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# THE EVOLUTION OF SAUDI-US RELATIONS

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One of the biggest events of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been the Russia-Ukraine war and the biggest consequence of this war, other than the large-scale migration and casualties, has been global inflation and the subsequent hike in the prices of oil. Such a hike in the prices of oil and gasoline (for US consumers) could have serious repercussions for Joe Biden's presidency as the US nears its Congressional and State elections scheduled for November 2022. Hence, Biden decided to make a trip to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in July 2022 to mend relations with Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman and secure a deal that would ensure a surge in oil production between September and December<sup>1</sup>.

This is going to have a significant impact, considering that the world consumes about 100 million barrels of oil every day. The US officials have claimed that they felt "duped by the crown prince's administration"<sup>2</sup>. It is in light of these events that we attempt to examine the evolution of Saudi-US relations and understand how the recent events have brought the already frayed relationship between the two countries to an all-time low.

## Beginning of Oil Diplomacy

Saudi Arabia first discovered its vast quantities of oil in 1938 which gave America an incentive to establish an alliance with the Kingdom soon after. US President Roosevelt asserted the importance of Saudi oil, amidst concerns about US' rapidly diminishing oil production capacity. The leaders of the two countries, President Roosevelt, and King Abdul Aziz met in 1945 onboard a US ship on the Suez Canal to discuss the future of this new relationship, just a few years before Saudi Arabia became home to the world's biggest oil field and became the world's largest exporter of oil.

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<sup>1</sup> *Washington Post*. "Analysis, Understanding the Ups and Downs of US-Saudi Relations." N.d. Accessed November 1, 2022, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/energy/understanding-the-ups-and-downs-of-us-saudi-relations/2022/10/07/235ae722-4693-11ed-be17-89cbe6b8c0a5\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/energy/understanding-the-ups-and-downs-of-us-saudi-relations/2022/10/07/235ae722-4693-11ed-be17-89cbe6b8c0a5_story.html).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

With big oil reserves, comes great revenue! However, the Arab nations weren't able to take advantage of their resource endowments because of abrupt price cuts and import caps imposed by Western oil companies and the US government, respectively. It was in light of these events that Saudi Arabia, Iran, Kuwait, Venezuela, and Iraq, representing 80% of the world's crude exports, met in Baghdad to form the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Nations (OPEC). The organisation was formed to stand up against all those practices of the western countries that depressed the oil prices and consequently hurt the oil-dependent economies of the Arab nations.

## Collaboration and Conflict

### Israel

When Israel entered into an armed conflict with Syria, Egypt, and Jordan in 1967, in what came to be known as the Six Day War, Arab ministers led a boycott of oil supply to all those countries friendly to Israel. Saudi Arabia was opposed to the establishment of an all-Jewish state in the Middle East and because of the US-Israel alliance, all oil shipments to the United States and Europe were halted. This embargo became the cause of recession in the West for a little while, however, its impact was offset by an increase in the domestic production of oil in the US.

A similar embargo was imposed on the United States under President Richard Nixon by Saudi King Faisal for supporting Israel during the 4<sup>th</sup> Arab-Israeli War, also known as the October War. Syria and Egypt had attacked Israel on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur after which the Nixon administration announced military aid worth \$2.2 billion for Israel. Arab states were quick to suspend all oil shipments on route to nations supporting Israel in the war. The embargo reduced the international oil supply trade by 14% and increased gasoline prices in the US by 40% which led President Nixon to announce a swath of new energy policies along with "Project Independence" to make US energy independent by the 1980s. Arab nations agreed to end the embargo on one condition that the US would actively promote the disengagement process between

the Israelian and Syrian forces. The International Energy Agency (IEA) was formed during the 1973-74 Oil Crisis to deal with such future emergencies of oil supply<sup>3</sup>.

## Iran

Saudi Arabia and Iran have been at crossroads ever since the Iranian Revolution of 1979 which dislodged Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi from power. This created fear among Iran's neighbors that Iran had started to 'export' its revolution to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia. There was also the religious angle. Up until the revolution, Saudi Arabia was the legitimate Muslim state because both Mecca and Medina, two of the holiest places in Islam were situated in Saudi Arabia, despite the presence of a larger Muslim population in Iran. However, the Iranian revolution threatened the stature of Saudi as it made Iran the leader of the Muslim world. An immediate policy response of the Saudi kingdom to this threat from Iran for regional dominance was to bolster its alliance with the US and formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981.

The US signed a nuclear deal with Iran that would verifiably prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon<sup>4</sup>. It was a historical deal that blocked every pathway that Iran could have potentially used to acquire enough fissile material to build a nuclear bomb. Iran was required to complete a few steps after which the US and the international community promised to lift all nuclear-related sanctions that had been imposed on Iran up until now. However, the non-nuclear sanctions were negotiated to stay in place. This is where Saudi Arabia comes into the picture. The Saudi Kingdom was never worried about Iran being a nuclear threat because of two reasons. First, it had already calculated the risk, that Iran would pose if it decided to use its nuclear weapons, as low. Second, it knew that it was safe under American vigilance against nuclear use. The nuclear deal between US and Iran threatens Saudi interests since the lifting of sanctions ends Iran's isolation in the

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<sup>3</sup> "Timeline: Oil Dependence and U.S. Foreign Policy" Council on Foreign Relations, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/oil-dependence-and-us-foreign-policy>.

<sup>4</sup> Medium, "The Iran Deal", August 4, 2015, <https://medium.com/@ObamaWhiteHouse/introduction-fcb13560dfb9>.

international community and dissolves its status as a rogue nation, hence, paving the way for it to acquire more income. This enhanced the nation's capabilities to gain regional dominance which was in direct conflict with the similar aspirations of the Saudi Kingdom.

## Kuwait

When Iraq invaded Kuwait due to a dispute over the Rumaila oil field on the border of the two countries, it posed a threat to both US and Saudi Arabia. It was an economic threat to the US since it was importing half of its oil from Iraq which was bound to be disrupted by Iraqi aggression towards Kuwait. At the same time, it posed a threat to Saudi Arabia since it shared a border with Kuwait and was concerned about its security. These developments allowed both countries to cooperate. King Fahd of Saudi Arabia turned to US President George H.W. Bush to fight Saddam Hussein together to liberate Kuwait.

## G20

G20 or Group 20 refers to an intergovernmental forum of 19 countries and the European Union, including the United States, considered the largest and fastest-growing economies of the world. It was founded in 1999 in Germany by the original Group of 7 countries and bank governors<sup>5</sup>. G20 became an effective and useful forum for the heads of state and government to meet and discuss issues of global importance. US President George W. Bush led the first G20 Summit in Washington to seek solutions for the 2008 stock market crash where Saudi Arabia, under the administration of Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, was allowed to showcase its leadership qualities in steering through the global financial crisis. The admission of the Saudi kingdom was primarily due to its economic importance as an effective pricing force in the world's fuel market. It was the 10<sup>th</sup> largest sovereign fund and had the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest oil reserves in the world after Venezuela. Saudi

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<sup>5</sup> "Saudi Arabia's First Meeting with G20 Leaders" Arab News, April 19, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1661486>.

Arabia took measures in the fields of monetary policy, trade, and finance which significantly reduced the adversities of the crisis. In addition to that, Saudi Arabia was made a member of the G20 because Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 aligned with the core objectives of the G20, that of sustainable development, increased trade and investment, women empowerment, etc. Saudi Arabia's involvement in the G20 leaders of the state summit demonstrated to the world the ability of the kingdom to become a representative of the developing world and a voice for the concerns of the region amongst the bigger powers of the world.

## Obama Presidency

Under President Barack Obama, the US and Saudi Arabia established a strategic alliance, however, frayed they may have been. When Obama started his diplomatic tours in 2009 in the Middle East, Riyadh was his first stop, however, the meeting was not as successful as he had hoped. Obama had promised the Saudi government decisive measures to resolve the Palestinian issue, however, no concrete action plan was formulated by his cabinet. This disappointed the Saudis who perceived this as Obama siding with Benjamin Netanyahu, the then-president of Israel.

## Arab Spring

The Arab Spring was a wave of pro-democracy uprisings against the authoritarian regimes of the countries in the Middle East, starting from Tunisia and spreading to the rest of the region throughout 2011. These 2011 anti-government protests and uprisings came as a surprise for the Obama administration who had underestimated the power of social movements and public opinion in the Middle Eastern region and focused more on backing pro-American autocratic rulers, like Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. This deepened Saudi royals' suspicions about whether America would be able to support them in case they have a domestic political crisis of their own<sup>6</sup>. The US was aware of the human rights violations occurring in the region under autocratic rulers yet chose to

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<sup>6</sup> Toosi, Nahal. "Obama, in an Awkward Twist, Becomes Saudi Arabia's Defender" Politico, September 22, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/09/obama-saudi-arabia-228521>.

pursue a quiet, subtle, and non-interventionist approach. As the protests gathered momentum in Egypt, forcing Mubarak to step down from power, Obama decided to change American foreign policy and abandon one of its longest allies in the Middle East because he knew that it was time for political reforms in the region which doesn't necessarily have to be a threat to the US interests. Saudi Arabia rejected US attempts of promoting democratic ideals in the region by encouraging the Gulf countries to institute significant politico-socio reforms and to listen to the legitimate aspirations of the citizens. Obama's approach was rejected by the Saudis as naïve and dangerous<sup>7</sup>.

Finally, US-Saudi relations started improving after the Defence Secretary of the United States, Robert Gates, and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia met each other to discuss the pressing issues of the time. The meeting entailed discussions on the sale of arms worth more than \$60 billion, which became the biggest arms deal signed by the US, and the modernization process of Saudi's missile defense systems<sup>8</sup>.

## 9/11 Attacks

It is reported that the September 11 attacks in the US were masterminded by Saudi nationals. 15 out of the 19 terrorists involved in the hijack operation were Saudi nationals, led by Osama bin Laden. The attacks were orchestrated by the terrorist group, Al-Qaeda whose ideology has its roots in the Saudi Wahhabi framework. US-Saudi relations suffered a minor setback when the Kingdom refused to acknowledge Al-Qaida's roots in their own country, but this lasted only until Al-Qaeda attacked Saudi Arabia itself, after which Riyadh was forced to make a concrete action plan against it.

In 2016, US Congress unanimously passed a bill, known as the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act, that would have allowed the families of 9/11 victims to sue Saudi Arabia over its alleged ties with the terror attacks of 2001. However, despite Obama's contentious relations with

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<sup>7</sup> GERGES, FAWAZ A. "The Obama Approach to the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?" *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-) 89, no. 2 (2013): 299–323. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23473538>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

the Saudi Kingdom, he vetoed the bill based on the concept of safeguarding ‘sovereign immunity’ under which U.S. citizens aren’t normally allowed to sue foreign governments (Toosi, 2016). The bill was passed under immense pressure from the aggrieved families of the victims of the 9/11 attacks as the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attacks neared. The Kingdom had denied any governmental involvement in the attacks and claimed that there was no proof of it either. Saudi went to the extent of releasing a White Paper that detailed the kingdom’s efforts to curb terror acts in the region. On the other hand, even though there were suspicions that Barack Obama vetoed the bill to hide Saudi relations with Islamist terrorists, officials claim that the bill would have eroded the principle of ‘sovereign immunity’ which would have potentially allowed nationals from other countries to sue the US over its actions abroad as well, putting US diplomats and other service members under threat of lawsuits.

## Syria

The Syrian Arab Republic is under the dictatorial rule of Bashar al-Assad, who is the second longest-serving president after his father Hafez al-Assad. Syrian citizens started demanding an end to the authoritarian Assad regime during the Arab Spring of 2011 which culminated in a full-fledged civil war by 2012 which has continued till today. Saudis believe that the civil war can only be ended by Assad’s departure from the seat of power and are, thus, waiting for a clear commitment from the US on doing the same.

## Trump Presidency

Donald Trump who became US President in 2017 has managed to maintain cozy and cordial relations with Saudi Arabia. Under Trump, the highly conservative kingdom had a privileged and personal relationship with America. He had placed Saudi Arabia at the heart of his foreign policy for the Middle East, supporting it against Iran and promoting its purchase of US-made arms and weapons. Prior to his election as the President of the United States, Trump was one of the critics of Saudi Arabia. However, his position on the kingdom changed drastically after he came to power. He supported the Kingdom even after the CIA concluded, in a report, that the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, a columnist for the Washington Post, was brutally killed on the orders of crown prince Muhammed bin Salman. There are various aspects of his relationship with the Kingdom.

## Business Deals

Donald Trump was a businessman before he won the Presidential Elections in 2017 and, thus, the enormous profits that Saudi customers, including the Saudi government, bring to the Trump business empire could be regarded as a major reason for the cordial relations that he managed to maintain with the kingdom. The kingdom is known to have paid \$4.5 million to purchase a floor of the Trump World Tower in 2001 since when it continues to pay tens of thousands in annual common charges for the property. At a 2015 campaign rally, when asked about his business relations with the Saudi's, Trump said, "I get along great with all of them. They buy apartments from me. They spend \$40 million, \$50 million. Am I supposed to dislike them? I like them very much."<sup>9</sup>. Saudi's billionaire Prince Alwaleed bin-Talal has come to Trump's rescue on multiple occasions when he was on the verge of personal bankruptcy and was scrambling to raise cash to keep his business afloat<sup>10</sup>.

## Muslim Ban

The "Muslim Ban" refers to a 2017 executive order by Donald Trump which prohibited travel and refugee resettlement from 7 predominantly Muslim countries- Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Yemen- for a period of 90 days. The order was challenged on the grounds that it promoted religious discrimination and was initially blocked by the Supreme Court. However, a third version of it was finally allowed to go into force after expanding the list of barred travellers to include nationals from Venezuela and North Korea as well.

In 2020, Trump imposed visa restrictions on 6 more countries- Eritrea, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Nigeria, Sudan, and Tanzania- citing national security concerns regarding nationals from these

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<sup>9</sup> Daily Kos. "Trump and Saudi Arabia: A Sinister Relationship," September 14, 2020. <https://www.dailykos.com/story/2020/9/14/1975777/-Trump-and-Saudi-Arabia-A-Sinister-Relationship>.

<sup>10</sup> Condon, Bernard, Stephen Braun, and Tami Abdollah. "Trump's Business Ties to Saudi Arabia Run Long and Deep." Trump's business ties to Saudi Arabia run long and deep | The Times of Israel, October 13, 2018. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/trumps-business-ties-to-saudi-arabia-run-long-and-deep/>.

countries. However, the important thing to note here was that Saudi Arabia was excluded from the Muslim travel ban which became a contentious issue since 15 out of the 19 hijackers of the 9/11 attacks were Saudi nationals.

## Arms Deal

Saudi Arabia has been America's primary destination for the sale of arms and ammunitions and according to a report by the Council of Foreign Relations, the kingdom purchased nearly 10% of US' arms exports between 2011 and 2015. In 2017, the United States signed a \$350 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia which was acclaimed by the White House as a significant step in the expansion of Saudi-US security relationship. US sale of arms to the kingdom is based on two important aims. First, the deal is expected to contribute to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and generate thousands of highly skilled jobs in new economic sectors. Second, arms deal with the Saudi government is expected to check and balance the threat posed by Iran by enhancing the kingdom's military capabilities. It not only promotes the security of the kingdom and the gulf region as a whole, but also reduces the burden on the US military to conduct counter terrorism operations in the region. However, the arms deal has also received widespread opposition because of Saudi Arabia's involvement in the civil war in Yemen and its barbaric use of the US arms there. Another concern for those opposing the arms deal is that Saudi Arabia is a speculated breeding ground for radical Islamic extremism because of which there is a fear of the misuse of the arms and ammunitions.

In 2019, Trump administration ordered an \$8.1 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia without prior congressional approval on the grounds that Iran posed an urgent and imminent threat to the stability in the region and thus supply of weapons was necessary to both, counter Iranian aggression and protect U.S. security interests. Again, the arms deal was criticized by both Democrats and Republicans who condemned Saudi-led coalition responsible for the countless civilian deaths in Yemen and rejected that it warranted the weapons sale without a congressional approval.

## Biden Presidency

As opposed to the standard set by his predecessor, American foreign policy under the 2021-elected US President Joe Biden has put Saudi Arabia on the backseat and shunned the crown prince. While Trump was on the side of the crown prince on the allegations of him being involved in the murder of Khashoggi, Biden has vowed to make Saudi Arabia a global “pariah” for ordering the killing of a US citizen.

## Iran

In the present scenario, as the Iranian provision of weapons, money, and expertise to the Houthi rebels in Yemen increases, it gives the US and Saudi Arabia new grounds for cooperation, especially to keep a check on its subversive activities in the neighbouring regions. As per a report released by the official Iranian newspaper “Iran”, the country has witnessed an increase of 118% in its oil exports and witnessed an increase in its oil income in the last 6 months which has escalated the concerns of the international community<sup>11</sup>. However, there have been speculations that Saudi Arabia has been misusing the military aid received from the US for its warfare in Yemen.

## Yemen

Achieving peace in Yemen has acquired a high priority on the agenda of Biden. Washington has been a silent partner in the Saudi Arabia-led coalition that has been fighting the Houthi rebels in Yemen along with the local government. The fighting has turned into a five-year-long civil war that has killed more than 112,000 people and become the world’s worst humanitarian crisis. Biden has publicly announced that he would stop selling arms and ammunition to Riyadh and put an end to all the critical assistance America has been providing up until now to stop US’ support of Saudi’s “offensive” operations in Yemen. He has halted the sale of precision-guided munitions that were passed under Trump, but a \$4 billion sale of weapons and services was authorized by the Biden administration under the pretence that they were “defensive” systems.

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<sup>11</sup> IRNA English, “Ten-Billion-Dollar Boom in Iran Oil Income”, January 15, 2022, <https://en.irna.ir/news/84613521/Ten-billion-dollar-boom-in-Iran-oil-income#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20report%2C%20Iran%20has%20witnessed%2018.6>.

## OPEC+ Decision

We circle back to where we started, the Saudi Arabia-led OPEC+ decision to reduce the global oil supply by 2 million barrels per day. Even though American officials had received assurance from the crown prince's administration that there would be no production cuts in oil supply to the US, the OPEC+ decision led by Saudi Arabia stunned not just the US but also the world. The decision was announced on October 5, 2022, at the 45<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Joint Ministerial Monitoring Committee and the 33rd OPEC and non-OPEC Ministerial Meeting at their headquarters in Vienna, that there would be a reduction in the collective output of oil by 2 million barrels a day November onwards. The Biden administration has responded to this by promising to release an additional 10 million barrels from its Strategic Petroleum Reserve to balance the potential effect of the reduction in OPEC's supply<sup>12</sup>.

US National Security Council spokesperson, John Kirby has claimed that Riyadh is aware of the effect such a reduction in output would have on the oil prices in the international energy market and has brought them into force to increase Russian revenues and dilute the effect of western sanctions on Russia. He has accused the Kingdom of funding the Russian-Ukraine war and counteracting any efforts to isolate Russia by the means of these output reductions.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has accused the US of distorting facts and claimed that the US only wanted to delay the cuts by one month which seems to be motivated, at least partially, by politically vested interests rather than trying to cut off Russia of its oil money, that has been funding its war on Ukraine. The Kingdom claims that the "delay" would have toned down the effect of public anger about the rising fuel prices on the performance of the democrats at the upcoming midterm elections scheduled for November 8, 2022. It has backed its decision to go against US' demand for a delay because of potential negative economic consequences, without

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<sup>12</sup> New York Times, "A Secret Deal, Wishful Thinking: How the US-Saudi Relationship Ruptured", The Indian Express. October 26, 2022. <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/a-secret-deal-wishful-thinking-how-the-us-saudi-relationship-ruptured-8230100/>.

explaining what they could be<sup>13</sup>. The OPEC+ decision comes at a time when the G7 countries are evaluating the possibility of imposing a price cap on Russian crude oil exports, a measure aimed at eliminating the primary funding source of its war efforts.

## NOPEC

The No Oil Producing and Exports Cartels (NOPEC) Bill became an Act after it was passed by the Senate committee on May 5, 2022, to protect US consumers from artificially engineered oil spikes. The move came after OPEC+, which includes OPEC and its allies like Russia, decided to reduce oil output in an already struggling energy market. The NOPEC Act invalidates the principle of ‘sovereign immunity’ and gives the US Attorney General the power and option to sue oil cartels, like OPEC, or its members, like Saudi Arabia, in the federal court. The bill is feared, by analysts, to have unintended consequences like overproduction by OPEC, which would reduce prices to such a low that would make it difficult for the US energy companies to boost their supplies to meet the exponentially high demand.

## Future of Saudi-US Relations

The Saudi-US relations have seen many ups and downs ever since the start. Both have continued to benefit from their mutual commercial interests, like the need for oil and military weapons, from one another. However, the latest decision by OPEC+ has deteriorated their relations to an all-time low. Given the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, it has become apparent to the world that Saudi Arabia has chosen to support the Russian side of the war instead of the US-backed Ukrainian side. US officials claim that the OPEC+ decision has been manipulated by Russia to fund its war against Ukraine. The stance of the Saudi government has put pressure on the Biden administration to either alter or terminate all forms of arms supply and military support to the kingdom. As of now, no

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<sup>13</sup> New York Times. “A Secret Deal, Wishful Thinking: How the US-Saudi Relationship Ruptured”. The Indian Express. October 26, 2022. <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/a-secret-deal-wishful-thinking-how-the-us-saudi-relationship-ruptured-8230100/>.

such measures have been taken by the American government, but it is adamant about introducing a bill that would remove US troops and missile defense systems from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. They intend on immediately freezing all aspects of cooperation with the kingdom, except those that are absolutely necessary for US security and interests in the region.

At the same time, US has also started questioning its involvement in the quest for regional hegemony between Saudi Arabia and its allies and Iran. While it stands with Saudi Arabia against Iranian aggression in the gulf region, it has started questioning whether Riyadh's value sets are any different than Tehran's and whether Saudi Arabia would have responded any differently to the protests in Iran, had they occurred in Riyadh. This becomes critical given the kingdom's track record of immense human rights violations in the past decades. The Saudi-US relationship is at a crossroads with both sides questioning the basis of their alliance. America has, especially, become unsure whether Saudi is a reliable ally anymore now that it has decided to side with Russia even after President Biden meeting with the crown prince in July 2022. Both countries still remain important for each other, given their commercial interests in oil and arms, but anything beyond that remains a conundrum.

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