Contemporary Sunni-Shia Dynamics: Conflict or Competition?

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the power competition between Saudi Arabia (Sunni) and Iran (Contemporary Shia) by examining their involvement in shaping Middle Eastern influence expansion through fundamentally different ideological approaches, namely Sunni and Shia. The author takes the cases of Syria and Yemen as focal points to narrow down the scope and gauge the efforts of both countries as balancing forces in the Middle East region. The paper adopts an ideological approach to identify conflict patterns and strategies employed by both nations. The objective of this paper is to explore the background of the conflict between these two countries, utilizing ideological approaches to achieve their political goals. Employing a descriptive-analytical approach, this article aims to address the research issues at hand. It reveals that Saudi Arabia and Iran play significant roles in Middle Eastern conflicts, particularly in Syria and Yemen, through various means such as funding and providing military logistical support. The ideological approach is inseparable from the missions carried out by both nations. Iran has succeeded in building alliances with local governments, thus securing victories in Yemen. However, Saudi Arabia, despite employing various alliance-building strategies, has yet to achieve success.

INTRODUCTION

After the passing of Prophet Muhammad fourteen centuries ago, the dispute over who should rightfully lead escalated. This disagreement laid the groundwork for the subsequent division of Muslims into two factions: Sunni and Shia. Sunni eventually dominated the Muslim population in the Middle East due to the influence of Sunni Islam practiced by the Ottoman Turks during their rule over the region, coupled with the expansion of Wahhabi movements in the Arabian Peninsula, which shared similar ideological patterns, namely Sunni. Today, Sunni representation, embodied by Saudi Arabia in the Middle East, plays a significant role across various domains. The ideological alignment and interests have prompted Sunni nations to collaborate internationally, both on a smaller scale through forums like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) comprising six member states, and on a larger scale within the Arab League, consisting of twenty-two member states (Arableague: 2024).

In 1979, the Shia faction gained political momentum in Iran under the leadership of Ayatollah Ali Khomeini, overthrowing the secular government and establishing a new leadership based on theocracy. Following this revolution, Iran frequently espoused revolutionary ideas in the Middle East
to advocate for leadership changes in the region. The dissemination of revolutionary ideas across Muslim nations was based on the belief among the pioneering clerics that a Shia Imamiyah-based governance transcends geographical boundaries, motivating Iran to expand extensively into the Middle East region.

This ideology forms the foundation for Tehran’s government to extend its influence across the Middle East in general and the Gulf region in particular, predominantly Sunni-led. Given Saudi Arabia’s significant role in the Middle East, with only a few nations being influenced by Iran, such as Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, to date. Until now, Saudi Arabia and Iran have fiercely competed to exert their influence as a balance of power in the Middle East. Given the ongoing rivalry between the two countries, questions arise about the extent to which they expand their influence in the Middle East and how effective these built powers are in achieving a balance of power in the region. To address these questions, this paper employs the balance of power theory.

Morgenthau elucidates the balance of power in various senses, including as politics aimed at achieving a certain condition, as an actual state, and as a distribution of power that is more or less equal. Furthermore, he states that nations’ aspirations to gain power, each country strives to maintain or overthrow the status quo, considering developments towards a configuration referred to as the balance of power and the politics aimed at preserving it (Morgenthau: 2010).

Moreover, viewed historically, the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia began with the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and the Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988 (Boone: 2012). The Islamic Revolution in Iran marked the overthrow of the monarchy, which also entailed Sunni-Shia sectarian conflicts (Samosir: 2016). Subsequently, the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia escalated with Saudi Arabia’s involvement in supporting Iraq against Iran during the Iran-Iraq War, thus initiating the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East. The conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, initially rooted in sectarianism, evolved into geopolitical competition. This rivalry creates tension between the two countries to this day. Geopolitical factors driving the confrontation can be seen through Iran and Saudi Arabia’s involvement in conflicts in Syria and Yemen.

The existing conflict escalated when Saudi authorities sentenced the charismatic Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr to death on terrorism charges (Samosir: 2016). Following Sheikh Nimr’s execution, Iran severed diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and its ally countries, including the United Arab Emirates, Sudan, Bahrain, and Kuwait (Setyanti: 2016). This execution further hampers peace efforts to end conflicts in the Middle East (Behn: 2016).

In their efforts to balance power in the Middle East, both Saudi Arabia and Iran utilize ideological approaches to expand their influence over other nations to fulfill their vision of balancing power in the region. Ideology represents the aspirations of various political issues often implemented as a systematic plan about the goals pursued by groups (in this case, countries) or societal layers (Kansil: 2005). Therefore, this serves as the basis for actions taken by both countries to contain each other’s power as a form of balancing power in the region. On one hand, Sunni parties view Shia ideology as highly dangerous, prompting Sunni-led nations, spearheaded by Saudi Arabia, to contain this ideology from infiltrating and disrupting the social and political order established in the Middle East. However, on the other hand, Shia, as Iran’s state ideology, attempts in various ways to penetrate and expand its ideology in the Middle East through various means, with the vision of spreading its Shia Imamiyah doctrine.

In discussing the power rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East, this paper examines contemporary issues in Syria and Yemen. These issues can serve as examples or samples of a series of events in the power balancing competition in the Middle East. Given that both countries are forces to be reckoned with and consistently play active roles in the Middle East.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

1. **The Conflict in Syria**

Syria is one of the countries that cannot be separated from the Arab Spring phenomenon that is spreading in the Middle East. This phenomenon began in March 2011 when fifteen children were
arrested for writing the slogan "the people want the regime to fall" on the walls of the city of Dara'a, southern Syria. This news spread and caused a wave of protests among the Syrian people against the government. The protest was followed by the burning of buildings and the destruction of statues of former Syrian President Hafiz Assad (Abouzied: 2011).

In response to this phenomenon, Iran, which is Syria’s main ally, is helping the Syrian government to reduce the upheaval that is occurring in its country. Iran sent military advisors from the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) to train personnel and provide other assistance to strengthen Syrian troops in fighting demonstrators and anti-government opposition, this aims to reduce the internal crisis in Syria. In addition, Iran also provided $23 million in US dollars in aid to Syria and built a military base in Latakia to facilitate arms transfers from Iran to Syria (Baidwai: 2012). At the same time, Iran also mobilized the power of Hezbollah which has a base in Lebanon to help Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to deal with the rebellion that occurred within Syria in 2013 which was funded by both countries (Charin: 2016). Close cooperation between the two countries, namely Iran and Syria, has existed since the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980-1988. At that time, the Damascus government took a very different policy from other Arab countries, namely by choosing to side with Iran.

This alliance, which is a strategic collaboration between the two countries, benefits both countries in facing upheaval in the Middle East. Therefore, it is not surprising that when Syria faced its internal conflict, Iran helped with all its power to support the power of the Assad regime. In addition, the geographical proximity between Syria and Iran makes it easier for the two countries to cooperate with each other in strategic fields. Hezbollah, which is also an agent of the Iranian government in Lebanon, also benefits Syria’s position during the conflict, because this group is supported by complete military weapons and can help Syria repel the rebellion that occurred during the Arab Spring. Hezbollah’s strong bargaining position in the Middle East is a strength for Iran and its allies to rely on this organization in several conflicts in the region.

Based on the cooperation that exists between the two countries, which is built on the principles of reciprocity and strategy, it is clear that the two of them are mutual allies who can be taken into account in overcoming the crisis occurring in Syria. This coalition, which was supplemented by Russia and China, has also proven successful in maintaining Bashar al-Assad’s leadership position in Syria to date.

When viewed in the context of the revolutionary substance often heralded by Iran, it stands in stark contrast to the situation in Syria. While the Arab Spring that swept across the Middle East served as a catalyst for revolutionary movements aiming to replace predominantly monarchic, authoritarian, and Sunni-led leadership in the region, this dynamic didn’t apply to Syria. Despite widespread acknowledgment of Assad’s authoritarian rule, the strong and strategically maintained partnership between Syria and Iran ensured that the revolutionary fervor advocated by Iran didn’t resonate in Syria. Iran has long provided a form of legitimacy to the Ba’ath regime in Damascus, primarily due to Syria’s Alawite-dominated population, a sect within Islam that some Shiite religious leaders have bolstered as part of the Shiite family, thereby cementing the alliance between Iran and Syria. This strategic cooperation, underpinned by shared ideological similarities despite literal differences, remains the cornerstone of the bilateral relationship between Syria and Iran. Additionally, Iran views Syria as a strategic and friendly nation that bolsters Iran’s presence in the Middle East. Therefore, Iran’s revolutionary rhetoric against authoritarian leadership in the Middle East didn’t find traction in Syria due to the deeply strategic nature of their relationship.

In contrast, when considering the relationship between Syria and Saudi Arabia, the absence of a close strategic partnership is evident. While Saudi Arabia had maintained friendly relations with the Assad government before the Arab Spring, the absence of a close strategic bond with Syria became apparent. Consequently, when the crisis unfolded in Syria, Saudi Arabia saw an opportunity to expand its influence in the country, particularly after the fall of a regime that had been overshadowed by Iran’s Shiite ideology. Therefore, Saudi Arabia swiftly shifted its foreign policy stance and became the first country to oppose the Bashar Al Assad government. Through
official statements, King Abdullah denounced the Syrian government’s role in violence against
demonstrators and called on the Syrian people to oppose the government, leading to the withdrawal
of the Saudi ambassador from Damascus as a protest against the Syrian government’s actions.

Saudi Arabia’s strategy during the Syrian crisis extended beyond mere opposition to the Assad
regime; it included support for opposition groups through financial aid and logistical support.
Fundraising efforts, led by Sheikh Al-Arif, garnered support from activists and the Saudi populace,
resulting in significant financial contributions to Syrian opposition groups such as the Free Syrian
Army (FSA) and the Syrian National Council (SNC). Moreover, reports emerged of arms shipments
from Gulf Arab states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar to Syrian opposition groups, facilitated through
smuggling routes across Turkey and Jordan. Saudi Arabia also pursued diplomatic efforts through
the Arab League, advocating for sanctions against Syria and freezing Syria’s membership in the
organization, hoping to isolate Syria economically within the Arab world.

The crisis in Syria presented Saudi Arabia with a significant opportunity to dismantle the alliance
between Syria and Iran, which had been robust since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of
Iran in 1979. Saudi Arabia’s anti-Iran policy aimed to weaken Iran’s influence in Syria, potentially
leading to Iran’s disinvestment in Syria, both economically and politically. Through regime change
and the installation of leadership aligned with Saudi Arabia’s interests, Saudi Arabia envisioned
curbing Iran’s power in the Middle East and achieving a balance of power. Given Syria’s
predominantly Sunni population, Saudi Arabia viewed a pro-Saudi and Sunni-led leadership as
imperative. With a change in regime that breaks Iran’s influence, Saudi Arabia sees an opport
unity to enter Syria on terms that align closely with its own interests. This aligns with Saudi Arabia’s
foreign policy direction of promoting Muslim solidarity and unity by actively supporting Sunni-led
governments and adopting an anti-Shiite stance, both in governance and religious ideology (Dacey:
2013).

2. The conflict in Yemen

The government’s failure to effectively manage the country, both in terms of economy, politics,
and other aspects, marked the beginning of the emergence of a rebellion by a group of Shia-oriented
citizens, known as the Houthis, in Yemen. The birth of the Houthi group in Yemen stemmed from
the deteriorating relationship between Badruddin al-Houthi and Zaidi Shia scholars. This was due
to the Zaidi Shia scholars’ fatwas, which Badruddin al-Houthi believed deviated from the core
teachings of Shia Islam. Consequently, he switched to the Imamiah sect and went to Iran to deepen
his understanding of this ideology (Chairin: 2016).

Simultaneously, Badruddin’s son, Husain bin Badruddin al-Houthi, resigned from the al-Haq
party, which advocated for Zaidi Shia voices and thoughts. Subsequently, Husain founded a new
group named the Houthi Shia, associating his name with the group. Initially, this movement focused
solely on religious matters, but later it allied with the government to combat the Yemeni
Congregation for Reform, which represented the Sunni community. However, in 2002, the group
reversed its direction and became an opposition force within the government.

The success of the Houthi group is evident in its ability to overthrow the legitimate government
and seize control of the Yemeni capital, Sana’a. This success cannot overlook Iran’s role in aiding the
group since 2009. Iran successfully supplied various military assistance required by the Houthis to
facilitate their succession to power in Yemen.

Iran’s intervention through its proxy, the Houthis, aligns with Iran’s vision of expanding its
Imamiah Shia ideology, as articulated in Article 12 and 72 of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s
Constitution, stating that Imamiah Shia is not only the official religion of Iran but also the
fundamental principle of governance. After the establishment of Iran’s post-revolution constitution
in 1979, the revolutionary leader, Imam Khomeini, asserted that Iran would expand its ideology
worldwide. This was based on the belief of the revolutionary scholars that a government based on
Imamiah Shia is not confined by the geographical boundaries of a country; therefore, the ideology
is universal (Chairin: 2016).
It is not surprising that the closeness between the Houthi Shia and Iran is based on their shared Imamiah Shia ideology. With this ideological alignment, Iran does not hesitate to view this group as an extension of Tehran’s government in spreading Shia ideology in the Arabian Gulf region, particularly in Yemen, and in combating governments deemed incapable of resolving internal issues. Additionally, with Sunni-based governments often marginalizing Shia groups in Yemen, Iran and the Houthis see this as an opportunity to initiate political and social changes in Yemeni society. The Houthi movement in Yemen serves as an opportunity for Iran to spread Imamiah ideology and advocate for revolution in the Arab Gulf, given that many Shia groups in the region live under the repressive rule of governing authorities. Hence, Iran is motivated to propagate the idea of revolution in the Arab world.

To strengthen the Houthi’s position in Yemen, the Tehran government has been sending aid in the form of logistical military equipment since 2009. Iran clandestinely sent hundreds of anti-tank and anti-helicopter rockets to the Houthi group (Landry: 2015). Reports from experts support the notion that Iran assisted the Houthis, indicating that five ships carried military logistics intended for Yemen and then the weaponry was unloaded at a farm in the Sa’ada province for the Houthi group.

Iran’s intervention in the Yemen conflict has escalated tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia in efforts to intervene in the conflict has turned Yemen into a battleground between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In this regard, Saudi Arabia perceives a significant threat if the Iran-supported Houthi group continues to strengthen, considering their initial base is near the border between Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Therefore, Saudi Arabia deems intervention necessary to secure its stability from this group, leading to the formation of an alliance with other countries such as Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, and Sudan, called the Decisive Storm (Budiman: 2016).

It is undeniable that Iran’s intervention in the Houthi group in Yemen is Iran’s initial step in expanding its influence and becoming Iran’s gateway to spread Shia ideology in the Arabian Gulf region. At the same time, it aims to balance Saudi Arabia’s dominance in the Middle East in general and in the Arabian Gulf in particular. Iran’s intervention in the Houthi group is not solely for Iran’s benefit, but also has economic orientations that can benefit Iran if the Houthis succeed in controlling Yemen.

Similarly, the coalition led by Saudi Arabia is their effort to contain Iran’s expansion of Shia-based power in the Middle East. Given that countries in the Middle East, especially the Arabian Gulf, are predominantly Sunni and Saudi Arabia’s influence over these countries is significant. Yemen, before the conflict, was also heavily dependent on and influenced by Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government feels the need to secure Yemen from Iran, both in containing Iran’s power in the Gulf region and safeguarding the economic potential contained within Yemen’s geography.

Yemen’s strategic location is highly potential when viewed from its geography. With its fertile land, rainfall, and especially the position of the Bab al-Mandeb strait, Yemen is coveted by many major countries, including Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi Arabia and Iran carefully consider Yemen’s position, so both countries strive to assert their power in Yemen for political and economic interests. Therefore, it is not surprising that both countries use ideological approaches to legitimize their steps in controlling Yemen in the eyes of the international community.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article focuses on literature review. In this study, the author reads and connects literature related to the theme addressed by the author. The focus of the study is on the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, with a specific focus on Syria and Yemen as samples. The other sources include books, articles, news, and other online media that support research data to gain a deeper understanding of the interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran in Syria and Yemen. The forms of support from Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Syrian conflict maximize the ability of assistance, including financial aid, military support, and political backing.
RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The strategies of Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Middle East

Saudi Arabia and Iran are countries that recognize Islam as their political ideology, leading to a tug-of-war between them for power in the Middle East. As described above, conflicts in Syria and Yemen serve as arenas to observe how these two countries highlight their strengths to achieve their foreign policy goals of expanding their influence and balancing each other's power in the Middle East.

There is no doubt that Saudi Arabia's influence in the Gulf region is evident in various aspects, particularly through its shared ideology of Sunni Islam. Countries based on Sunni ideology and allied with Saudi Arabia include the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar. Through this shared purpose and ideology, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was established, comprising Saudi Arabia's allies in the Gulf region, which are predominantly monarchies. Since its establishment, the GCC has been a highly effective tool for promoting conservative approaches among its members in addressing regional security issues (Tyler: 2012). On a larger scale, there is the Arab League, within which Saudi Arabia employs a similar approach to its member states. Through these organizations, the Saudi government benefits by playing its role in forging close relationships with elites in these countries, which are predominantly Sunni, based on shared political interests.

Iran, on the other hand, pursues a different strategy to counterbalance Saudi Arabia in the Middle East and expand its ideological influence in the region. Iran builds alliances with local Shia communities in Middle Eastern countries, aiming to exert pressure on governments in the Middle East in general and in the Arabian Gulf in particular, which are predominantly Sunni-based, through strategically significant issues for the Tehran government. In several aspects, this strategy is highly effective, considering that Shia communities are more susceptible to Iranian propaganda than Sunni Muslims. Success through this ideological approach can be seen in expanding its influence in the region, as evidenced in Yemen by building networks to strengthen the legitimacy of the Houthi Shia group. Similarly, the success of Iran's relationship with Syria is built on ideological alignment and strategic cooperation between the two countries.

The effectiveness of these strategies varies between the two countries in different cases. In the case of Yemen, the Riyadh government even directly intervened in the crisis to crush the Houthi group, but so far, these efforts have failed, as the Houthis eventually seized power in Sana'a and assumed leadership in Yemen. The biggest challenge for Saudi Arabia at present is its rivalry with Iran in Syria, which has yet to find common ground. With the alliance established between the Damascus government, Tehran, Moscow, and Beijing, the crisis has prolonged, maintaining the legitimacy of Bashar al-Assad's leadership. In this crisis, the Damascus government benefits from the presence of Iran and other countries in defending its power to this day, despite opposition from many countries, including Arab states, against Bashar Al-Assad's government. Therefore, if Saudi Arabia aims to diminish Iran's influence in Syria, it poses a significant challenge for Saudi Arabia, considering the extent of Iran's influence in Syria to date, and Tehran is unlikely to easily relinquish Syria to its rival, Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia's efforts to minimize Iran's influence in the Middle East

Arab Saudi has made efforts to minimize Iran's influence in the Middle East, especially amid their increasing involvement in indirect conflicts in Yemen and Syria, aiming to expand their respective influences in the region. Additionally, the execution of Shia clerics, including Sheikh Nimr, has further deteriorated the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Therefore, the escalating conflict requires effective and efficient efforts to reconcile the tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia has attempted to improve relations with Iran, especially after the execution of Sheikh Nimr Al-Nimr. The Saudi government has opted for peaceful approaches to resolve conflicts with Iran. These efforts demonstrate goodwill, ultimately leading to peace-building, especially in the Middle East region. Another effort made by the Saudi government to normalize relations with Iran is by utilizing...
third-party mediators. The involvement of mediators can offer solutions to the Saudi-Iran conflict. Therefore, the Saudi government has requested Iran, through Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi, to mediate the dispute between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This request has been positively responded to by the Iranian government based on Islamic solidarity and to reduce tensions in the Middle East.

Another initiative taken by the Saudi government to resolve the conflict with Iran is through international organizations. This is evidenced by the meeting of OIC member states in Jeddah to discuss the developments in the Syrian conflict and Iran’s attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran. The meeting of OIC member states was proposed by the Saudi government to address conflicts in the Middle East, especially with Iran, following the execution of Sheikh Nimr Al-Nimr. Therefore, the Saudi government has taken positive steps to build peaceful relations with Iran.

Another alternative pursued by Saudi Arabia is to use a sectarian peace approach. Globally, Islam predominantly follows Sunni beliefs, accounting for 87-90% (Jawan: 2013). This includes OIC member states, with approximately 70% involved in the IMAFT security organization (Ahmad: 2017). Supported by dependence on Saudi Arabian funding and dominance in the structure of OIC, Saudi Arabia is inclined to choose a peaceful approach to resolve conflicts with Iran. This is because Saudi Arabia stands to gain more benefits than losses through peaceful means. Furthermore, the peaceful approach adopted by Saudi Arabia is believed to minimize casualties and physical damage resulting from conflicts in Syria and Yemen, which both Saudi Arabia and Iran are involved in. This could even reduce the overall level of conflict in the Middle East region.

CONCLUSION

The power competition in the Middle East is clearly evident between two major countries, both adhering to Islam but differing in their Islamic ideologies. Saudi Arabia, following Sunni Islam, plays a leading role in the Middle East, considering that most Middle Eastern countries adhere to the same Sunni understanding as Saudi Arabia. However, Iran also plays a significant role in various issues in the Middle East to achieve its goal of spreading its ideology and, on the other hand, balancing Saudi Arabia’s power in the region.

Saudi Arabia, which has built alliances based on Sunni ideological similarities, faces a significant challenge in containing Iran’s influence in the Middle East, as seen in cases like Syria and Yemen. In confronting each other’s power, both countries employ a similar approach, namely, an ideological affinity approach. Through international forums like the Arab League and the GCC, Saudi Arabia can embrace local leaders who share ideological similarities to contain Iran’s power and ideology in the Middle East. However, Iran employs a similar strategy but not through international forums, rather by building networks with local communities sharing its ideology. These local communities are eventually utilized by Iran as its proxies in spreading ideology and asserting its influence, as seen in the case of Yemen. With Yemen falling under Iran’s control, Iran’s power in the Middle East expands. In other contexts like Syria, the Iranian government has a strong relationship with the Syrian government, based on strategic cooperation and ideological alignment, benefitting both countries in strengthening their legitimacy and existence in the Middle East.

In terms of escalation, Iran has so far succeeded in its efforts to balance power in the Middle East, as seen in cases like Yemen and Syria. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has failed in its attempts to contain Iran’s power and prevent the spread of its ideology into the Middle East. Considering the deteriorating relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia, particularly after the execution of Sheikh Nimr Al-Nimr in 2016, Saudi Arabia requires actions aimed at normalizing peaceful relations. Speaking of actions taken by Saudi Arabia to build peaceful relations with Iran, they opt for a peaceful approach through forums within the OIC institution. Saudi Arabia’s choice of peaceful resolution is to achieve optimal results.

In the context of ideology in the Middle East, based on the cases mentioned above, ideologies are essentially used as political vehicles for legitimizing their goals in controlling a country on a small scale and the region on a larger scale. The use of ideological approaches is the easiest to use, as it can evoke emotions among various parties and the international community in general. Therefore, it’s not
surprising that both Iran and Saudi Arabia often use ideological approaches for their foreign policy goals.

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