

# Mapping the Genesis of the Abraham Accords: Elite Preferences, Rising Nationalism, and the Quest for Political Stability

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**ABSTRACT** *The Abraham Accords have presented themselves as one of the most significant geopolitical developments in the Middle East in this decade. They represent a trend in which increasingly, Arab states are seeking their own geopolitical arrangements with the State of Israel. This commentary considers the Abraham Accords from the lenses of elite preferences and nationalism –arguing that the recent politicization of the Gulf-Arab elite constitutes the nexus of the Abraham Accords. We argue that the Abraham Accords were born from a desire of bolstering regime security, regional security and extend local transformations to the international domain. Our analysis opens the literature to a wider discussion on the political capital of Gulf elites, and how increasingly their decisions impact wider Middle Eastern geopolitics.*

**Keywords:** Israel, GCC, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Nationalism, Abraham Accords

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## Introduction

**T**his commentary analyzes the Abraham Accords, the subsequent diplomatic initiatives, and efforts to create a security umbrella through regional geopolitical shifts and ideological transformations. The main factors that led to the emergence of the Abraham Accords can be articulated as elite preferences in the Arabian Gulf, rising nationalism, and the perennial quest for political stability sought by constituent elements of Gulf society.

The foremost premise that needs to be established is that the accords are a result of the relationship maintained by the ruling elite and their political regimes. The survival of monarchies in the political field depends on social stability and highly rationalized foreign policy. Monarchies must either eliminate or manage threats that could be directed toward them both on the domestic and external levels. It is valid to point out that the existence of national identities and the institutionalization of regional alliances against geopolitical imbalances gained pace in the post-Arab Spring period for kings or emirs who themselves represent the political body of monarchies.

Secondly, in conjunction with the above, the nature of social affiliation (religious, ethnic, or cultural) is important and can be cited as the source of widespread discontent toward the political elite and their precarious position. As a dynamic shaping the process, the means of communica-

tion and the fluidity of information began to create a political consciousness that transcended national borders and local cultures to the point of connecting Arabic-speaking peoples on an unprecedented scale. As a fact backed by historical reality, the role of the masses in determining political representation has been the case since the French Revolution. In the Arab Spring, it was clear that social mobilization posed a threat to the political schema of the Gulf with the combination of political consciousness that transcends national borders and the desire for massification with a pronounced revolutionary character taking form.

Thus, the ruling elite of the Gulf sought methods to limit social belonging within the confines of national borders. To this ultimate end, they aimed to strengthen the new middle classes as opposed to the defunct traditional classes by prioritizing social reform projects in a way that would nurture and strengthen the national consciousness. For this purpose, an ultimate *design of nationalism*, unequivocally tied to and oriented toward the country, the homeland, was encouraged by the ruling elite. The end goal of this self-imposed *mission civilisatrice* is to conform social tendencies to this new political trend and to make it a dominant political creed gradually, but astutely. At this point, the Abraham Accords proved that the main component of the value system that determines foreign policy is national affiliations rather than historical self-obligations motivated by religious identity.

Lastly, since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, Tehran has been attempting to transform the Shiite Arab population in the Middle East into a proxy power as an extension of its strategy of expanding its geopolitical influence and deepening its political hinterland. For Arab countries with a Shiite population, this is a security threat and a source of political instability. Several Iranian proxy organizations (Hezbollah, Hashd al-Shaabi, and the Houthis) are active in the Arab geography. The Middle East remains the singular region where Iran manipulates sectarian divisions and uses them as leverage for its own benefit in the internal political balance of the relevant country. With the Abraham Accords, the Gulf countries see a solution to overcoming this problem by encircling Iran with a common security umbrella.

### **Blocs Established around Israel in the Middle East: Nasserism and Pan-Shiism**

The existing literature on the Abraham Accords dwells largely on structural and security-related rationales as the main determinant in the process.<sup>1</sup> They also allude to the foreign policy input of then U.S. President Donald J. Trump as one of the main driving forces behind the process –necessitated by U.S. strategic rationale, which oversaw a process of limiting direct engagement with the Middle East. While this commentary does not dispute these premises, it tackles the question of the Abraham Accords with a political science

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lens– aimed more at scrutinizing elite behavior in the Gulf rather than the powers dynamics stipulated by studies on foreign policy and geopolitics. Hence, this commentary sets out to provide an introduction to a wider analysis of elite behavior in the Gulf, and how this is linked to the formulation of domestic and foreign policy.

Our scrutiny over elite preferences begins with an analysis of two ideological currents in the Arab world that sprouted after the establishment of the State of Israel: Nasserism and Pan-Shiism. These currents form the ideological groundwork that would eventually lead to the Abraham Accords. The ideological structure that formed in the post-1960 period – exacerbated by the Islamic Revolution in Iran– has motivated Gulf elites to tackle this unique structural phenomenon.

Faced with the danger of becoming a perpetual minority, deported, or killed, Palestinians began to convey that their problem was essentially an Arab problem. The antagonistic relationship that started between Israel

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and the Arab states was thus embodied in Gamal Abdel Nasser as a result of this rationale. The main dynamic shaping Nasser's acute political influence beyond the borders of Egypt stems from the Arab collective's desire for unified, singular politics, often manifest in visions of a common Arab realm, a singular Arab state, and the consolidation of the fractured Arab geographic polity.<sup>2</sup>

During the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser (1952-1970) Cairo's choices in regional geopolitical affairs forced the countries neighboring Egypt to act accordingly. Egypt was also coupled with the Soviet Union's strategy of expanding its military influence on a global scale with the onset of the Cold War. Egypt's intensifying relationship with the Soviets led Israel to alternative diplomatic avenues to address this situation. It should be noted that Israel's options were severely limited at this point as the state of war between Arab countries and Israel persisted.

As a result, no Arab country could be expected to openly engage in a relationship with the Israelis. In ad-

dition, it did not seem plausible for hypothetical open engagement to transform into a security pact, considering the political and societal dynamics at play in Arab countries at the time. Due to these factors, Egypt became the center of Nasser's regional leadership, both to feed on this basin of societal emotions and to fill the vacuum of regional leadership. The overall sustainability of this model of leadership relied on geopolitical support spaces and engagement in limited social economic reform projects.<sup>3</sup>

Iran benefited thoroughly from the collapse of Arab political unity, which particularly gained momentum after the Arab Spring. Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and its continued presence until the 2000s provided the inevitable rise of Hezbollah in South Lebanon. Iran thus cultivated a successful relationship by investing in the heart of the Arab political realm. Efforts to establish influence through the Hashd al-Shaabi over the massive Shiite population in Iraq again produced results like those in Lebanon. Efforts to threaten the security of Gulf countries through Ansarullah/Houthis in Yemen are also an addition to this list. This situation can be perceived as the most concrete and immediate threat that directs both Israel and the Gulf states toward cooperation.<sup>4</sup>

The matter of contextualizing between the Pan-Shiism and Nasserist strains of thought is also of significance. As a type of Pan-Arab nationalism that emerged in the 1950s, the

most prominent component of Nasserism is its emphasis on the populist zeitgeist and its insistence on regime changes in Arab countries directed by a monarchy. In addition, the fact that its ideological orientation (socialism and nationalism) has geopolitical spaces (Soviet Union) made it a necessity for the U.S. to fortify the regime capacities of Israel and the Gulf countries at this point during the Cold War period.<sup>5</sup> However, the difference between the Pan-Shia expansion is that it creates an alternative political and social reality around religious sectarianism and splits, not over Arabism at this point. Iran is indeed a nation that has clearly drawn opportunities from the U.S. military interventions in the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> This made the geopolitical hard divergence seen in Nasserism impossible to attain. The U.S.' cooperation with Iran on many issues regarding regional security was the most important development that made it necessary for Israel and the Gulf to act together.<sup>7</sup> The geopolitics shaped between Nasserism and Pan-Shiism would open the door to the Abraham Accords as an open, transparent, and public alliance model.

The fact that regime building in Iran faced a protracted war (1980-1988, the Iran-Iraq War) and that the narrative of this war was webbed around the divides between the Sunnis and Shiites was the harbinger of a new and deep social rift awaiting the region. This great crisis had Iran on one side, and Sunni Arab countries on the other, the latter of which were struggling to consolidate against this

challenge around dispersed and differentiated national interests.<sup>8</sup> An expected result of the Sunni-Shiite divide was the restructuring of Sunni-Arab politics at varying degrees. It is possible to say that a delicate balance has emerged in the region with the religious/sectarian division of politics. States consolidated Sunnism by public means to mobilize their populations against the Iranian threat, and thus this paved the way for anti-Iranian socialization among vast swathes of Sunni Arab populations.<sup>9</sup>

With the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, sectarian divisions were used to the extreme to promote respective agendas in the geostrategic stratosphere. This revisionism attempted to erode the status quo of the region first with the Muslim Brotherhood and then with ISIS. The sectarian, social, and political divisions of Islamic politics and the massive popular support forced the actors who favored the preservation of the status quo to take new action. The most important of these was the concentration of an anti-Brotherhood and anti-Iranian bloc around the Gulf. National interests were brought to the fore by adding a new and contemporary dimension to the fight against Iran through the manifestation of the Abraham Accords.<sup>10</sup> The main factor of these accords, rather than the determinant of religious divisions, was national security. At the end of the day, this led to the acceptance that foreign policy based on material interests is universal and indeed prevalent in the Middle East too, despite some popular



Agreements on the normalization of relations between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain, known as the Abraham Accords, were signed in September 2020 at the White House, with the brokerage of U.S. President Donald Trump.

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commentary that might suggest that the region is simply a playing ground for ideological politics.

### ***Elite Preferences: The Driving Force of the Gulf Monarchies***

The Gulf monarchies enjoy relative political stability when considering the rest of the Arab polities. In this region, where regime changes have not materialized since the inception of the Gulf Arab nations, the descendants of the founding elite of the countries that achieved independence maintain their ruling positions. In addition, the high oil revenues in these countries facilitate the distribution of public resources to society.<sup>11</sup> In these countries where the political organization is not seen, the stances of different interest groups and their implicit alliances with the ruling elites crystallize the traditional and conservative distinction.

The prerequisite for political stability is that social demands can be met by the ruling elite.<sup>12</sup> Since the main change in the Gulf lies in increasing the technical capacity of the state, social change projects accelerated by the economic transformation are at the forefront. A new generation of Gulf Arab youth is confronting the existing regimes with discontent and anger, and anger contradicts the principle of stability that such monarchies prioritize.<sup>13</sup> For this reason, it was necessary to eliminate closed, traditional, and exclusionary practices to ensure stability. This meant the emergence of an area of conflict between the traditional classes and the new technocratic elites, the scale and depth of which could not have been foreseen. In the case of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, this reality implies that it precedes a transformation in which

local dynamics are not ignored. In this context, the construction of national identity around a monarch stems from the dynamic nature of the monarch's relationship with society. In other words, it should be added that a policy with internal contradictions, but whose main goal has been clarified, is preferable rather than a hard and fast transformation.

Another reflection of the search for balance between the local and the global lies in the new foreign policy openings of the Gulf. This manifests itself in two ways: (i) peace with Israel; (ii) establishing closer ties with Russia and China.<sup>14</sup>

The declining interest of the U.S. in the Middle East, the need for reform that emerged with the Arab Spring that started in 2011, and the recalibration of the economic-social consensus are such phenomena that have ignited the very process. Thus, the construction of bureaucratic institutions and public spaces suitable for demographic transformation has become evident.<sup>15</sup> In fact, the Abraham Accords can be seen as a diplomatic venture taking place amid macro-transformations. The monarch's quest for stability turned to the Abraham Accords to fulfill expectations of a foreign policy outside of Muslim Brotherhood-like and Pan-Shia ideas and in line with emerging new demographic trends. By normalizing relations with Israel, the Gulf Arab nations are trying to create an autonomous and alternative reality outside of the general Arab consensus and in turn, are paving the way

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for a more streamlined reality of their own making.

It seems that instead of moving away from general Arab politics, leaning on the balances in the Gulf has come to the fore. A prominent foreign policy issue in Arab geopolitics was establishing diplomatic relations with Israel on a set of preconditions.<sup>16</sup> Discourses such as Israel's withdrawal from its borders before the 1967 Six-Day War and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital were of fundamental importance. In this sense, both ends of the Islamic movements in the region (Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood) were coding the Palestinian issue as the central and decisive discourse of their political discourses and subsequent policies. This posed challenges for countries, leaders, and institutions that chose to engage with Israel.

The rising Arab response to Iran and the exclusion and decline of the Brotherhood opened a favorable window of opportunity for the Gulf states. Constantly being on the agenda of Palestine meant that the (Islamic) orientations of the coun-

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tries were kept alive and for this reason, the monopoly and hegemon positions of the traditional groups residing in the country were confirmed.<sup>17</sup> In a way, this prevented the state's mechanism and political power from establishing direct and open relations with its citizens. With the absence of geographical constraints on Islamic identity, the erosion of national identity and its political organization, the nation-state, and more importantly, the geographical deepening of the domestic central authority was challenged by the power of the organization that transcends borders.<sup>18</sup> Such dynamics caused Ikhwanism to be perceived as a security problem that must be dealt with by the Gulf, which is the center of Arab politics. The Ikhwan's political fall from power in Egypt left no obstacle in front of the countries that wanted to act nationally and autonomously in the region.

Nationalization at the social level and the technocratic process at the bureaucratic level were thus the systemic processes that ignited the normaliza-

tion.<sup>19</sup> The pure national interests that these accelerated on the geopolitical axis placed the rapprochement with Israel within a rational mechanic. The monarchs' quest for stability was shaped by meeting emerging new social trends and keeping pace with changing geopolitical equations.<sup>20</sup> Israel, on the other hand, stood out as a potential ally for the Emirates and Bahrain due to its institutionalized bureaucratic apparatus and sympathetic social structure. In this respect, Israel's position as an actor to deal with the changing and contested developments in the region and to follow a common strategy was deemed valuable by the decision-making apparatuses in Abu Dhabi and Manama.

The reflections of the change in political culture are seen in the processes of Israel's foreign policy. The change in the political orientation of demographics as an important determinant of social structure in Israel is remarkable. In Israel, where electoral democracy is the dominant political regime, the dominant distribution of political orientation is concentrated in right-wing and religious Zionist parties. This political reality pushes the Israeli elites to establish relations with the Arabs outside of the two-state solution.

Arabs make up 20 percent of Israel's population of nearly 9 million. Another factor that determines the depth of the relations that Israeli policymakers will establish with the Arabs lies in Israel's capacity to develop a normal and transparent diplomatic relationship with Arab countries. In

other words, Israel makes social divides manageable through its relations with Arab countries through an administrative stability model.

The fact that one of the main common determinants between Israel and the Gulf is political stability highlights that the elites are the main guiding vector of the Abraham Accords. The lack of intense and transparent coordination among the elites does not provide sufficient data to determine the scale of cooperation of this diplomatic initiative. Ultimately, elites carry out a foreign policy discourse to prevent the alienation of the social structure on which they stand within the political system. But there is a two-pronged deviation. The first is that Israel does not seek an alternative route in foreign policy in Europe and America. For Israel, it sees the Middle East as its main geopolitical destination. For the Gulf countries, the Palestinian issue ceases to be a prerequisite for establishing diplomatic relations with Israel.

### ***Rising Nationalism: The Territorial Nationalism of the Gulf***

The Gulf monarchies encouraged a general and polarizing political trend that would spread to other Arab countries, starting with Egypt, to establish a stable political environment in the Middle East. This started by characterizing the Brotherhood and its elites, values, and ideas in the Arab geography as a national security threat. An anti-Ikhwan generation was embodied instead of the Brotherhood generation, which rose and became widespread with the Arab

Spring. Contrary to Ikhwan's ideals that transcend national borders, Gulf elites encouraged nationalism through public displays of power.

This novel arrangement, however, is not mere security-based thinking. Rather, it stems from the fundamental need to establish a new social contract between the state and society that is now under the influence of the inception of the Arab Spring.<sup>21</sup> Structural transformation of the economy, such as reducing dependence on oil and the subsequent reduction of unilateral "rentier" payments, accelerated the process. This resulted in strengthening and opening the organizational capacity of the state in favor of society.<sup>22</sup> The bureaucratic organs of the state and the ruling elites rationalized that it was necessary to meet social demands on a wide basis. This runs in stark contrast with an argument favoring more political representation for the sake of preserving the regime. The monarchies of the Gulf see this process in the implementation of technical reform projects that prioritize social reform rather than political representation. Thus, they simultaneously develop a new set of relations with society, and on the other hand, reorganize the state in a post-oil economic order.<sup>23</sup>

The fact that these processes operate the consent mechanism lies in the dissemination of nationalism as a mass emotion. By considering the example of Saudi Arabia, the basic parameters of this general and widespread trend can be ascertained. The promotion of women's employment

in the economy, the increase of socialization opportunities for young people to realize themselves, the diversification of the country's tourism destinations, and the reinterpretation of history are all part and parcel of this process. In this sense, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a political entity that is often considered to bear anachronistic values and systems of governance, emerges as the model for social reform in a post-Arab Spring, post-Brotherhood Middle Eastern geosphere.

The transformation process in Saudi Arabia, which consists of a series of integrated processes in the fields of social, cultural, and foreign policy, is still expanding its roots. Currently, the crown prince seems to have set the first stage of this process as Vision 2030. The question of what kind of effects this Saudi Arabia-based social differentiation and separation have on its relations with Israel, and more precisely, on the Abraham Accords, is significant.<sup>24</sup>

It is unlikely that the Abraham Accords will be made by a ruling elite initiative that is not accelerated or based on a social structure not fostered by nationalism. For this reason, the early effects of the social transformation process, the elimination of traditional classes or forcing them to change direction, opened wide and navigable maneuvering areas for Saudi Arabia and then other countries of the Gulf. The main obstacle here is the insistence on maintaining the delicate balance of the social contract.

The regime's efforts to centralize on the one hand and to modernize traditional affiliations on the other hand revealed obstacles whose borders transcend Saudi Arabia. In a geopolitically intense region like the Middle East, social divisions are seen as areas of vulnerability that could be manipulated by hostile countries in conflicts or competition. In other words, it is quite easy to geopoliticize every social division in the region in general and in Saudi Arabia in particular.<sup>25</sup> For this reason, the Abraham Accords are the result of confining these social divisions to geographical limitations. This process has its inception in restricting Arab nationalists and Ikhwanists inside the country. Preventing the geographical circulation of ideas and being suspicious of them loosens the barriers that prevent countries from taking different, distinctive, and status quo-destructive steps.

The encouragement and support for nationalism by the political elite in Saudi Arabia, one of the central countries of the region, served as a decisive role model for the other countries of the Gulf. In addition, this country provided the necessary financial support for the sustainability of the regimes of the countries that were trying to move away from Brotherhood politics. Therefore, the transforming social structure in Saudi Arabia and the nationalism it supported revealed a different foreign policy understanding. This nationalism, which rose in the Gulf with the emergence and institutionalization of the Abraham Accords, would also reinforce Iranian skepticism.

Saudi Arabian foreign policy feels the threat of Iran intensely and continuously due to the tensions in Yemen. It is of national security-level importance to eliminate this danger for Saudi Arabia, which is struggling with the Houthis, Iran's proxy power in the region.

### ***Seeking Political Stability: The Gulf Security Umbrella against Iran***

Iran is the primary threat to the Gulf monarchies, a premise that continues to shape the basis of any intellectual discussion strategizing the foreign policy of Gulf Arab nations.<sup>26</sup> With the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution and the regime's shift from monarchy to theocracy, a shift also occurred in the value system on which geopolitical orientation was based. Consisting of narrow, close-knit, and opaque cliques, the Iranian regime elites geopoliticized the national identity they had built over Shiism in the post-revolutionary period and made it the founding element of their revisionist foreign policy.<sup>27</sup> By popularizing the belief that they are the natural protectors of the Shiite minority in the Middle East, they succeeded in mobilizing these masses of people, who are often excluded and ostracized by the majority Sunni population.

This practice of Iran's relationship with Sunni countries of the region has turned into a bilateral struggle with Israel, which has a limited social character but whose geopolitical containment policy is intense and streamlined. The main point of conflict between Israel and Iran was Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons

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and their use as a threat to Israel. Israel's perception of this as an existential threat and causing a crisis in bilateral relations with the U.S. reached its peak in 2015 with the JCPOA agreement. The fact that the Gulf could not maintain its long-term strategic cooperation with the U.S. became clear with the pro-democracy stance taken by the general political actors in the U.S. during and after the 2011 Arab Spring.

The regional agreement that Iran's revisionist approach can be balanced by a bloc to be formed in the region is the institutional ethos of the Abraham Accords. The meaning of Israel's peace with Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994 is important in terms of regional legitimacy. However, the expectation of limited security cooperation and some diplomatic initiatives in return, rather than acting jointly with Israel in regional engagements, limited the relations between the two countries and Israel. The main factor that started the relations between these two countries and Israel was territory disputes. The main development that constitutes the Abraham Accords is the political agenda that includes the power imbalance that

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emerged with the withdrawal of the U.S. in the region, opening malleable windows of opportunity in favor of Iran and thus creating a plethora of security challenges. In this respect, the Abraham Accords differ in scope and content from the diplomatic normalization process with two Arab countries (Egypt and Jordan).

The geographical dispersion and spread of the power struggle between Iran and Israel indicate that the parameters determining the bilateral relations are quite diverse. Israel, which is struggling with the Assad regime in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Gaza, must attempt a different approach to each instance. Besides, in addition to the shared geo-local space, the security risks created by the Shiite minority of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia for the Gulf, and the Houthi militias in Yemen are intensifying. Thus, the diplomatic co-

operation of the constituent parties (Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan) revealed that the Abraham Accords will evolve into a security umbrella due to the expansion of the Iranian threat.

## Conclusion

The Gulf's assessment of regional instability created by the politicization of the popular masses, which was accelerated by the Arab Spring that started in 2011, is the groundwork of the Abraham Accords. Gulf countries have focused on social reform projects to prevent the mobilization of the young population created by their changing demographics against political power. The open socialization created by the internet has led young populations to question whether the current political regimes in their countries can meet their demands. When it was understood that the economic order created by the Gulf's oil revenues could not be sustained in the global economic conjuncture, it was seen that the ruling elites produced faster and more effective responses to the demands of the youth. This is the fundamental dynamic behind the recent developments in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The reality created by this situation is that the venue opened to an intense and widespread technocratic transformation. In this process, which is carried out by the ruling elites in a top-down manner, the political space revealed processes that spearhead sustaining middle classes and expanded possibilities of social representation. The

agreement on the division of social and political space established with traditional groups in the immediate post-independence era was thus ruptured by the technocratic transformation of the Gulf.

This commentary set out to provide a lens into how shifting elite behavior in the Gulf has a direct impact on the formulation of foreign policy and thus regional geopolitical transformation. Indeed, there are structural and power dynamics as stipulated by the existing literature on Gulf studies, American foreign policy, and Middle East politics. However, the agencies of the Gulf elite, which are becoming some of the most intriguing subjects of analysis in the Middle East, are a largely novel way of addressing the question of the Abraham Accords. As the Abraham Accords expand –now likely set to include the likes of Saudi Arabia and Qatar– elite preferences will become even more substantial in analyzing the catalyst of a new regional order in the Middle East. ■

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