United Nations
Office on Drugs and Crime

UNODC
UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME

BACKGROUND GUIDE AleMUN 2026

Topic: Addressing the growth of Organized Crime - and Militia - Mediated Drug Crisis in Latin America

Chairs: Alexia Bichara and Arthur Espíndola

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1. GREETING WORD

Dear delegates,
Welcome to AleMUN 2025! We are Arthur Espindola and Alexia Bichara from Deutsche Schule Corcovado, and it is an incredible honour to be chairs in this year's UNODC council. It’s a pleasure to have you join us as we engage in a vital discourse on the topic: "Addressing the growth of Organized Crime - and Militia - Mediated Drug Crisis in Latin America”.
The UNODC council is a global organization dedicated to promoting justice, security, and human rights by addressing transnational crime, drugs, and terrorism. It plays a crucial role in advocating for effective policies against organized crime and corruption, within the framework of international law. The topic of addressing the growth of the drug crisis in Latin America aligns with the council's mission, as it addresses issues such as combating illicit drugs, transnational organized crime, and corruption . This discussion is essential for advocating for policies and actions that disrupt drug chains and prevent corruption.
As we embark on this journey together, we are excited to serve as your chairs, guiding and facilitating the dynamic debates that will shape our sessions. The topic we've selected is highly relevant to today's global challenges, and we can't wait to see the creative solutions and collaborative ideas that emerge from our discussions. Feel free to reach out with any questions, concerns, or suggestions as we gear up for the sessions ahead.
Together, we'll explore diplomacy, cooperation, and mutual understanding, making a real impact on our world. We're truly honored to be part of this prestigious event and look forward to the engaging debates and impactful resolutions we'll craft. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to contact us—we're here to support you throughout the UN negotiation process.

We wish you all good luck with your preparation and see you in UNODC!
Best regards,

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2. UNODC

2.1 General Information

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), officially established in 1997, was created through the merger of the United Nations Drug Control Programme and the Centre for International Crime Prevention. Its creation reflected the growing concern among Member States regarding the expansion of transnational organized crime, illicit drug trafficking, terrorism, corruption, and other threats that increasingly challenged international peace, security, and development in the post–Cold War era. The establishment of the UNODC formed part of the United Nations' broader effort to strengthen international cooperation and provide a more coordinated global response to complex criminal issues affecting multiple regions simultaneously.

The origins of international drug control and crime prevention within the United Nations system, however, date back much earlier. Since the foundation of the United Nations in 1945, Member States have recognized the importance of addressing illicit narcotics trafficking and promoting international legal cooperation. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the UN adopted several major conventions aimed at controlling narcotic drugs and combating criminal activity, including the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs of 1961, the Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971, and the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988. These legal instruments established the foundation for international cooperation on drug control and law enforcement.

At the same time, the rapid globalization of financial systems, trade, and communication networks contributed to the growth of transnational organized crime. Criminal organizations expanded their operations across borders through activities such as human trafficking, money laundering, arms smuggling, cybercrime, and corruption. In response, the United Nations increased efforts to strengthen legal frameworks and encourage cooperation among Member States. One of the most significant developments was the adoption of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime in 2000, followed by the United Nations Convention against Corruption in 2003. These agreements became central pillars of the UNODC's mandate and international operations.

Over time, the role of the UNODC expanded beyond law enforcement and drug control. The organization became increasingly involved in counterterrorism assistance, judicial reform, prison system improvement, anti-corruption initiatives, crime prevention, and the promotion of fair and effective criminal justice systems. Today, the UNODC works closely with governments, regional organizations, civil society actors, and other UN agencies to provide technical assistance, support legal reforms, strengthen institutions, and coordinate international strategies against global criminal threats.

Headquartered in Vienna, the UNODC currently operates in all major world regions and plays a central role in advancing the rule of law, international security, and sustainable development. Through its broad and interconnected mandate, the organization seeks to address the root causes and consequences of crime while promoting international cooperation, human rights, and global stability.

2.2 Structure of UNODC

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime is led by an Executive Director appointed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations. Headquartered in Vienna, the organization coordinates international actions related to drug control, crime prevention, counterterrorism, anti-corruption efforts, and criminal justice reform. The Executive Director oversees the agency's global activities and ensures that its operations align with the priorities established by the United Nations system and Member States.

The UNODC's work is mainly supervised by two intergovernmental commissions operating under the authority of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC): the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) and the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ). These bodies are composed of Member States elected on the basis of geographical representation and are responsible for guiding international discussions, reviewing global challenges, and adopting resolutions related to the organization's mandate.

The Commission on Narcotic Drugs consists of 53 Member States elected by ECOSOC for four-year terms. It serves as the principal policymaking body of the United Nations regarding international drug control and supervises the implementation of global drug conventions. The Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice is composed of 40 Member States elected for three-year terms and focuses on issues such as organized crime, corruption, trafficking, cybercrime, and criminal justice reform.

In addition to these commissions, the UNODC operates through regional and country offices located across different parts of the world. These offices provide technical assistance, training programs, research, and institutional support to governments and law enforcement agencies. Together, the commissions, field offices, and specialized divisions form the institutional structure that enables the UNODC to coordinate international cooperation and support Member States in addressing transnational crime and security challenges.

2.3 UNODC's mission

UNODC is the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the UN's primary agency dedicated to addressing illicit drugs, transnational organized crime, terrorism, and corruption. Established in 1997 through the merger of the UN Drug Control Programme and the Centre for International Crime Prevention, it was created to strengthen global efforts against these interconnected threats.

UNODC's core mission is to tackle the world drug problem, combat organized crime and terrorism, prevent and counter corruption, address money laundering and economic crime, and promote fair and effective criminal justice systems. It works with Member States, governments, civil society, and the private sector to develop laws, policies, and programs that enhance security, rule of law, and sustainable development worldwide. It also ensures to disrupt criminal networks and protect vulnerable communities across all regions.

3.TOPIC BACKGROUND

3.1 Current Situation

Organized crime and drug trafficking caused over 100,000 homicides in Latin America in 2025, fueling a structural crisis with transnational networks co-opting state institutions and weakening democracy. Synthetic drugs like fentanyl worsen global public health, with 316 million illicit drug users worldwide in 2025.

Cartels diversify into arms trafficking, illegal mining, and extortion, while militias and gangs like Ecuador's criminal groups incentivize violence. Ecuador faces increasing violence from drug rivalries, with military deployments failing to curb institutional frailties in ports and prisons. Money laundering hits $400 billion annually via crypto, corruption, and weak regulations, with Haiti, Nicaragua, and others vulnerable.

The nexus between organized crime and the State represents one of the most destabilizing dynamics in the region. Criminal organizations do not merely operate in the margins of governance — they actively penetrate it. In countries like Mexico, Honduras, and Venezuela, cartels have embedded themselves within police forces, judiciaries, and political parties, transforming the State from a counterforce into an enabler. This phenomenon, known as "State capture," blurs the line between institutional authority and criminal power, making traditional law enforcement responses insufficient. Where the State is weak, criminal actors fill the vacuum, providing parallel governance, social services, and employment — consolidating territorial control and popular loyalty in ways that formal institutions have failed to achieve.

The growing consumption of drugs in Europe has become a critical driver of the Latin American drug economy. European cocaine consumption has risen by 60% since 2016, with record seizures in ports like Antwerp, Rotterdam, and Hamburg reflecting expanded trafficking routes rather than reduced supply. The European market, with its high purchasing power, generates premium profit margins that incentivize cartel expansion, industrial-scale cocaine production in the Andes, and violent competition over export corridors. Demand from wealthy consumer nations sustains the entire chain — from Andean farmers dependent on coca crops as a livelihood, to transshipment hubs in the Caribbean and West Africa, to street-level distribution networks across the continent.

Rich countries bear a structural responsibility in perpetuating drug use and its consequences in Latin America. The flow of capital, weapons, and chemical precursors from North America and Europe fuels the same criminal networks that devastate local communities. The United States remains the world's largest drug market, and the southbound arms trade — with an estimated 200,000 firearms trafficked annually from the US into Mexico alone — directly arms the cartels responsible for mass violence. Meanwhile, the "war on drugs" model exported by wealthy nations has historically prioritized militarized enforcement over public health approaches, criminalizing consumption and production in the Global South while demand in the Global North remains largely unaddressed. This asymmetry — where the burden of violence is borne by producer and transit countries while consumer nations pursue incremental decriminalization domestically — exposes a profound structural inequity at the heart of international drug policy.

US President Trump urged military action against drug dealers in March 2026, while Brazil launched the DESARMA program with the US for intercepting arms and drugs via data sharing. UNODC prioritizes transnational crime and drugs in its 2022–2025 Latin America strategy, amid record European cocaine consumption up 60% since 2016.

3.2 Historical Context

Drug-related organized crime in Latin America traces back to pre-colonial psychoactive plant use. European colonization spread coca and opium globally, establishing narcotics in trade networks by the 19th century. Governments in countries like Colombia and Mexico regulated poppy and coca cultivation due to economic instability in the 1970s.

From the beginning, drug economies developed in symbiosis with political power. The Medellín and Cali cartels emerged in Colombia during the late 1970s, dominating cocaine production and export to the US — but their rise was inseparable from the corruption of state institutions. Police forces, judges, and politicians were systematically bribed or intimidated, establishing a pattern of criminal infiltration of the State that would define the region's trajectory. Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) era (1930–2000) made this dynamic explicit: cartel growth was not merely tolerated but structurally enabled through institutionalized corruption, with groups like Sinaloa transitioning from couriers to suppliers by the 1980s, controlling 90% of US cocaine by 2007. Prisons, rather than serving as a deterrent, became organizational hubs — Brazil's Comando Vermelho (CV), formed in the 1970s from prison networks, entered the favela drug trade by 1982, illustrating how the failure of the penitentiary system fed directly into criminal expansion.

The demand side of this crisis has always been driven by wealthy consumer nations. The United States, as the world's largest fentanyl consumption market, generated the financial incentives that transformed Colombian and Mexican criminal groups from local operations into transnational enterprises. The cocaine boom of the 1980s was fundamentally a response to North American demand, and the subsequent shift toward synthetic opioids followed the same logic: US consumption patterns dictated Latin American production patterns. More recently, Europe has emerged as a parallel engine of cartel finances, with cocaine consumption rising 60% since 2016. Record seizures in Antwerp, Rotterdam, and Hamburg reflect not declining supply but expanding trafficking infrastructure built to meet European demand. The revenues flowing back to Latin American cartels from these wealthy markets financially empower the same organizations responsible for the region's homicide crisis — creating a structural loop in which consumption in rich countries directly subsidizes violence in poor ones.

After 2006, Mexico's drug war under Calderón fragmented cartels like Los Zetas, doubling criminal groups to over 200 by 2020. Colombia's 2002–2006 paramilitary discharge integrated 24,000 fighters into crime networks. In Brazil, militias ("polícia mineira") displaced gangs in Rio favelas, mimicking their territorial control while targeting traffickers — but themselves becoming criminal enterprises deeply embedded in local politics and security forces. This evolution, fueled in no small part by sustained foreign demand, cemented Latin America's homicide crisis, with organized crime now linked to half of all killings in the region.

3.3 International Legal Framework

The international legal framework addressing organized crime and drug trafficking rests on three UN treaties: the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs (as amended in 1972), which controls production and trade of substances like coca and opium; the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, targeting synthetic drugs; and the 1988 UN Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, which mandates criminalization of trafficking and money laundering.

The 2000 United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC, or Palermo Convention) and its Palermo Protocols (on human trafficking, migrant smuggling, and firearms) provide the structure for combating groups like Latin American cartels, requiring states to criminalize participation in organized crime and enhance international cooperation on extradition and asset recovery.

The Organization of American States (OAS) complements these via the 1988 Anti-Drug Strategy and 1996 Inter-American Convention against Corruption, promoting hemispheric cooperation on drug prohibition and anti-corruption. Additional OAS efforts, like the 2013 Declaration of Antigua, advocate balanced approaches integrating public health, human rights, and crime prevention.

4. IMPORTANT FOR THE PREPARATION OF THE DEBATE

4.1 Topics to focus on during the debate

Analyzing how corruption, money laundering, prison systems, arms trafficking, financial flows, and prevention/public health strategies influence the dynamics, operations, and resilience of global drug trafficking networks

Should the US successfully nominate Brazil's PCC and CV as narcoterrorist groups, imposing sanctions and extraditions despite sovereignty concerns?

Can unilateral action by one state against foreign criminal groups be legitimate without multilateral approval?

What role should the United Nations and UNODC play in regulating or guiding responses to groups labeled as narcoterrorist?

4.2 Guiding Questions for Further Research

How does your country define organized crime and militia activity within its domestic legal framework?

What forms of organized crime most directly contribute to the drug crisis in your country or region?

How does your country cooperate with neighboring states and international organizations to combat transnational criminal networks?

What policies has your country implemented to prevent the recruitment of young people into criminal organizations and militias?

How does your government balance law enforcement and security operations with the protection of human rights and the rule of law?

5. IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT THE COUNTRIES

5.1 Federative republic of brazil

Brazil is a major cocaine transit hub with powerful prison-born gangs like the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), which dominates exports to Europe through its ports, and Comando Vermelho (CV), controlling Rio favelas. Local militias extort communities while often allying with traffickers, fueling violence and transnational expansion. The US pushes FTO terrorist designation for PCC in 2026, as Brazil partners on DESARMA for arms interdiction. Brazil's stance prioritizes national sovereignty, militia disarmament programs, and regional cooperation over foreign sanctions.

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5.2 United Mexican State

Mexico leads global fentanyl production through cartels like Sinaloa and CJNG, which process Chinese precursors into pills responsible for massive US overdoses. No longer mere trafficking organizations, these cartels exercise territorial control and parallel governance in certain regions—acting as de facto authorities that provide services, enforce rules, and maintain militia-like structures central to the criminal governance aspect of organized crime. The 2006 drug war fragmented these groups into violent networks that have diversified into extortion, violence, and arms trafficking. A defining challenge of Mexico's organized crime crisis is the pervasive corruption and infiltration of local institutions, police forces, and political spheres by these cartels. Despite large-scale lab seizures, Mexico downplays its role as a primary producer, emphasizing consumer demand reduction in user countries and intelligence sharing without foreign military intervention

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5.3 Republic of Colombia

Colombia remains the top global source of coca for cocaine production, caught in a decades-long conflict where drug cartels are deeply intertwined with paramilitary and guerrilla-style violence. Following the peace process and demobilization of the FARC majority in the late 2010s, multiple dissident FARC fronts rejected the agreement and reorganized into powerful trafficking-militias that control key cultivation zones and transit corridors. Parallel to them, the ELN continues to operate as a hybrid guerrilla-criminal actor, while organizations such as the Clan del Golfo dominate strategic ports and land routes, using territorial control to manage trafficking flows and extract illicit rents. These armed groups not only secure cocaine and precursor routes but also exploit illegal gold mining—an activity that now generates profits comparable to the drug trade and is similarly controlled by the same networks.

Recognizing its role as a key producer, Colombia’s current policy stance emphasizes forced-coca eradication, alternative-development programs, and cooperation with international partners to disrupt supply chains, while insisting that long-term solutions require reducing demand in consumer countries and strengthening governance in conflict-affected territories.

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5.4 Republic of Peru

Peru ranks second in coca cultivation with over 62,500 hectares, relying on remote Amazon river networks to transport leaves to clandestine labs in neighboring countries. Farmers in these regions depend heavily on coca due to the collapse or absence of viable legal alternatives, and cultivation has steadily increased despite international pressure. The expansion of trafficking is closely tied to the state’s weak presence in remote Amazon and VRAEM areas, where limited infrastructure, security, and public services allow organized crime groups to operate with little oversight and consolidate control over production and transit routes. Peru’s official stance calls for UNODC-supported development aid, voluntary crop substitution programs, and targeted rural investment, while opposing large-scale forced eradication that further undermines the livelihoods of impoverished farming communities.

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5.6 Bolivarian State of Venezuela

Venezuela serves as a key drug-transit corridor for Colombian cocaine, using Caribbean maritime routes and porous land borders to move narcotics toward Central America, Mexico, and the United States. The Tren de Aragua has emerged as one of the country's most prominent and internationally discussed criminal networks, operating partly from within the prison system and expanding its influence across borders. At the same time, pro-government militias and other armed groups exploit the country's economic collapse and weak state control to facilitate trafficking, creating de facto criminal safe havens. The United States has designated certain Venezuelan actors, including elements linked to the so-called "Cartel de los Soles," as "narcoterrorists," reflecting the international concern over state-linked criminality. Venezuela's official stance, however, attributes these vulnerabilities to external sanctions and emphasizes the need for humanitarian aid and dialogue rather than punitive labels and militarized approaches.

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5.7 United States of America

The United States faces over 100,000 annual fentanyl-related overdose deaths and remains the main driver of international pressure on Latin American militaries to combat drug cartels, reflecting a continuation of the long-standing "war on drugs" approach. The Trump administration in 2026 has pushed for terrorist designations of groups such as the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) and certain Venezuelan actors, backed by financial sanctions and demands for extradition, while funding interdiction programs like DESARMA to disrupt regional trafficking networks. The U.S. stance emphasizes aggressive labeling of cartels as terrorist organizations, broad financial penalties, and rapid handover of suspects, but it has also raised concerns about potential unilateral military or extraterritorial operations against cartels, which many Latin American governments and regional actors view as a major geopolitical tension and a challenge to national sovereignty. At the same time, critics argue that sustained U.S. drug demand and opioid consumption remain a key pillar of cartel profitability, underscoring the limits of a supply-side-only strategy. https://www.cnn.com/2026/03/17/americas/trump-latin-america-military-drug-trafficking-latam-intl
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5.8 People's Republic of China

China supplies most fentanyl precursor chemicals to Mexican cartels despite tightened export rules with enforcement gaps. Domestic drug use remains low but enables global synthetic flows. International scrutiny focuses on chemical exports. China's stance highlights user-country responsibilities and offers technical assistance without accepting primary liability

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5.9 United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

The UK consumes substantial cocaine amid Europe's 60% usage surge, supplied via PCC-controlled routes to its ports. It funds UNODC demand reduction initiatives. High domestic market drives import demand. The UK's stance supports balanced supply interdictions alongside home harm reduction and treatment programs.

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5.10 French Republic

France experiences rising cocaine consumption and monitors trafficking routes near French Guiana from Brazil and Suriname. It backs EU-wide precursor chemical controls. Atlantic maritime pathways pose key risks. France's stance promotes multilateral intelligence sharing and naval interdictions in trafficking corridors.

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5.11 Federal Republic of Germany

Germany receives Brazilian cocaine shipments through major European ports and leads EU money laundering investigations. Crypto and trade-based schemes proliferate. Strong financial oversight exists domestically. Germany's stance emphasizes blockchain tracking and UNTOC-based asset forfeiture mechanisms.

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5.12 Russian Federation

Russia faces emerging synthetic drug routes and potential links to Latin American illegal mining operations. It resists US-dominated approaches. Geopolitical tensions shape policy. Russia's stance advocates multipolar international cooperation without unilateral Western sanctions.

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5.13 Republic of Paraguay

Paraguay operates as a key tri-border hub for cocaine and precursor chemicals bound for Brazil and Europe, while also serving as a major conduit for large-scale contraband trade in weapons, cigarettes, electronics, and other goods. Institutional weaknesses, including corruption and weak customs enforcement, allow criminal networks to exploit porous borders and informal economies, making the region a fertile ground for money laundering and diversified illicit activities. Limited resources and capacity further constrain law-enforcement efforts, forcing authorities to rely heavily on cross-border coordination. Paraguay’s official stance calls for UNODC-supported capacity-building assistance to strengthen policing, border controls, and financial-intelligence capabilities, aiming to address both the drug trade and broader criminal economies operating in the region.

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5.14 Republic of El Salvador

El Salvador combats MS-13 gangs that traffic cocaine northward, with President Bukele’s large-scale crackdowns significantly reducing homicide rates but also drawing serious human rights concerns over mass detentions and due-process violations. The prison reforms implemented under his administration have reshaped gang dynamics by concentrating incarcerated members and restricting their internal structures, yet regional gang networks remain resilient. MS-13 is not only a local Salvadoran gang but a transnational network operating across Central America, Mexico, and the United States, which makes it highly relevant to UNODC discussions on cross-border organized crime and urban violence. El Salvador’s official stance emphasizes sharing its “anti-gang” security model with other countries and seeks stronger extradition agreements to pursue gang leaders beyond national borders.

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5.15 Republic of Honduras

Honduras serves as a key Northern Triangle corridor in regional cocaine trafficking routes that move drugs from South America toward the United States, while extreme homicide rates fueled by gang extortion and violence reflect the country's deepening organized crime crisis. Groups such as MS-13 and Barrio 18 are central to Honduras' criminal ecosystem, operating as highly structured transnational networks that control neighborhoods, extort businesses, and recruit heavily from impoverished urban and rural areas. Deep poverty and lack of opportunity drive recruitment into these groups, while corruption and weak state capacity—particularly in the police and judiciary—undermine enforcement and allow gangs to entrench themselves in local communities. Honduras' official stance emphasizes that transit vulnerabilities can only be durably addressed by tackling the socioeconomic drivers of gang membership and calls for increased development aid, institutional strengthening, and regional cooperation to reduce both drug trafficking and violent crime.

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5.16 Kingdom of Spain

Spain's Galicia region receives primary cocaine shipments from Colombian maritime routes. Judicial cooperation with Latin America remains strong. Europe's gateway status continues. Spain's stance promotes OAS-EU law enforcement partnerships and comprehensive demand reduction strategies.

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5. 17 the Kingdom of the Netherlands

The Netherlands remains involved in the global response to the growth of organized crime and the drug crisis in Latin America. As a major transit and financial hub, Dutch ports, airports, and banks are often used by criminal networks, while the country also has strong law-enforcement and rule-of-law institutions. The Netherlands supports international cooperation, intelligence sharing, and financial measures to weaken drug-trafficking networks and combat money laundering.

For the Security Council, the Netherlands tends to argue that the drug crisis in Latin America cannot be solved by military force alone. It supports development, governance reform, and human-rights-based policies to reduce the power of militias and organized crime groups linked to the drug trade.

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