defend this strategy as based on a rational calculation of US interests rather than moral commitments. Accordingly, "the United States would encourage other countries to take the lead in checking rising powers, intervening itself only when necessary."¹⁴ In 2003, President George W. Bush overthrew the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, paving the way for a Shia regime. In the current Syrian crisis, President Obama refuses to intervene and thus leaves the opposition alone in the face of the Assad

regime and its backers. The interventionism of Bush and non-interventionism of Obama appear contradictory, yet they have both practically served to increase Iran's regional clout and shake the balance in the Middle East.

In the meantime, the ISIS terror threat has allowed Russia to project its military power in Syria and to enter into a situation of confrontation with Turkey. Turkey's downing of a Russian military aircraft in November 2015, while it was in Turkish airspace, has created a crisis in Turkish-Russian relations at an enormous financial cost to Turkey. President Erdogan has written two letters in which he expressed his sorrow over the event and hope for a speedy normalization, which is still in process. Furthermore, Turkey's relationship with the United States is suffering from tensions as a result of American support to PKK-affiliated Kurdish groups in Syria. Turkey is deeply worried about the establishment of a PKK-linked Kurdish state stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to Iraq in Syria along its border.

Finally, Turkey's refugee agreement with Europe is at risk of being cancelled due to Turkey's refusal to meet all of the conditions for visa liberalization. This agreement was the product of a diplomatic effort led by former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, and following his departure, there is a clear loss of appetite in the European integration process. President Erdoğan has openly declared his support for a referendum to end the Turkish membership process.¹⁵

In addition to all of these foreign policy complications for Turkey, one should add the end of the peace process and the resumption of PKK terrorist activity. At the same time, the country is being targeted by ISIS terrorist attacks on Turkish civilian targets, such as the suicide bombings at Istanbul Ataturk Airport. Terrorism has clearly become the number one agenda item in Turkish politics today.



Under these circumstances, it was only expected that Turkey would initiate normalization moves in its foreign policy in order to “reduce the number of its enemies, and increase the number of its friends” as Prime Minister Binali Yildirim stated in his first address to the JDP parliamentary group meeting.¹⁶

Israel has moved closer to Russia, building a strategic partnership that is labelled “an alliance of necessity”

For Israel, conditions in the region were only slightly better. Despite the efforts of Israel and the Israeli lobby in the United States, the Israeli government was unable to prevent the Obama administration’s decision to sign the nuclear deal with Iran. Benjamin Netanyahu’s futile efforts towards this aim included a talk at the joint session of US Congress in March 2015. In response, Israel has moved closer to Russia, building a strategic partnership that is labelled “an alliance of necessity”. Just like Turkey, Israel is deeply disturbed that this agreement has increased Iran’s regional clout. However, Turkish and Israeli interests diverged during the Arab Spring, as Turkey gave support to the process which brought the Hamas-linked Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt. Although Turkey shared Israel’s anxiety, it was an ardent supporter of Arab Spring. Prime Minister Erdogan even claimed that Israel was behind the coup in Egypt, but avoided declaring the same about Saudi Arabia.¹⁷

Rather than Turkey, it was Saudi Arabia that shared similar security concerns on the Arab Spring as Israel. As senior journalist David Hearst claims, Israel and Saudi Arabia had secretly forged an alliance: “Mossad and Saudi intelligence officials meet regularly: The two sides conferred when the former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi was about to be deposed in Egypt and they are hand in glove on Iran, both in preparing for an Israel

strike over Saudi airspace and in sabotaging the existing nuclear programme.” Now that the Arab Spring is over, Turkey has mended its differences with Saudi Arabia, building a common security force and allowing Saudi air force to be stationed at the Incirlik air base in Adana; it was quite natural for Israel to join them in this new regional alliance system, as the pro-government media in Turkey has already declared.¹⁸ It is also noteworthy that the warmest contacts that President Erdogan had during his visit to the United States in March was not with American officers but with the Israeli lobby groups including AIPAC.

Despite all the tensions in the relationship, the volume of trade between the two has increased by nearly 20 percent between 2009 and 2015

There are also significant economic motivations for both Turkey and Israel to normalize their relations. Despite all the tensions in the relationship, the volume of trade between the two has increased by nearly 20 percent between 2009 and 2015.¹⁹ Turkey hopes to attract Israeli tourists to boost its ailing tourism sector, which has severely suffered from the loss of Russian tourists as well as as a result of terrorism incidents in the country. In addition, perhaps the principal factor in convincing Turkey of Israel’s significance and vice versa was the lucrative natural gas deal that may be on the table following normalization. With a proposed pipeline that could transfer Israel’s rich natural gas reserves off the Mediterranean coast to Turkey. Israel could transfer an estimated 30 billion meters cubed of natural gas to Turkey through a proposed 550 km long pipeline.²⁰ Turkey approximately needs 50 billion meters cubed of natural gas per year, and about 55 percent of this is supplied by Russia. Iran is the second largest supplier to Turkey. Given Turkey’s strategic differences with Russia and Iran, it is natural that Turkey would seek to diversify its suppliers and, in addition to Azerbaijan, Israel is a significant option in this sense.



Concluding Remarks

Turkish politicians have always regarded Israel as a factor through which they could win leverage in the United States, where Turkey lacked a significant population-based lobby power. Yet close relations with Israel has created a strategic burden complicating Turkey's relations with the Arab world. The only exception was the February 28 process, in which the Turkish generals running the country's security policy regarded Israel as a strategic asset. The JDP government years witnessed a dramatic worsening in relations, culminating in the Mavi Marmara incident. At the same time, as the US-Iran rapprochement shows, Israel's capabilities for shaping US policies towards the region are becoming more limited. Nevertheless, in the context of complications in Turkish foreign policy, largely due to the Syrian crisis, the Turkish government appears to have revised its interpretation of Israel's own strategic significance.

During the February 28 process, strategic links with Israel were imposed on the democratically-elected Erbakan government by the military, and pro-Israeli circles in the United States voiced strong support for the re-militarization of Turkish politics. Today there is no such situation, as a democratically-elected President enjoying an allied single-party majority government is the only strong actor in Turkish politics. Arguably, Erdoğan's strong charisma coupled with his Islamic credentials makes this agreement much more palatable for the conservative and Islamic-leaning segments of Turkish population. Reacting to the silence of Islamist groups on this issue, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the secularist opposition party CHP, has speculated that, if this agreement was signed by his party, Islamist groups would stage massive demonstrations against it.²¹ Now the Islamists are the driving force behind a new strategic re-orientation of Turkish foreign policy in which the old foe Israel

becomes a key actor. This odd situation begs an explanation.

Changes in Turkish-Israeli relations were always a function of changes in the geostrategic landscape of the Middle East, which is caused mainly by the rise of Iran, the projection of Russian military power in the Middle East, and the changes in US strategic calculations towards the Middle East. The United States withdrawal from the Middle East has left its allies in a situation in which they have to confront both Iran and Russia on their own terms. For Turkey there are not only both strategic and economic incentives to normalize its relations with Israel but also to deepen it to the status of a new regional alliance. This is in fact a major departure from not only the foreign policy perspective followed by the ruling JDP since 2002, but also from Turkey's general strategic perspective. With the brief exception of the February 28 process, Turkey historically considered Israel as strategically significant not on its own value but because it provided access to the US policy-making process. Despite soaring relations between the United States and Israel, largely due to the rapprochement between the US and Iran, Turkey is moving towards a new position of accepting Israel as a strategic ally.

The United States withdrawal from the Middle East has left its allies in a situation in which they have to confront both Iran and Russia on their own terms

However, democracies are regimes in which domestic public opinion is a major ingredient for foreign policy. For this reason, future relations with Israel will be based on extremely shaky grounds unless Israel seriously addresses the Palestinian issue. Turkish-Israeli relations lack popular support, as they are not based on common definitions of friendship and enemies rooted at the



popular level. Israel is among the least popular foreign countries in Turkey, and according to public opinion polls Turkey enjoys only a slightly better perception in Israel.²² Any future crisis on the Palestinian front and the silence of the Turkish government towards it will lead to a questioning of Erdogan's policies and possibly damage to his personal image. Already there are signs that his distancing himself from the Mavi Marmara incident despite the fact that he clearly supported the aid flotilla at the time when it happened is provoking reactions, albeit muted. It is also clear that Turkey's rapprochement with the United States will bring Turkey under increased rhetorical attacks from both radical Islamists and regional competitors, chiefly Iran. At the same time, this rapprochement complicates Turkey's strategy of bringing Hamas out of the Iranian orbit, a strategy that appears to have worked well until now, as Hamas has closed its Damascus headquarters. According to Israeli sources, Hamas has already started negotiations with Iran in order to repair its ties.²³ Hence, only time will tell if Israel proves to be a strategic asset or strategic liability for Turkey.

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