

The Role of Syria in Israeli-Turkish Relations

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This article argues that, since the end of the Cold War, developments in or associated with Syria have proved instrumental in determining Israeli-Turkish relations, for better and worse.¹

Syria borders both Israel and Turkey. Not surprisingly, its geographic location, regional strategic conduct, relations with Israel's and Turkey's regional rivals, military capabilities and, more recently, the implications of its civil war have affected both Israel and Turkey, and their relationship with each other. While strategic cooperation between Turkey and Israel reached a high point in the 1990s, and then soured and largely dissipated over the last several years, Syria's civil war has posed a new set of challenges and opportunities for renewed Israeli-Turkish ties. Indeed, shared interests on Syria may propel new possibilities for cooperation between Turkey and Israel on security, economic and humanitarian issues.

Through the historical analysis presented in this article, the authors attempt to explain the evolution of Israeli-Turkish relations through the prism of Syria. Understanding the historical background provided herein is relevant for contemporary analyses aimed at finding new ways to

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renew Israeli-Turkish strategic cooperation and assist in securing a stable post-war Syria.

Israel, Turkey, and Syria after the Cold War. Since the end of the Cold War, Syria has played a pivotal role in affecting the nature of Israeli-Turkish relations, for better and worse, due to Syria's location, its regional ambitions and relations with Iran and terrorist organizations, its chemical and conventional weapons arsenal and, more recently, the implications of its civil war.

Syria is situated between Israel and Turkey, and shares borders with both.² Throughout the years, both countries have experienced tensions and border disputes with Syria: Israel fought three wars against Syria in 1948, 1967, and 1973. As Turkish-Syrian tensions heightened during the 1990s, Turkey's security establishment classified Syria, together with Greece, as its primary source of external threat.³

Over the past five decades, Syria has attempted to use its unique strategic location to advance its national interests and geopolitical status, often at the expense of Israel and Turkey. One way of achieving these ends was by sheltering different terror organizations and providing them a base for operations.

In the mid-1960s, Syria provided refuge and logistical support to the Palestinian group, the Palestinian National Liberation Movement (Fatah), then a terrorist outfit. Headed by Yasser Arafat, Fatah's militants often used Syrian soil to raid Israeli villages and to execute terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians and soldiers. These attacks stopped after Israel's victory in the Six

Days War in June 1967 and its occupation of the Golan Heights, which forced Fatah to relocate to Jordan.⁴

After the collapse of its Soviet patron, Syria further tightened its relations with Iran. Since the 1980s, Syria has been an important supporter of Iranian protégé, the Shia-Lebanese terrorist organization Hezbollah ("The Party of God"), supplying it with arms, money and training. In 1993 and 1996, Hezbollah triggered conflicts with Israel that escalated and required American mediation with Syria to restore peace. Syrian president Hafez al-Assad saw Hezbollah's attacks as a point of leverage against Israel, and would only act to curb them when it served Syrian interests to do so. In late 1999, after Jordan expelled the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) from its territory, the movement's political leadership under Khaled Mashal relocated to Damascus, where it remained until 2011.⁵

As for Turkey, water disputes with Syria have almost evolved into a direct conflict. In 1992, after Turkey completed the Atatürk Dam on the Euphrates River, Syria protested that the project disrupted its water supply.⁶ To exert pressure on Turkey, Syria harbored combatants of the separatist Kurdish terror organization, the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK).⁷ The PKK used Syria and the presence of a large Kurdish minority there to train and execute attacks against Turkey.^{8,9} Furthermore, in 1995, reports surfaced regarding a developing military pact between Syria and Greece, which would have forced Turkey to mobilize forces on two fronts simultaneously in the event of conflict.¹⁰

Consequently, deterring Syria became a mutual interest for Israel and Turkey. In 1996 the two countries signed the most comprehensive strategic agreement in the history of the modern Middle East to this day: the Military Cooperation and Training Agreement. Coerced by the politically influential Turkish Armed Forces (TAF), the Islamist Prime Minister, Necmettin Erbakan, signed the agreement against his will.¹¹ Shortly after, Süleyman Demirel became the first Turkish president to visit Israel.¹²

At the core of the agreement were strategic and security cooperation. The 1996 visit by TAF Deputy Chief of Staff General Çevik Bir to Israel concluded with a series of military agreements covering intelligence sharing, electronic surveillance, joint training, naval strategy, weapons sales, and the upgrade of Turkey's Phantom F-4 jets by Israel, totaling \$630 million.¹³ The strategic agreement was later expanded to a Free Trade Pact that included commerce, technology, science, and the lifting of barriers on investment in certain sectors. Between 1987 and 1999, bilateral trade grew from \$54 million to almost \$1 billion.¹⁴

According to General Bir, the Turkish alliance with Israel had "the objective of keeping theocratic extremism and martial despotism at check."¹⁵ The alignment of two regional powerhouses who had both suffered from Syria's strategic conduct was with a clear aim: to restrain the Syrian regime from hostile actions against Israel and Turkey. Syria was deterred by the possibility of the two countries coordinating a "strategic pincer," pressing it when necessary from the southwest and the north.

The military agreements between Israel and Turkey did not include the premise of mutual defense. Nonetheless, these agreements appeared to increase Turkey's assertiveness towards Syria. In March 1996, Turkey's Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz threatened Syria, "Some of our neighbors shelter those who seek to destroy the unity of our land...Either this neighbor puts an end to this situation or it will sooner or later surely be punished for its enmity...when our patience runs out our reaction will be violent."¹⁶

In 1998, as PKK attacks continued, Turkey explicitly threatened Syria with an invasion. Succumbing under Turkish pressure, the countries signed the Adana Agreement whereby Syria agreed to classify the PKK as a terrorist organization and pledged to cease all aid to it. As testimony to Turkey's augmented leverage over Syria, the latter deported the now-jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan even before the agreement was signed.¹⁷

Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations during the mid-1990s helped to promote Israeli-Turkish strategic cooperation. If Israel and Syria were to have finalized a peace agreement, Israel would no longer function as a deterring power, reducing Turkey's deterrence as well. Thus, the prospects for an Israeli-Syrian settlement magnified the urgency for strategic cooperation with Israel for Turkey.¹⁸

For Israel, any peace agreement with Syria would have required withdrawal from the Golan Heights, which would curtail its strategic depth, surveillance capability, and military training zones. Cementing ties with Turkey—negotiated in the early 1990s before and

in parallel to the Syrian track—could compensate for what Israel would cede as a result of an agreement with Syria. Turkey's terrain would allow the Israeli air force (IAF) to diversify its training zones while providing a landscape resembling Syria.¹⁹ Both militaries used Turkey's border with Syria to gather and share intelligence.²⁰

Shifting Perceptions. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations had decelerated. There were also far-reaching political changes taking place in Turkey: the Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, came to power in 2002. Domestically, the AKP's ascendance signaled the transition of power from the urban, elitist and secular Kemalist establishment (supported by the TAF) to the peripheral, conservative lower and middle classes represented by the AKP.

This political shift had direct ramifications on Israeli-Turkish relations as the old guard Kemalists and the TAF, who were the major promoters of the strategic alignment with Israel, gradually lost their political power. As part of its political reform the new leadership removed military men from positions of political power, enabling the government to drastically change its regional threat perception.

Seeking to promote its regional status, stability, and economic opportunities, the AKP government formulated a “zero problems with neighbors” regional policy. According to this policy, suspicious and defensive attitudes towards neighboring states would be assuaged through dynamic diplomacy

and economic engagement.²¹

Consequently, Turkey began to perceive Syria as a business partner. In 2004, Syria's new president and Hafez's son, Bashar al-Assad, visited Ankara on the first presidential trip to Turkey since Syrian independence in 1946. Al-Assad said that Syria and Turkey “have together shifted from an atmosphere of distrust to trust.”²² In 2006, he added that both countries share “common views on regional issues.”²³ In 2009, ten Turkish ministers met with their Syrian counterparts and declared the lifting of visa restrictions on their shared border.^{24,25}

Erdogan began to travel to Syria frequently and the countries inaugurated the Turkey-Syria High Level Strategic Cooperation Council in 2009 to cover issues ranging from trade to security. A year later at the Fifth Turkish-Arab Economic Forum in Istanbul, Turkey and other Arab states, including Syria, signed a free trade agreement.²⁶ Evidently, Turkey and Syria have benefited from their mutual economic opening. Between 2009 and 2010, Turkish exports to Syria increased by nearly 30 percent and imports boomed by 104 percent, totaling almost \$4 billion in bilateral trade.²⁷

The change in Turkey's threat perception and regional priorities—as well as its increasing ties with Syria—began to reduce the Turkish leadership's view of the strategic values of its relationship with Israel.

That did not mean that Erdogan was prepared to undo the strategic ties with Israel. During the early 2000s Erdogan stressed several times that no change would occur in relations with Israel as they served Turkish national inter-

est.²⁸ Further, it was during Erdogan's premiership that most trade deals with Israel were signed.²⁹ In 2004, bilateral trade hit a record at \$2 billion—and in 2012 has grown to over \$4 billion.^{30,31,32} Military cooperation further developed as the Israeli, Turkish, and American navies conducted a joint marine exercise, Reliant Mermaid. Turkey also continued to purchase Israeli arms, implemented a contract with Israel to upgrade its tanks, and in 2005 bought Israeli UAVs worth \$200 million.^{33,34} In December 2005,

es in Syria to reinstate the Israeli-Syrian peace process. According to Turkey, its mediation efforts were on the verge of delivering a peace agreement in the winter of 2008 when the talks were abruptly terminated because Israel had launched Operation Cast Lead against Hamas in Gaza that December.³⁷

Turkey's disappointment and fury at the collapse of the negotiations, at least in part because of Turkish anger over Operation Cast Lead, has been evident in Erdogan and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's intensi-

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Israel's Chief of Staff, Dan Halutz, traveled to Ankara and met with his Turkish counterpart, General Hilmi Özkök. The two officers agreed to continue the joint military exercises and to sell Israeli surveillance equipment to Turkey.³⁵ Moreover, Turkey did not cease to perceive Syria's secret military programs as dangerous for its own security.³⁶

Nevertheless, the deep political, economic, social, and regional policy changes that Israel and, far more significantly, Turkey have undergone in the last decade have adversely affected their relations. Interestingly, the negative watershed moment in Israeli-Turkish relations is directly associated with Syria.

As part of its regional ambitions, Turkey attempted to use its good offic-

fied anti-Israeli statements and policies since then. From the perspective of the Israeli public, Turkey's anti-Israel rhetoric took on an entirely new character at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in January 2009 when Erdogan verbally attacked Israeli President Shimon Peres.³⁸ In Israel, criticism focused on Turkish mediation with Syria: Given the delicacy and importance of its relationship with Turkey for Israel, the latter should never have involved the former in a complex process whose prospects for success were uncertain.³⁹

Israeli-Turkish relations continued to deteriorate. In 2010, Turkey's National Security Council released its annual "Red Book," which lists Turkey's security threats. Turkey had omitted Syria from its list of threaten-

ing states and classified Israel's policies as a threat to regional stability.⁴⁰

Following the flotilla incident of May 2010 in which nine Turkish citizens were killed onboard the *Mavi Marmara* vessel, both countries suspended defense contracts. Turkey recalled its ambassador from Tel Aviv, blocked Israel initiatives in NATO, supported legal procedures against Israeli decision-makers and soldiers who were involved in the incident, and cancelled joint military exercises.⁴¹ Turkey conditioned the renormalization of relations on Israeli apology for the killing of Turkish citizens, monetary compensations to the victims' families and the removal of the blockade off the Gaza Strip.

A Resurgent Alliance? The outbreak of the Arab turmoil—and especially the developments in Syria—has gradually brought the two sides, with American assistance, to reassess their relations. Both Israel and Turkey are deeply concerned about al-Assad's chemical and conventional weapons falling into the hands of Hezbollah or jihadist groups fighting in Syria, not to mention Iran's involvement in Syria and the conflict's spillover to Lebanon and Jordan.

For Israel, the Syrian border that has remained stable since 1974 has turned into a source of major concern. To fight the rebels on other fronts, al-Assad redeployed most of his forces from the Syrian Golan Heights to the vicinities of Damascus and other strategic locations, enabling the rebels—some of whom are Jihadists with links to al-Qaeda—to gain control.⁴²

Security deterioration immediately

followed. Between March and May 2013, more than 20 monitors from the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) were abducted and later released by Jihadist rebels. In response, some of the UNDOF contributing countries decided to withdraw their troops from the mission, widening the security vacuum on the countries' border and the mobilization of Jihadist rebels.⁴³

Probably the most prominent Jihadist group is *Jabhat a-Nusra* ("the Support Front"), recently classified by the United States as a terror organization. Some of its forces are located in southern Syria, near the borders with Israel and Jordan. In April 2013, one of its leaders, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, announced the group's merger with the Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda with the intent to establish an Islamist state in Syria and Iraq under the guidance of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.^{44,45}

As long as the Jihadists remain occupied with securing their strongholds in the Golan Heights, they are likely to refrain from provoking Israel. Nevertheless, since November 2012, the IDF has been involved in several exchanges of fire with Syrian forces shooting and rocket shelling from the Syrian part of the Golan Heights near Israeli villages and IDF patrols. While it remains unclear whether the fire was intentional or inadvertent and the identity of the forces remains unidentified, Israeli concerns about potential spillover of the conflict and terrorists infiltrations led the IDF to replace its reserve forces near the border with more qualified regular forces and construct a new border fence with sophisticated anti-

infiltration devices.^{46,47,48}

Among Israel's critical concerns are Syria's attempts to traffic conventional weapons to Hezbollah, thus jeopardizing Israel's air and sea forces.⁴⁹ Israel considers the trafficking of such weapons a "redline" that necessitates a preemptive response. Between January and May 2013, it was reported that the IAF had destroyed a convoy of trucks on the Syrian-Lebanese border and weapons' warehouses in Syria that carried and stored missiles destined for Hezbollah.⁵⁰

Turkish pressure on al-Assad to stop violence against his countrymen has been futile. The Syrian president rebuffed efforts by Davutoglu and Turkish officials to end the civil war and implement democratic reforms.⁵¹ Syria's interception of a Turkish F-4 jet in the summer of 2012 was followed by intensified condemnations by Erdogan calling for al-Assad to resign, imposing sanctions, and threatening military invasion to create safe zones on Syrian soil; none of which convinced the regime to cease its repression.^{52,53}

The humanitarian and economic tolls of the war in Syria have directly affected Turkey too. Currently, there are approximately 500,000 Syrian refugees in Turkey living in refugee camps and costing the Turkish authorities over \$600 million.⁵⁴ Due to the war, bilateral trade has plummeted by 75 percent to \$568 million in 2012 compared to \$2.3 billion in 2010 and previous forecasts to record \$5 billion in bilateral trade in 2013 are no longer feasible.^{55,56}

Syria's disintegration may also result in a nightmare for Turkey with nascent Syrian Kurdish self-rule adjacent to

the countries' border that is already administrated by the Kurdish Democratic Union party (PYD), the Syrian franchise of the PKK, and guarded by its militia, the Popular Protection Units (YPG).⁵⁷

Both Israel and Turkey share concerns regarding Iran's deepening involvement in Syria. Through its *al-Quds* force and Hezbollah, Iran is offering massive support in arms, training, combat support and money to the Assad regime.⁵⁸

Despite their economic and diplomatic relations, Iran remains Turkey's main geopolitical rival. For its part, Israel sees Iran's support for terror and its pursuit of a nuclear capability as posing an existential threat. An established Iranian presence near Israeli and Turkish borders during and after the war in Syria severely endangers both countries' security.

Where It Stands. The radical changes in the region compelled Turkey and Israel to initiate discreet talks. During Operation Pillar of Cloud against Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in November 2012, reports leaked about a meeting between the director of the Israeli Mossad, Tamir Pardo, and the Undersecretary of Turkey's National Intelligence Organization, Hakan Fidan, in Cairo.⁵⁹ The same month, back-channel talks to break the diplomatic impasse were held in Geneva between Joseph Ciecchanover, former Foreign Ministry director general, and Turkish Foreign Ministry Director Feridun Sinirlioglu.⁶⁰ These discussions continued in February 2013 in Rome between Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's national secu-

rity adviser, Yaakov Amidror, accompanied by Joseph Ciechanover, and Feridun Sinirlioglu.⁶¹

Other developments suggest that relations are taking a more positive turn. In February, Israel completed the delivery of an airborne reconnaissance system to Turkey, a deal previously suspended by both the Turkish authorities and the Israeli Ministry of Defense following the flotilla incident.⁶² In addition, a delegation of Israeli and foreign energy companies and one of Netanyahu's senior aides traveled to Turkey to promote the joint construction of an underwater gas pipe from the Israeli Leviathan reservoir to

Obama, Netanyahu expressed Israel's apology for any operational mistakes that might have led to the loss of life or injury on the *Mavi Marvara*, agreed to compensate the victims' families, and to continue to work on improving the lives of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as long as quiet prevails. Both prime ministers agreed to restore diplomatic relations and re-dispatch their ambassadors. Erdogan, accepting Netanyahu's apology, promised to repeal all current and future legal proceedings against IDF soldiers who were involved in the flotilla raid.⁶⁴

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Turkey and from there to Europe.⁶³

American efforts to end the crisis, facilitated by President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry, were instrumental in the process. Restoring normal relations between its two main allies in the region is a clear American interest, for it helps Washington to approach the diverse challenges in the region and those in Syria in particular. As a probable gesture to the United States and Obama's second administration, both Netanyahu and Erdogan exhibited readiness to restore Israeli-Turkish relations.

Concomitant with Obama's departure from his March visit to Israel, Netanyahu called Erdogan for the first time since 2009. During the conversation, joined at one point by President

prochement between the two states is premature. Referring to the Military Cooperation and Training Agreement as a guide for the countries' relations in other areas would be unrealistic in light of the aforementioned changes in Turkey and Israel, their high mutual suspicion, and Turkey's regional policy. In Turkey, Israel is not merely a regional player and former ally, but also a convenient symbol in domestic politics.

Under the AKP, mention is usually made of Israel to harshly condemn its policies on the Palestinian issue, to silence the Kemalist establishment that advocated strategic cooperation with Israel and—by the same token—to promote the image and credibility of the AKP government, and to advance

Turkey's status in the Muslim world.

Turkey's ambitions for greater influence in the Middle East—often by playing-up its Muslim identity in an effort to have common denominator with the Muslim population in the region and cultivating relations with Israel's foes—not only limits overt cooperation with the Jewish State, but also raises questions about whether Turkey still considers Israel part of its strategic outlook. Conversely, Israel might not trust the new political establishment in Turkey to be a reliable partner. If nothing else, these questions suggest that while normalization is likely, a return to the kind of strategic cooperation that existed previously is less immediately probable.

Turkey's siding with Hamas at the expense of President Mahmoud Abbas' Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in the West Bank furthers Hamas' legitimacy and feeds Israeli suspicions regarding Turkey.⁶⁵ Additionally, the stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process delegitimizes relations with Israel in eyes of consecutive Turkish leaderships and the current one in particular.⁶⁶ Within Turkey, senior generals who served as a powerful lobby for strong relations with Israel are now stripped of authority, imprisoned or otherwise restricted.⁶⁷

As in the past, time and circumstances will be the best judges. Here, again, Syria is a platform for renewed cooperation.

Conclusion. Whatever Syria will become—a unified state, a collection of largely independent entities, or a system of cantons—it will maintain a

pivotal role in affecting Israeli-Turkish relations. While Israel and Turkey are limited in their ability to influence the civil war in Syria, both would prefer to see a unified, stable, moderate, and—optimally—democratic Syria emerge. Given the current status of their relations, the question becomes whether Israel and Turkey can find ways to use these shared interests to restore cooperation between them, and what role can the United States play in facilitating such cooperation.

The United States is uniquely positioned to promote initiatives with Israel and Turkey in a number of areas that reflect shared concerns about trying to end—or at least contain—the conflict in Syria and its possible spillover effects in the region.

In the short and medium terms, security remains Israel, Turkey, and the United States' main preoccupation. The disintegration of Syria's conventional and nonconventional military and the risk that these weapons may fall to radical groups, Iranian protégés, and warlords can drag Syria and its neighbors into long years of low-intensity, yet highly lethal, warfare.⁶⁸

Preventing the trafficking of weapons to radical groups is a mutual interest for both Israel and Turkey. If Israel were to execute preemptive attacks to curtail weapons' trafficking, Turkey should refrain from publically criticizing these operations, as it has done in the past.⁶⁹ Such operations clearly serve Turkish national security interests. Furthermore, continued Turkish anti-Israel rhetoric, especially in light of Israel's apology regarding the flotilla incident, will contribute to prolonging Israeli concerns about whether Tur-

key is genuinely prepared to cooperate with Israel—and also take American concerns and interests into account.

In addition, discreet contingency planning between the security establishments in Israel, Turkey, and the United States—including intelligence sharing and future resumption of joint military exercises specifically related to Syria—will benefit coordination efforts in order to reduce unfavorable threats and outcomes from the war in Syria. Economically, both Israel and Turkey are export-oriented countries and can expand their economic cooperation to enhance broader regional stability by including other regional players in general and to affect Syria's population in particular. At the moment, a unique precedent is being established in the region. Blocked roads in Syria helped to facilitate a historic cooperation between the Israeli, Turkish, Jordanian, and Iraqi, enabling the continuation of trade between the Middle East and Europe. Israel's roads and ports have become alternative trade routes for Syria to freight goods to Turkey and Europe, estimated at tens of millions of USD per month. Israel considers this economic interconnectivity a rare opportunity to demonstrate its good intentions to its Muslim neighbors.⁷⁰

Similarly, even a smaller-scale Israeli-Turkish, and possibly Jordanian and Iraqi, initiative to export goods from Syria to the Western markets can somewhat ease the current economic suffering of the Syrian people and, more importantly, function as a platform for future confidence building measurement between Israel, Turkey, Syria's civil-population, and other

Middle Eastern countries.

Moreover, when the war in Syria ends the country will begin its reconstruction process. Israeli pharmaceutical, agriculture and software companies, and "know-how" may play a vital role in rebuilding post-conflict Syria. Turkey's large construction and civil engineer companies, which already have a strong foothold in other Middle Eastern countries, as well as Turkish consumer goods, will find renewed markets in Syria. Joint economic ventures between the already interconnected Israeli and Turkish private sectors in fields such as telecommunications and infrastructure can benefit all sides.

Lastly, humanitarianism is a value shared by Israel, Turkey, and the U.S. While Israeli and Turkish approaches to the crisis in Syria diverge, both are highly concerned by the human tolls of the war there—and so is the United States. Israel is a leading country in emergency preparedness and medicine. In the past months, the IDF has built field hospitals near the border with Syria to treat injured Syrians, some of whom were also treated in Israeli hospitals, while Turkey has long sheltered Syrian refugees.⁷¹ Working together with the United States and various international organizations to establish services for the welfare of the Syrian people now can serve near-term humanitarian needs, and be a long-term opportunity to initiate better working relations and trust between Israel, Syria, and Turkey.

The political, economic, social, and strategic changes that Israel and, more significantly, Turkey have undergone in the last decade have adversely affect-

ed their relations. Nevertheless, the unfortunate reality in Syria creates a window of opportunity to foster Israeli-Turkish ties. American involvement in promoting its allies' relations is instrumental in serving the strategic interests of all three states and in the region's future prosperity.

NOTES

1 Many thanks to Aurora Nou and Alexandra West for their invaluable contributions to the researching of this article.

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6 The Atatürk Dam is used for energy production and irrigation

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