



# Towards a Definition of Jihadist Radicalization: A Case Study

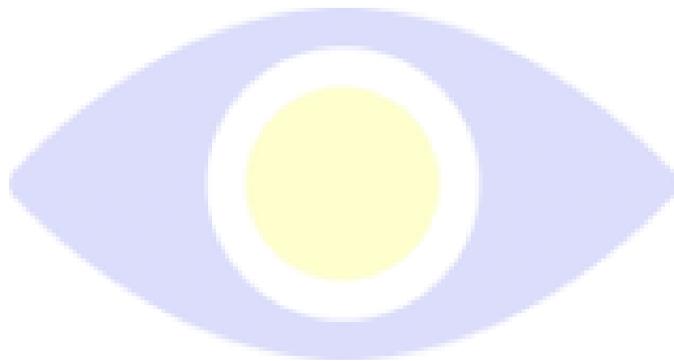


**Alessandro Boncio**, OR9 Italian Carabinieri Corps, Counter Terrorism Analyst & Lecturer

## **An Overview**

After September 11 2001, a complex set of concepts entered political and societal discourse about violence motivated by jihadist ideology. They had been used in the past as well, but with slightly different meanings. In recent years, homegrown terrorism further advanced this trend as Western societies tried to understand the factors and drivers leading to jihadist radicalization.

It has been a difficult task. Analyzing the root causes of individual radicalization took governments far beyond the traditional fields of criminal law, intelligence and law enforcement – prevention and security were linked with the ultimate goal of draining the swamps that produce



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jihadis. Counterterrorism became a multifaceted effort encompassing complex societal issues such as integration, multiculturalism and social cohesion in a broadened security agenda[1].

This field of study is increasingly important nowadays, with studies in different theoretical fields attempting to address the influencing factors for radicalization while at the political level various countries try to pinpoint the basic prerequisites needed for an unequivocal definition of the term. Despite differing perspectives, almost every definition produced agrees on at least one basic point: individual violent radicalization involves a shift of personal thought towards a specific form of political violence – terrorism.

However, the task quickly becomes much more complicated once one moves beyond very basic points. For example, the narrative following recent terrorist attacks made extensive use of terms such as fundamentalism, radicalization, extremism, and terrorism.

Unfortunately, these terms were associated with Islam and used interchangeably, due to their wide-ranging meanings and the indistinct boundaries between each of these terms and what is considered mainstream thought. This practice generated confusion in public perceptions, inadvertently feeding social polarization.

The lack of unequivocal terminology is also seen in various Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and de-radicalization programs, as individuals who could be included in such programs vary according to the terminology used to define who is a radical or an extremist[2].

In Italy, the political and academic discourse about the phenomenon of jihadist radicalization is still at an early stage. The issue is not yet considered a priority, partly due to the low numbers of jihadists in the country. But a coherent and long-term effort is needed to prevent a dangerous increase in those numbers and other nations' experiences with CVE programs may help to shape that effort. Assessment of the situation is underway – the government commission for the study of jihadist radicalization pathways and the draft law n.2883/2017 are aimed at structuring a national plan to prevent and counter jihadi radicalization,[3].

In this framework, a clear-cut definition of jihadist radicalization is fundamental for several reasons, from homogeneity in risk assessment standards and interpretation of data to the correct and effective application of norms and CVE programs adapted to the needs of the country.

The aim of this short paper is to propose a new and univocal definition of the jihadist radicalization concept, highlighting links with other similar terms but also underlining the differences. Ideally, it will spur debate, with academics, politicians and practitioners joining the discussion to reach a shared definition of a phenomenon that threatens the core democratic values of the state.

### **The Necessity of the Term**

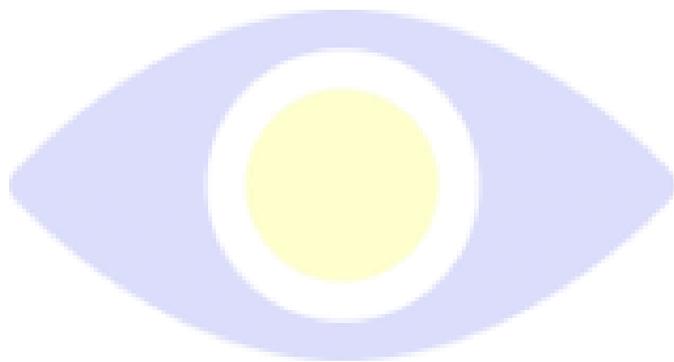
As noted in media reports, Italy has not suffered any jihadist attacks recently, and this sets it apart from many European countries.[4] Another important difference with bordering countries is the Italian jihadist milieu – it is still mainly composed of migrants and people Lorenzo Vidino calls “sociological citizens”. [5] There is a relatively small number of second and third generation Muslims, and this contrasts with the situation in other European countries such as France, England, Germany or Belgium [6]. These nominally settled individuals are widely considered more prone to radical discourses due to personal identity crises where a Muslim family background is juxtaposed with a Western secular lifestyle. These youths often feel torn between their traditional model of Islam and a modern social environment. For this reason, some second and third-generation Muslims experience poor social integration and this strengthens feelings of marginalization and resentment [7].

Italy should take advantage of this generational backdrop, applying best practices learned from other nations’ CVE experiences before the dimensions of the phenomenon become a real emergency [8].

Reaching a shared definition of jihadist radicalization is the first step in this direction, paving the way to secure numerous benefits in the societal and political arena:

- The most important advantage is related to CVE programs, where standardized parameters are necessary for the assessment of individuals at risk. A definition of radicalization that is overly generic may lead to interpretations that are either too wide-ranging or too narrow, in turn generating ambiguities that could be exploited by actors interested in societal polarization as well as extremists themselves.
- In fact, this issue is set to become even more important in Italy with the advent of the “second generation” problem. Deportation of radicalized foreigners on security grounds is a widely used tool that will not be applicable to Italian citizens born to first generation parents.[9] Developing terminology and tools that could be implemented over the long term is an urgent security policy issue. Moreover, a uniform definition of jihadist radicalization would also support the deportation tactic itself, providing accurate criteria for the inclusion of radicalized individuals in the national deportation list[10].
- Another important argument for defining jihadist radicalization is semantic. Different terms are currently used to describe people holding radical beliefs and/or engaging in violent behavior. Radicalization and extremism are not the same thing and these terms should be used in different circumstances to avoid dangerous misconceptions. Both terms ought to be defined as processes which are not uniform in their development rather than a simple status.[11] In addition, the trends and dynamics of radicalization and violent extremism evolve over time and take on new forms and capabilities[12]; making it even more important to define each term clearly and associate it with different manifestations of personal ideology[13]. This risk analysis must include the individual belief system, which is intrinsic in evaluating and countering violent extremism as radical ideas can be precursors of more serious developments. In this way, a rigorous definition of “what” jihadist radicalization is can also be helpful in defining “who” is involved in it[14].
- Lastly, and this is also the goal of this short paper, the attempt to produce a shared definition of jihadist radicalization will hopefully spur a necessary societal and political debate. The terminology under examination is relatively new in our lexicon, having been introduced only after the events of September 11 2001. Furthermore, definitions were often borrowed from the study of other types of violent extremism and then modified and adapted to jihadist ideology. As a national security concern, radicalization and violent extremism

have only been analyzed systematically recently, with the rise of homegrown terrorism and foreign terrorist fighters. The effort to produce such a definition will help to address the question of what is mainstream and what is deviant coherently, remembering that



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stigmatization associated with one's religion or ideology is playing into the hands of the enemy. We should intervene in the physical and virtual spaces where radicalization occurs, trying to understand grievances and resentment through a multifaceted approach and a general agreement among all institutions, which will also provide authority to the chosen definition[15].

In the light of these general considerations, a shared and accepted definition of jihadist radicalization could indeed provide valuable support in shaping and addressing the security policies of a country. Preventing and countering an increasingly expanding phenomenon that impacts the social fabric of many countries is fundamental in the face of the current danger of societal polarization. Government policies should avoid becoming push factors towards violent ideologies themselves. Terminology and its usage should be taken into high level consideration when shaping a national plan to counter and prevent jihadist radicalization in order to avoid such unintended consequences[16].

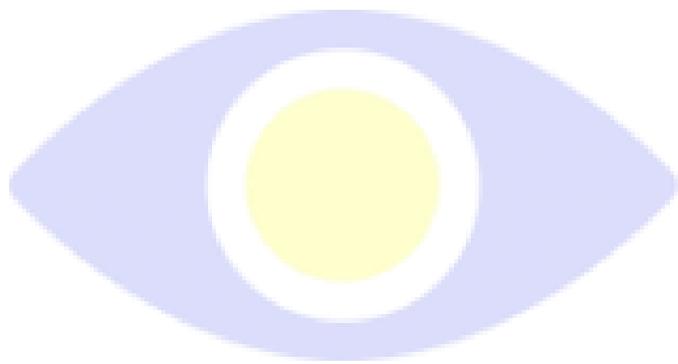
Consequentially, the agreed concept of jihadist radicalization should be the result of thorough assessment and balanced judgment. We have to remember that even radical ideas, when expressed in the appropriate forums and through democratic means, cannot be stigmatized, being part of a human process of redefinition of principles and values. In this respect, radicalism can be considered as beneficial, in time having led, for instance, to the abolition of slavery and the introduction of women's suffrage.[17]

### **Different terms, controversial definitions**

In several articles, research studies, and policy papers, various terms are used interchangeably to identify, explain and delineate the radical expression of ideas, concepts, ideologies, and beliefs; radicalization; and violent extremism. Some were already in use to define other ideologies and were associated with jihadi terrorism, creating the danger of linking Islam to such violent manifestations[18].

Although often used interchangeably, these terms in fact represent different nuances of human thought and should be used appropriately to avoid the risk of misunderstanding

among the public and the stigmatization of one religion as the only bearer of violent ideologies[19]. For the limited



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purposes of this paper, the whole academic and governmental discussion on such terminology will be avoided and only a short review of terms will be provided, in order to highlight substantial differences in significance.

### Fundamentalism

This word is currently applied to designate a group belief system through which regional, national and even global developments are shaped. Organizations are usually considered fundamentalist if they oppose scientific, secular and modern principles while favoring a vision of life based on literal adherence to (sacred) texts[20].

Modern religious fundamentalism, which is nowadays often linked to Islam, was actually born in the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century among Protestants who opposed the idea of adapting religious principles to modern times. They saw the Bible as infallible and, therefore, to be followed word for word.[21] In fact, every religious creed has its fundamentalists, – conservatives who oppose a progressive idea of religion and its interpretative application to social and historical events as they happen and prefer an unchanged vision of life based on principles literally extrapolated from sacred texts.

Islamic fundamentalism is sometimes intended as a synonym for violent extremism, despite many academic definitions presenting it as a set of rigid religious norms and ideals. Islamic fundamentalists oppose what they see as the corrupting influence of secular and Western culture and urge believers to follow Islamic law and the prophet Muhammad's example literally and in all of life's interactions.[22] Here it is important to distinguish Islamic fundamentalism from Islamism; seeing the first as the "individual orientation towards the roots of a religious creed" and the second additionally characterized by the "subordination of political decisions under the primacy of religion"[23].

### Radicalism

Extremism and radicalism are often used to refer to the same phenomenon, especially in the world of social sciences. "Radical" is a term used since the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, associated then with the

French and American revolutions. It became widespread in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in discussions about people who wanted broad and marked social and political changes. Consequently, over the course of history the concept of radicalism has had different meanings, tied, as Mark Sedgwick has said, to diverse social and political manifestations.[24] The confusion related to concepts of radicalization is also due to the existence of different contexts (security, integration and foreign policy) in which the concept is currently used, leading to particular understandings of the term as those contexts are characterized by different agendas.[25].

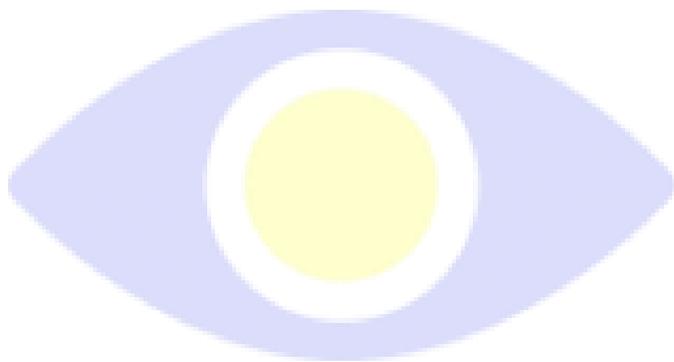
Along an imaginary historical timeline, people once labeled “radicals” could today be considered as reformers, not revolutionaries. In many cases, their actions were illegal, but not illegitimate according to today’s standards, and the goals they pursued became praiseworthy to the point that many of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century radical questions became key elements of today’s civil rights. As a result, while in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century a radical person was generally considered as liberal, anti-clerical, pro-democratic and progressive, the current association of the term with an Islamic connotation points in the opposite direction, embracing anti-liberal, anti-democratic, and fundamentalist positions.[26]

A radical person, however, is generally keen to discuss his beliefs in a critical analysis; even if there are intersections between radicalism and extremism, we know that there is no path dependency between the acquisition of radical ideas and an actual turn to violence[27].

### Extremism

Radicalism and extremism have common characteristics. People in both camps distance themselves from moderate, mainstream and conventional positions.[28] However, they differ too. An extremist holds narrow opinions and rejects a rational discussion. His beliefs are so extreme that he opposes the rule of law and rejects pluralism and democratic principles. An extremist’s goal is to create a homogeneous society based on rigid and dogmatic ideological principles, making all citizens conform by suppressing all opposition and subjugating minorities;

Radicals, by contrast, tend to accept diversity of thought and opinions and believe in the power of persuasion and compromise rather than pure dogma[29]. Indeed, the term was first introduced



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in the field of jihadist terrorism studies through the European Union Policy Advisory Group, which held that, as an ideology, radicalism challenges the legitimacy of established norms and policies but does not, in itself, necessarily lead to violence.[30]

There are important distinctions within the field of extremism as well. Even though extremism is at the edge of the democratic spectrum, not all extremists engage in violence (terrorism) to enforce their agenda. Some focus more on promotion of the “cause” than the destruction of those who oppose it.[31] When analyzing extremism in fact, it is important to understand the differences and potential relationships between violent and nonviolent extremists, noting that the distinction is not linear, as nonviolent actors could still sympathize with violent extremists’ goals and even support or assist them.[32]

When it comes to Islamic extremism today, selective reading of Islam’s strictest school of law allows “puritans” to oppose “moderates” in their interpretation of Islamic tradition for current times, relying on God’s law (sharia) alone for all aspects of human affairs.[33] Yet distinctions come in once again. As Alex Schmid has noted, classification of Islamic extremists is fluid, as nonviolent actors in this context is a term that can cover both political and missionary Islamists, and among them some individuals do support violent means to achieve their goals.[34]

## Terrorism

The UN has noted many times that a shared definition of terrorism would provide a valuable aid for addressing and combating the phenomenon. But the lack of consensus in the international community and even among academics highlights the complexity of this issue. To add to the complications, it is entangled in multiple national, political, ideological and social considerations.[35]

Most terrorism definitions agree on some basic points, starting of course with the threat or use of violence as a basic prerequisite. The identities of the victims raise more problematic questions. Are they civilians, armed forces personnel, or public personalities? There are

different interpretations and thus definitions among various government and academic figures[36].

Another controversy surrounds the possible inclusion of state actors. Some stakeholders tend to



classify non-state actors alone as terrorist organizations while others prefer to include state violence in their definitions. The goals for which terrorism is a mean and the fear instilled in the public and associated with the violence are also noted as essential for a definition in many terrorism classifications[37].

Generally speaking, and for the limited purposes of this paper, one definition from the UNSC in

2004 can be cited as a starting point, including the inherent complexities noted above:

*“criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act, which constitute offences within the scope of and as defined in the international conventions and protocols relating to terrorism, are under no circumstance justifiable by considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other similar nature.”*

Jihadization

Turning back to Italy, the proposed law 2883/2017 is the country's first attempt to define jihadist

radicalization. Its first article states:

*”for the ends of the present law, radicalization is understood as the phenomenon of individuals, even without a stable connection with terrorist groups, who embrace jihadist ideologies, inspired to the use of violence and terrorism, also through the use of the internet and social networks”[38].*

As seen above, however, there has been criticism of the failure to include other forms of violent extremism in the draft law. In addition, the term “radicalization” is problematic because of its broader meanings and connotations, which are not always negative. Yes, radicalism is situated at the edges of democracies, but, unlike extremism, it is not rigidly intolerant and unwilling to compromise.

Another complex factor in the definition is the reference to jihadist ideologies as a prerequisite for an individual to be labeled as radical. The influence of ideologies in the radicalization processes is debated. Extensive academic literature suggests that social encapsulation, friendship ties, and bonds of affection are the principal vehicles by which ideology, as a superstructure, gains momentum[39].

From this perspective, the use of the term “radicalization” in a definition to denote a turn towards a specific form of political violence – terrorism – is unfortunate.[40] This is the main reason for this search for a new and more precise term that will permit a better analysis of the specificities of jihadist radicalization.

Apart from previous classifications, the researcher A. Boukhobza, observing the general meaning of the term radicalization and the absence of a widely agreed-upon definition reflecting a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon, chose the word “jihadization” in this context[41]. This neologism is intended by the author as “the last stage in a rapid process of radicalization towards violent jihadism, not (only) motivated by religious ideology”. Prerequisites for this last step are a prior cognitive opening towards fundamentalist beliefs, often motivated by personal trigger factors or identity crises, and a polarization of positions that distances an individual from society as a result of exposure to radical propaganda[42].

## **Final Proposal**

A widely shared opinion holds that there will never be univocal and internationally accepted definitions of terms such as terrorism, radicalization, and violent extremism. The obstacles are numerous and insurmountable. They include varied socio-historical-cultural legacies, the interests of different actors proposing definitions, and personal and social biases.

In addition, after summing up academic literature one can see jihadist radicalization as a process for which there is no single driver, factor or formula. It is also a relative concept – each factor’s importance differs according to context and the individual.[43].

Yet definitions of some sort are desirable in a delicate balance of norms, programs, and strategies. If an individual is labelled as a terrorist, a radical, or an extremist, he or she will be subjected to a differential assessment by society. This fact that, alone justifies the effort to coin an unambiguous and shared definition. The danger is that any form of radical thought could be stigmatized and associated with illegitimate extremism, with the potential effect of driving pro-democracy radicals into the arms of anti-democratic extremists, thus feeding the vicious circle of violent extremism[44].

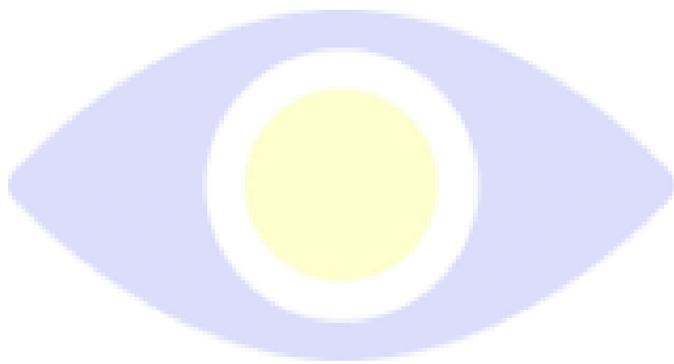
In this framework, the proposal for a new definition of jihadist radicalization in Italy stems from the *jihadization* neologism, broadening its original meaning to encompass not only the last stage, but the whole process up to that stage. The proposed definition could be summed up as follows:

*“Violent jihadization is the individual extremist’s progression towards the willingness to use undemocratic means and violence, motivated by jihadist ideology, regardless of personal connections with any terrorist group. This process facilitates violent confrontation and social polarization. It includes opposition to democratic values and the rule of law, incitement for and dissemination of extremist ideas and material, including through the internet and social networks, and any other behavior that threatens the security of the state, through the facilitation and dissemination of potentially violent ideologies”.*

For the time being, the small jihadist milieu in Italy allows the country to act and legislate in a relatively serene environment; eventually agreeing an accurate definition that can support a structured de-jihadization program backed by careful yet assertive monitoring and mediation activity. An integral part of this strategy must be the effort to prevent future jihadization, especially in the “at-risk” environments and contexts mentioned by the government study commission on jihadist radicalization[45].

International experience can help. Italy still has the opportunity to observe and apply some of the best prevention and de-radicalization strategies implemented in other countries. But there are pitfalls: academics and the European Union Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) have pointed out that positive experiences in one country may not be achieved in others due to

different contexts and heritages.<sup>[46]</sup>



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Another difficulty is the grey zone of people who express bitterness, resentment and anger but cannot be associated *tout-court* with terrorism. These grievances and hatreds require a balanced and thorough assessment and intervention at the social and political levels. Moreover, “fence-sitting” individuals require constant evaluation in order to spot potentially troublesome developments and prevent further social polarization.

In this framework, an inclusion policy is advisable, working with trusted people from the Italian Muslim community. They should be flanked by individuals who know how to reach at-risk youth, taking the lead to counter jihadization through a multidimensional approach, including pressure on its real-life facilitating mechanisms[47]. Variety is important too. Academics and practitioners with different backgrounds and origins should be part of a trustworthy network of advisers at the local level, along the lines of the model proposed by the European Radicalisation Awareness Network[48].

Above all, it is important that political, social, and academic discourses do not repeat generalizations and stereotyped or misleading definitions, thus avoiding the risk that terms themselves become jihadization push factors, easily exploited by jihadist propaganda. Fear should be fought off without deviating from our democratic foundations. Security and freedom are not two clashing goals. Instead, they are two faces of the same coin and intrinsically associated. It is clear that there is no effective security if freedom is not granted, but it is also clear that there is no freedom if security is not guarded.[49] Hopefully, this paper will be only the beginning of a sorely needed debate to produce a shared definition of violent jihadist radicalization, followed up by publications and discussions by the most important and relevant institutions and figures. The outcome should be implementation measures that prevent or counter jihadization using authentic and accepted definitions of violent jihadist radicalization, backed by sound evaluation standards applied to CVE programs and best practices for at-risk individuals.

*All the information originates from open sources and/or personal research and study. The expressed opinions as well as any mistake or inaccuracy in the text should be referred solely to*

*the author. The author would like to express his heartfelt thanks to Dr. Milena Uhlmann for her invaluable help and her precious suggestions in reviewing the paper.*

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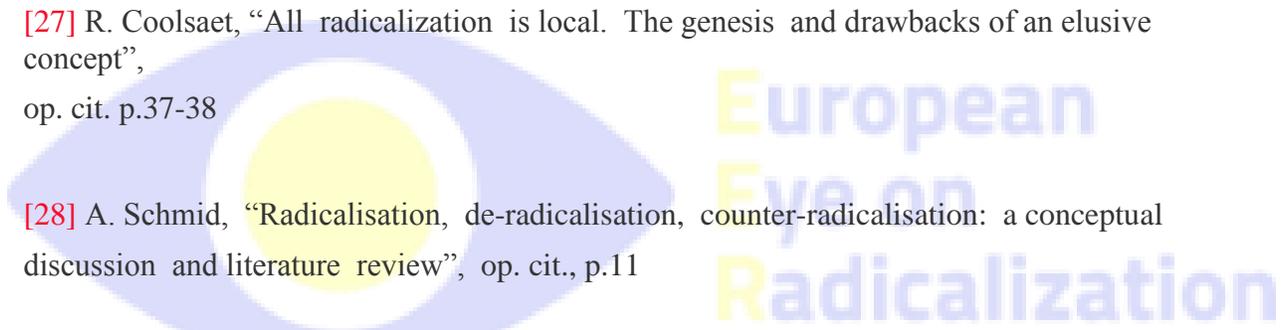
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