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Akel Ismail Kahera

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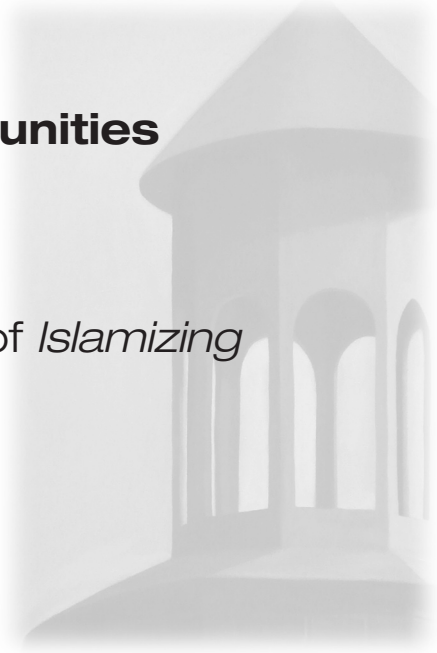
# Two Muslim Communities

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## Two Disparate Ways of *Islamizing* Public Spaces

**Akel Ismail Kahera**

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*This article clarifies what Hayden has termed “space as a cultural product.” The author discusses the Islamizing of public spaces in two urban Muslim communities. The Salafiyya, a proto-Islamic movement (Community A), is at the center of a heated debate over the control for the soul of the community—the mosque. Normally this would not be a problem, but the Salafiyya heavily rely on the past in interpreting religious texts. In contrast, “Community B” demonstrates how competing visions of public space and religious practice can coexist in urban America. Their goal is to invest the neighborhood with a bona fide religious virtue through activism and social change. More broadly, the worldview of these two communities forces an examination of two disparate ways of Islamizing public spaces. Islamizing exaggerates the problems that both A and B must confront and the kinds of uncertainties that accompany cultural identity, religious legitimacy, and valorization of the word community.*

**Keywords:** *urban Islam; Islamizing urban space; Diaspora; religious practices; production of space*

In urban America religious institutions are woven deeply into the physical and social fabric of the city. In nearly every neighborhood we find temples, churches, synagogues and mosques. These places of worship are perhaps the oldest and most ubiquitous forms of the urban community—the religious congregation.

McRoberts (2003, p. 1)

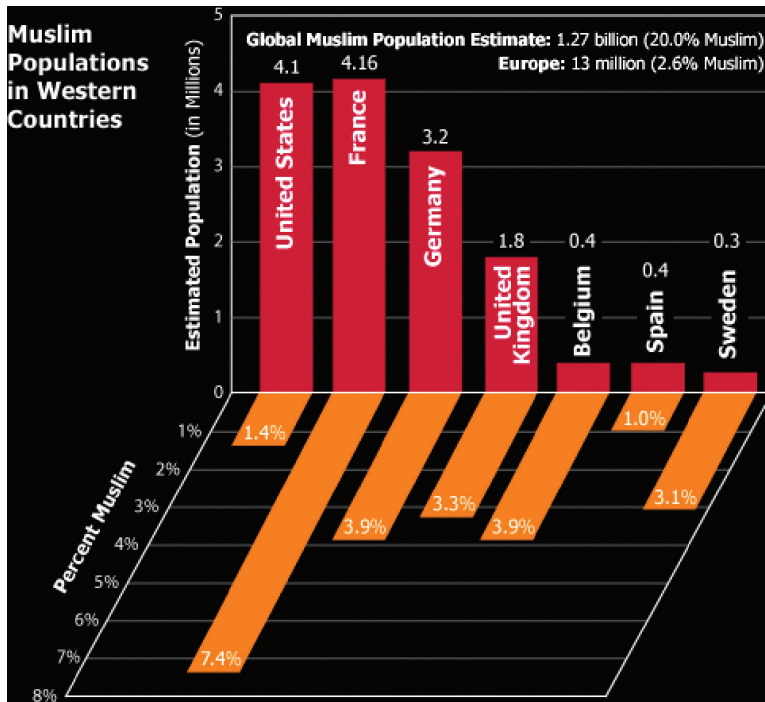
Inspired by a religious dispute that occurred in Essex County, New Jersey, in the early 1990s, this article brings to light the tensions that can exist when the rhetorical posturing over a public space proves most powerful in the production of a “space as

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384



**Figure 1.** Muslim Populations

Source: Courtesy of PBS. PBS's Wide Angle program "Young Muslim and French;" graphics from companion Web site <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/shows/france/info.html>

a cultural product." In this essay, I wish to apply the term *Islamizing* as the basic relationship of "space as a cultural product" and to interrogate the form and appearance of public spaces. The term *Islamizing*, exaggerates the struggle of two urban Muslim communities ("Community A" and "Community B") that are engaged in the conversion of the neighborhood they inhabit. In my view, the conversion, construction, and expression of place prompt two crucial questions: How does the expression of place affect the perception of immigrant and indigenous Muslims in urban communities? What kinds of configuration produce a unique sense of place in the urban context?

Hayden (1997) demonstrates and outlines the elements of space and how they connect people's lives but more importantly how the power of an urban landscape nurtures public memory. In discussing the plight of urban Muslims in Toronto, Isin and Siemiatycki (2002) offer a number of relevant points that are applicable to our discussion. They argue that "this specific struggle was one of many for Toronto's growing Islamic population seeking appropriate places of worship" (p. 189). To this end, they ask, "How do we interpret these conflicts that are simultaneously about space, identity, faith and fate and that are increasingly visible in urban politics?" (p. 189). Today, Muslims in Europe and America have found themselves in similar but much more complex conditions since September 11, 2001, forcing them to establish some form of religious identity (see Figure 1). It seems almost certain that the Patriot Act (Public Law 107-56), signed into law October 26, 2001, has been instrumental in composing and decomposing expressions of uncertain religious beliefs putting all Muslims in the West off balance. However, the problem does not begin and end with the Patriot Act; four decades earlier, Cheikh

Hamidou Kane's (1961) novel *L'Aventure ambiguë* convinced us that the potential to become displaced and off balance already existed among immigrant Muslims. In his narrative, he describes the disorientation of a Senegalese Muslim who set forth from the heart of his native land only to find himself at the periphery of French society estranged from God and country.

## Community A: Exclusion—*Salafi* Space Construction

Choosing the Past Helps us to construct a Future. (Lynch, 1976, p. 64)

We turn now to the case of a *Salafi imam* (cleric) versus a group of defectors. The reference by the imam to a well-known reference in the Qur'an, the "mosque of dissention," or *masjid al-Dirar*, is linked to an incident that occurred in his congregation. The case questions the legality of a group of defectors to establish a rival mosque, which resulted in reprimands from the imam. Our interest in this case is not to pass judgments on the *Salafiyyah* doctrine or the imam but to interrogate the Salafi "space construction." First, the term *Salafi* was revived as a slogan and movement among latter-day Muslims. Like similar movements that have historically appeared in Islam, its basic claim was that the religion had not been properly understood by anyone since the seventh century CE, the time of the first community of the early Muslims in Madinah (Keller, 1995). Second, the Salafi space construction reveals no motion, no sense of place or time; it is a framework that locates the mind and the body within static "historical" space and time as though it were fossilized. It is for this reason that when the imam disputed the legality of a newly established mosque created by the defectors, he referred to the Dirar mosque incident, which occurred in Madinah, Arabia, in the seventh century (Lecker, 1995, pp. 75-149). That a seventh-century case may help draw attention to a possible detail concerning the religious significance about the use of space is indeed an anachronism, clearly well-documented Islamic jurisprudence, and historical evidence confirm that American law does not support that framework (Jackson, 1999-2000).

A corresponding discussion is reflected in Isin and Siemiatycki's (2002) description concerning "integration and assimilation" by understanding one's identity and the configuration of urban space. Isin and Siemiatycki offer at least two relevant tactics that are applicable to the discussion about identity and assimilation. Accordingly, the first step is "how diaspora communities make and remake space . . . through strategic differences that draw upon their religion and culture" (p. 191). The second tactic is "how Muslim diaspora reshapes urban space by strategically articulating certain needs and how it encounters equally strategic resistances" (p. 191).

In essence, the debate posits that in the seventh-century CE incident, about a "mosque of dissention" that is mentioned in the Qur'an, the mosque was destroyed. The imam used this argument with the hopes of restoring religious identity, legitimacy, and piety that were somehow threatened by the behavior of the dissenting group. Conceding that normative Islam was less congenial to the construction of religious identity (i.e., to Salafi Islam), the imam sought ways in which his dogma might be a positive factor for religious reform.

He expected that influence to be exercised through the direct integration of the Muslim community into one urban mosque community. But he underestimated the direct influence of freedom of religion through the shaping of urban religious culture and the personal values of the uncooperative congregants. But is it arguable that members of the

same faith can indulge in the censorship of some other members by invoking an incident that occurred in the seventh century? How could the seventh-century case be used as a valid precedent today? To judge the defectors, the imam cited the masjid ad-Dirar incident because the rival mosque at that time was destroyed (Lecker, 1995, pp. 75-149).

That was not enough; a legal opinion (*fatwa*) was sought from a foreign authoritative figure hoping to settle the case once and for all. I believe that the imam's scolding of the defectors was designed to reform them through condemnation and to bring them back into the fold into one solitary public space. In the interest of both parties, the fatwa was sought concerning three points of contention: the comparison to masjid al-Dirar, the right to claim that the followers who pray in the opposing mosque are hypocrites, and the imam's right to invoke a curse on the defectors (Al-Albani, 1997). The idea of seeking answers from a foreign scholar is nothing new; as late as 1937, petitions were sent from the Far East to Makkah and Cairo in a dog saliva debate that could not be locally resolved (Roth, 1983).

It is important to note that the Hanbali jurist Ibn al-Qayyim (751-1350), the student of Ibn Taimiyya (728-1328), admitted that the change of time and condition could admit modification of a law on the basis of the public interest. Ibn al-Qayyim's observation yields little comfort regarding a fatwa if we cannot distinguish between space and time. I believe that it is this question that imam could not reconcile.

Given this background, it is easy to understand why both parties disagreed. But above all, the dispute captures the ambiguities inherent in the notion of the Salafi space construction. As stated earlier, it is a framework that locates the mind and the body within static historical space and time. We should also be aware that there is a related danger when an interpretation of the religious text is believed to be independent of other practical legal concerns unless a scholar has the acumen and legal learning to independently solve such problems.

## Reversible Space and Linear Time

The points of this case, the Salafi imam versus the defectors, are eminently paradoxical: two opposing points of view and two different interpretations of the same religious text. The first party, the Salafi imam, viewed the congregational mosque as a utopian space that represented absolute knowledge and absolute "male" power. This interpretation treats history as though it were outside of history, which makes it impossible to create a discourse. Furthermore, it puts the Qur'an on a collision course with the principle of freedom of religion.

The second party, the defectors, viewed the urban mosque as an embodiment of the very essence of American religious life; they exercised the principle of freedom of religion and the right to congregate. Furthermore, the defectors refused to take a position that was true to what Professor Sherman Jackson declared: "The biggest enemy of religion is not persecution but apathy. Apathy renders you as irrelevant as a casual yawn" (Lecture at University of Texas, Austin, 2000).

Rationality and reason neutralize the dangers of apathy, but the rupture in one's knowledge can ultimately alter one's understanding of space and time. And the knowledge that is needed to negotiate the tensions that are present in a new environment calls to mind what Lévi-Strauss dubbed "reversible space and linear time." The accusations I noted above need not be solely reserved for the Salafi space construction; they are transferable to any community.



**Figure 2.** Newark Storefront Masjid (Mosque)

*Source:* Courtesy of L. Craig Schoonmaker.

## Community B: Integration, Activists, and Agents

In cities across America, the urban mosque institution is now vital to the life of Muslim and non-Muslim residents in infinite ways. Storefront mosques and storefront churches provide places for spiritual repose, for philanthropic support of the poor, destitute, and needy, or for simply “breathing space” to escape from the hustle and the unbearable stress of urban life (see Figure 2). Urban Muslims represent at least 75% of the 6 million to 8 million American Muslims, and 45% of American Muslims are African American. In view of this evidence, it would be a mistake not to view the problems that the African American Muslim community must confront, themselves creating a rich history of social activism (Kahera, 2002b).

Undoubtedly, environmental racism still exist in the “hood” (local neighborhood), although we have come a long way from the race riots of the 1960s. The social activism of the 1960s (e.g., the Black Power movement) and the rise of urban Islam in the 1970s gave momentum to the ideological compulsion for social activism and neighborhood intervention in many urban communities. Given these historical facts, it is not hard to understand why the contemporary urban mosque institution currently agrees with the vision of social activism and neighborhood intervention because such activism is rooted in the notion of equality. Today there are a range of urban issues both large and small that plague local communities across America. The most immediate reason for the success of the urban mosque in dealing with some of these issues is that it has allowed advocates of faith-based activism to avoid the stigma of fuzzy bipartisan



**Figure 3.** Philadelphia Urban Mosque

Source: Design by Courtney Ridley; Courtesy of Courtney Ridley.

politics. For example, in South Philadelphia, the most prominent Muslim leader in the struggle to create viable neighborhood initiatives is Kenny Gamble, founder of the Universal Companies Organization (“Gambling on South,” 2003; see Figure 3).

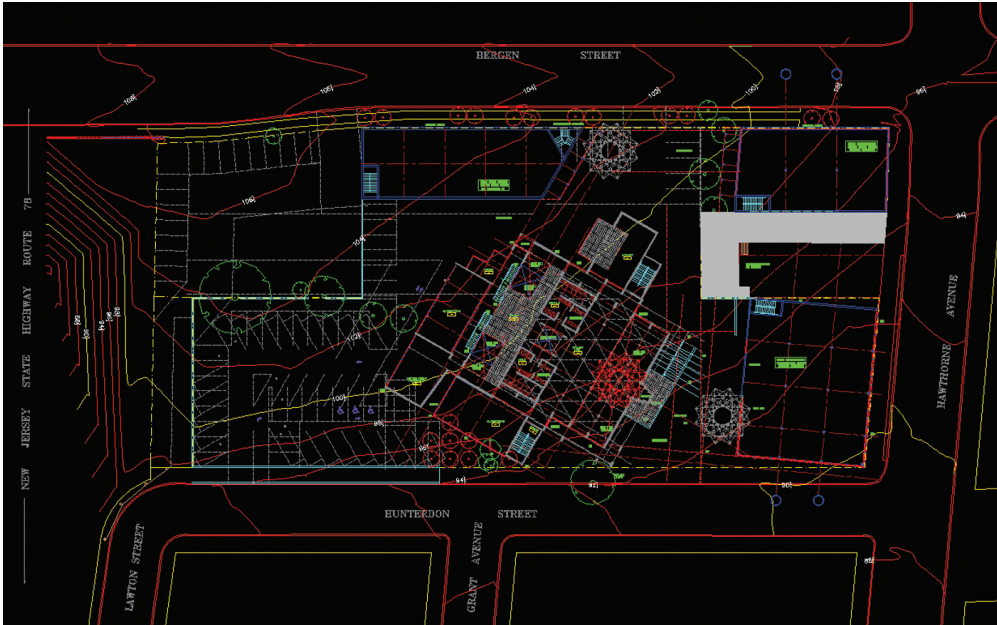
Another fitting case in point is Newark, New Jersey, where plans are under way for the development of a commercial, religious, and educational complex under the initiative of United Muslim Inc., a local urban mosque organization (see Figures 4 and 5). The site of the planned development is on a typical city block in South Ward, adjacent to a major corridor, Route 78, that is linked to several highways and Newark International Airport.

The master plan for the vacant plot of land that was purchased by United Muslim Inc. calls for a sensitive use of the land and for sensitive scaling of the buildings to preserve the integrity of the adjacent neighborhood, mostly two- and three-story residential structures. The master plan establishes a great variety of spaces: a multipurpose hall, a banquet hall for formal events and lectures with a seating capacity of 500, a mosque that can accommodate 700 worshipers, an elementary school with 12 classrooms, administrative offices, and a library. The complex will be bordered on two sides by commercial shops and by office space above the shops.

Because of this and other projects, the city of Newark is experiencing an urban renaissance of its vibrant business and academic hub with a diverse ethnic and religious community that includes more than 10,000 Muslims in the greater Newark area. The establishment of the mosque, school, and business and commercial complex in South Ward will enhance the contributions that Muslims have made to the city of Newark for more than two decades. The project has already received support from city officials.

The implications for architecture and urban design in projects such as the Newark South Ward project are important because they provide a shift back toward grassroots





**Figure 4.** United Muslim Inc. Master Plan, Calling for Commercial Shops, Business Offices, Housing, a School, and a Mosque

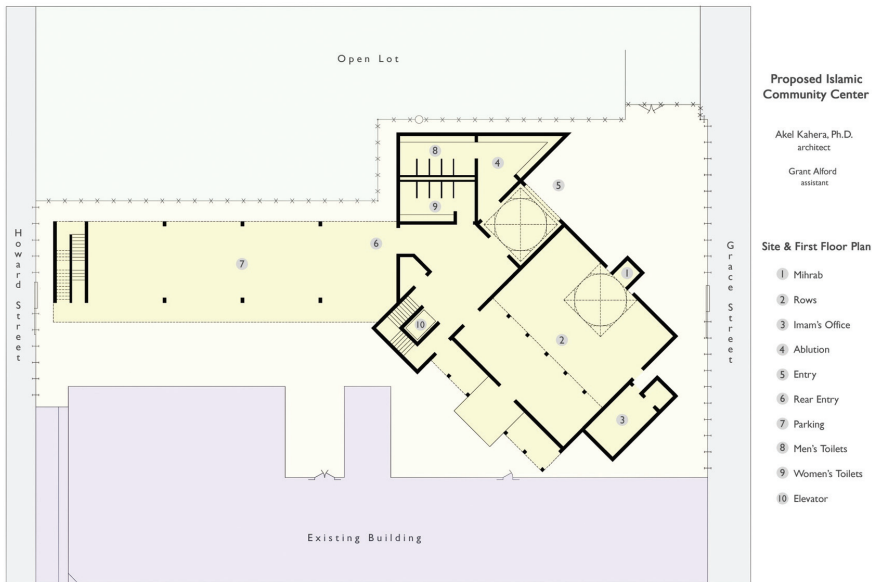
Source: Kahera+Anz+Kerr: Integrated Metropolis Architects.



**Figure 5.** United Muslims Inc. New Mosque and School

Source: Design by Akel Kahera.

intervention, given that corporate and government funding will primarily go to local faith-based initiatives in the coming years. Constructing in or renewing neighborhoods such as South Philadelphia and the South Ward reestablishes the nexus between sustainability and the desire to create a better and more livable urban community.



**Figure 6.** Site Plan for Masjid Waarith ud-Deen and Cultural Center, Irvington, New Jersey

Source: Design by Akel Kahera.

The urban mosque, the local community development corporation (CDC), and other types of grassroots groups are playing a constructive role in the faith-based initiative process, which has broad resonance in America (see Figure 6). Furthermore, these initiatives conform to basic American values, especially the performance of civic duties in the public interest. These values are clearly foreshadowed in Islam's teachings.

## Restoring the Possibilities of Place

It seems almost certain that claiming the neighborhood, "taking control of the hood," is an important part of the strength of urban life. It is for this reason that most African American Muslims are rooted in the sense of place at a level of intensity much greater than that of the immigrant community. On this point, one might cite another example in Brooklyn, New York, the Mosque of Piety, or *masjid at-Taqwa*, which exerted its influence by altering the dreadful conditions that existed in a local neighborhood by chasing the drug dealers from the streets when the police had failed to do so. In the past two decades, there has been a number of similar examples of intervention in South Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Boston, where social and activist mechanisms that have produced change are evident. Thus, Community B takes on constructive forms of urban intervention while it advocates the sustainability of the neighborhood. Because Community B is largely made up of an African American congregation, it relies on recognized forms of activism well known since the civil rights era. Therefore, Community B is devoted to intra muros measures that solve the problems of poverty, housing, employment, and the social disenfranchisement that are so often appendages to environmental racism. Indeed Community B is a community of place values rather than a community of diaspora values (Kahera, 2002b).

Ultimately, these issues inform several kinds of spatial appropriations that interrogate the notions of exclusion or inclusion in urban spaces. For example, by supporting the revivification of distressed spaces by a predominantly African American community, masjid at-Taqwa in Brooklyn resisted political marginalization in the local inner city (Kahera, 2001, pp. 49-64). On the other hand, immigrant communities differentiate themselves, for example, by Muslim parades with floats that depict universally recognized edifices such as the mosque and the *kabah*, which temporarily “converts” the “spatial” images of New York City (Dodds, 2002, p. 42) through its presence. Using this argument, I have critiqued differing modes of conversion and construction by citing the case studies that explain nuances about forms of exclusion or integration.

Over several decades, urban neighborhoods across America have been engaged in an intense struggle to change conditions of urban blight and poverty. The paramount goal of the urban mosque organization is improvement of the quality of life, providing a safer environment, stimulating economic growth, and creating opportunities for education, health care, and economic sustainability. Admittedly, the mosque institution cannot solve the compounded problems that exist; however, it is worthwhile to mention the current direction of certain types of financially viable developments proposed or already accomplished by local mosque organizations and CDCs under the direction of American Muslim leaders.

Perhaps more than any time in our history, there is a need to preserve equal access to public space and inclusion of the Muslim community in American society while avoiding the dangers of false political, religious, or ethnic associations. One could therefore argue that the right to establish Muslim religious institutions in America and the right to access public space (i.e., to congregate) are highly conducive to ideals of democracy.

The term *faith-based initiative* includes reference to the “social activism” that has been well established by urban mosque organizations in America during the past decade. The role of the urban mosque organization has been largely understudied in spite of the marked emphasis in Islamic law of the *maslahah*, or the performance of duties in the public interest, coupled with moral, social, and religious practice. At the nexus of these norms is a philosophy that radicalizes the term *faith-based initiative* because it encompasses everything that pertains to public welfare, social life, religious life, economic life, and urban life in general. The purpose of this discussion was to briefly examine the urban mosque organization in America, its performance of duties in the public interest. Historically, the urban mosque has been an institution connected to an inventory of social, educational, and religious activities; in America, these activities include the renewal of underdeveloped neighborhoods (see Figure 7).

## Summary

When de Tocqueville wrote about American democracy in the 1830s, he took great pains to highlight the importance of religion in the development of democracy. de Tocqueville repeatedly spoke of the condition of “equality.” Henri Lefebvre (1991, pp. 366-367), in *The Production of Space*, speaks of analogous spaces, repellent spaces, and *utopias*, or spaces occupied by the symbolic, the ideal, and the imaginary. Hayden (1997) also writes about “connecting the history of struggle over urban space [and the] poetics of occupying particular places” (p. 12; see Figures 8 and 9). It appears that in the indigenous community, space and time inadvertently allow us to “map the tensions” over the struggle for terrain.



**Figure 7.** Branford Place, Newark, New Jersey  
Source: Courtesy of Naeem Nash.



**Figure 8.** The New Islamic Center of Boston  
Source: Courtesy of ISB (Salma Kazmi); design by Steffian-Bradley Architects Boston.



Figure 9. Boston ISB Site Plan

Source: Courtesy of ISB.



Figure 10. The Islamic Cultural Center of Washington, D.C.

Source: Photo Courtesy of Mark Susman.

Since the 1950s, a proliferation of architectural styles, imported aesthetics, imported imams, and ubiquitous storefront mosques in places such as New York City have pointed to a general pattern of worship and the Islamizing of public space (see Figure 10). In this sense, the space of the urban mosque is not created *ex nihilo*; it suggests cultural and religious meaning through the configuration and production of space. Other telling examples are the Grande Mosquée de Paris (1926) and the Islamic Cultural Center of Washington, D.C. (1957), both of which are imbued with sets of aesthetic dualisms that lay claim to the universal function of the edifice in tandem with a culturally specific regional style influenced by the patron, client, and architect (Gale, 2004; Kahera, 1999, 2002a; Nasser, 2004).

Finally, to return to the issue of Islamizing space, Lévi-Strauss's interpretation of reversible space and linear time is profoundly enlightening to one or more aspect of the struggle. More broadly, the problem is to understand that the concept of Islamizing a public space is driven by dual impulses: commitment and disengagement.

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