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Extremist Thought in The New Media and Its Impact on Society (Case Study: Defense Network of The Companions and Mothers of The Believers)

Fadwa Abdel Sater^{1*}, Dr. Yahya Jahangiri², Dr. Asghar Masoudi³

1. * M.A, Department of Media Sciences, Faculty of Mass Communication and Documentation, Lebanese University, Beirut, Lebanon. (*Corresponding Author*)

2. Assistant Prof, Department of Shiite Studies, Faculty of Islamic Studies, University of Religion and Denomination, Qom, Iran, yahia.j.s@gmail.com

3. Assistant Prof, Department of Shiite Studies, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Al-Mustafa International University, Qom, Iran, masoudi.asqar@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT	
<p>Article History: Received: 26 Januray 2024 Revised: 20 March 2024 Accepted: 23 April 2024</p>	<p>SUBJECT & OBJECTIVES: Extremist thought in the new media and its impact on society, showing the role of this media, in how they employ the contents of the Islamic values and concepts, within the framework of forming a specific intellectual trend, that aims to influence the vision and convictions of individuals. This analysis also uncovers the most famous electronic communication networks, influencing the extremism and deviation of thought among Arab youth, by analyzing the path of their emergence and formation. Revealing the distortion and misinformation in the media discourse, directed through the network for the defense of the companions and mothers of the believers.</p> <p>METHOD & FINDING: The study relied on precise research tools, such as the technique of quantitative content analysis, the use of the framing method, and the questionnaire also are adopted. The treatment required several research approaches, such as historical, descriptive, and analytical ones. Additionally, using statistics, opinion polls, and numbers fall within the inductive approach. The comparative approach was also used when comparing theory and practice in a case study. The study showed the failure of these extremist sites to distort the image of religious thought and to deviate human societies from their nature, faith, and morality.</p> <p>CONCLUSION: The concepts and values broadcast by these media outlets do not bear the characteristics of thought that make them fall within Islamic thought. Those are thoughts that deviate from the values of Islam.</p>	
<p>Key Words: <i>Sectarianism</i> <i>Extremist Thought</i> <i>Terrorism</i> <i>New Media</i> <i>Network of Companions</i> <i>Defense</i></p>		
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<p>* Corresponding Author: Email: fadwakh74@gmail.com ORCID: 0009-0009-9534-2824</p>	<p>Article Address Published on the Journal Site: http://p-l.journals.miu.ac.ir/article_9561.html</p>	
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Introduction

Since the beginning of 2010, a political event has occurred in some Arab countries, such as Syria, accompanied by indications of the emergence of social media, which promotes certain ideologies, some of which are very rigid, to the point that they reject any alternative point of view, including followers of other ideologies such as secularism, religion, or different systems of thought like secularism which itself can become exclusionary by marginalizing alternative, non-secular visions of the world.

This cancellation brings to mind what we read in the history of the ancients, about personalities who practiced this exclusion of others, such as contemporary thinkers who adopted extremist ideas in the Arab and Islamic world like *Sayyid Qutb (Tarebiq, 2017)*, *Sheikh Muheiseni (Haddad, 2023)*, and recently *Sheikh Yusuf Qeradawi*, who still years before his death the source of *Fatwas* (verdicts) for Islamic State militants in Iraq and Syria. “ISIS” as a *Takfiri* group (*Fadhli, 2013*), presents many extremist ideas as well.

The importance of this research lies in studying the intellectual contents of the concepts broadcast by social media to influence humans and society, which reveals their backgrounds, in addition to revealing the extent of their compatibility with the principles of the divine message by which they characterized the titles of their topics.

The points mentioned above raised a set of questions required by studying this case, and constitute a natural entrance to crystallize the research problem, which will start from the following main question: What thought is created by Islamic social media?

Notably, it emanates more following questions:

1. What are the reasons behind the spread of this extremist ideology?
2. What are the concepts included in their intellectual and religious topics?
3. How did extremists use these media to support their ideas, goals, and ideological orientations?
4. What are the sources relied on to support and document its ideological and intellectual topics?

5. What are the nomenclatures used in the topics, dialogues, and debates?
6. Do the dialogues present intellectual issues as matters of disagreement among Islamic sects?
7. What about the image of Islam? Does it fall within the framework of contemporary Islamic thought?
8. Was this media of intellectual extremism able to divert Muslims from their true religious compass?

In this context, researchers aim to explore the impact of social media on recipients. by comparing and analyzing diverse content across these platforms and observing the expressions, and frameworks used in texts as part of a case study. Additionally, they quantitatively analyzed the content to gain insights into its broader context and meaning.

Research Method

This is analytical research that describes, interprets, and analyzes within a precise methodology in analyzing the content of the intellectual issue, starting with selecting the sample with its time

limits and ending with an analysis of the nomenclature used in the programs. Remarkably, the limitations of the objective study are from 2011-2023.

The sample was chosen from among the media for the network defense of companions and mothers of the believers, due to their abundance of Islamic topics that infuse concepts and values, that require uncovering them and setting their goals.

Theoretical Foundations and Research Background

The Qur'anic method was based on non-extremism and dialogue with good advice, and this is what was confirmed by the words of the Noble Messenger, in forbidding religious extremism where He said, "*Beware of extremism in religion*". Extremism, as we see in the world, is the abundance of temptations and shedding. Bloodshed, stoking sectarian strife, and blindly following false *Fatwas* are conclusive evidence of sectarian fanaticism and lack of acceptance of the other (*Khamis, 2013*).

These words of the Noble Messenger require defining a few keywords, that distinguish the forbidden extremism from the moderation and tolerance that is encouraged by our true religion, e.g., sectarianism, extremism, and severity, as well as difficulty and alienation.

The origin of extremism is in thought, but it has been linked to violence by degrading the sanctity of violators (*Kamel, 2002, 1-5*).

Extremist thought is a deviation from the intellectual rules, values, standards, and behavioral methods common in society, expressed in isolation, negativity, and withdrawal, or by adopting different values and standards, the defense of which may amount to a tendency toward violence, in an individual form or organized group behavior to bring about change in society, and forcefully imposing opinions on others (*Gundi, 1989: 7*).

Terrorism involves the use or threat of violence and seeks to create fear, not just within the direct victims, but among a wide audience (*Jenkins, 2024*).

New media, is any media including newspaper articles, blogs, music, and podcasts that are delivered digitally, from a media or email to mobile phones and streaming apps, as well as any internet-related form of communication (*Girolimon, 2023*).

Defense Network of Companions is one of the Syrian opposition networks that treat an Islamic religious issue as intellectual, belief, and political. In another definition, it is a preaching channel that explains the belief of the *'Ithnā 'Ashariyya* (Twelver Shi'ism) with evidence, proofs, and documents through debates and programs.

Historically, the Middle Ages were characterized by bloody conflicts of religious origin (*Zamil, 2020: 2*), fueled by intellectual extremism and fanaticism that destroyed human life and society, especially in the Jewish and Christian areas in Europe (*Rayyan, 2020, Vol. 2: 73-85*). In the East, Islam was not immune from such conflicts. Intellectual extremism was manifested in its most severe form

during the centuries of the Islamic Caliphate (*Tarebiq, 2017*).

Extremism, in all its forms, continues nowadays under religious slogans disguised as thought and Islam. For example, Islam did not know expressions such as apostasy, heresy, and other *Takfiri Fatwas* before *Ahmad ibn Hanbal*. In this respect, *Shorbagy* said,

They supported these statements with texts from the books of jurisprudence that they have proved it with verses from the Qur'an and Sunnah (Shorbagy, 2018).

We may find here the best clarification of the essence of intellectual extremism that turns into violence and terrorism. In this regard, *Saleh* said,

The first thing on which intellectual terrorism is founded in the actual practice of revisionist Islamic tendencies, is determining the legal position of individuals and societies, by prosecuting actions and words based on invented principles, and prior

convictions that end with the issuance of a ruling of innovation, or disbelief is imposed on the person to whom it was directed (Salah, 2008).

Hence, intellectual extremism which destroys life and society began in the modern sense through the *Salafist* system, which initially relied upon spreading its thought by holding meetings of a secret nature, in which elite academics and thinkers participated to attract young minds through multiple methods (*Kinkar, n.d.*), the most recent of which was contemporary means of communication (network), the international information (internet). Despite its many advantages, it provides many disadvantages that contribute to its exploitation in dangerous and extremist fields, some of which come as follows:

- Connecting millions of entities, organizations, and individuals in one global network.
- Making the process of knowledge exchange a mutual process between the publisher and the user or recipient.

- Ease of use and deployment.
- Low cost (*Kinkar, n.d.*).

Adam Hoffman in the article “*The Islamic State’s Use of Social Media; Terrorism’s Siren Song in the Digital Age*”, said,

This use of social media has enabled “ISIS” to present its narrative apart from traditional media (print, television, radio, design) the image it wishes to see reflected in global public opinion (Hoffman, 2016).

This historical background between the past and the current age answered many questions raised in the introduction of the research about the emergence of intellectual extremism, its development, and sources, leading to the era of modern technology and how it was exploited in expanding. What concerns us is the intellectual extremism that we have seen on some social media, which has historical origins that were revealed by the emergence of the *Kharijites*, separatist sects, and their issuance of many extremist *Fatwas* (verdicts) (*Shorbagy, 2018*).

Digital Technology and Intellectual Invasion

The rapid developments in communication technology led to a parallel development in the form and content of media messages, which contributed to increasing the audience’s interaction together and achieved immediate resonance so that it became possible to measure the negative or positive impact of the contents (*Hosseini, 2016*).

What is this technology? How is it transformed from a platform for disseminating knowledge and communication among people, which is an environment that allows individuals and groups to communicate their voice and the voice of their communities to the entire world, to a network that injects concepts, values, and thoughts that suit those in charge of it in the process of systematically penetrating minds with soft war tools?

Henry Kissinger said,

The revolution in the world of communications and information is the first in history that brought such a large

number of individuals and processes to the same communication tool, in translating and tracking their movements in a single technological language (Kissinger, 2015).

It means it is working on espionage and spreading extremism at the same time. Reports indicate that there are more than 30,000 fake accounts with fake names on Facebook, belonging to individuals and officers from the security and intelligence services of the Israel regime who are fluent in all languages of the world. It is an attempt to reach the largest segment of Facebook users in the Arab world and the meaning of the sentence *"If the page is in Arabic, the target is the Arabs"* (Abu Nahl, 2017).

So, how did the *Takfiri* system benefit from exploiting this technology to spread its extremist ideology that destroys human life and society, and through what platform?

The intellectual invasion of the East, specifically Islamic thought, has invaded the new

and traditional media in the past decades. With the emergence of social media networks, this invasion has turned into media because of its effective influence in changing the culture and values based on the behavioral and intellectual orientations of the members of society browsing it. This has contributed to the emergence of extremist ideologies within online communities that have become a source of great concern, as these communities are led by influential figures, especially with the emergence of platforms that promote intellectual extremism that destroys human life and society.

The language of violence, hateful speech, and extremism in the debates and programs of these platforms, the *Defending the Companions and Mothers of the Believers Network* is one of them on the *YouTube* platform which has produced a generation of fanatical youth who reject any other thought that has reached the limits of extremism. Thus, to measure the extent of influence, researchers should study the process of repeatedly publishing

the information. This repetition, desired by the web creators, aims to make these details accepted by individuals, even if the source and content are inaccurate (Hassan, 2019). This implies questioning the goal of the publisher or media owner for publishing false information to recruit possible browsers to adopt an extremist ideology, and this is demonstrated by the interaction rate that appeared in the table measure whether by view, like, or comment. To obtain accurate answers about the involvement of these sites in fanning

the spirit of nervousness and extremism through the ideological headlines they present, we chose research form questions in a pilot study that was distributed among a random sample of 100 male and female respondents to find out the facts and verify the stability of the metrics for followers of the *Defense Network* programs and debates to evaluate interaction as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Cross-Cutting Intersecting Ratios with Social Media and Interaction

Social Media	Interaction Level: Cognitive/Interactive		Interaction Forms: Like/Comment/Share			Level Of Impact: Immediate Followed by Commitment	
Facebook	4	8	7	5	6	5	3
Twitter	7	18	13	11	8	35	7
YouTube	14	49	0	27	23	34	16
Total	25	75	20	43	37	74	26

These results showed that the *YouTube* platform ranked first among the visual media used and social networking sites in displaying debates and programs presented by the *Defense Network* followed by the Twitter blog in attracting those who openly express hostility to a specific Islamic doctrine and support the violence to which they are exposed based on *Takfiri Fatwas* that were broadcast by the network. On the aforementioned platform, *YouTube* recorded a rate of 49%, compared to *Twitter*, which received 18%, while *Facebook* did not exceed 8%, these percentages seem to be normal in the circumstances of the spread of new media platforms that have played a major role in spreading sectarian strife and incitement.

It was recorded that a high rate of extremism in 2010-2015 led to violence and intellectual extremism, the origin of which was primarily the debates and dialogues that were broadcast on social media (*Morjan, 2017*), which instilled hatred, murder,

bloodshed and intellectual extremism, especially the mass executions that the whole world watched on *YouTube* in 2015, the individuals belonging to certain sects, consider to be enemies and infidels, so it is necessary to punish them with death based on the extremist ideology, which was published under Islamic titles and intellectual debates, such as *Defending the Companions and Mothers of the Believers* network through its channels.

YouTube's lack of seriousness in deleting extremist material played a pivotal role in the occurrence of terrorist acts because of the extremist and inflammatory thought broadcast on its platform (*Morjan, 2017*), in which the *Countering Extremism Project* documented 1348 videos on *YouTube*, that garnered thousands of views for an extremist group in 2018, which is still using the platform to publish videos with extremist content, despite *YouTube* implementing the removal decision (*Yamani, 2019*).

Analyzing The Contents of Dialogues and Debates of Islamic Thought, Between the Method of Advocacy and Practice

After investigating several webs, such as the *Network for the Defense of the Companions and Mothers of the Believers* and other pages for religious figures, it became clear that they broadcast the same content, that raised controversial issues among Islamic sects to influence individuals and attract them through the publication word, voice, and image to achieve sectarian political goals.

This matter led us to investigate and clarify, whether there is a role for this media in distorting religious thought or has been able to divert human societies from their faith and moral nature, characterized by mercy through the propaganda methods used, whether through speech or expressions that stimulate the instinct of intellectual extremism, and adds to its owners a certain religious feature characterized by being Jihadist

and the implementation of the provisions of Sharia.

This is new insight into immediate media memory, of what the peoples of the Arab region, and their different religious and sectarian backgrounds were subjected to including killing, displacement, injustice, persecution, and enslavement by those groups that imitate, and are guided by the ideas of their leaders that impersonate Islam, and call for applying God's law on the earth. Furthermore, they broadcast *Takfiri Fatwas*, against anyone who opposes or disagrees with them.

The questions that lead us to the problem of the study are: What thought is created by Islamic social media? And are these contents included under the name of contemporary Islamic thought?

The *Defense of the Companions and Mothers of the Believers* is a network that specializes in resolving the conflict among the Islamic sectarians. Its programs of dialogues and debates, especially the virtual ones, represent the largest percentage of

media influence in any society, as they are the primary gateway to influencing public opinion, and crystallizing its ideas in a way that is consistent with the goals envisaged for managing.

So, we present some practical titles that were broadcast in more than one episode, and on more than one occasion and year, within the concept of contrast or contention such as titles that enter the deep of Islamic beliefs. Notably, the focus is on the repetition of a certain idea to instill a certain concept of intellectual extremism, here are some of them that the paper analyzes and compares:

- Who was right, Imam Ali (PBUH) or *Muawiya*? It hosts a figure to talk about a controversial issue, spoken by *Othman Khamis* about the wars between Imam Ali (PBUH) and the Companions.

In this debate, *Khamis* said that the Qur'anic verse about the Holy Prophet with the believers when they pledge allegiance to you under the tree (*Ref: The Qur'an, 48: 18*), gives the meaning of inner

righteousness. Imam Ali (PBUH) was the closest one to the truth and they were the closest to falsehood, but in the end, they were all on the truth!

Some dangers in *Khamis's* presentation come as follows:

- The infallible Imam in the rank of public
- Marginalizing the essence of the wars that were waged to protect Islam from deviation
- Wasting the truth and distracting the follower's mind by overlapping more than one title during the main topic, as if what is meant is indoctrination, which consists of slips that the mind absorbs without discussion. On one hand, *Khamis* summarized the war of *Jamal* and *Nahrawan*, describing them as all the efforts between Imam Ali (PBUH), the Companions, and others. On the other hand, he asked God to forgive them all. Since they believed that they were the truth, they should not be mentioned but with goodness, because the Qur'anic verses and narrations mentioned them as pure.

Their inner being is like the Qur'anic verse which said,

*“Muhammad, the
Apostle of Allah, and
those who are with him
are hard against the
faithless and merciful
amongst themselves”
(The Qur'an, 48: 29).*

Then *Khamis* quoted a narration from the Holy Prophet in which He praised Imam Hasan's peace and did not praise Imam Ali in the fight! Although *Aisha* cried until her veil was wet because of what happened in the days of the *al-Jamal* war, at last Imam Ali was the closest to the truth.

So, this thought is based on confusion and contradiction which aims to the following cases:

- Falsifying and distorting facts
- Providing followers with lies and deception in twisted ways
- Showing affection for the honorable Ahl al-Bayt (PBUT)
- Directing the individuals to accept falsehood and not distinguish truth, by establishing a culture of being satisfied with everyone, and asking for forgiving them, even by declaring war on their Imams.

By analyzing the frames and nomenclature of these programs, we find that the content contained, at the level of frames, many expressions that constitute concepts and foundations in the exclusionary and *Takfiri* direction of the other such as denial, infidelity, and accusation. As for the level of nomenclature, we find expressions about concepts such as sectarianism and polytheism, and these frameworks and labels enter through the process of extracting the implicit meanings carried by the text.

The observation was made during the dialogue, the interaction and participation rates were recorded by followers of “ISIS” believers and other Islamic sects around the globe as an indicator of the impact that such content has on the Arab and Islamic environment and its danger to future youth and upcoming societies.

The process observed the number of views, likes, and comments, reflects the level of demand for ideological and intellectual topics, and its level of influence (influence score).

Table 2. Cross-Cutting Programs with Frameworks, Names, And Interaction Standards

Episode title	Frame	Nomenclature	No of views	Like	Comment
Iranian Agents, What Do They Want?	Conspiracy, Atonement	Safavid, Safavid Party, Sectarianism	78369 k	477	53
The Qur'an, Memorizing and Agreeing It	Denial, Accusation	Grudges, Sectarianism	1.421.426	12 k	2.2 k
Eye On Yemen	Incitement, Threat	Safavids, Sectarianism, War	211 k		OFF
Who Was Right, Ali or Muawiya?	Fabrication	War, Equating Falsehood with Truth	1.2 M	N/A	OFF

The letters “OFF” and “N/A” are striking in these numbers. The comment counter “OFF” means it was closed due to its content being extremist and deviating from the platform's rules. If this indicates anything, it means that the level of fanaticism and extremism noted in the comments counter, despite the low level of viewing and the lack of likes in the interaction counter.

It indicates what the community of followers has reached regarding intellectual extremism, such that they automatically reject others without the need to follow the

content. We find that the admiration meter on the debate “*Who was right, Ali or Muawiya?*” is recording N/A, which means that the value is not available for display, either because the influencer i.e., the managing director for the network, decided to maintain his privacy, or because he is unable to provide accurate calculations, or refrain according to proportions, and thus influence his style of thinking and discourse. Furthermore, this explanation means that the amount of interaction with the debate, was not in the interest of the goals intended

for its presentation, despite it achieving one million and two hundred views (1.2 M).

All these points mean that there are dangers in the role of this media and its contribution, to spreading extremism against Islam and the Islamic nation that resulted from this discourse, which can be summarized in the following three points:

1. Characteristics of extremism and terrorism
2. The impact of extremist discourse on Islamic followers
3. The geographical area of the spread of intellectual extremism and terrorism

In the statement of the third point above, the questionnaire was distributed to a random sample of 100 respondents, in the geographic area that was exposed to high-level extremist discourse, specifically in Syria, which was subjected to a sectarian war of genocide, in terms of evaluating the interaction and extent of its impact with the media, and the reflection of its inflammatory dialogue especially on the ISIS's and extremist sects' followers such

as groups affiliated with the *Al-Tahrir* army, *Al-Nusra*, and *Jund Al-Sham*.

How to Confront

Since the new media constituted the main tool in strengthening the arm of extremist groups, these groups needed to seek to establish media rooms through which they could carry out polarization and recruitment operations. Since the sixties of the last century, they have used all available means to achieve their goals (*Kinkar, n.d.*), the most recent of which was the invasion of modern technology and exploitation of it to spread their extremist religious belief and approach, can be said that this media is a double-edged sword and a weapon that spreads a torrent of extremism thought concepts that destroy human life and society, in addition to the values that are alien to our Muslim societies, as well as an extremist approach to thinking and behavior.

So, confronting intellectual extremism begins by establishing a solid base that

constitutes the sum of the supposed ways to confront such a challenge. Therefore, the responsibility falls first on society in all its categories, and then on its official institutions especially "Education" to develop educational and religious curricula through which they play distinct roles in fostering intellectual security and protecting youth from intellectual deviations, in a way that simulates the requirements of contemporary life and openness to other opinions, accepting other religions, sects and coexisting with them based on the fact that they are at the core of the teachings of Islam and do not conflict with it as propagated by those with the extremist and *Takfiri* approach.

Conclusion

The "*Defending Companions and Mothers of the Believers*" network presented titles of intellectual religious debates that represent points of disagreement through the research approach to the most prominent concepts that are presented on social media.

This constituted a necessary knowledge introduction to understanding the paths adopted by the network's management in the structure of topics, their axes, and aspirations, which attempted to combine the consolidation of the doctrinal and religious aspects and reject the opinions that conflict with them, the best evidence for this state may be the contents presented by the program "*The Authenticity and Preservation of the Qur'an among All Muslims*" that reflect the reality of their goals and their *Takfiri* discourse.

By following the debates, it became clear that hate speech is widespread in the *Salafist* community, as it is considered its approved ideology and a major source of religious extremism, and this constitutes a major problem in contemporary religious discourse in the Arab and Islamic worlds. Extremism was not limited to the soul-stirring content of dialogues of thought and belief but to create a youth society that adheres to the *Salafist* doctrine and is hostile

to any other confronting extremism in all its forms, especially intellectual ones, constitutes thought that disagrees with it.

A motive and a basic rule require developing a strategy with an integrated system for how to deal with this approach which has been documented by history and we have seen in the criminal practices of some extremist groups that falsely call themselves Islamic, such as “ISIS” and other extremist groups. Some recommendations come as follows:

1. To introduce a law that regulates the media’s performance in dealing with extremist speech.
2. Urging all official and civil society institutions to confront extremism.
3. Activating the role of the media in spreading moderate Islamic thought.
4. Promoting reliable and unrestricted media alternatives for internet followers, such as moderate Islamic knowledge and authentic Islam networks.

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Author contributions

The corresponding author fulfilled various works including appointment of subject matter, processing, and evaluation by comparing and analyzing diverse content of different topics and debates of the network for the *Defense of Companions and Mothers of the Believer*'s perspectives, the second author was assigned to supervise the research idea and the sequence of points raised for discussion and treatment, and the third author reviewed the texts. Therefore, the authors contributed to reviewing the research and approving the final version.

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AUTHOR BIOSKETCHES

Abdel Sater, Fadwa. M.A, Department of Media Sciences, Faculty of Mass Communication and Documentation, Lebanese University, Beirut, Lebanon. (Corresponding Author)

✓ Email: fadwakh74@gmail.com

✓ ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9536-2824>

Jahangiri, Yahya. Assistant Prof, Department of Shiite Studies, Faculty of Islamic Studies, University of Religion and Denomination, Qom, Iran.

✓ Email: yahia.j.s@gmail.com

✓ ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0335-8000>

Masoudi, Asghar. Assistant Prof, Department of Shiite Studies, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Al-Mustafa International University, Qom, Iran.

✓ Email: masoudi.asqar@gmail.com

✓ ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3953-1338>

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