

Via Facebook, Israel is trying to change Palestinian perception of the occupation

Shin Bet officers, who control the fate of the Palestinians in the territories, are waging psychological warfare on social media

Hillel Cohen Aug. 8, 2020 | 8:59 AM | 9

In the summer of 2016, Israel's Shin Bet security service opened a Facebook page in Arabic called Bidna Na'ish ("We Want to Live"). It's a rather tricky name. In Palestinian slang, bidna na'ish is an expression used by residents of the territories who are sick of the struggle with Israel and are mostly interested in putting food on the table for their children. Which is in fact a central message of the Shin Bet's Facebook page: You're better off, Palestinians, concentrating on improving your quality of life than in dealing with politics.

About two years later, Shin Bet case officers – the "captains" responsible for various regions, from the Gaza Strip in the south to Jenin in the north – joined the organization's Facebook activity, opening their own personal pages. The officers identify themselves as Israeli intelligence personnel and use Arab aliases. The Shin Bet has thus launched open, even aggressive, activity on social media. Some 30 of the organization's case officers have uploaded hundreds of Facebook posts

which have attracted thousands of Palestinian followers and have generated thousands of comments.

Operatively, the Facebook posts are intended to help curb violent resistance by the Palestinians, but they seem to have a more important purpose as well: to change Palestinian perception about their situation in the West Bank and about Israel in general. The overriding aim seems to be to legitimize Israeli military rule and to normalize the settlements in the territories. The modus operandi is to create an imaginary world on Facebook in which there is no occupation, where Palestinians and Israelis live in tranquility and equality in the West Bank, and the Shin Bet works on behalf of Jews and Arabs alike. In this virtual reality, resistance to Israel's military government is described as opposition to the peace and progress that Israel has to offer, and as harmful to those who take part in those benefits.

These “consciousness operations,” as they are known in the argot of the Shin Bet (and the Israel Defense Forces as well, which has also established its own Center for Consciousness Operations), are designed by psychologists, marketing experts, Arabic studies scholars and intelligence personnel. What's distinctive about the case officers' Facebook activity is their direct acquaintance with the situation on the ground and with the local population. They present themselves as being close to the communities they are responsible for, and their tone is that of a big brother:

a friendly but firm approach couched in an aura of superiority. These Shin Bet officers, who in many ways control the fate of the inhabitants of the territories, seek to educate and teach, present facts and interpret them, warn people against doing silly things, make threats, make promises, stress that they are acting for the common good – and heap scorn on Palestinians who take part in the armed struggle.

Here's a current example: In June, a Border Police team at the so-called Container checkpoint east of Jerusalem shot to death Ahmed Mustafa Erekat, a 27-year-old Palestinian from the town of Abu Dis, as he drove rapidly toward soldiers. Israeli and Palestinian sources disagreed over whether it was an attempted car-ramming attack. Palestinians tended to reject the possibility that Erekat was targeting IDF soldiers, as he was on his way to pick up his mother for his sister's wedding, but the security sources maintained that it was a clear-cut attempt at such an attack.

The heated online discussion was joined by the Shin Bet agent in charge of Abu Dis and its surroundings, who goes by the name "Captain Fadi." On his official Facebook page he wrote: "This is not a heroic act / This is not an act of self-sacrifice in the name of God / This is no more than an act of suicide / On the day of his sister's wedding / The suicide Ahmed Erekat."

The purpose of this approach is clear: If Erekat was perceived by the Palestinians to be a shahid – martyr – it could generate additional acts of protest and even

perhaps unleash a wave of car-ramming attacks. Captain Fadi added to his post a video clip from Erekat's phone in which he recorded himself apologizing to his family.

The clip brought in its wake dozens of fierce responses from Palestinians. Many declared that they did indeed see Erekat as a martyr for the homeland, contrary to the Shin Bet post, and ridiculed the attempt by an Israeli to determine who is a shahid. Some mentioned that Erekat had been left to bleed to death, without receiving medical treatment, after he was shot; and others took Captain Fadi to task for removing Erekat's mobile phone from his body and using it for propaganda purposes, to discredit him.

This exchange exemplifies several extremely important aspects of the Shin Bet's activity on Facebook. It allows the Palestinians to respond to the captains' claims – something that is very difficult to do in Shin Bet interrogation facilities or in the organization's offices in army bases in the territories – and to let off steam, while allowing the security service to collect valuable information, disseminate propaganda and even recruit new agents. But for a better understanding of the phenomenon, it might be useful to begin by describing how the Shin Bet officers present themselves on the Facebook pages.

Image and counter-image

The cover photos the case officers post on their pages may be surprising. Many present an image that suggests a Palestinian-Israeli partnership between equals. A hand painted in the colors of the Palestine flag shakes a hand painted in the colors of the Israeli flag; an Israeli and a Palestinian sitting together; an Israeli flag intertwined with a Palestinian one.

The visual images of fraternity and partnership are accompanied by texts in the same spirit. Despite the disconnect from reality – the Shin Bet does not really believe in Israeli-Palestinian equality in the territories – this is not just a public-relations gimmick. The source of the images and texts lies in Theodor Herzl’s utopian Zionist novel “Altneuland” (“Old New Land,” 1902), along the lines of: We come in peace, our presence here is a blessing for the Arabs, resistance to Zionism is resistance to morality and progress. Some Israelis still believe that.

Another type of cover photo features scenic pictures of the locales where Shin Bet officers are in charge, or symbolic, nostalgic images of a typical Palestinian landscape. These images evoke a sense of home and proximity. This is our shared village, these are the hills and the olive groves we all see and love. Captain Fadi’s page, for example, shows a bend in a rural road, old stone dwellings, arched windows, an elderly Palestinian woman in traditional attire walking on the road. A vision of the pastoral, a yearning for tranquility.

The case officers' contact details – Facebook Messenger, direct phone number – are provided to enable Palestinians to transmit information, but also to create the feeling of an attentive ear, of someone who cares. Some case officers simply note how to contact them, others add a few sentences of invitation and encourage the locals to turn to them with any problem.

The message of “We are here to help” is reflected not only in the background images but also in many of the posts' texts. The outbreak of the coronavirus crisis in the spring offered Shin Bet case officers an additional opportunity to present themselves as working for the general good and to portray the reality of 2020 as a period of Israeli-Arab struggle against a common enemy. In addition to publishing advice on how to avoid infection, many case officers emphasized the fact that the virus attacks people without regard for creed, gender or nationality, and that the Arab and Israeli worlds are joining hands in efforts to preserve the health of all the people living in the Middle East.

It's difficult to gauge the effectiveness of the effort to depict the Shin Bet as a positive organization that is working for the benefit of the Palestinians. Fraternity and conciliation are not the immediate images that come to the mind among Palestinians vis-a-vis the Shin Bet. Some will remember its interrogation rooms and the physical pressure brought to bear on them; others will recall arrests or searches of their homes, or efforts to recruit them as informers by means of

pressure and enticements. Such experiences likely account for the aggressive and mocking responses from Palestinians that are relatively common on these Facebook pages.

The deep involvement of Israeli intelligence and government elements in discourse on social media by means of bots and fake profiles makes it difficult, in many cases, to know the true source of the posted comments. Intelligence agencies often use bots to respond to and like their own posts, under different names, as a means to augment a page's exposure. Since it's hard to determine the credibility of the Facebook profiles, the discussion focuses on comments here due to the fact of their publication and the dialogue they engender. Indeed, how do Palestinian profiles (whether real or imaginary) respond to the Shin Bet officers' fraternal declarations of tranquility?

One basic response is to extend a hand in peace in return. For example, a user responded to a post by Captain Amin, the case officer for the Old City of Jerusalem, by writing, "Islam, too, is for peace." Another wrote, "That's how it should be." Last March 22, Captain Eli, the Shin Bet regional officer of Isawiyah, in East Jerusalem, published a conciliatory photo during the wave of false arrests by the Israel Police in that village. "Yes to peace and a life of equality," one person responded. "Shalom haver [friend]," another wrote. "Ahlan wasahlan [Welcome], happily," a third added.

But these were not dominant responses, and often they give rise to counter-responses. Captain Adib, who operates on behalf of the Shin Bet in Hebron, chose a cover photo of a Palestinian-Israeli handshake. A young student from Al-Quds University in Jerusalem who took the message at face value responded by wishing peace to all the country's inhabitants. To which someone else, apparently more familiar with the Shin Bet pages, responded, "What kind of peace is it, my friend – there can be no peace in the country as long as they are here." Another summed up with the standard phrase, "Victory is near, with God's help."

Indeed, expressions of opposition to Israel or to the occupation are very widespread, as are the curses at different levels of crudeness directed at Shin Bet officers as well as their mothers, wives and sisters.

Occasionally, Palestinians want to enter into a genuine dialogue. "God bless you, my brother Captain Eli," a person who identified himself as a Jerusalemite wrote to the Shin Bet officer in Isawiyah. "If you move away from Al-Aqsa Mosque and revoke the laws against the Palestinians, you will be the first Jew I will invite for stuffed mutton and stuffed vine leaves in my home." Both the welcoming comments and the curses, in this Facebook page as in others, were not responded to by the officers.

In response to a new page opened by Captain Hussam (Ramallah and Qalandiyah refugee camp) showing a picture of hands approaching each other with the Arabic

caption ta'ayush (life together), someone wrote, “How can there be coexistence if you are occupying our country and killing the children and the elderly and the women and harming people and making their life oppressive?”

‘Let them work for us’

A Shin Bet power that affects the daily life of the Palestinians in the territories is the organization’s authority to grant – or deny – entry permits into Israel. Since the 1990s, Palestinians have needed such permission to enter Israel, and anyone caught inside without it risks arrest and a fine. The high unemployment rate in the territories and the higher wages in Israel prompt many Palestinians to look for work in Israel, but to work on a regular basis, they need Shin Bet authorization. Over the years, the Shin Bet has denied entry to tens of thousands of Palestinians – both to those involved in the armed struggle and their extended families, but also to the families of people who were killed by Israel. The security rationale in the latter cases is concern that relatives will carry out attacks to avenge the death of their loved ones.

The result is that a vast number of Palestinians are on the Israeli blacklist without having been involved directly in political or military activity. From time to time the Shin Bet announces its readiness to reconsider the security ban on residents in various locales – on an individual basis. This is based on the assumption that improved economic conditions reduce pressure on the Palestinians and induce

them to oppose violence on the part of their relatives (so that existing entry permits will not be revoked).

For example, in October 2017, the Shin Bet made it known on the Bidna Na'ish page that Captain Hussam would be holding special days dedicated to reconsidering the security status of individuals residing in Ramallah who are not involved in any anti-Israel activity: “I call on you directly because of the importance I attribute to improving your situation and the living conditions in the region... I will make every effort required to stand by your side in order to improve your living conditions. I will examine all the requests carefully in order to respond positively to the maximum extent.”

The Palestinians’ desperate need for entry permits to Israel has spawned verbal responses and also visual ones, via memes. People who wanted an entry permit have adopted an apolitical, businesslike tone, having no choice but to accept the Shin Bet’s authority. Many others have focused on the suspicion that the meetings with local residents were intended to recruit informers for the security forces.

“Whoever goes [to a meeting] places himself in a situation in which he needs to compromise his honor. We should not go,” one person wrote. An angrier young man asserted: “Why should we work for them? Let them work for us cleaning toilets.”

Facebook also serves the Shin Bet to recruit collaborators and to solicit information in a directly and overt way, either by means of a general invitation or as a request for concrete information in the wake of a terrorist attack. This was one of the first subjects raised on the main Bidna Na'ish page at its outset. “Share information with us and you will be rewarded,” was the caption. On the left side was a drawing of two intelligence personnel in trench coats, done in the old Hollywood style; on the right a fistful of dollars symbolizing the quid pro quo for collaboration. In addition, a disembodied hand, representing the confidentiality promised to those who provide information, is seen shaking the hand emerging from an Israeli flag, standing for the Jewish state and its Shin Bet officers.

Another security service post called on Palestinians simply, and in English, “Join us to fight against terrorism.”

In certain cases the Shin Bet will publish on Facebook photographs of perpetrators of terrorist attacks (from security cameras or other sources) and their names, in the hope that someone will be tempted to pass on information about them. For example, following a shooting incident at the tunnels checkpoint, through which Israelis coming from the direction of Kiryat Arba and Gush Etzion enter Jerusalem (Palestinians from the territories are prohibited from using that route), the Shin Bet published a post on Bidna Na'ish (Jan. 11, 2018) stating, “The shooting at the checkpoint was intended to undermine the security of the region

and of all its residents, Jews and Arabs alike. We are making supreme efforts to preserve everyday life in the entire region, and an incident of this kind is bad for everyone.”

Appended to the post was a security-camera photo of the shooter, who was still at large, and the promise of a cash reward for information received.

The wording fuses the image presented by the Shin Bet of an organization that preserves the security of all the inhabitants of the territories in equal measure (a viewpoint that most responders dispute), to the notion – which also fails to persuade the responders – that Jews and Arabs live side by side peacefully in the West Bank, and only certain Palestinians are trying to disturb that harmony.

The same approach underlies the general request for maintaining the quiet which the Shin Bet published in September 2016: “Recently you must certainly have noticed the increase in hostile activity. Such actions bring no benefit to anyone – just the opposite, they cause only harm to their perpetrators, to their families and to all inhabitants of the region. Accordingly, I am asking you to assist in this matter, so that everyone will be able to live in peace and tranquility.”

The post ends with a request to report activities that took place and/or to pass on information about future ones. A cash reward was promised to anyone who helps.

A request from Shin Bet case officers to locate Asem Barghouti, a Hamas man who was involved in attacks near the settlements of Ofra and Givat Assaf in December 2018, was accompanied by his photograph. As in other instances, the Shin Bet emphasized that Barghouti “worked to destroy the sensitive day-to-day connections of life between the Palestinians and the Jews in the West Bank.”

Those wishing to assist the Israeli security forces in their struggle against the Palestinian organizations will not state that explicitly in their Facebook response. Following Barghouti’s arrest, the Shin Bet expressed its “thanks to all the decent folk who assisted us” to convey a message (true? false?) that information arrived in the wake of the request.

The responses were not surprising: “God’s curse on the dog who helped you”; “Soon there will be another thousand like [the shooters] Asem and Salah and they will desecrate your honor, you are contemptible – expect surprises”; and “Whoever helped you is a traitor and a collaborator.”

The Shin Bet’s Facebook pages are ornamented with Islamic images, verses from the Koran, proverbs and flowery sayings. The aim is to create an impression that its staff know about Arab and Islamic culture, respect traditions and to some extent constitute part of the local social fabric. Palestinians respond to this in different ways. In some cases, people don’t understand which Facebook page they’ve reached – Bidna Na’ish does not declare its affiliation with the Shin Bet –

and ask questions along the lines of “Are you Arabs?” Or “Are you Muslims?” Others, aware that Israeli intelligence is behind these Facebook pages, cite grammar and language mistakes to mock the Shin Bet’s writers. “Send me your posts before you publish,” a Palestinian from the Bethlehem area suggested to Captain Bashir, who got the names of villages in his area wrong.

The Koran verses quoted by Shin Bet personnel largely repeat themselves and convey messages in keeping with the organization’s approach. A popular verse is, “Cast not yourselves to perdition with your own hands” (Surah Al-Baqarah, 195; Shakir translation), which is quoted as part of the recommendation not to engage in activity against the occupation and against Israel, as this is self-injurious (the captains emphasize that the fate of a terrorist is death, arrest or the demolition of the family’s home). This verse has assumed added significance during the coronavirus epidemic – the need to maintain rigorous caution in the face of the virus – and it’s quoted by Shin Bet officers to show concern for all inhabitants.

Publishing greetings ahead of religious holidays and as Ramadan approaches is a regular practice, both by commercial firms and by Shin Bet case officers. Like many of his colleagues, for example, Captain Adib from the Hebron area published Ramadan greetings this year with a traditional picture of an illuminated half-crescent enveloping the mosque in Mecca and the caption, “The month of repentance and atonement.” He received one response, laconic in nature:

“Ramadan is ours. Not yours.” The traditional greeting he added – “May you be well every year” (“Kul ‘aam wa antum bekhair”) – drew the following comment from someone in Hebron: “God willing we are well, just stay away from us.”

Heroes killing babies

A standard tool in Israeli psychological warfare is verbal abuse – well-grounded or not – against activists of Hamas or other organizations. There are several types of vilifications. In the summer of 2019, the Shin Bet published a Facebook post about a Hamas man in Hebron who was said to be sexually harassing children. There’s no way to know whether this information was correct, but it dovetailed well with the Shin Bet approach that maintains that Palestinian militants are morally inferior. The hashtag attached to the picture stated, “He is not a Hebronite,” meaning he is a disgrace to Hebron. The writer also presents himself as someone who can speak in the name of Hebron residents, as in other cases in which Shin Bet agents refer to the Palestinian situation in the first person plural (and usually get responses that expose them). In this case the comments were mostly mocking. “Be careful not to stand in front of him if you’re worried,” one person wrote, and others picked up on that.

Another way in which the Shin Bet tries to delegitimize the Palestinian leadership is by claiming that Hamas leaders, particularly those in the Gaza Strip, exploit young people in the West Bank for political purposes. The underlying assumption

here is that young people who join Hamas are not motivated by religious faith or a sense of national obligation, but because they were fooled by members of the Islamist movement. The Shin Bet also puts forward the same approach toward the Palestinian Authority leadership in the West Bank, even though the PA cooperates with the Israeli organization in the struggle against Hamas.

On January 28, the PA organized protests following the publication of the Trump “plan of the century.” The Shin Bet responded by bad-mouthing the PA leadership with the aim of undercutting the protests.

“It’s important for me to have the days ahead pass peacefully,” wrote Captain Mofid, who operates in Hebron. “Some of you are liable to be influenced by the incitement of the dysfunctional Palestinian leadership, which over the years has acted solely on behalf of its own personal interests. I advise you not to be caught up by their incitement, because, simply, they are not sending their children into the streets and are not throwing stones and are not taking part in the disturbances, because in their own eyes they are worth more than other people.”

Another way to taint the image of the Palestinian struggle is by pointing to immoral elements in attacks by Palestinians. In December 2018, the squad of Hamas man Asem Barghouti, mentioned above, carried out a shooting attack at the Ofra Junction in the West Bank. An Israeli woman, Shira Ish-Ran, seven

months pregnant, was among those wounded. The fetus was hit and birthed in an emergency operation but died three days later.

The Shin Bet published a photo of the newborn's body, wrapped in a tallit (prayer shawl) before burial, with the caption, "What does a nation feel like whose heroes open fire on a pregnant woman? What kind of hero kills an unborn infant while it is still in its mother's womb? What kind of hero flees after opening fire at soldiers? These are not heroes. Hamas people are not heroes. Cowards."

Most likely the Shin Bet team of the Bidna Na'ish Facebook page that wrote this post felt pain at the death of the fetus, like many Israelis who followed his condition in the media. But above all else publication of the photo and the post showed the disparity between the patronizing approach of the Shin Bet (and perhaps of Israelis altogether) to the Palestinians. The post drew hundreds of comments intended to hold up a mirror to the Shin Bet. They made it clear that the Israeli-Shin Bet dialogue that claims to care about the lives of both peoples and purports to seize the moral high ground, is perceived as duplicitous.

Palestinians who see time and again photographs of children who were killed in Gaza (and sometimes in the West Bank, too), who know personally or from the media cases in which Palestinian women who had miscarriages a checkpoint, refused to weep together with the Shin Bet officers. And, as usual, some raised

well-grounded arguments, some made do with ridicule (“What is this stupidity?”), some cursed, and there were those who wished every Jew dead.

Expressions of empathy or sorrow were few and far between, and they, too, were accompanied by advice to the case officers: “Indeed haram [forbidden, unacceptable, indecent], but is the killing in Gaza not haram?” one woman wrote in response to the Shin Bet post. Another (whose Facebook page indicates that he is from the Muslim Brotherhood) maintained that it’s clear that the intention was not to kill an infant or a woman, as that is contrary to Islam.

Alongside those who noted that Israel carries out killings on a far broader scale, some justified the killing of children, employing a logic that is familiar from online Israeli comments about the killing of Palestinian children. “Better he should die in his mother’s stomach, because when he grows up he will kill our children,” one person wrote, adding, “May every Jew and every Israeli settler burn. May God strengthen Hamas people and grant them health and long life.”

A student from Hebron aimed a message laced with bitterness and hatred at Shin Bet personnel: “And if this infant would have come into the world and grown up, what would have become of him? An imam of a mosque or something? Clearly a dog like all of you and more would have emerged. It’s best for Hamas to tread on your heads.”

A bad end

The word “occupation” is not part of the Shin Bet’s political lexicon, certainly not in its campaigns to alter the Palestinians’ consciousness. From the organization’s point of view, the present situation – in which Israel is in control and settlements are expanding in the territories – is what the Shin Bet must protect. In the virtual world created by the latter, young Palestinians who take to the streets to demonstrate or to throw stones or who take part in the armed struggle are working against peace or against Israel, or to uproot the good-neighbor relations with Jewish settlers. Furthermore, they are doing so, according to the Shin Bet, because outside elements planted harmful ideas in their head.

The Shin Bet’s argument is simple and catchy: These young people are harming themselves and their families, above all. To that end, the organization appeals to their mothers, urging them to keep their children at home so that they will not lose their life or their freedom. “For his sake and for your sake, dear mother, if you suspect that your son has anything to do with these attacks, let us know or report it to the responsible authorities.”

In June, following the arrest of two residents of Hebron – one a medical student, the other an accountant – on suspicion of maintaining ties with Hamas, the Shin Bet posted a clip on Facebook showing their images behind bars, with the caption:

“Ties with Hamas affects the course of your life.” The clip had more than 20,000 views.

This argument has a certain logic to it. There is every chance that the Israeli security forces will get to these activists and that their fate will be death or prison. However, the Shin Bet approach ignores the existence of national and religious feeling, a sense of justice, preparedness for sacrifice and the like. Indeed, this is the method of those who seek to shape consciousness: Identify the weak links, present a partial picture, not necessarily fabricated, reinforce the existing dialogue of those who seek harmony and have despaired of the hope for freedom, and conceal the positive motivations of those who are struggling for freedom.

That is also the underlying purpose of posting images of the demolition of Palestinian homes or of children being arrested. Those images appear usually in the media in order to present Israel’s negative face. Here the point is to heighten the Palestinians’ apprehensions about becoming involved in resistance activities. But Facebook also enables us to see the counter-reactions. Not only the allegation that the Shin Bet’s actions constitute terrorism, but also presentation of the activists’ motives from their own perspective.

“These young people are acting to attain the most basic rights: justice and freedom,” one woman commented. “The Hamas prisoners are [the] pride of us all,” another person wrote. “A contemptible page,” was the view of another about

the Shin Bet's Facebook page, who added, "Long live Hamas. Hamas are lions, you will end up in the garbage can."

Palestinian activists who know their way around the virtual world are aware that the Shin Bet's Facebook pages are part of a broader campaign of Israeli psychological warfare. It includes appearances by Israeli spokespersons on Arab television networks such as Al Jazeera, the Twitter and Facebook pages of the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, Arabic-language sites administered by the Israel Defense Forces Spokesman's Office and so on. The goal is to undermine the commitment of residents of the territories to Palestinian nationalism. Fatah officials have, for instance, issued a poster calling on Palestinians not to hit the "Like" button on the page of the coordinator of government activities, so as to expose its "deceitful role" and not to cooperate with the positive face of the occupation. Facebook posts of Fatah and others using the hashtag "Either the Coordinator or me" received thousands of positive responses.

But the virtual world has a life of its own, and despite the drawbacks, both politically aware Palestinians and others surf the Shin Bet's pages and sometimes respond. Are these pages achieving their goal? Are they succeeding in changing the Palestinian consciousness? In May, on the website of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs think tank, journalist Yoni Ben Menachem quoted security sources who claim that many terrorist attacks were thwarted thanks to these pages. But

that claim, too, is dubious – perhaps it, too, is part of the psychological warfare. Still, in periods of calm they could dissuade some young people from joining the armed struggle.

Can these posts foment a genuine change in Palestinian consciousness? Probably not. The main reason for this is the arrogance of the writers, and their lack of empathy for the situation of the Palestinians. One example is the Shin Bet-Israeli expectation that Palestinians will be shocked by a photo of a Jewish infant who was killed, whereas the case officers themselves – and Israelis in general – do not express regret over the dozens of Palestinian children killed by the IDF. Another example is Shin Bet posts explaining the importance of Independence Day to Israelis, without mentioning the price paid by the Palestinians for the Jewish state's independence, and how Israelis themselves prevent Palestinian independence.

As such, these Facebook pages are above all a virtual monument to the arrogance, the disconnect and the blindness of official Israel and its representatives in the territories.

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