

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY

SABAN FORUM 2017

“AMERICA FIRST” AND THE MIDDLE EAST
A Keynote Conversation With Jared Kushner

Washington, D.C.

Sunday, December 3, 2017

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. SABAN: Good afternoon, everyone. We have a special guest today that we're very honored to have with us. He is a 36 year old successful businessman who left it all behind to be of service to his country by being Senior Advisor to the President of the United States. Ladies and gentleman, Jared Kushner. How are you doing?

MR. KUSHNER: Great. Thank you for having me.

MR. SABAN: Thank you for being here.

MR. KUSHNER: Thank you. It's an honor to be here. I know a lot people in the audience here and it's really an honor to be able to talk about this topic with so many people who I respect so much who have given so much to this issue.

MR. SABAN: Great. You've been in the news the last few days, to say the least.

MR. KUSHNER: Yeah.

MR. SABAN: But you've been in the news about an issue that I personally want to thank you for because you and your team were taking steps to try and get the United Nations Security Council to not go along with what ended up being an abstention by the U.S. against 50 year old tradition, and to be honest with you, some people might -- as far as I know, nothing illegal there, but I think that this crowd and myself want to thank you for making that effort. So thank you very much.

MR. KUSHNER: Thank you.

MR. SABAN: Okay. The President has referred to the Middle East peace as the ultimate deal, everyone here knows that.

Expert gives you hard marks for trying, but none of them believe it's possible. Why do you think it's possible or do you think it's possible?

MR. KUSHNER: Let's start right with it then, so.

MR. SABAN: Okay, yes.

MR. KUSHNER: So the President has a very long career of accomplishing things that a lot people say were impossible. I think the most recent example of that is the election where a lot of people who were the experts on the election thought that was impossible, and the President took a very unconventional approach towards running and was ultimately successful with that.

When we started to process of looking at how to create the peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians the first thing a lot of people told us was that it wasn't the right time, the conditions weren't right. After years of distrust we were really wasting our time to do it.

The approach we've taken, even Barak Ravid wrote recently that the President's injected peace back into the discussions and that's something we're very proud of because we do think it is achievable, and we think that there is a lot of reasons why this is a time why it should happen. When you look at the region you have several issues that are of grave concern to people. You have Iran and their nuclear ambitions and their expansive regional mischief. You have ISIS which this administration's done a really great job of beating back and almost defeating at this point. You have the ideology, you know, the extremism which I think you're now seeing a lot of leaders in

the Muslin world try to restore the religion to what it always has been, and to try to eliminate the ability for people to pervert it in the way they have. And then you have the Israeli Palestinian issue.

And I think that if we're going to try and create more stability in the region as a whole you have to solve this issue, and so the President sees it as something that has to be solved, that he very much wants to be solved, and it's something that he's personally trying to put a lot of time into trying to see happen.

MR. SABAN: I understand that, but to achieve that the team has in it an entrepreneur, you, a real estate lawyer, a bankruptcy lawyer. I don't know how you've lasted eight months in this line up, but that's for another day, and it's impressive that it's still going. There's not a Middle East marker in this group, so I mean, how do you operate with people who basically, you know, with all due respect, a bunch of Orthodox Jews who have no idea about anything? What are you guys doing? Seriously, I don't understand this.

MR. KUSHNER: So, I'll definitely say it's not a conventional team.

MR. SABAN: You can say that again.

MR. KUSHNER: That's what I said.

MR. SABAN: Yeah. Well, say it again.

MR. KUSHNER: Okay. It's a perfectly qualified team in the way Haim sees it, so.

MR. SABAN: How is that?

MR. KUSHNER: No, no. I was joking.

MR. SABAN: Oh, okay.

MR. KUSHNER: So when we were thinking about how to put a team together the President and I focused on who had the right qualifications, who we both trusted, and, you know, we have David Friedman who's one of the most brilliant bankruptcy lawyers who is a close friend of mine.

MR. SABAN: It's a bankrupt situation, so yeah. So it's appropriate to have a bankruptcy lawyer.

MR. KUSHNER: You could argue that you're wondering why they've never had a bankruptcy lawyer working on this before, so.

MR. SABAN: And it's a real estate issue too, so you're of the real estate aspect too.

MR. KUSHNER: Well, actually so there's no better real estate lawyer than Jason Greenblatt, who's been working on this, and there are a lot of real estate related issues to it, but it's also a function to be able to listen to all the different sides and understand them and the personalities work. We also have Dena Powell who works with us who's been very instrumental. Her family's Egyptian. She speaks Arabic, but her -- she's been very instrumental in helping us develop a regional aspirational economic plan for what could happen post-peace because we don't view a peace agreement just as signing a piece of paper and then hoping everything works out.

We're focused on what happens after and how do you create an environment where ten years down the road the people

who are beneficiaries of the peace have jobs and opportunity that they didn't have before. So, that's really how the teams work. I'd say that the best thing about the team is there is a lot of trust within the team, and the fact that we're so close. There's been no leaks on the process to date, has enabled a lot of the sides that we work with to be able to work with us, maybe in a more open format than they would have.

So what we found originally was there was a lot of hesitancy from the people on both sides to share ideas, to really explore the ideas with us in a way that could be constructive to come to conclusions. But what we've found is as they saw that nothing would leak out and we could have honest and open dialogues, and that we were really listening to what they had to say, and what their issues were, and how they thought things could be resolved we saw that the conversations really opened up a lot.

MR. SABAN: Well, I'm happy you mentioned trust because there's no trust between the sides at all. You've managed to build trust on the Israeli side. I know you're working hard on winning trust on the Palestinian side, but frankly, it's all going to end up with the mediator, you. Both sides need to trust you because if they don't then you won't be able to, by any stretch of the imagination, get there.

What is your approach in getting them to trust you? They don't trust each other. That's a fact, right? As you mentioned.

MR. KUSHNER: Let me take two of the different things

you mentioned there that I slightly disagree with. The first thing is I think there actually is a lot --

MR. SABAN: You disagree with me?

MR. KUSHNER: Yes.

MR. SABAN: That's a bad idea.

MR. KUSHNER: If you want to stop this we can, but only slight disagreements. So the first thing that you mentioned was that there's no trust between the Israelis and the Palestinians. I think that there's a lot of instances of great trust between Israelis and Palestinians. I think that there's not a lot of trust between the leadership, and I think that's what we've been really working on because the leadership ultimately has to come together, but I've been very overwhelmed by all the cases I've seen of Israelis and Palestinians working together and having great relationships and saying, look, if we could only get this thing resolved politically then we could move on to, you know, a much brighter future.

With regards to trust in the mediator I think that we've done our job, but both sides really trust the President, and I think that that's very important because while I've been working the problem for the President the fact that both sides trust him and know that he has the right intentions, and the right creativity, and the right desires to see this happen has been very important.

What I will say though is that as this process has gone through my team, in particular, being three Orthodox Jews and a Coptic Egyptian has tried very hard to do a lot of

listening, not just with the Israelis because when we have titles and positions that doesn't come with trust. Trust is earned. It's not granted. So, we've gone out of our way to do a lot of listening with the Palestinians, with the Israelis to understand what their issues are, what their red lines are, why they're their red lines, and then to decide how we can find areas of mutual agreement, and to find reasons to do things as opposed to reasons not to do things.

We've done the same with the different countries that are regional stakeholders, and I think the fact that we've tried to find a solution that comes from the region as opposed to imposing something --

MR. SABAN: To pick on that.

MR. KUSHNER: Sure.

MR. SABAN: Because I think that this is a very important point. The regional approach with is basically an outside in approach that you're taking is what differentiates this period from previous periods. Can you expand on that? How are you planning to work with the Iraqis and Saudis and all the other Arab states in order to help, at least make progress, engaging negotiation on the Israeli Palestinian thing? What's the strategy there?

MR. KUSHNER: Sure. So the regional dynamics are very interesting right now. But before I talk about that though, one other point I want to make is that we've been very focused on the deal, right. And spending, I guess now it's about seven, eight months that we've been very focused on that. You see a lot

of reasons why this deal can go south very quickly, and there's a ton of distractions that come up. You know, my team deals every month with maybe three or four different issues that will come up and everyone says, this is the end of it if it doesn't work. And, you know what I tell me guys, I says guys, we're not chasing rabbits. And then they'll say these aren't rabbits. These are elephants. These are big deals. That means they're slower. We'll get to them after.

But a lot of the issues that come up in the relationship on a day-to-day basis are causes of not having a final status agreement. So if you solve the bigger issue then a lot of the little issues, not little issues, because they're all very serious issues, will be mitigated over time. And so we try to keep everyone focused on solving the bigger issue, and we've done a lot of work. You know, people talk about trust building exercises. I don't see a lot of trust, as you've said, so I'm not sure, you know, you can do trust exercises for the next hundred years. I'm not sure what that will really accomplish. You've got to focus on solving the big issue.

The regional dynamics play a big role in what we think the opportunities are because as the Middle East has evolved a lot of these countries look and say that they all want the same thing. They want economic opportunity. They want peace for their people, and they look at the regional threats, and I think they see that Israeli, who is traditionally their foe is a much more natural ally than perhaps they were twenty years ago. So --

MR. SABAN: Because of Iran?

MR. KUSHNER: Because of Iran, because of ISIS, because of extremism.

MR. SABAN: Right.

MR. KUSHNER: And, you know, Israeli's got a very powerful army. They've got a great economy. They've got a lot of innovation in their economy, and, you know, there's an old reason why this has been not put together. So you have a lot of people who want to see it put together, but we have to overcome this issue of the Israeli Palestinian issue in order for that to happen.

MR. SABAN: Should we see the President's trip, first trip I should say, as a president to Saudi Arabia and then followed by Israel as part of this plan? What was that trip about? I mean, why did you start in Saudi Arabia?

MR. KUSHNER: Right. So that was something we spent a lot of time thinking about and we ultimately decided to make the President's first trip to Saudi Arabia for a few reasons. The first one was that Saudi Arabia is the custodian of the two holy sites, is one of the leaders in the Islamic and the Muslim world, and we thought that that would be a great place to really convene a lot of the countries. We got 54 Arab and Muslim countries together for a summit which was the first time that that had happened, and we were really able to set out what this administration's priorities were, but then also say that we're not going to solve all these problems ourselves.

We have to solve them altogether, and these problems

are not just America's problem. They're the world's problems, and, you know, we called upon all of the leaders in the Muslim and Arab world to step up with us to be our partners and to take action to try and solve them. The problems were unifying everyone against Iran's aggression. We spoke about --

MR. SABAN: How much progress have you made there unifying everybody against Iran?

MR. KUSHNER: I think we've made significant progress there, not just in the Middle East --

MR. SABAN: Well, how does it manifest itself in the field?

MR. KUSHNER: We'll find out. So, I mean, it will take some time, but --

MR. SABAN: Jared. You know, but you're not telling us.

MR. KUSHNER: If you look at the last years before we came into office I think a lot of these countries felt like Iran was being emboldened and their --

MR. SABAN: That's true.

MR. KUSHNER: -- aggression was being unchecked.

MR. SABAN: Yeah.

MR. KUSHNER: And I think that there is a lot of -- they welcomed American leadership and they welcomed the President's vision of everyone unifying around common objectives. So the President likes to be very, very clear with the way he speaks and what his intentions are. People accuse him of a lot of things, but not of being blunt and straightforward, and going

into Saudi Arabia, convening 54 Muslim countries and laying out the priorities of countering Iran's aggression, of fighting extremism, of defeating ISIS, and of creating peace and opportunity in the region was very important.

King Salman in his speech actually said something we thought at the time was very significant where he said, you know, there is no glory in death which we thought was very significant. And then when you go to the peace in the region, from the first discussions we've had with the Saudis, the Israeli Palestinian conflict is something that they care a lot about. You know, the King and the Crown Prince care a lot about the Palestinian people. They believe that the Palestinian people should have the same hope and opportunity as everyone else in the world.

MR. SABAN: This is bin Salman?

MR. KUSHNER: Yes.

MR. SABAN: Right.

MR. KUSHNER: And this has been a big priority for the King and the Crown Prince to try and see the Palestinian people have that, and they recognize that finding a solution to this problem is the only way that that can really be achieved. So they've been very committed to doing that. And it's not such the Saudis as well. It's really all of the people we've been talking with, whether it's the Iradis, the Jordanians, the Egyptians, the Qatars. We've seen a lot of these countries really pushing very strong to try and see if they can create a solution there.

MR. SABAN: Right, right. The President seems really

firm on his commitment to resolve this conflict, and he also said that if you can't get it done nobody can get it done, so I hope you can. But so that's -- can I tell them how we met? Because I reached out to you.

MR. KUSHNER: Please.

MR. SABAN: Yes, so we have a foundation and we have a guy that runs our foundation, and one day he calls me up and he says, I'm putting some documents in storage and there's a letter from a Jared Kushner from 2010 praising you. I say, praising me? I don't know who this guy is. I never answered that letter. And he said, yeah, it was about an article which I hated in the New Yorker. Just shred me to pieces. He loved it, go figure.

But he loved it so he wrote me a letter, you know, very nice letter. I never answered it and I said, oops, here we go. So I called Jared and he was very gracious and said, yeah, I'd be more than happy to -- I know who you are, well, he wrote me a letter. I never answer, you know, so. But I didn't know who he was, and this is how we met. And I'm glad I did so and we became friends and we exchange ideas on an ongoing basis. He advises me and I advise him, whether he takes my advice I have no idea, but that's a separate conversation.

But going back to the President, what drives him? I mean, what's this about? His commitment that seems to be so firm to get a deal done. Is it your influence? Is it his heart? What is it? I mean, is it a compilation of both? He seems really committed to get something done. Why does he care so much about it?

MR. KUSHNER: So I'll talk to the President's commitment to this issue, but to talk about your story. I recall reading that article in the New Yorker many years ago and being impressed with the way that you'd, obviously, accomplished a lot of things in your professional life, but then devoted yourself to a lot of causes, not just with your financial resources, but also with your time. That you really wanted to make a difference in. So I had admiration for that. I wrote a letter, and I'd forgotten about it too until I got a call.

MR. SABAN: Thank you.

MR. KUSHNER: Of course. But then we're in the middle of a --

MR. SABAN: After ten years I could say thank you.

MR. KUSHNER: But then we're in the middle of a presidential campaign, and needless to say, we were on slightly different sides, and I got a call from Haim Saban and I said, what the hell is going on here? And so Haim called me. We got together. And I don't know if you remember what I said to you because, you know, your primary concern was, obviously, you care a lot about the U.S. Israel relationship for a lot of reasons. And, you know, you said to me, well, I'm very concerned. I don't know much about Trump and I don't know what this means for Israel.

And I don't know if you remember what I told you, but I remember saying that you should hope that Trump wins if you care about the U.S. Israel relationship because they're be no better president who could strengthen the relationship and try to

cause change in the region if Trump wins. And so I'm not going to put you on the spot at the Forum and ask you if, in retrospect, you're happy with the outcome or not.

MR. SABAN: Okay. Let's talk about Hilary.

MR. KUSHNER: But --

MR. SABAN: Let's talk about Hilary, okay, so.

MR. KUSHNER: Yeah, but I would --

MR. SABAN: Look, I mean, the rhetoric is there.

MR. KUSHNER: Yeah.

MR. SABAN: And, you know, the team of lawyers that have no clue about the Middle East is there. You know, the commitment, I mean, looking from the outside in, you know, it appears to be there to get something done. I mean, you fly to Saudi Arabia unannounced for a day and a half, you spend a night speaking. I don't think you necessarily speaking so much about Yemen, so I don't know what you spoke about, but I'm assuming. So there is no question that, you know, it comes across, to us looking from the outside in, that there is a commitment there.

And the team that is working on it, I am sure, have their heart, starting with you, have their heart into getting a deal done and bringing peace to the Middle East which is all of us, all of us here hope for. So, you know, I wish you luck.

It's --

MR. KUSHNER: Thank you.

MR. SABAN: Yeah, I wish you luck with that.

MR. KUSHNER: What I will say, you know, to your question on the President's commitment. You know, the way that I

try to define the President's foreign policy objectives to people is that he really has two major foreign policy objectives: peace and prosperity. And the President wants us to work on all areas where he can end as much conflict as possible, create as much peace, and then he obviously wants to see a world there's as much, you know, growth and economic opportunity as possible.

The difference maybe between this president and the past is he wants to fight hard to get as much of that economic growth into America. So that's really where America first. He wants to make good deals for our country. He wants to figure out how to create good opportunity to bring that back.

Figuring out how to bring peace and how to strengthen the U.S. Israeli relationship he sees as an integral part of furthering both of those objectives.

MR. SABAN: It's part of an overall plan, if you say.

MR. KUSHNER: Yes.

MR. SABAN: If you would.

MR. KUSHNER: But it's very personal to him.

MR. SABAN: Right.

MR. KUSHNER: And he sees this as something that is very integral to America and to his personal values.

MR. SABAN: Oh, I'm glad to hear that. That's encouraging. So, as I said, you know, I wish you luck. So there is a plan. There's a speculation there is a plan. You've got to have a plan by now. I mean, four lawyers. Come on. There's got to be a plan. Tell us what it is.

MR. KUSHNER: I thought with four lawyers you're

guaranteed not to get to a plan if you have so many lawyers working on it. No, we --

MR. SABAN: I have Jason Greenblatt here. Where is he? Right here.

MR. KUSHNER: Good guy.

MR. SABAN: And then I met David Friedman when I was in Israel. And who's the fourth one?

MR. KUSHNER: Dena Powell.

MR. SABAN: She's not a lawyer?

MR. KUSHNER: She is not a lawyer.

MR. SABAN: She's not, okay. So --

MR. KUSHNER: But I will say, you know --

MR. SABAN: -- tell us, yes.

MR. KUSHNER: -- we work with all the agencies very well. You know, we've read in people at the State Department, all the different agencies, so we've got plenty of lawyers around who are looking to get involved if we need any more help.

I think we solicited a lot of ideas from a lot of places. There's obviously speculation all the time about whether there is a plan, there isn't a plan, and what's in it, and the reporters will call and say, well, we hear that you've got these four points are in and these two points are out. And then I'm looking around the room and all the people in the room I know don't talk to the media. They're all very trustworthy and I know that none of them have spoken to this reporter, so we all kind of laugh and say, okay, we're just not going to play the guessing game.

So I think that one of the reasons we've been able to come this far is that, you know, we know what's in the plan. The Palestinians know what discussions we've had with them. The Israelis know what discussions we've had with them. And --

MR. SABAN: So you can tell us.

MR. KUSHNER: Okay. So let me start. No, so we're not going to disclose that today, but I am optimistic that there is a lot of hope for being able to bring a conclusion to this. And I'll say that, you know, especially with the people who are here today there's been so much work on this problem set for so many years by so many people who have been so devoted to the cause, so a lot of you here have been very generous with your time talking with myself, my team, with your writings, and with your thoughts, and that's been very helpful also to us, developing the ideas that we ultimately believe have the potential to be successful.

So we're working forward. You know, one thing people always ask us is they say, you know, well, you have a timeline? When's this? When's that? And we're business people. We're not politicians. And you're a businessman, and you know that when you do deals sometimes you have deals you think will go very quickly and they take forever, and then you have deals sometimes you think will take forever and they go very quickly. So we've been very deliberate about not setting timeframes, not trying to do this the way that it's been done before so that we have more room and opportunity to, hopefully, be successful with it.

MR. SABAN: And the whole story with the Embassy

coming on Wednesday. Can you tell us something about this?

MR. KUSHNER: I'll tell you what we're telling everyone else which is that --

MR. SABAN: No, don't tell me what you're telling everybody else. Are you kidding me? I mean, look at this crowd here. You can't put a pin in here it's so crowded. They all came for you.

MR. KUSHNER: All the reporters have already called saying they have inside sources that know what the decision is, but what I'll say is that the President's going to make his decision and --

MR. SABAN: He hasn't made his decision?

MR. KUSHNER: He's still looking at a lot of different facts and that when he makes his decision he'll be the one to want to tell you, not me. So he'll make sure he does that at the right time.

MR. SABAN: So, basically, you're not going to tell us?

MR. KUSHNER: Not today.

MR. SABAN: Okay. Wednesday. Thursday. I'll call you on Thursday.

MR. KUSHNER: Perfect.

MR. SABAN: After the President says you can repeat what he said.

MR. KUSHNER: Perfect, perfect.

MR. SABAN: Deal. So I'd like to end on a personal note. For a young man you had a pretty successful -- you have a

pretty successful career as a businessman in the real estate business. Your wife had her own career. And then you dropped all this and put it in trust or whatever you had to do by law.

MR. KUSHNER: Mm-hmm.

MR. SABAN: And I don't know how much they pay you, but I know the American government doesn't pay a lot, so. And you decided to do this. Tell us a little bit about the changes. People don't know you, so tell us a little bit about this. Tell us about how did you adapt your life into Washington. The kids, do they like it? Ivanka. Ivanka.

MR. KUSHNER: Yeah.

MR. SABAN: Tell us how you met Ivanka.

MR. KUSHNER: We could go through that as well. We actually got introduced by two business colleagues and I got very, very lucky in that one, but --

MR. SABAN: Yes, you did.

MR. KUSHNER: Very, very lucky.

MR. SABAN: Yes, you did.

MR. KUSHNER: But what I would say is that, for us, we did not plan our lives like we would go into politics. You know, Ivanka's father decided to run for president and then we slowly got, you know, more and more into the campaign and as we saw more of the country we saw a lot of the problems. We met a lot of the people. We saw that he was fighting for a lot of change that really needed to happen for the country, and so we helped with the campaign.

And then when he said he was coming to Washington we

made the decision to leave our lives and to do this, and, look, it's definitely been -- we've probably been working harder than we've ever worked before. I mean, every day it's a different challenge. I think that, you know, we view it like you have a short amount of time to create as much impact as possible in the areas that you really care about.

And so whether it's working on the peace process or working on the U.S. Mexico relationship which I know you also care about, you know, working on, you know, the technology upgrades that we're working on throughout the government, working with Kelly Anne on the opioids, working on the improvements we're making in the VA, and improving, you know, the future of workforce that we've been figuring out how we get Americans trained for the jobs of tomorrow and ten years from now. There's so much great work that needs to be done, that can be done, and we feel very honored to be able to do it.

But I will say is that every day, you know, we come in, the reason why we've been working so hard is that we feel like it's just sand going through an hourglass, and, you know, before we know it it'll be over and so we're going to work as hard as we can to make as much impact as we can in the areas that we care about. And that's really how we judge ourselves. So, you know, we try not to get distracted by the day-to-day, and we don't pay a lot attention to the noise.

MR. SABAN: The scrutiny.

MR. KUSHNER: But it's --

MR. SABAN: The press.

MR. KUSHNER: Yeah.

MR. SABAN: The media in general. How do you deal with that? I mean, this is not a world you're familiar with, you know, even though you owned a newspaper, but basically, you know, now you can't open the TV or read a newspaper that there's not a story about you or about Ivanka's shoes, or this one's ties, or I don't know what. Always going back to you, analyzing what you did, what you didn't say, what you're doing, what you're not doing.

MR. KUSHNER: Yeah.

MR. SABAN: Is that disturbing you?

MR. KUSHNER: I don't let it bother me. I mean, there are people who are good at dealing with the media. My focus is on the objectives, and will stay focused on the different missions, and, you know, we're here to serve the country and we'll just keep going. And, you know, what I am confident is that when our service is done we'll look back and we won't say, oh, there was a bad story on this. There's a bad story on that. We'll look back and we'll say did we spend every minute we could to push as hard as we could on the issues we cared about to make as big of an impact as possible.

So we feel very fortunate to be able to have the opportunity to work for this country that we think is the greatest country in the world. And so we're just going to keep going, and, you know, look I think that it's -- you know, you can choose what you spend your time on every day, and unfortunately, if we spent our time focusing on trying to, you know, correct

things or deal with the media then we wouldn't have time to do the other things.

So, you know, we do the best we can with that, but we don't let it bother us. And, you know, we recognize that it's politics. That's the sport of it and people will either agree or disagree with what you said or didn't say. But that's not what's real. What's real at the end of the day is what you accomplish, the differences you make, the lives you impact, and that's what we stay very focused on.

You know, look, D.C.'s a different place. We never thought we'd move out of New York, but the kids are loving it here. The schools are great, and my wife and I feel like we've made a difference so far and there's a lot more impact that we have the ability to make. So --

MR. SABAN: That's great.

MR. KUSHNER: Thank you.

MR. SABAN: Jared, thank you so very much.

MR. KUSHNER: Thank you.

MR. SABAN: I appreciate it.

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