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## Security by Design: Counterterrorism at the Airport

*Mark Maguire and David A. Westbrook*

### Introduction

In 2019, more than 4 billion passengers travelled by air, many through international airports. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has restricted global travel, but aerial modernity will return. Although those with wealth and status may glide past special gates, perhaps even through a separate building, the great majority of people will run a gauntlet of insulting rules, imperious stratification and intrusive surveillance. The hope is that there is reason behind the maddening regulations. And one may occasionally catch a glimpse of subtler designs: plainclothes officials appear and disappear; armed patrols switch direction according to earpiece commands. Airports thus struggle to reconcile the modern goals of freedom as mobility and security from physical violence.

Perhaps this contradiction explains the strangely bifurcated literature on airports, with celebratory books positioned on the coffee table and critical texts in the scholarly library.<sup>1</sup> Many in the critical social sciences openly admit that the airport is hard to study, a place of contradictions and dizzying complexity that resists traditional situated analysis. One is often left with abstractions such

as “the State” and metaphors such as “theatre.”<sup>2</sup> While hardly easy, a more empirical approach is possible. Since 2015, our work has drawn on paraethnographic research with counterparts in the world of counterterrorism.<sup>3</sup> Our focus has been on specific terror attacks and the responses of key agencies and actors—security bureaucracies, elite special forces, managers, experts and designers. We reconstructed attacks in Belfast, Glasgow, London, Paris and Nairobi, attacks on airports and symbolic spaces but also attacks on the “unsuspecting public.” The resulting 2020 book, *Getting through Security: Counterterrorism, Bureaucracy and a Sense of the Modern*, develops an image of contemporary counterterrorism as secretive and dangerous but also fractured, limited and haunted by failure.

Here we look closely at one particular challenge in the world of airport counterterrorism, that of securing the airport’s “landside” zone. We describe this challenge through the eyes of key European agencies and actors; we acknowledge their desire for handy solutions, such as security by design, but also their willingness to do better. Instead of a portrait of coherence and excessive power, we show security to be a dangerous scene where responsibility meets uncertainty.

### It Could Be You

In the world of security, someone is always responsible. The individuals responsible for airport security always hope that the day ahead will be empty, free of incident. But at any given moment a catastrophic event may occur, so security officials live in uncertain



Figure 1. "Man-made - San Francisco - Airport - Airport," photograph by Andrew Choy, Santa Clara, California, Creative Commons CC BY-SA 2.0 license.

fear that the worst might happen when they are in charge. On March 22, 2016, William (pseudonym) was one of the people responsible for Brussels Zaventem Airport. A tall, thin man with the nervous energy of someone who recently quit smoking, William describes himself as a man going places in the years before 2016. Responsibility certainly took its toll, but he still felt like the master of his domain, confident in answering any question of significance. As was his habit, on the way to his office at around 7:45 a.m. he walked through the arrivals hall with a take-away coffee in hand. It was a good way to meet people and be seen by other security officers, his “troops.” He may have passed by three men pushing luggage trollies—he cannot be sure, he told us, and the CCTV coverage is partial. Regardless, at exactly 7:58 one of the men detonated a massive nail bomb at the Delta Airlines check-in area. The building shuddered, then the screaming began. A second man ran toward fleeing travelers to maximize the death toll from his improvised explosive device, while a third attacker fled the scene without detonating his suitcase bomb. He remained at large in the capital of Europe for days, a mysterious *l’homme au chapeau*, the man with the hat.

William is not a detective, nor is he an armed responder. He is a security bureaucrat; his job is to implement plans with elaborate protocols. That day, the communication system failed, and alerts to counterterrorism special forces, ordonnance experts and medical services did not go as planned. The situation was confusing. Were more terrorist cells in play? An hour later, another explosion ripped through Maalbeek Metro station right in the heart

of Brussels. That day, March 22, 35 people lost their lives at the airport and metro station, and many hundreds were physically and psychologically scarred, the day that William was responsible.

What to do? In *Getting through Security* we describe airport security as a perpetual game of “castles and cannons,” with as yet unseen malicious actors. Each new threat occasions a defensive response (building a castle wall), to be countered or evaded by a different form of attack (a new cannon). The attackers might arrive by taxi, as on March 22, but they might just as easily be among one’s staff, so-called insider threats. One might think about some recent phases in airport security to illustrate matters more finely. During the 1960s, hijackings were a common monthly occurrence in the United States. In 1972, hijackers threatened to crash an airliner into Oak Ridge National Laboratory, changing the rules of the game, so to speak. New security measures hardened airports and aircraft in response. During the 1980s, a spate of airline bombings resulted in passenger-to-baggage matching, among other measures. Whatever the threat, the response was always to introduce new rules, technologies and designs to prevent “unlawful interference” while preserving “business continuity”—that is, mobility, shopping, any other important “airport experience.”

A raft of new counterterrorism measures, from biometric security to passenger surveillance, came into force internationally in the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The technology sector was quick to offer assistance and seek profit. One senior partner in a multinational firm described a deliberate corporate pivot to the new home-



Figure 2. “Brussels after the terror attacks,” photograph by Matthias Ripp, Creative Commons CC BY 2.0 license.

land security market. “Proof of concept” was needed, he explained to us, so his firm collaborated on publicly funded research programs and assisted in various technology trials, such as the use of fast channels through airports for “trusted travelers,” meaning business-class passengers willing to pay for this identifier and to submit to advanced biometric systems. “The systems worked too well,” he told Mark during an interview. Passengers signed up “in droves” and only rarely asked questions about data protection or privacy,

but the airport buildings were too old and inflexible to respond. “We moved them [passengers] so quickly that we had them standing waiting for their baggage for an age,” the technology entrepreneur explained. Or, even worse still, “We’d get them through ‘security’ but they’d run into some other bottleneck, alongside economy class.” Today, he is a leading advocate for comprehensive security by design.

To think about airport security is to consider bureaucratically byzantine, multidimensional

mensional and interdependent systems that nonetheless may be understood and acted upon by experts. Not only security is at issue. To be introduced, each new measure is tested according to a calculus that considers the potential risk and cost against passenger delay, the latter counted to the exact second. During an interview, one airport police interlocutor expressed the security portion of the calculus thus: “We don’t make money, we cost money.” In the world in which William and other security professionals operate, it is actually rather hard to do anything to improve security.<sup>4</sup> And yet security *must* be improved, infinitely, and specified problems must be met with credible, scalable solutions. Airports are not secured by single devices or even coordinated systems, yet everything must work in harmony. Thus an approach or story that gives meaning is required, one that provides a high level of trust, reassurance, perhaps even rest.

To this point we have described the view from inside the castle; we see fragmentation, limitation, competition for scarce resources. From the outside, however, all one sees is expanding layers of security measures and devices, with insulting rules announced to the peasants from atop the walls.<sup>5</sup> But it may be possible to consider responses other than the imposition of still more rules or the deployment of yet more technology. Such alternative solutions, however, are only possible if one understands the problem to hand.

## Landside

In the wake of September 11, airline security was hardened with everything from intrusive

database checks to physically stronger cockpit doors. It became significantly more difficult to sneak a weapon past the gauntlet of agents and detection machinery. “Airside,” the sterile area of the airport beyond security clearance, including the apron and runways, is now safer than ever. But there is still the so-called landside challenge that keeps people such as William up at night, and to which security by design is a partial response.<sup>6</sup> Landside is the whole world *before* security clearance. In 2006, Madrid-Barajas Airport was attacked. In 2007 a plot failed at the doors of Glasgow Airport’s terminal, and a plot to attack JFK International was foiled the same year. Then came the horrifying attack on Moscow’s Domodedovo Airport in 2011. Year after year, the list of successful, failed and foiled attacks grew. In March 2016 it was the turn of Brussels Airport, followed a few months later by a devastating attack on Istanbul’s Atatürk Airport. The pattern, European counterterrorism experts told us, was clear: Terrorists were targeting the crowded landside zones with improvised explosives and (in the case of Atatürk) small arms, but worse, they were responding dynamically to crowd movement by herding people. A “nightmare scenario” emerged: People might die in horrifying numbers at an airport, but the security system of that airport would remain untouched. The castle’s walls would be rendered irrelevant.

Even at first glance it is clear that the dimensions of this landside problem are dizzying. First, we have to account for the sheer scale of an international airport. Brussels Zaventem—an airport that only ranks as 24<sup>th</sup> busiest in Europe—catered for more than 25 million passenger trips in 2019 and has a



Figure 3. “Denver Airport Security Lines,” photograph by alist, Creative Commons CC BY-NC 2.0 license. [The photographer explains the image thus: “Weirdest thing. They funnel everyone through these long, long lines. You can watch it all from above.”]

campus of 1,254 hectares, on which 25,000 people are employed at any one time.

In *Getting through Security* we discuss ethnographic research with several airport police forces. One day during a months-long ethnography project on “community policing” in a major international airport, Mark accompanied a seasoned officer as he patrolled the campus perimeter in an SUV. The officer pointed at one of the terminals, just visible beyond a motorway interchange choked with cars and busses, before lamenting, “I can’t protect this. How could I?” To say that William or this officer faced a dif-

ficult challenge is not to grant undue sympathy to those who should be able to reassure the public by at least projecting competence. Rather, we note the technical challenge they face and the fact that this challenge always exceeds expectation. Second, consider that after 9/11 in counterterrorism circles the terrorists of the future were defined speculatively as “unknown persons with never-before-seen weapons who intend to cause the maximum loss of life with no regard for their own preservation.” Of course there are variations on this, depending on jurisdiction and training program. Moreover, after the Brus-

sels attack, the intention to cause maximum loss of life was painted as efforts to target “the unsuspecting public.” How to design security when neither form nor function is clear?

Early policy statements made by key international bodies in the wake of the attacks on Brussels and Atatürk Airports showed a certain bureaucratic sympathy for the landside problem. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO 2017), the Leviathan of aerial modernity, issued a regulatory amendment that begins by insisting that all contracting authorities (i.e., states) “ensure that landside areas are identified,” that risk-based analyses inform security measures and that there is coordination between “relevant departments, agencies, other organizations of

the State, and other entities” such that “responsibilities for landside” are defined. Here one can see the true scale of the problem surfacing, especially for European counterterrorism. Landing at a given airport and exiting passport control and customs, consider that the building may be owned by a quasi-governmental or commercial enterprise and patrolled by a mix of state police and private security, perhaps with a military presence. Does “landside” begin in the terminal or outside at the transit center or taxi stand, and where does it end, exactly? When one steps off the metro in the nearest city center? And what of major airports such as Amsterdam Schiphol, with its 71 million passengers per annum and 28 square kilometer campus,



Figure 4. “NYC – JFK Airport: TWA Flight Centre,” photograph by Wally Gobetz, Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 license.



where one departs the terminal by walking through a shopping area that opens out into the city center? At multiple closed counterterrorism training events we attended as researchers, the core question, as we came to expect, was, Who is responsible? In public, the discussion was less embarrassing and more focused on possible new measures and matters of design.

### Who's in Charge?

An airport is a particular place *and* a node, a nexus point, in an international system of transport, technology and regulatory standards. The ICAO is most insistent on “the highest practical degree of uniformity.” Thus to advance a specific new measure meant to change the system in general. In the immediate wake of the Brussels attacks, various security experts took to the news media to insist on the “Israeli model,” which denotes the movement of security checks and the resulting crowds away from terminals to the outskirts of the airport campus. Airport terminals are halls of glass and movable objects that might become shrapnel. Better to spread the people out, and far from breakables. Although this sounded sensible enough, as conversations played out in public, it became obvious that cause and effect are not so easy to establish in the realm of security.<sup>7</sup> One may extend security outside a building only to be struck by an insider threat; one may reduce the crowd in one area only to make it more vulnerable elsewhere. Moreover, discussion of international exemplars or models quickly lost traction on the soft ground of values, context, culture.<sup>8</sup>

Security is hard to think. Experts might think about concentric rings, perhaps each having a different security measure, with some measures for show, some to generate a delay or an alert. Experts also think about security systems as polyfunctional and interoperable. An entertaining information console that guides people around the terminal and indicates different shopping opportunities might be constructed so as to be shatterproof, fire-retardant and bulletproof; or it might not be any of those things, because the airport budget did not permit such an extravagant purchase. To explain the landside challenge, one has to describe actual vulnerabilities and explain the limits of security. That is not easy. One is not permitted to discuss specific vulnerabilities in the public sphere. Important events are invitation only or are entirely closed to the public; there is no obvious forum in which members of the public see and respond to that which is done in their name. In the absence of informed conversation across lines of expertise, paranoia spreads *within* reason.<sup>9</sup>

In 2018, a closed European counterterrorism research group met near Dublin, a meeting that Mark attended by invitation. By that point, the ICAO guidelines had been interpreted by European civil aviation authorities, and those responsible for landside security had been identified, as far as possible. “Israeli models” had been rejected as excessive. And the cost of retrofitting blast-resistant material also had been judged to be excessive and unlikely to reduce risk. William, one of the presenters, took the floor and gave a presentation on the Brussels Zaventem attack. As he spoke about the airport's pre-2016 measures and attack time



Figure 5. "Security Design Conference, Westminster, London," photograph by Mark Maguire.

line, he flicked from slide to slide, each with an airport image or CCTV still. The audience watched as the terrorists exited a taxi; another camera picked them up entering the terminal. The time stamp showed 7:58, and the presentation slide changed to show the terminal façade. The building erupted with shattering glass, fragments of concrete and great clouds of smoke. We watched the footage with William, who stood with his back to the audience, concentrating as if seeing the images for the first time. Something needed to be done. But what was most interesting about this meeting, and similar ones in other European jurisdictions, was that front-

line security managers were not driving the discussion, nor were the physically assertive but rather lost-looking members of tactical units. Such "practitioners" were at the table but were expected to cooperate with applied academics, corporate representatives and members of "industry liaison" networks. It was quickly clear that in the closed counterterrorism meeting in Dublin, as in numerous other meetings across Europe, the landside challenge was a problem technology companies and academic technologists intended to solve with premade products assembled to make meaning collectively, as security by design.

## Security by Design

Security by design is a conceptual approach familiar to those working in the architecture of information technology systems as one path to cybersecurity. The idea is to integrate security concerns into a whole-of-system design process. Security by design addresses known vulnerabilities but also weaknesses yet to be exploited; during the design process, participants imagine what a malicious actor would do, based on what might be described as credible speculation. The approach thus captures the internal impulse towards unending speculation and critique while trying to tame the dizzying complexity of external reality. Put differently, the goal is to reduce an insoluble problem into a series of boxes which are arranged in a reality-as-a-diagram process. It's all very reassuring. The expectation in a busy international airport is that IT systems, security staff and access control will all nest together. People and things should be in the right place at the right time, and physical environments should not be open to weaponization, all while reducing the "threat surface." A practitioner like William, then, should be able to walk through Brussels airport knowing that vulnerabilities have been mapped, that the taxis do not drop people mere feet from the front door of the terminal, but instead passengers should walk a distance and pass stand-off trace detection systems that may automatically trigger a shutdown. William should know that the raised flower beds outside the terminal are secured to the ground with steel to prevent a vehicle from crashing into the building, and they are blastproof, too.

There is an aesthetic here. Security should be visible to the expert eye but relatively invis-

ible to the public, such that it runs the length of one's interaction with a process or space, facilitating that interaction, until it does not. Clearly, then, one might argue that security by design delivers securitization by stealth in the form of expert discourse in concrete form, often literally concrete. But such an approach risks closing down analysis before it truly begins. Inspired by and at some odds with Max Weber, we are interested in the contemporary scenes where the responsibilities of the state and nonstate actors meet uncertainty. Thus understood, security by design's efforts to close off security's inherent limitations are doomed to a degree of failure, just as are efforts to avoid all risk, including terrorism.

Security by design is institutionally appealing in part because it addresses itself to no threat in particular and to the smooth functioning of airports in general. In so doing, security by design tells a story and paints a picture. One is invited to imagine the likely progress of a traveler through airport space and think about the multiple design devices along the route, with the sympathetic cyber-systems and communication infrastructure ticking along. Perhaps smart CCTV systems will use behavioral algorithms to manage crowd flow while searching for abnormal patterns. And, as each device is added to the airport-as-diagram, and as each fortification acquires a friendly veneer or recedes to the background, complexity and uncertainty fade to modernity of a kind.

## The Airport Para-ethnographically

Something had to be done, indeed, and perhaps all of this will make us safer. But as



Figure 6. "Airport Security," photograph by Hakan Dahlström, Creative Commons CC BY 2.0 license.

Dwight D. Eisenhower is reported to have quipped, “If you want total security, go to prison. ... The only thing lacking ... is freedom.” At the end of the day, as William knew well, there was very little if anything that could have been done to prevent the attack on March 22, 2016. At the time, Brussels was in a heightened state of alert following the wave of Islamic State–inspired attacks across Europe over the previous 12 months. Intelligence services issued specific warnings, and police raided a terrorist safe house in the days before the attack. Nonetheless, in a period of just a few minutes, three men went from being ordinary-looking passengers with luggage to suicide bombers.

The landside zone is a contemporary focal point in the more general problem of security, for which “castles and cannons” is shorthand. “Securing” an uncertain future is an unavoidable oxymoron: Security cannot be known precisely because the future is uncertain. Nor is the pursuit of security costless. When we spoke to William, and to other responsible individuals in Belfast, Glasgow, London, Paris and Nairobi, it was clear that they were not looking to turn their airports or shopping malls into high-tech prisons. William searched for solutions, but only security by design was on the table as something reasonable, scalable, acceptable. Security by design became an official way for airport bureaucracies to conceptualize what they were doing to forestall horrific possibilities.

Questions such as how to think about an institutional response such as security by design, and more generally how to think outside of the game of castles and cannons, cannot be answered in the abstract, certainly not in a short article. But we think it is important

to note that ethnographers have a real opportunity here. Doors are open for conversation, though such conversations are difficult, often uncomfortable. In our work, we noted a desire among some (not all) police for training in deescalation, a desire among managers to explore the security “culture” of their organizations and a desire among various experts to discuss responsibility and uncertainty with the public. Local experiments, some resembling ethnography, were already taking place, as practitioners contemplated their own worlds. The securityscape is neither contiguous nor coherent; it is filled with cracks and gaps. Para-ethnographically we see the possibility to temper power by engaging with counterparts, and at the very least we see the possibility of more informed critique.

## Notes

1. For a review of literature, see Mark Maguire and Reka Pétercsák, “Airports, from Vital Systems to Nervous Systems,” in *Routledge Handbook of Anthropology and the City*, ed. Setha M. Low (London: Routledge, 2018), 129–142.

2. During the 1990s, venturesome scholars used the airport as a metaphor for the unchecked “flow” globalization, and modernity’s capacity to strip meaning from local worlds (e.g., Augé). After 9/11, numerous social-scientific studies described the airport as a site of surveillance and Deleuzian control (e.g., Adey). However, the latter body of research is not based on significant access to airport systems, especially access to counterterrorism planning and processes. Because there is no firm basis to this research, technologies are misunderstood, trends exaggerated and implications folded into speculative theory until we have an image of airport security that is as coherent and logical as a paranoid delusion. Marc Augé, *Non-places*:

*Introduction to an Anthropology of Super-modernity* (London: Verso, 1995); Peter Adey, "Surveillance at the Airport: Surveilling Mobility/Mobilising Surveillance," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 36, no. 8 (2004): 1365–1380; and Peter Adey, "Facing Airport Security: Affect, Biopolitics, and the Preemptive Securitisation of the Mobile Body," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27, no. 2 (2009): 274–295.

3. Borrowing from Holmes and Marcus, we take paraethnography to denote the academic study of inquiries that are already taking place in a variety contemporary scenes. In the older tradition of ethnography, the anthropologist often relied on key interlocutors, "consultants," but these individuals tended to be understood as gatekeepers who permitted access for the analysis of the professional anthropologists. In many contemporary scenes, however, the village does not await analytical discovery. In situations as varied as finance, policing and government, we find counterparts already discussing contemporary life in cultural terms, sometimes carrying out experimental projects, and often capturing important characteristics of social structure in "lay" terms. Those in contemporary scenes, then, often desire the kinds of conversation that the ethnographer may enable, and the paraethnographic can make the contemporary available within the academy, shrinking the distance between the university seminar and the boardroom. Douglas Holmes and George E. Marcus, "Fast Capitalism: Para-ethnography and the Rise of the Symbolic Analyst," in *Frontiers of Capital*, ed. Melissa S. Fischer and Greg Downey (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 33–56.

4. In anthropology there has been some attention to the discourse of "preparedness" in disaster management and counterterrorism (e.g., Lakoff), a vague word for whole-of-system approaches to risk, planning, harmonized procedures and multi-disciplinary team readiness. However, the term preparedness is infrequently used except in aspirational policy statements. Much like the modern

university's aspirations for "inter-disciplinary" academic work, in counterterrorism there is a significant gap between the "as-is" and the ideal. Like academic disciplines, security bureaucracies are stubborn and resist cooperation. This is why, empirically, when studying multiple terror attacks in multiple jurisdictions we never heard the word "preparedness" in the wild. Instead (cf. Keck 2016), we attended "joint exercises" and "scenario-based training" where different security bureaucracies jockeyed for position. Security is complex, and sometimes a discourse is just a discourse. Andrew Lakoff, "Preparing for the Next Emergency," *Public Culture* 19, no. 2 (2007): 247–271; and Frédéric Keck, "Preparedness," *Fieldsights*, September 30, 2016, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/preparedness>.

5. Scholars, especially since the events of September 11, 2001, have commented on specific security "design devices" as indexing the larger workings of "power." To illustrate, geographer Stephen Graham notes the proliferation of "Jersey-barrier blast walls, identity checkpoints, computerized CCTV, biometric surveillance and military styles of access control protect archipelagos of fortified social, economic, political or military centers from an outside deemed unruly, impoverished or dangerous. In the most extreme examples these encompass green zones, military prisons, ethnic and sectarian neighbourhoods and military bases; but they are growing around strategic financial districts, embassies, tourist and consumption spaces, airport and port complexes, sports arenas, gated communities and export processing zones" (xxi). The list of "design devices" is long here, but according to Graham they are all part of the insidious process of "military urbanism." Stephen Graham, *Cities Under Siege: The New Military Urbanism* (London: Verso, 2010).

6. To be clear, other common security vulnerabilities have been identified of similar seriousness to the landside problem. The ICAO and many national security agencies are concerned with

the threat posed by unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones, and attacks on aircraft from sites adjacent to airports using MANPADS, or portable surface-to-air missiles.

7. See Fredrick Kunkle, “Is it Time to Set Up Checkpoints Outside Airports?” *Washington Post*, April 1, 2016.

8. It is often surprising that in the wake of terror attacks ostensibly liberal publications, perhaps in an effort to appear mature and “reasonable,” propose the use of draconian legislation, often with no sunset clauses mentioned, or seek to expand the budget and reach of intelligence agencies, often with no proposal for oversight. Laura Hood, “Brussels Airport Attacks Are Not Just a Matter of Airport Security,” *The Conversation*, March 23, 2016, <https://theconversation.com/brussels-airport-attacks-are-not-just-a-matter-of-airport-security-56736>

9. George E. Marcus coined the term “paranoia within reason” as a way to explore rational contemporary worlds and the structures of feeling that obtain in such domains. In the realm of security, we propose, certain features of highly rational security bureaucracies—hierarchy, internal partitioning, silos, secrecy, among others—generate a reasonable suspicion that the whole story is not being told, and that others are working together to a plan, paranoia *within* reason. As Joseph Masco put it, “Paranoia is ... a structuring principle for those inhabiting the expert worlds and spaces of compartmentalized secrecy” (383). George E. Marcus, *Paranoia within Reason: A Casebook on Conspiracy and Explanation (Late Editions Series)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Joseph P. Masco, “Boundless Informant: Insecurity in the Age of Ubiquitous Surveillance,” *Anthropological Theory* 17, no. 3 (2017): 328–403.

## Suggestions for Further Reading

International Civil Aviation Organization, Annex 17 to the Convention on International Civil

Aviation. 2017, <https://www.icao.int/security/sfp/pages/annex17.aspx>

Tulumello, Simone. “From ‘Spaces of Fear’ to ‘Fearscape’: Mapping for Re-framing Theories about the Spatialization of Fear in Urban Space.” *Space and Culture* 18, no. 3 (2015): 257–272.

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