
Centre for International
Governance Innovation

MEDIA AND MASS ATROCITY

**THE RWANDA
GENOCIDE
AND BEYOND**

Foreword

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"MORE IMPORTANT THAN JIHAD OF THE SWORD": THE ISLAMIC STATE'S MEDIA STRATEGY AND THE YAZIDI GENOCIDE

MICHAEL PETROU

It was 2005 and, as insurgency and civil war burned through Iraq, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the drab and uncharismatic deputy to al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, wrote to an upstart jihadist colleague in Iraq. The letter's recipient was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, leader of an insurgent group that the previous year had pledged loyalty to bin Laden and joined al-Qaeda. Zarqawi's outfit, Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, commonly known as al-Qaeda in Iraq and eventually renamed the Islamic State of Iraq, was responsible for spectacular terror attacks throughout the country against government soldiers, Shia mosques, American and other international troops and the United Nations. It captured and murdered Western hostages, frequently filming their beheadings.

Zarqawi, a one-time drug dealer and high-school dropout from Jordan, sometimes carried out the beheadings himself. He was fast becoming the most notorious face of the insurgency in Iraq, and of global Islamist terror more broadly. Despite Zarqawi's oath of loyalty to bin Laden, his group was somewhat autonomous and seemed to be eclipsing al-Qaeda Central,

whose leaders were holed up somewhere in Afghanistan or Pakistan and made comparatively little noise. Zawahiri's weak position was implicitly acknowledged in the letter. A surgeon from a well-respected Egyptian family, Zawahiri far surpassed Zarqawi in age, education and years devoted to jihad. But his tone was laudatory and humble.

"Dear brother, God Almighty knows how much I miss meeting with you, how much I long to join you in your historic battle against the greatest of criminals and apostates in the heart of the Islamic world, the field where epic and major battles in the history of Islam were fought," Zawahiri wrote (Bergen 2006, 365). "I think that if I could find a way to you, I would not delay a day, God willing."

But Zawahiri also beseeched Zarqawi to scale back his terror. Shoot hostages instead of beheading them, he suggested. And maybe stop attacking Shia mosques. His advice wasn't born of mercy, but of concerns about public relations. "Among the things which the feelings of the Muslim populace who love and support you will never find palatable — also — are the scenes of slaughtering the hostages," he wrote. "You shouldn't be deceived by the praise of some of the zealous young men and their description of you as the sheikh of the slaughterers, etc. They do not express the general view of the admirer and the supporter of the resistance in Iraq, and of you in particular by the favour and blessing of God."

Zawahiri revealed he had "tasted the bitterness of American brutality" when his favourite wife, a son and a daughter were killed in an airstrike. "However, despite all of this, I say to you: that we are in a battle, and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. And that we are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our Ummah."

A little over a decade later, after Zarqawi's Islamic State of Iraq had split from Zawahiri's al-Qaeda, expanded into Syria and declared the rebirth of a global caliphate — which was reflected in its new name of "Islamic State" — the group circulated a document titled "Media Operative, You Are a Mujahid, Too."

In its pages, Zawahiri's exhortation — "we are in a battle, and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media" — is repeated. Zawahiri, however, is not named as its author. And the actual advice he gives in the letter — to refrain from filming gratuitous gore and wantonly targeting Shia Muslims in terror campaigns — is similarly obscured (Winter 2017, 11).

The Islamic State had by now grasped Zawahiri's message about media's importance. But, crucially, it had also forged its own new and bloody path regarding how media should be used — one that had no room for the restraint Zawahiri suggested.

The Islamic State's media strategy and production are not just different from the propaganda and media operations of al-Qaeda, but also from those of any Islamist jihadist group that preceded it. The Islamic State's media productions are slick, professionally crafted and intimately violent, a combination of tabloid-like populism and high-minded appeals to religious texts and Islamic history. The volume of media products it creates is also unprecedented. It released hundreds of photographs, feature-length films, radio bulletins, short videos and other media products every month in 2015 — numbers that shrank as the Islamic State's loss of territory impeded its ability to produce media.

An underlying message in all of the Islamic State's media outputs is relentless religious supremacism and a denigration and even dehumanization of all those who are not Sunni Muslims subscribing to the Islamic State's extreme interpretation of the faith. This narrative accompanies the mass atrocities the Islamic State commits; it also helps make them possible. Just as Nazi propaganda depicting Jews as rats or that of Radio Television Libre des Milles Collines in Rwanda calling Tutsis cockroaches prepared the ground for genocide, so, too, has the Islamic State's scorn for "filthy Rafida" (a pejorative term for Shia Muslims), "cursed Jews," "wretched Druze" and "belligerent Christians" smoothed the road to slaughter and slavery.

There is no religious shield that can protect someone living under the Islamic State's control from its murderous cruelty. Sunni Muslims have been killed by the hundreds, as have Shias. But the atrocities suffered by one group in particular, the Yazidis of Iraq, were unique.

The Yazidis, who number perhaps one million worldwide, are a religious minority in Iraq whose faith mixes elements of Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Zoroastrianism. They are monotheistic but also worship seven angels, Chief among them is *Malak Taus*, known in English as the Peacock Angel, who temporarily fell from God's grace when he refused to bow to Adam, but was ultimately forgiven.

Because of perceived similarities between stories about *Malak Taus* and those of Satan, or *Iblis*, his Islamic equivalent, Yazidis have been widely and falsely described as devil worshippers. "Their creed is so deviant from the truth that even cross-worshipping Christians for ages considered them devil worshippers

and Satanists, as is recorded in accounts of Westerners and Orientalists who encountered or studied them," reads an article in an Islamic State magazine (*Dabiq* 2014, 14).

Long derided and misunderstood, Iraq's Yazidis have shunned living in major cities, seeking shelter instead in towns and villages lying in shadow of Mount Sinjar in the northwest of the country. But they have never really been safe. Yazidis have been the target of pogroms and persecution for centuries. The Islamic State nevertheless crafted a unique media narrative to justify its barbarism against them.

The Islamic State's worldview is infused with Muslim apocalyptic prophecies about the "end times," which its followers eagerly anticipate.¹

This is reflected in the group's obsession with a small town in northern Syria named Dabiq. Of no strategic importance, it was nevertheless a military priority for the group because there is a prophecy predicting a pre-apocalyptic confrontation between the armies of the Muslims and those of the infidels there.

Mohammed Emwazi, a British member of the Islamic State who was dubbed Jihadi John because of his murder of Western hostages, once posed in an Islamic State video with Dabiq behind him and the severed head of the American aid worker and former US Ranger Abdul-Rahman Kassig, born Peter Kassig, on the ground at his feet. "Here we are, burying the first American Crusader in Dabiq, eagerly waiting for the remainder of your armies to arrive," he said.

For a time, before losing the town to Turkish-backed rebels, the Islamic State named its online magazine *Dabiq*. Every issue opened with a quote from Zarqawi, who died in 2006, long before the Islamic State captured Dabiq or indeed controlled territory anywhere in Syria. "The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify — by Allah's permission — until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq."

It was in *Dabiq* that the Islamic State confirmed and celebrated its mass sexual enslavement of thousands of Yazidis. Its written justification for doing so was detailed and, the group claimed, based on conclusions reached by scholars of sharia, or Islamic law.

1. For a more detailed discussion, see William McCants (2016).

"Upon conquering the region of Sinjar in Wilāyat Ninawa, the Islamic State faced a population of Yazidis, a pagan minority existent for ages in regions of Iraq and Sham. Their continual existence to this day is a matter that Muslims should question as they will be asked about it on Judgment Day," explained the article, published in October 2014. "Sham" refers to the region roughly corresponding to modern-day Syria.

The article's author said Islamic law students were tasked with researching the Yazidi religion to determine whether Yazidis were once Muslims who became apostates, or if they belonged to an original *mushrik* religion, meaning idolaters or polytheists, and concluded the latter.

"Accordingly, the Islamic State dealt with this group as the majority of fuqahā [Islamic jurists] have indicated how mushrikin should be dealt with," the author continued.

"Unlike the Jews and Christians, there was no room for *jizyah* [protection] payment. Also, their women could be enslaved unlike female apostates who the majority of the fuqahā say cannot be enslaved and can only be given an ultimatum to repent or face the sword. After capture, the Yazidi women and children were then divided according to the Shari'ah amongst the fighters of the Islamic State who participated in the Sinjar operations, after one fifth of the slaves were transferred to the Islamic State's authority to be divided as *khums* [tax taken from war spoils]."

This explanation is based on a rigid interpretation of sharia that most modern Islamic scholars would reject as illegitimate. But the article's author also reached for prophetic justification, citing a Hadith, or a saying attributed to the prophet Muhammad, in which Muhammad reportedly said one of the signs of "the Hour," meaning the end times, would be when "the slave girl gives birth to her master."

The meaning of that particular Hadith has been debated for centuries, and there is no consensus among commentators (Bletcher 2017, 186-87). The *Dabiq* article's author acknowledged differing interpretations of the text, including metaphorical ones, but concluded those were more prevalent at a time when slavery was common and scholars therefore "found it hard to understand it as referring to actual slavery." Considered at a time when slavery has been abandoned and then revived, the author said, a literal interpretation becomes more plausible. And one interpretation is that the enslavement of infidels could result in a concubine giving birth to a child who would then be free like his or her Muslim father. Such an outcome, the author suggested,

might be a sign of the imminent apocalypse. The mass enslavement of the Yazidis, in other words, is not just permitted; it may in fact be a sign of the awaited end times (*Dabiq* 2014, 14–17).

The Yazidis of Iraq were hit by a series of coordinated car bombings near Mosul in 2007 that killed more than 400. No group claimed responsibility for the attacks, but about a month later the United States claimed to have killed in an airstrike the mastermind of al-Qaeda in Iraq, whom they identified as Abu Muhammad al-Afri. A military spokesperson, Rear Admiral Mark Fox, said, Afri was al-Qaeda's emir of the region and an associate of Abu Ayyub al-Masri, then leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, the organization that became the Islamic State.

Despite this, the Yazidis did not much feature in the Islamic State's propaganda before the group's conquest of Sinjar in 2014. It is noteworthy that the October 2014 article in *Dabiq* reveals the Islamic State found it necessary to study the Yazidi religion *after* conquering their territory. And yet the Islamic State's media propaganda about Shias, and about Sunni Muslims it considered deviant, also enabled the hate it levelled against Yazidis.

At the heart of Islamic State ideology is the concept of *taḥfīr*, which means to excommunicate. It is, notes author and journalist Graeme Wood, theologically perilous. A man who accuses another of apostasy is condemning him to death. If the accusation is false, the accuser himself is guilty of apostasy and should likewise be killed. For this reason, accusations of *taḥfīr* have historically been made cautiously — if someone denied the holiness of the Qur'an, for example. But Zarqawi expanded supposed crimes that fit the definition of apostasy, which would therefore warrant a death sentence, to include voting in an election, or being one of the roughly 200 million Shias in the world (Wood 2015).

This is a distinction in Islamic State's strategy that distances it from al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda is also a Sunni supremacist organization, but recall that Zarqawi counselled Zarqawi to show restraint regarding Shias. "And can the mujahedeen kill all of the Shias in Iraq? Has any Islamic state in history ever tried that?" he asked in his 2005 letter. "And why kill ordinary Shias considering that they are forgiven because of their ignorance?"

The Islamic State allows for no such mercy or practical considerations. Its claimed right to excommunicate and slaughter Muslims it deems to be apostates is reflected in its media. A typical *Dabiq* photograph of an Islamic State fighter brandishing a knife above some seated prisoners is accompanied by the caption, "Islamic State soldier humiliates the Nusayriyyah," a pejorative

term for Alawite Muslims (*Dabiq* 2014, 6). Shias are described as "the Jews of this Ummah," in another article, which concludes: "Thus, the Rafidah are mushrik apostates who must be killed wherever they are to be found, until no Rafidi walks on the face of earth, even if the jihad claimants despise such and even if the jihad claimants defend the Rafidah with their words day and night" (*Dabiq* 2016, 33).

The Islamic State's *taḥfīr* ideology does not directly relate to Yazidis — at least once the group's scholars decided Yazidis were not apostates who strayed from Islam, but followers of an original *mushrik* religion. But *taḥfīr* is part of a larger Islamic State worldview that rejects any tolerance for pluralism that might have shielded Yazidis from the fates they suffered. And the Islamic State's media inculcated an acceptance of this worldview among its supporters.

When Polish resistance agent Jan Karski presented his report on the extermination of Jews in German-occupied Poland to US Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter in 1943, the judge replied: "I am unable to believe what you told me."

A Polish diplomat intervened to protest. He told Frankfurter that Karski spoke with the authority of the Polish government in exile behind him and that Frankfurter could not tell Karski he was lying.

"I didn't say this young man is lying," Frankfurter replied. "I said I am unable to believe what he told me" (Frankfurter 1943).

There was a similar reluctance from some quarters to accept early reports about the Islamic State's atrocities against the Yazidis: specifically, mass murder and the group's enslavement of Yazidi women and girls. But while the Nazis and other genocidal groups throughout history made efforts to hide the extent of their crimes, planting trees where gas chambers once stood, the Islamic State has gloried in it.

In a May 2015 *Dabiq* article, a woman author calling herself Umm Sumayyah al-Muhajirah lamented that some Muslims had tried to defend the Islamic State by denying that its members were slavers.

But what really alarmed me was that some of the Islamic State supporters (may Allah forgive them) rushed to defend the Islamic State — may its honor persist and may Allah expand its territory — after the kafir media touched upon the State's capture of the Yazidi women. So, the supporters started denying the matter as if the soldiers of the Khalifah had committed a mistake or evil.

I write this while the letters drip of pride. Yes, O religions of kufr altogether, we have indeed raided and captured the kafirah women, and drove them like sheep by the edge of the sword. ["Kufi," "kafirah" and variants generally refer to those who deny or conceal the truth — in this case, the truth of Islam.]

I further increase the spiteful ones in anger by saying that I and those with me at home prostrated to Allah in gratitude on the day the first slave-girl entered our home. Yes, we thanked our Lord for having let us live to the day we saw kufr humiliated and its banner destroyed. Here we are today, and after centuries, reviving a prophetic Sunnah, which both the Arab and non-Arab enemies of Allah had buried. By Allah, we brought it back by the edge of the sword, and we did not do so through pacifism, negotiations, democracy, or elections. We established it according to the prophetic way, with blood-red swords, not with fingers for voting or tweeting. (*Dabiq* 2015, 46–47)

There can now be little doubt of the full nature of the crimes the Islamic State visited on Iraq's Yazidis, even without the group's own admissions. Following the Islamic State's conquest of the Yazidis' traditional homeland of Sinjar in northern Iraq, it murdered captured Yazidi men and boys who did not convert to Islam, kidnapped and converted Yazidi children, and sexually enslaved Yazidi women and girls. Men and boys who were forcibly converted to Islam may also have been killed at a later date. A UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) commission of inquiry and the US Holocaust Museum both concluded the Islamic State committed genocide (UNHRC 2016; Kikoler 2015).

Articles in *Dabiq*, and in *Rumiyah*, meaning Rome, the more recent name for the Islamic State's online magazine, which now appears to be discontinued, are carefully crafted. The magazine as a whole is of very high quality. Some writing is generally vivid and crisp, and free of grammatical mistakes. Some photographs are pornographically violent. Throats are slit; a woman is stoned to death for adultery. Others are professionally composed and shot. In one, an Islamic State fighter appears to sleep peacefully in a field of soft light. In another, a fighter pushes rifle cartridges into a magazine, every scuff and crease on his fingers captured in the close-up frame.

But one of the successes of the Islamic State's media strategy has also been harnessing the amplifying effects of supporters on social media. The importance it places on this dual approach is reflected in its efforts to empower its journalists and propagandists, as well as supporters living outside

the caliphate who might nevertheless serve its cause on the Internet. The Islamic State's document "Media Operative, You Are a Mujahid, Too" informs operatives that "the media jihad against the enemy is no less important than the material fight against it," adding that sometimes "verbal jihad is more important than jihad of the sword."

"Have you not seen the photographer, how he carries a camera instead of a Kalashnikov and races before the soldiers in raids, welcoming bullets in his chest with open arms?! Have you not seen the brigades that disseminate videos and pamphlets? How they enter into the most dangerous and fortified areas to circulate the mujahidin's productions in the heart of the hypocrites' den? Have you not seen how dedicated the media operative is in gathering intelligence on the enemy's movements and following the work of the brothers as they monitor the news of the enemy?" (quoted in Winter 2017, 13–14).

According to a report by Quilliam, a London-based "counter-extremism" think tank, the Islamic State's media narrative focuses on six main themes. The first is brutality, of which depictions of murder are the most common. The second, mercy, is often paired with brutality. This message is geared in large part toward opponents and offers them a path to safety through repentance. They are given a choice: "resist, and be killed, or willingly submit, recant past beliefs and be rewarded with mercy."

A third theme, victimhood, is sometimes also entwined with brutality. Before footage of Jordanian pilot Moaz al-Kasabeh is shown on a propaganda video, for example, the viewer sees images of dead or dying child victims of coalition airstrikes. Here, the message is one of just retribution. Other times, the deadly effects of airstrikes are shown without subsequent revenge.

War, a fourth theme, involves footage and reports from the front line and is meant to convey strength and momentum. A fifth theme, belonging, depicts brotherhood and camaraderie. "This idea is one of Islamic State's most powerful draws to new recruits, particularly from Western states," writes the report's author, Charlie Winter (2015, 22–31), a senior fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence. The final theme, utopianism, specifically apocalyptic utopianism, is arguably the broadest and most important, Winter says, and is cumulatively supported by the other narratives.

To these we might add an additional and related theme of legitimacy, or statehood. One of the strategic differences that divided al-Qaeda from the Islamic State centred on whether to declare a caliphate now or at some future date when it could be sustained. For a time, the Islamic State's decision to

declare a caliphate paid off. It earned credibility in the eyes of jihadists and Islamist fellow travellers because it appeared to have built a genuine state that was, in Islamic State's own parlance, "lasting and expanding." A subset of much of the Islamic State's media production has been aimed at bolstering this narrative by showing a functioning society with social welfare services, security and a thriving economy.

The Islamic State's media regarding the Yazidis combines several of these themes. In the October 2014 *Da'iq* article, Yazidi men are shown supposedly embracing Islam. Here is the mercy available to those who repent. The enslavement of the Yazidis is also depicted as a consequence of conquest. They are war booty, proof of the caliphate's military success. Finally, as discussed above, the Islamic State has portrayed the "revival" of slavery as an indication of the coming apocalypse, and the Yazidis' enslavement thereby fits with the utopian narrative that the Islamic State treats as paramount.

It is notable that several of Islamic State's stock media narratives have become difficult to sustain due to its recent loss of huge chunks of land. It is now near impossible to depict the Islamic State's rapidly shrinking territory as a utopia of brotherhood and normalcy in which children play and the elderly are cared for. The Islamic State, in the sense of conquered territory, is currently neither lasting nor expanding. This will surely force a sort of jihadist rebranding as its media operatives craft new stories about the group.

There is one element of the Islamic State's media strategy, related to the theme of brutality, that is especially worth highlighting for journalists. In the *Media Operative* booklet, readers are reminded: "Anyone who knows the Crusades of today and keeps track of that which infuriates them understands how they are angered and terrorized by jihadi media. They — the curse of Allah the Almighty be on them — know its importance, impact and significance more than any others!" (quoted in Winter 2017, 17).

It is clear that the Islamic State's snuff videos and other staged executions are aimed not only at its supporters and potential supporters; they are also meant to enrage and terrorize its non-Muslim "Crusader" enemies. How, then, should journalists report on the Islamic State's atrocities?

A journalist should not distort or soften the Islamic State's message, however unpalatable it might be. But just as press gallery reporters must be aware of the efforts of politicians to spin and use them, so should reporters covering the Islamic State know that they might be similarly manipulated, with potentially grave consequences.

Mainstream journalists, says Charlie Winter (2017, 20), should recognize that the Islamic State "weaponizes" media coverage. "Whether they consist of video executions or vague statements in the wake of terrorist operations, the Islamic State's media 'projectiles' enable it to dictate its own story, quite literally in its own words, to a captive audience of millions.... Hence, it is of the utmost importance that media organizations resist the inherent 'clickability' of the group's propaganda and take none of its messaging at its word, let alone broadcast its contents without accompanying them with nuanced analysis."

Images of an Islamic State fighter brandishing a knife before beheading a hostage in an orange jumpsuit are memorable and arresting but serve little public good. Publishing such photos simply makes more powerful the media the Islamic State has weaponized. And while it is unlikely that choosing not to publish photos of beheadings will result in the Islamic State curtailing the practice, it is also probable that doing so encourages the group's lurid brutality.

It is likewise difficult to see any news value in the Fox News decision to air uncut footage of the Islamic State burning to death the Jordanian pilot Kasasbeh. A host for the network said they broadcast the footage to show viewers "the reality of Islamic terrorism," but surely the horror of burning someone alive can be readily imagined without being seen.

A large number of Yazidi women and children have now escaped Islamic State captivity. Some of the women have willingly described their experiences, showing courage as they recount in details the abuses they suffered. Journalists are hungry for these stories and have, on occasion, aggressively sought them out without paying much heed to the additional trauma that may be caused by asking women to describe the enslavement and rape they suffered. This sort of reporting is vital to gather testimonies and document the victims suffering, but must be undertaken with compassion and sensitivity.

Regarding the media narratives espoused by the Islamic State, there is a tendency among mainstream journalists to repeat the mantra that there is nothing Islamic about the Islamic State. For Muslims who reject everything for which the Islamic State stands, this accusation is understandable. It is also trite and misleading, and journalists reporting it should include explanatory analysis.

The Islamic State's ideology is, in fact, deeply rooted in an interpretation — a majority of Muslims would say a misinterpretation — of Islam. Its media propaganda provides copious evidence drawn from the Qur'an and Hadiths to support its doctrine and actions, from slavery to burning prisoners. It is able to do this because Islamic texts are voluminous, varied and open to differing interpretations. Islam is not unique in this regard. The Old Testament also

contains instructions regarding slavery. Most Jews and Christians today, like most Muslims, do not condone the practice. Islamic State scholars and media operatives pick and choose from Islamic texts to find narratives that bolster their worldview. But these same examples can also be used to subvert the Islamic State's messaging.

An article in the fifth issue of *Rumiyah* (2017, 11), for example, decries the partisanship of *jahiliyyah*, a term referring to the state of ignorance that prevailed before the advent of Islam, and cites a Qur'anic verse that reads in part: "We made you peoples and tribes for you to recognize one another." The Islamic State cites the verse to argue for unity among Muslims. It might also be understood as praise for pluralism. The same group of prophets predicting an apocalyptic confrontation between Muslim and infidel armies at Dabiq also speaks of a temporary peace and even partnership between "Rome" and the Muslims, suggesting constant and unending conflict is not inevitable.²

The Islamic State also seeks legitimacy by looking back to earlier caliphates. But here, too, it manipulates history as it sees fits. Harun al-Rashid ruled the powerful Abbasid Caliphate in the eighth and ninth centuries, a golden age in Islamic history. He is famous in Arabic and Western folklore because he features in *One Thousand and One Nights*. He is admired by the Islamic State today.

"But Harun governed in ways and did things that are anathema to Islamic State," notes William McCants, a scholar of Islam and the Islamic State. "He drank wine. He may have had male lovers. He allowed musical instruments in his court. He made truces with the Christian empires of the day" (quoted in Petrou 2016). A fuller picture of Rashid, so venerated by Islamic State propagandists, might in fact undermine their ideology. Instead of dismissing or ignoring the Islamic State's claimed connection to Islam and Islamic history, journalists should seek out and reflect a broader picture of what those texts, and that history, might mean.

In that sense, reporting on the Islamic State and the mass atrocities it commits is no different than most other good journalism. It requires skepticism and curiosity, extensive research, a commitment to finding diverse and legitimate sources, and a desire to inform and serve the public rather than simply capture its attention for a moment or two. Given the subject matter and the lives affected, it is important to get this right.

2 A Muslim-Christian partnership is discussed in Abu Dawood's Hadith collections. See also Petrou (2016).

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