

# Vicious Cycles in the Middle East and Africa Continue to Threaten US National Security Despite Efforts to Withdraw



Featuring Emily Estelle

OCTOBER 11, 2020

*The US is routinely confronted with crises that worsen and expand in scope over time. Modern technology and global interconnectedness have made these self-reinforcing crises increasingly common and intractable. In this episode of Overwatch, Emily Estelle discusses this phenomenon and the danger it presents to US national security.*

## **Jacob Taylor:**

This is Overwatch, a podcast presented by the Institute for The Study of War. I'm Jacob Taylor, the United States has routinely confronted with crises that appear at first to be far off and unimportant to U.S. National Security interests. But that only seemed to worsen and expand in scope and importance over time. Such self-reinforcing crises have been the bane of great powers and empires going back millennia, but modern technology and global interconnectedness has made them all the more common and intractable. Today, many argue that the U.S. needs to distance itself from the conflict zones of the Middle East and Africa, to make a pivot to great power competition against China and Russia. But the question of how to deal with spreading crises remains. Emily Estelle has studied this phenomenon and is with us today to discuss its dangers and some possible solutions. Emily, thank you for being here.

## **Emily Estelle:**

Thanks so much for having me. It's great to be here.

## **Jacob:**

So you've been writing about a concept called the Vicious Cycle. Could you give us a basic rundown of this theory and what it attempts to define?

## **Emily:**

Yeah, so my work focuses on Salafi-Jihadi groups, Al-Qaeda, ISIS, et cetera, but I studied those groups in the context that they operate in. And one trend that's jumped out at me over the past couple of years, is that the context that they're in is getting much more complicated, at least in some of these cases, over time. So the conflict zones that jihadist groups exist in are getting more and more international in how they function. There are more players involved, other countries bringing in more advanced weaponry, more geopolitics are at stake in these conflicts. And meanwhile, jihadist groups are still operating in that space.

So my theory is an attempt to identify the relation between Salafi-Jihadi groups and geopolitical competition in these multi-level conflicts. So by multi-level, I'm thinking of cases where you have a civil war or conflict at the local or national level, but it's also drawing in regional States or global players who are pursuing their own interests at multiple levels at the same time.

So I argue that geopolitical competition and extremist movements, they don't just co-exist in these conflict zones or what you could call a fragile environment. They actually reinforce each other, hence the vicious cycle. So, the involvement of external players makes conflicts spiral or continue on or get larger and more violent. And that, in turn, worsens the conditions that fuel extremism. Meanwhile, the presence of extremist groups provides justification for external players to intervene. So, anyone can say that they're doing counter-terrorism in some fashion, but that might actually be cover for pursuing a different objective that doesn't anything to do with the actual terrorist groups that are operating in that space.

**Jacob:**

Can you tell us a bit more about the details of the conditions that fuel extremism? How exactly do the extremists that you, study tap into, or take advantage of the conditions that they find in a crisis environment or a fragile environment, like you mentioned?

**Emily:**

That question actually kind of gets at the heart of what Salafi-Jihadi groups are and what they seek to achieve. So I'll give a little bit of background. We call these groups terrorist groups sometimes because that's what we see from them. And that most effects out of life and history here in the U.S. but terrorism is a tactic. It's not the objective that groups like Al-Qaeda, groups like the Islamic State are actually trying to achieve. What they actually want in the end is to be governing a State, an Islamic State or a polity under their definition of a fundamentalist version of Islamic Law. And they seek to bring that polity about through violence, terrorism is one way to do that. The fact that these groups are pursuing governance means that they have an opportunity to succeed when a population is vulnerable, when its relationship with the State has been broken in such a way that the governance that people are experiencing is either absent, neglectful, harmful, et cetera.

So Salafi-Jihadi groups pursued a couple of different strategies to try and take advantage of such a situation and become the governing force themselves, mediate local conflicts, even if they had a role in starting them or making them worse, they'll come in as the mediator. They might claim to defend vulnerable communities from aggressors who might be local rivals, or if the State tends to crack down on a certain population, then a jihadist group can come in and defend them. This means that when jihadist groups come in and are very coercive, and of course using force and brutality as they are, local populations might not have much choice, but to either kind of accept their offer to govern or to leave. So in terms of a vicious cycle, when you have external forces coming into an already troubled local dynamic and making it worse, say have supercharging the capability of security forces to cause harm or extending a conflict that may have been able to otherwise resolve locally, then there's a larger seam or a bigger opportunity for jihadist groups to come in and both enforce their will violently, but also provide governance in an environment where people aren't going to be able to access it otherwise.

**Jacob:**

Can you give us an example of a place in the world where this theory is in action, where the vicious cycle is alive and occurring?

**Emily:**

Libya is one case that's been influential in my thinking. So I'll walk through that example. I think it's a helpful one. Libya is one case where the involvement of external players and the mapping on of regional and global conflicts onto the local dynamic has prolonged or heightened the Libyan civil war or whichever phase of the Libyan civil war we're currently in, while also creating favorable conditions for the expansion of Salafi-Jihadi groups inside Libya. So we have to kind of go back to at least the beginning of this phase of Libya's history, which is 2011, fall of Gaddafi, the NATO intervention, et cetera. I won't have attempt to litigate or re-litigate that entire dynamic now because that's worth its own conversation. But the basic kind of theme to take away is that Gadhafi had so hyper-personalized the Libyan system and avoided building any sort of real state, such that when he was gone the system just collapsed completely. And you had this surge of militias that became more powerful than what remained of any official security forces. And the country became very fragmented. And that trend has only continued.

Now the fact that Libya collapsed the way it did made it a competition ground at a really pivotal time across the Arab world. If you look back at 2011, you had the Egyptian Revolution, as one example of this regional compe-

tition for who was going to be in power in the Arab world was playing out. So you see this in kind of the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to the presidency in Egypt, and then the subsequent crew that brought President Sisi to power. The different countries that lined up on either side of that dynamic are pursuing similar interests across the whole region and are to this day. So, some of those countries are Egypt itself, which of course has interests inside its neighbor, Libya, but also the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey among the key Middle Eastern players that started from the beginning of the 2011 revolution in Libya back in different players. And they held onto that influence over time.

One key feature of Libya's last decade is that while the U.S. and NATO were very involved, of course, in 2011, they didn't stick around and some of the other players did and really built up these kind of lines of influence and ability to work with Libyan proxies. That influence continued to matter over time as different Libyan factions have tried to gain control of the State and its wealth. And so, years after Gaddafi's fall, Libya actually kind of collapsed into civil war again in 2014 and essentially split in half. And you started to see the influence of these other players happen with airstrikes coming from external forces, media campaigns, foreign money funding, and also kind of the diplomatic level of giving legitimacy by meeting with different Libyan players in a way that really fueled that conflict back in 2014.

**Jacob:**

Well, I can suspect from what you've already said, what your answer will be on this. Did interventions from external powers mitigate or fuel the vicious cycle in Libya once that cycle got going?

**Emily:**

Yes, I've shown my cards here, but I think that the intervention has certainly fueled a cycle inside Libya. I'll weigh up the history a little bit more. Starting with that war in 2014, there was really an opening up of space for more Salafi-Jihadi activity in Libya. This trend had already started after 2011, but if you look at 2014 and 2015, as the civil war was really going, and then as it kind of hardened into two sides on either sides of the country, seams opened up. The most notable outcome of that from a counter-terrorism perspective was the rise of the Islamic State in Libya and the takeover by the Islamic State of a city in Central Libya during that time. So that was basically right on the seam between the two different sides, the two main sides in the civil war, to over-simplify. And that's a really good illustration of how a local war fueled by external players with their own interests created conditions that allowed the Salafi-Jihadi group to make great strides.

Now, things have certainly changed since then. And so I think we're in a kind of a different phase of what I would call the cycle now. There was a big counter-terrorism effort by a lot of different players in Libya and with external support to, for example, get ISIS out of that city and also kind of defeat different militant groups in different parts of the country. The civil war in Libya also kind of froze essentially. It had simmered down into 2018.

The dynamic that's worth calling out next though, is that at a moment 2018 into 2019, when it looked like Libya's war might be headed towards resolution, there was a big UN conference coming up. Things were not resolving in the way that some of the Libyan factions, and then more importantly, some of their foreign backers, things were not resolving in the way that they wanted and so they restarted the war. So the next key point is April, 2019 when the force that's known as the Libyan National Army led by Haftar, who's the warlord that you'll hear about, he basically tried to storm the Capitol Tripoli. Now, that was with the backing of some of his key allies, Egypt, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Russia, et cetera. He did not have the capability to do that without external funding, military support, et cetera. So here we have an example where Libya may have been on a better trajectory, but the regional conflict made it so that that progress could not continue. Speed forward to today. The situation's gotten really nasty and we've seen major involvement on the part of Turkey. On the other side, Libya is very blatantly kind of

a Turkey-Russia conflict, a Turkey-UAE-Egypt, conflict. You've got all of these other dynamics, including spill-over into Eastern Mediterranean Naval issues. And so Libya is very much become a theater for these bigger things in a way that is hindering the resolution of the conflict inside Libya to bring that cycle back to the Salafi-Jihadi problem. There's still, for example, a lingering Islamic State presence in Libya, it's very weak compared to what it was, but it's carved out a haven and that group's ability to continue to operate and to rebuild over time is based on the environment it's in. And my forecast is that, because of all of the different involvement of these players in the Libya war, that war is going to continue. And we're going to see a next iteration of a major Salafi-Jihadi group in that space because the conditions that allowed it in previously were never resolved and were in fact made worse as the conflict expanded.

**Jacob:**

Now, in order to kind of tease out the specifics of the vicious cycle theory, and not just in how it applies to Libya, but how it applies to struggling countries in general. Could you talk a little bit about any other places in the world that are suffering from the vicious cycle or from a vicious cycle, and specifically identify the common themes and elements between these various conflict areas?

**Emily:**

One other case that's really useful is Syria, which in some ways might be kind of the archetype of the dynamic that I'm trying to discuss. Syria is obviously very complicated, so let me focus on one particular aspect of that conflict. If you look at the Russian intervention in Syria initially, the air campaign in support of Assad, that was framed by the Kremlin as a counter-terrorism campaign meant to help defeat ISIS at the time. And actually, one of the reasons that narrative didn't end up sticking for Russia is in part because of ISW's work highlighting where the airstrikes were actually going, which was to target the moderate opposition to Assad. So, under the guise of the counter-terrorism campaign, Russia was helping Assad basically eliminate any reasonable opposition to him and create facts on the ground that would make it much harder to kind of oust Assad from his position. Then, in turn making, actually strengthening, the jihadists inside of Syria rather than working against it.

So, essentially doing the opposite of what the stated goal was. That kind of double talk and the exploitation of the idea of counter-terrorism, you kind of see that all over the place now. And I think it's, in part, a symptom of kind of how the concept of the war on terror was used. But in this particular case, you can see this kind of weaponization of the idea of fighting a legitimate threat to achieve a political objective instead. Playing Syria forward now, it's increasingly obvious that this has become a theater for regional conflict. The Turkey-Russia dynamic is one that's very obvious in Syria, and that is now increasingly obvious across large parts of Africa, Asia, and Europe, where those two States are at odds in a lot of theaters. And they kind of play chess between all of them, Syria, Libya, Armenia, Azerbaijan, et cetera. Now, as the kind of international geopolitical component has come to the foreground in Syria, we focus less on the ISIS dynamic. But if you're following analysis on this, including ISW's work or watching the early stages of an ISIS resurgence because progress that could have been made to close the governance gaps and to stabilize the country hasn't been made, because it's been subsumed by this kind of geopolitical firestorm.

Moving to another example that's not discussed as much, Yemen has aspects of this same dynamic. What was a local war, the Arab Spring, and then subsequent fallout in Yemen has become regional as well, in part because Saudi Arabia and its allies feared Yemen becoming a kind of pro-Iranian enclave. In trying to prevent that, the Saudi-led coalition has actually pushed the El-Hufi movement in Northern Yemen closer to Iran. So objective backfired there. Another example inside Yemen is that the way that the intervening States have tried to work with Yemen partners and establish influence in the country has actually heightened secessionist sentiment in the South and kind of set Yemen up for another round of conflict in the future that's going to reopen scenes that have bene

fited Al-Qaeda in the past. One way of looking at the cycle is that there's kind of progress actually fighting jihadist groups up to a point, but then the conflict is overtaken by these larger dynamics in a way that prevents it from coming to an end. And that allows this resilient and resurgence of Salafi-Jihadi groups that we've seen time and again, and in different theaters.

**Jacob:**

So pivoting now to the United States, how does the vicious cycle relate to U.S. activity in the world? And what role does the U.S. play in some of these vicious cycles, if any?

**Emily:**

I see the vicious cycle as kind of, in part, a symptom of the weakening of the international order. And part of that is the US stepping back from its traditional leadership role, the weakening of alliances, et cetera, that facilitates the vicious cycle dynamic. It's not the only cause, but kind of looking big picture, when we're talking about kind of States involving or States getting involved in proxy warfare or trying to pursue their objectives blatantly, but also in violation of say UN resolutions that they've not really subscribed to. You're seeing an erosion of international norms because there's a lack of ability, lack of political will, et cetera, for some of the stakeholders in those norms to actually help enforce them.

To make that more concrete and look at Libya specifically, there are a lot of reasons why the US sought to avoid leadership on the Libya file. And some of those are certainly valid arguments. What's happened though is that kind of the absence of a leader or even a solid coalition on stabilizing Libya has facilitated this transformation into a regional conflict. More recently U.S. policy in the last couple of years has been inconsistent and confusing, mixed messages coming from different parts of the U.S. government in a way that undermines the positive effects of certain policies.

So, to characterize the U.S. policy in this case, there are a lot of lower level initiatives working to improve local governance, trying to help with technical issues, trying to help with humanitarian issues that have been really positive, but they're not adding up towards actually resolving the overall conflict because the diplomatic muscle basically isn't there. The willingness to engage with the allies and partners who are doing destructive things in this theater, it doesn't rank high enough in our priorities to want to engage with Turkey or with the UAE on this. And I think that's a mistake because of the precedent it's setting and the spillover into other theaters or the threats to core interests that do come up over time.

**Jacob:**

Some of the things you describe, you mentioned some of the perhaps seemingly erratic policy choices by the United States over the past several years and spanning several administrations, but there have been some larger policy shifts that have been intentional. So, for example, the U.S. has been actively trying to get out of the Middle East and, in some assessments, is shifting from a counter-terrorism focus to great power competition. So, with all that in mind, why should the U.S. focus on these countries that are affected by the vicious cycle, given that many of them fall outside the great power competition that has become a primary focus of the U.S. government?

**Emily:**

It's a great question and a discussion worth having. My position is that you can't actually draw sharp lines between... We really want to move from the counter-terrorism box into the great power competition box. And that's just not how the world works. The great power competition is happening in these spaces. It's more obvious with

Russia, but if you look at Russian engagement and use of private military companies inside Libya, now they're set

ting up to have enduring military position and air defenses on the Central Mediterranean in a way that will make that a contested space that the U.S. has not militarily prepared for. We haven't had to treat the Mediterranean unit as contested in a very long time, and that affects what assets we have for different missions that we're pursuing. And it affects our ability to continue to compete in the great power competition as we're conceiving of it.

Another thing is the conflicts that we see as local or the crises that we see as local and far away, not all the time, but some of the time they get a lot before we're aware of it. And once they've gotten much messier and harder to solve, they are our problem. If you look at Libya now, it's part of a crisis for NATO, particularly the way Turkey's become involved and Turkish-Greek tensions, and by extension Turkish-French tensions in the Mediterranean are playing out. We're seeing a real challenge to NATO's cohesion and the opportunity provided by the Libya conflict was part of that.

So I think, in some ways there's a failure of imagination to see where things that seem far away at first can become bigger problems. The risk, of course, would be seeing everything as existential and completely destroying our ability to prioritize. And that's a huge challenge in some of the work I'm trying to do now, is identifying what the early warning signs are and trying to forecast so that you can actually parse which of these things are likely to become a real threat to U.S. interests or not, because we certainly can't do everything. One other piece is that, while we shouldn't overstate the threat from the Salafi-Jihadi movement, it is a real threat. And I think one thing we're at risk of as we try and pivot to some of these great power challenges is the Black Swan events, or maybe not a Black Swan event because we should be able to predict this one to a degree. If there's another major attack coming out of one of these groups, does that completely shift us again, because we don't have a strategy already in place for the right size response to organizations like this. I think figuring out how to approach these State collapses and things that erode the international order has implications for great power competition and counter-terrorism in ways that we should think about more holistically because they're inherently going to affect each other.

**Jacob:**

Yeah. Even with the implications that you've mentioned, and point well taken, but there are a lot of leaders and policy makers out there who make the argument that threats from nations, like China for example, or Russia, are just far greater than those presented by the groups that play the key roles in the vicious cycle problem that you have identified, but also in the theaters that you've identified. So, how do you answer that argument? The argument that the U.S. should aggressively prioritize competition with China, and secondarily Russia, over involvement in what I think these people would argue are lesser conflicts, such as Libya, such as Syria, such as other areas where the Salafi-Jihadi movement has presence?

**Emily:**

I think part of the problem here is a very kind of narrow conception of great power competition, meaning conventional warfare with Russia and China. And I think what gets missed in part is that both Russia and China, for one thing, have plans to achieve their objectives by avoiding conventional war with us. And so, we can kind of walk ourselves into failure by making that our sole objective. And that's not to say we should be cavalier about the risks of war, but I think what we're missing is the way that this competition actually is going to take place. And it takes place, in part, in these conflict zones, in the gray zone, in the places where order's been eroded. I think you can draw some parallels also across the erosion of international rules and norms in a lot of different contexts and see these vicious cycle conflicts as just one example of that. I kind of think of it as death by a thousand cuts in that, the line shifts all the time for kind of what's permissible, what the U.S. won't push back on, what's allowed to happen, say violations of an arms embargo with no one saying anything and no accountability. And I think a world that operates increasingly on those terms is not one that favors the United States in the longterm. And so I think we need to be a little bit more holistic in how we think about the challenge that we're actually facing, because I think it's

actually larger than just the risk of conventional war. Obviously we have to prioritize, and I agree that our prioritization has been, often, we haven't necessarily scaled our policies in the right way. But I think in the risk to correct that we're running at risk of overcorrection and kind of moving away from having any kind of influence or even awareness in some of the places where the frontier of this competition is going to be happening, such that we won't be seeing it or engaged in it until it's in a much more critical place that's even closer to home.

**Jacob:**

So with all that being said, what is the U.S. doing right now? And how does that relate to what you feel the U.S. should be doing? And what are the challenges that the U.S. faces at present?

**Emily:**

I can actually be slightly optimistic here, which I don't get to be often, so I'll savor it. But there is some positive momentum on basically trying to come up with a better overall policy and strategy for how the U.S. should approach the kinds of failing States and conflict zones where these problems tend to arise. So if you look at the Passage of The Global Fragility Act last year, for one, which requires an inter-agency strategy and planning for addressing fragility as the underlying cause of extremism and some of these other dynamics. I think that's a positive step. The challenge would be getting stuck in a status quo and not actually making a substantive change to strategy. So that's what I'm more worried about now, because I think that we've actually made a lot of progress on the framework and also, moving away from a kind of military only conception of counter-terrorism towards this more holistic approach. So, the next steps are trying to make that into something actually concrete that also advances our priority objectives with regard to great power competition. There are specific things that would matter in the near term as well. I'll keep on the Libya thread because I've been using it. The thing that I wish for the most would be actual strong diplomatic statements and some serious meetings with some of our allies and partners who are engaging really destructively in the Libyan space. I think that's been pushed down the priority list too far. And I think we haven't been willing to do that because we have higher, other interests, at stake with these partners.

But I think the U.S. has undervalued its own influence in some of these cases and ability to actually put pressure on allies and partners. I think we should be more willing to do that because of the precedent that's set in some of these different countries that then spills over into areas we care about even more. I also think that there are some ideas already moving forward and in draft legislation to make this better. Just reporting out what's going on in some of these cases where everyone knows, it's common knowledge, that weapons are coming in and where they're coming from, but because of the nature of the UN Security Council, that information doesn't always come out in the official forum because of members who don't want to see it come out or don't want to see that resolution. So I think the U.S. has a role in just sharing information at a basic level. The information space in these really murky conflicts is one of the kind of important areas of competition itself. And the fact that it's not quite clear what's going on and there are all these competing narratives is to the benefit of malign actors who are trying to skew things in a more negative direction. So I think even just shining light on reality in some of these vicious cycle areas is something that the United States can do well.

To kind of raise some challenges then, obviously we have massive challenges at home right now. And, so I'm a little bit skeptical about seeing any significant evolution in U.S. foreign policy thinking in anything resembling the near term. And I think a lack of creativity and also a lack of political will to take strong stances on what role we want to play in the world, I think that's been a challenge for several administrations now. I think that's probably going to continue. So there's a requirement for the people doing this work to kind of be creative within what's a pretty fraught space. And I'll also flag the challenge of what the U.S. footprint in Africa is. Our primary instrument for engaging in insecure areas like this is Africom, U.S. Africa Command, which has a huge area of responsibility and quite limited resources that might become more limited. And so, I think there's a conversation to have on kind of

a what Africom's role should be, because if you listen to some of the commanders, they're looking for more support from non-military parts of the inner agency to actually lead on some of these issues. And that's not necessarily kind of synced up or forthcoming as it should be.

And then on the security concerns in the military interests that we do have, we have to ask if Africom's resource are going to be resourced for the mission's that it has. Particularly, layering on great power competition to a still existing counter-terrorism mission set is going to create more gaps and challenges there.

**Jacob:**

Just for clarity, within all of these challenges, what are the specific conflicts or specific crises that you are worried about that you see on the horizon? And specifically, what new theaters do you see as being at risk for opening up to or devolving into vicious cycles?

**Emily:**

I'll keep my Africa analyst hat on for that one, because there are a couple of different things that I'm concerned about looking forward. So, when I'm trying to think through kind of what are the next crises, what are the next conflicts, I'm looking at not just kind of what States are unstable, but which are kind of unstable in a way that's going to be favorable to armed extremist groups like Salafi-Jihadi groups, and also which groups, or which States, are going to be pivotal for different regional interests and international players who might want to get involved, that kind of create this perfect storm dynamic.

So, looking across the continent, one obvious area to watch is the the Sahel Region of West Africa, which already has a huge Salafi-Jihadi problem. But we saw a coup in Mali in August, and there's, I think, risk of some domino effect as far as regime stability across several States in that area, which creates a larger risk for kind of general governance collapse. I'm a little bit less concerned about kind of major international involvement in that area, just because it's remote for a lot of the countries. Russia or some of the Middle Eastern States who might be involved. So I'm a little bit less concerned about expansion of regional conflicts, but I am worried about a pretty huge area where Salafi Jihadi groups are establishing themselves and becoming kind of the long-term governance solution for people there. Looking at that as kind of a next significant base for the Salafi-Jihadi movement.

Looking elsewhere, there's also a burgeoning insurgency in Northern Mozambique, which again is not a place that we're accustomed to talking to looking at US foreign policy very much, but what that signifies is the expansion of Salafi-Jihadi insurgencies into Southern Africa and Northern Mozambique is also kind of super resource rich in a way that is already starting to attract attention from not just neighboring States, but also, Wagner Group has been present there too. There's no attraction to some of the Gulf States as well for investments in that space. So that's one that I'm watching as becoming a potential hotspot.

And then my kind of big one that I am worried about down the horizon, that I hope I don't have to get more worried about, is actually Ethiopia because Ethiopia had a tenuous political transition a couple of years ago and has been struggling with intermittent bursts of conflict across different regional States since then, between different ethnic groups and other constituencies. And that's very worrisome in part because Ethiopia is just such a cornerstone state in East Africa, big population, important economy in a way that a significant destabilization in Ethiopia would reverberate throughout the region. We've seen kind of the early indicators that some of the Salafi-Jihadi groups in the region are trying to kind of gain support there, though that's very, very limited at this point. And Ethiopia certainly would attract other interested parties across the broader Eastern Africa, into the Middle East, and also kind of the global players like Russia and China, already has big interest there. So in the unlikely, but serious scenario that you saw some sort of state collapse in Ethiopia, or another cornerstone state on the

continent, then I think we're going to be looking at some of these problems identified in the vicious cycle on a larger scale. And that's the thing that I'm worried about seeing, especially now that smaller conflicts like Libya, for example, have been able to escalate so much. If you do that on a much larger scale, then the risks to global security and to U.S. National Security are going to be that much more severe.

***Jacob:***

Emily Estelle, thank you so much for being here today and sharing your expertise with us.

***Emily:***

My pleasure, always happy to come back.

***Kim Kagan:***

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