

# The General's Trap in Libya

By Emily Estelle

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## Key Points

- The Trump administration is considering supporting a would-be strongman Khalifa Haftar to stabilize Libya and fight the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) and al Qaeda as if the Arab Spring never happened. Haftar is a military dictator tied to the old regime of Muammar Qaddafi. This attempt to go back in time will fail.
- Haftar is not strong enough to secure the country and American interests. Outsourcing American interests to Haftar will lead to a new sanctuary from which ISIS, al Qaeda, and other Salafi-jihadi groups can plan and conduct attacks on the U.S. and Europe.
- Prioritizing short-term military gains, through Haftar or any other partner, will not lead to the permanent defeat of Salafi-jihadi groups. The U.S. must abandon the strongman approach and develop a comprehensive strategy that reinforces a UN-led political process and engages Libyan actors at both the national and subnational level.

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The U.S. is falling into a trap in Libya. The Trump administration may yield to the temptation to back a would-be strongman, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, ostentatiously committed to the destruction of political Islamism.<sup>1</sup> Haftar's superficial attractions conceal flaws that make simply backing him a terrible mistake. Libya is an important theater in the fight against the Salafi-jihadi movement. White House interest in developing a strategy for it is a positive sign. But supporting a would-be military dictator who can neither win the support of nor crush the populations most likely to tolerate al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) is a strategy for failure.

Haftar promises that he will stabilize Libya and defeat Salafi-jihadi groups in the country. His command of the Libyan National Army (LNA) coalition that controls eastern Libya makes him seem an ideal partner, as does his recent pledge to cease all noncounterterrorism hostilities.<sup>2</sup> He has supported U.S. counterterrorism efforts in the past, has shown a sustained commitment to fighting ISIS

and al Qaeda, and is backed by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).<sup>3</sup>

But Haftar's liabilities are greater. He refuses to endorse the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA)—the UN-brokered government the U.S. recognizes—and is building an increasingly autocratic regime in eastern Libya. He makes no distinction between al Qaeda and ISIS on the one hand and nonviolent political Islamists on the other. This attitude drives moderate Islamist groups to tolerate, support, or cooperate with al Qaeda, ISIS, and their ilk to survive.<sup>4</sup> Haftar does not have the forces to impose order on western Libya by violence. His tribal connections stop well short of the most important areas in the west as well, which will prevent him from extending the tribal negotiation strategy he has pursued to gain control without violence in parts of the east. His approach to stabilizing Libya and fighting terrorism may succeed in the short term in some areas but will exacerbate the conditions that allow ISIS and al Qaeda to flourish in the long run.

The debate about Haftar's role reveals a flaw at the heart of U.S. strategy: the prioritization of short-term military gains against ISIS first and al Qaeda secondarily over addressing the root causes that drive tolerance and support for Salafi-jihadi groups.<sup>5</sup> The U.S. wrongly defined the military defeat of ISIS as its objective in Libya and elsewhere, largely ignoring the need to change the conditions that allowed ISIS to establish itself in the first place. It pursued this objective by partnering with a Libyan force that in turn used U.S. support to pursue its own political objectives.<sup>6</sup> The counter-ISIS fight weakened ISIS, but it also worsened Libya's overall political crisis. American partners drove ISIS from the central-Libyan city of Sirte, but their gains only exacerbated the underlying grievances that sparked the war and mobilized the population to begin with. ISIS is reconstituting, and al Qaeda has an active network of militants and supporters in Libya primed to exploit these grievances.<sup>7</sup> Governance, not just military operations, is required to remove the conditions in which these groups thrive.

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A strategy that backs Haftar will not lead to good governance. It is a tempting shortcut that will ultimately harm American interests. The U.S. must recalibrate its Libya strategy to seek a resolution to the conflict that will weaken Salafi-jihadi groups and advance regional stability in the long term. The Critical Threats Project will publish a proposed strategy in the coming months.

## Background: The Libya Conflict

The 2011 revolution that overthrew Muammar Qaddafi shattered the Libyan state, destabilized neighboring states, exacerbated the European migrant crisis, and created an opening for ISIS and al Qaeda.<sup>8</sup> Political divisions and the proliferation

of militias aborted the postrevolutionary transition, and a political crisis between rival parliaments tipped the country into civil war in 2014.<sup>9</sup>

The warring sides fall generally into two major camps, although the hyperlocalization of Libya generates fractious coalitions and shifting allegiances that dichotomies cannot capture. Power in the west coalesced largely around Libya Dawn, a coalition of mostly Islamist militias aligned with the General National Congress (GNC) government and backed by Turkey, Qatar, and Sudan.<sup>10</sup> Haftar's LNA, a coalition of military units, tribal forces, and eastern federalists aligned with Libya's House of Representatives body and primarily backed by Egypt and the UAE, rose to predominance in the east.<sup>11</sup>

Salafi-jihadi groups seized the opportunity of the Libyan revolution and subsequent civil war to expand their operations in the country dramatically. Al Qaeda reconstituted in Libya during the revolution and facilitated the formation of Ansar al Sharia, which built a human network in Libya's armed Islamist movement that will outlast its formal dissolution in May 2017.<sup>12</sup> Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb participates in the Libyan conflict and uses safe havens there to support al Qaeda operations in Syria and insurgents in Mali.<sup>13</sup>

ISIS dedicated leadership and resources to establishing three *wilayat* (provinces) in Libya in 2014, aided by deep divisions in the Libyan population and preexisting Salafi-jihadi networks.<sup>14</sup> ISIS established the first external branch of its caliphate in Sirte in 2015.<sup>15</sup> It has since lost Sirte and its areas of control in Derna and Benghazi, but it remains active in Libya as a network of cells and cadres capable of waging ground operations in Libya and supporting external attacks in Europe.<sup>16</sup>

Western initiatives intended to combat terrorist groups and slow migration to Europe have shaped the past two years of the Libya conflict. A UN-brokered agreement among elite Libyan factions established the internationally recognized GNA in December 2015.<sup>17</sup> The GNA did not unify Libya's political landscape but rather reinforced existing divisions and thrust another competing government onto the Libyan political scene.<sup>18</sup> The U.S. implemented a counterterrorism partnership with the GNA in 2016 to help the al Bunyan al Marsous coalition, comprised of forces mainly from the western Libyan city of Misrata, oust ISIS from its stronghold

in Sirte.<sup>19</sup> This campaign did not solidify the GNA's position, however, and it remains weak due to its reliance on allied militias.<sup>20</sup> The balance of power has shifted in favor of Haftar, who controls key oil infrastructure, military sites, and population centers.<sup>21</sup>

## The Wrong Strategy in Libya

U.S. policy has mischaracterized the Salafi-jihadi threat, producing a single-minded focus on the military defeat of ISIS in Libya and elsewhere. The U.S. has also pursued partner-driven military strategies that have ignored, and sometimes worsened, the conditions that allow Salafi-jihadi groups to continually resurge.

U.S. air strikes in support of Libyan partners weakened ISIS in Libya in 2016 and 2017 but did not defeat it. U.S. air support helped the GNA-allied al Bunyan al Marsous forces oust ISIS from Sirte in late 2016, handing ISIS a major military loss.<sup>22</sup> Subsequent U.S. air strikes further degraded ISIS's fighting force.<sup>23</sup> But ISIS anticipated the Sirte campaign and is now reconstituting in remote areas from which it can disrupt crucial flows of oil and water.<sup>24</sup> Seasoned ISIS units operating in Libya can also direct attacks in Europe. The relationship between Libyan ISIS unit Katibat al Battar and Salman al Abedi, who conducted the May 2017 Manchester Arena attack, demonstrates the threat that ISIS generates from within the Libyan security vacuum, even if it does not control urban terrain.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, the myopic focus on ISIS has distracted from the full scope of the Salafi-jihadi threat in Libya. Al Qaeda is pursuing a deliberate policy of localization to build popular support throughout the Muslim world.<sup>26</sup> The group has actively obscured its presence in Libya while using the country as a front for jihad, a training ground for militants bound for Syria, and a safe haven to support regional operations.<sup>27</sup> The threat goes beyond ISIS, al Qaeda, and their successors. The Salafi-jihadi movement, not just particular groups and individuals, is the real threat to the U.S., as Katherine Zimmerman argues.<sup>28</sup> This movement draws strength from its relationship with Sunni Muslim communities, especially mobilized populations that face unresolved grievances, inadequate governance, and existential threats. Securing Americans against this threat requires not just defeating militant groups but also fostering governance that is both responsive

and legitimate to its people to strip support from the Salafi-jihadi movement as a whole.<sup>29</sup>

U.S. strategy in Libya has also suffered from relying on local partners that inherently prioritize their interests over those of the U.S. The al Bunyan al Marsous forces that fought ISIS in Sirte did so at great cost to protect their communities.<sup>30</sup> However, these forces—decimated by a bruising multimonth fight—lacked the capability and will to chase the remnants of ISIS's Sirte cadre into the desert.<sup>31</sup> Instead, they seized the opportunity to secure their advantage in Sirte, setting off a competition for control of the city that has bred additional conflict.<sup>32</sup>

A fixation on counterterrorism objectives has diverted attention away from other critical interests that must factor into the American calculus in Libya. The same instability that benefits ISIS and al Qaeda also exacerbates the migrant crisis, which destabilizes Europe and bolsters criminal networks to the benefit of transnational Salafi-jihadi groups.<sup>33</sup> The Libyan crisis also worsens security and economic woes for neighboring states, including U.S. major non-NATO allies Egypt and Tunisia.<sup>34</sup> Russia, seeing an opportunity in U.S. disengagement, seeks to broker a Libyan peace deal to reap economic benefits and possibly establish a military presence to challenge the U.S. and NATO in the southern Mediterranean.<sup>35</sup>

## The Rise of Haftar

The proposed U.S. strategy, which rests on the same assumptions about Salafi-jihadi groups as the prior approach, includes a counterterrorism partnership with LNA commander Khalifa Haftar. Haftar is a former Qaddafi regime officer who defected after the dictator abandoned him as a prisoner of war during a disastrous campaign in Chad in the 1980s.<sup>36</sup> Haftar joined the CIA-trained anti-Qaddafi resistance and operated from African states for several years before moving to the U.S., where he spent two decades.<sup>37</sup> He returned to Libya in 2011 to vie for the leadership of the anti-Qaddafi revolutionaries, finding little initial success.<sup>38</sup> He spent 2012 and 2013 building his personal support network and lobbying for military and political reforms.<sup>39</sup> Haftar attempted to launch himself to national leadership in February 2014, when he announced a coup against the GNC that failed to materialize.<sup>40</sup>

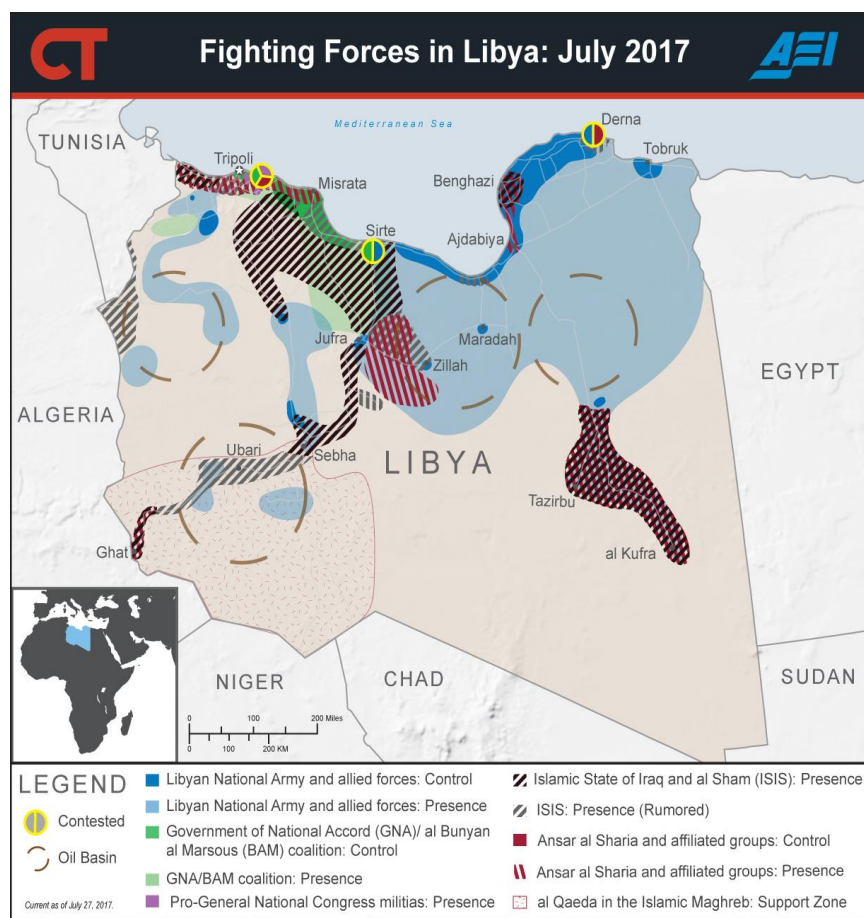
Haftar returned with greater impact in May 2014 when he began Operation Dignity, a military campaign intended to capture Benghazi from Islamist militant groups.<sup>41</sup> Haftar dubbed his force the LNA. It is comprised of a loose coalition of military officers and units, tribal militias, and eastern Libyan federalists.<sup>42</sup> Haftar draws political support from the leaders of the Libyan House of Representatives, the governing body ousted from Tripoli by the Libya Dawn coalition in 2014.<sup>43</sup> He also has increasingly visible ties to the Qaddafi regime old guard, which retains influence.<sup>44</sup> Haftar's main international backers are Egypt and the UAE.<sup>45</sup> He enjoys support from Russia, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, France, and others.<sup>46</sup> Haftar's primary objectives are to eradicate political Islam in Libya while securing his power at the national level.<sup>47</sup>

Haftar has the momentum in the Libyan civil war. The LNA, currently the country's most powerful fighting force, declared victory in Benghazi on July 5, culminating a three-year campaign.<sup>48</sup> Haftar's forces and their allies are dominant in the oil crescent region, home to the bulk of Libya's oil resources, and recently seized other strategically valuable areas of central and southwestern Libya.<sup>49</sup> The LNA is now intensifying its campaign to seize Derna and complete its takeover of eastern Libya.<sup>50</sup> However, the LNA's rapid territorial advance does not signal overwhelming military capability. Egyptian and Emirati air power and external support for the LNA's rudimentary air force provide a necessary edge.<sup>51</sup> Haftar relies on skillful manipulation of tribal politics, far more than military acumen, to win over and retain new partners.<sup>52</sup> Haftar may soon turn these skills toward Tripoli, where his recent

statements indicate an effort to make common cause with the nominally GNA-allied militias that control the capital.<sup>53</sup>

The pieces of Libya's political puzzle are falling into place to Haftar's benefit. Haftar and GNA Prime Minister-designate Fayez al Serraj committed to a French-brokered conditional ceasefire and plan for elections, legitimizing Haftar's position on the international stage.<sup>54</sup> Egypt, the UAE, and Algeria are also spearheading a regional process that has overtaken UN-led negotiations and now includes some of Haftar's longtime rivals, including Misratan power brokers.<sup>55</sup> Russia and the Netherlands have also entered the ring as potential brokers.<sup>56</sup> Serraj's efforts to make a deal with Haftar have increased Haftar's clout while sowing discord in the GNA camp.<sup>57</sup> Misratan leaders, their forces weakened by the grueling campaign to recapture Sirte from ISIS, have seen the writing on the wall and cut ties with hard-line anti-Haftar militias, which are now

**Figure 1. Fighting Forces in Libya: July 2017**



Source: AEI's Critical Threats Project.



rebranding to survive a new Haftar-led political order.<sup>58</sup> Haftar's promise to deliver law and order resonates with many Libyans, who are tolerating the return of Qaddafi regime officials in Haftar's camp.<sup>59</sup> The Qatar diplomatic crisis, which harms many of Haftar's opponents, as well as anticipated American and French foreign policy shifts, strengthen Haftar's hand in negotiations.<sup>60</sup>

## **Haftar's Victory Is a Loss for Libya and the U.S.**

Khalifa Haftar's ascension appears on the surface like a win for the U.S. Haftar is a secularist-leaning military commander who has sought U.S. support, has the endorsement of regional allies, and fights ISIS and al Qaeda.<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately, a counterterrorism partnership with Haftar is insufficient to secure U.S. interests. The current trajectory leads to several possible outcomes, none of which meet the needs of the United States.

The first likely outcome is that Haftar will struggle to achieve and maintain national power, despite the absence of a viable challenger. Elements of his fractious coalition may turn on each other when the time comes to secure their roles in a new Libyan state.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Haftar's overtures to Tripoli militias will count for little if these forces oust their shared enemies only to grapple with each other for control of the city. Haftar's heretofore successful tribal negotiations will reach a limit in the west, where tribal dynamics differ significantly from the east.<sup>63</sup> While some of Haftar's longtime opponents have signaled willingness to reconcile, others have doubled down in opposition.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Haftar's takeover of Benghazi does not signal reconciliation but rather another phase in a multilayered conflict that has torn the city's social fabric.<sup>65</sup> Tensions are already rising in the city as Haftar and his political allies fail to deliver adequate postconflict services.<sup>66</sup> Continued fragmentation will produce either more war or continue the cycle of weak transitional governance, neither of which will improve regional stability nor excise Salafi-jihadi safe havens from Libya.

Another possible outcome is the expansion of the autocratic state that Haftar is building in Libya's east, resulting in a Libya characterized by book burning, military control over civilian institutions,

and the sidelining of democratically elected officials.<sup>67</sup> Haftar opposes civilian control over Libya's military while actively pursuing his own political ambitions.<sup>68</sup> Elections, if held in early 2018 as discussed, could even secure Haftar's power through an ostensibly democratic process—but one that would lack popular legitimacy in an environment still controlled by armed actors.<sup>69</sup> Haftar's reliance on Salafi militias and religious leadership also threatens civil freedoms and introduces a dangerous current likely to incite conflict with factions both inside and outside Haftar's bloc.<sup>70</sup>

A Haftar-led government would preserve and possibly worsen the conditions of unresponsive governance that empower the Salafi-jihadi movement. Haftar classifies all political Islamists as terrorists.<sup>71</sup> The French-brokered ceasefire allows continued counterterrorism operations and will not force Haftar to stop his quest to eradicate political Islam, which polarizes the Libyan political environment and drives moderate Islamist militias to fight for their survival by cooperating with hard-line and extremist groups.<sup>72</sup> Locally legitimate groups in the al Qaeda network are particularly well-positioned to capture support from Islamist groups and vulnerable populations that view Haftar as an existential threat.<sup>73</sup> Documented abuses by LNA forces, while not unique among Libyan militias, further exacerbate grievances.<sup>74</sup>

Any sustainable solution to deny Salafi-jihadi groups safe haven in Libya will require communities to buy in to a political solution—not gird themselves against what they see as the rise or return of a hostile regime. Haftar's forces' increasing association with senior Qaddafi regime officers and officials only heightens the perception that the old guard is rising in Haftar's wake, a narrative that is prewritten for Salafi-jihadi recruitment and further bolstered by Haftar's efforts to consolidate his personal power.<sup>75</sup>

Haftar would also make a bad partner on a practical level. He has resisted the will of Egypt, his main backer, and has attempted to play his supporters in Moscow and Cairo against each other.<sup>76</sup> His skills as a military commander are limited, as is his command and control over the LNA's decentralized conglomerate of members and allies.

Even if Haftar were more pliable and competent, it is unreasonable to expect that he would subordinate

his political interests to U.S. objectives. Haftar and Libya's other main players seek to exert control over population centers and oil infrastructure—the components necessary to control a Libyan state. U.S. interests in Libya go beyond this terrain, however. The country's vast ungoverned spaces are crucial to both regional and transnational militant and criminal organizations. Haftar's forces have neither the capability nor the will to secure Libya's terrain, including its southern border, in a way that will be sufficient to secure the interests of the U.S. and its European allies.

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## A narrow military victory over a Salafi-jihadi group is not enough to change the conditions that foster Salafi-jihadism in Libya.

U.S. support for Haftar also has potentially damaging regional implications. Egypt's desire to exert influence over eastern Libya rings alarm bells for many Libyans and regional states, who fear an expansion of President Abdel Fattah al Sisi's war on political Islam or oppose the growth of Cairo's sphere of influence.<sup>77</sup> The ascension of an Egyptian- and Emirati-backed figure to lead Libya would also heighten regional tensions with Qatar, Turkey, and Sudan, which have also backed Libyan proxies, as well as Algeria, which seeks to challenge Egypt as a regional power broker.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, Haftar's cozy relationship with Moscow provides an opening for Russia, whose expansion into the southern Mediterranean would threaten American and European freedom of movement in previously uncontested waters.

### Recommendations: Redefining Success in Libya

There is an alternative to Haftar, but the U.S. must change its definition of success in Libya before embarking on a new strategy. The goal must be establishing governance that is legitimate and responsive to the Libyan people—not merely the military defeat of ISIS and al Qaeda. A narrow military victory over a Salafi-jihadi group is not

enough to change the conditions that foster Salafi-jihadism in Libya. Neither is a fragile stability at the hands of a strongman. Haftar will be an important component of a political resolution in Libya, but he cannot be the answer.

The policy apparently under consideration by the White House addresses some key failings of the past strategy but risks encountering both preexisting and new pitfalls. Renewed diplomatic engagement, as proposed in the new plan, is necessary should the U.S. seek to help broker a sustainable solution to the Libya conflict, a requirement for changing conditions that currently favor ISIS and al Qaeda.<sup>79</sup> Attention paid to ameliorating the migrant crisis is also valuable.

The proposed strategy also carries major risks, however. It reportedly seeks to replicate the Somalia counterterrorism model, a plan that is worrisome both because U.S. policy in Somalia has not been successful and because Libya is not Somalia.<sup>80</sup> The most concerning aspect of the proposed policy is a move to initiate a counterterrorism partnership with Haftar, a short-term decision that would cause long-term damage to Libya and U.S. interests there.

The U.S. has an opportunity to set Libya on a new course before Haftar and his external backers solidify their partial hold on the country. A new U.S. strategy must prioritize supporting the establishment of governance that is responsive and legitimate to the Libyan people.

- **Support the UN Process.** The U.S. should reaffirm its support for the UN process and act in concert with the new head of the UN Support Mission in Libya, as well as European partners, to foster inclusive negotiations under the UN's auspices. This will require pressure on Egypt and the UAE to end their military support for Haftar and commit to the UN process.
- **Engage Haftar, with Conditions.** The U.S. should engage Haftar with the dual goal of encouraging his participation in the UN framework and securing his adherence to key conditions, including civilian control over governing bodies and the military. Haftar must be a part of a solution to the Libyan crisis—but not as an autocrat, even if he secures

power through a nominally democratic process.

- **Train Security Forces.** The U.S. and European allies should support the formation and training of professional security forces. The LNA cannot be the only starting point. The GNA's nascent Presidential Guard and elements of the al Bunyan al Marsous coalition are also good candidates. Security forces must be vetted for past abuses and any connections to Salafi-jihadi groups. Training should focus on capacity building to fight militant groups and professionalization to prevent security forces from causing or exacerbating communal grievances.
- **Work with Subnational Actors.** Increased diplomatic engagement must address not only the national level but also municipal

and regional structures that are best positioned to deliver the governance that will weaken Salafi-jihadi groups. Possible types of engagement include capacity building and aid to support Libya's failing health care system, capacity building in the financial and banking sector, and training for local officials to support service delivery and communication with the public. This engagement will also give the U.S. visibility on the local dynamics that drive the Libyan conflict, including the smuggling and trafficking networks that enliven militias and terrorist groups.

The administration's interest in Libya is well-placed. The U.S. must look beyond Haftar to develop a comprehensive strategy that will bring the greatest return on investment—a stable Libya that breaks the cycle of continuous intervention.

## About the Author

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## Notes

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