

US-Israeli policy: What can we expect in a new White House

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Whoever becomes the next US president, Illinois Senator Barack Obama or Arizona Senator John McCain, will inherit the burden of dealing with the world's oldest and most dangerous conflict—that between Israel and Palestine - and one for which a solution seems as far off as ever. There is a smouldering humanitarian crisis in Gaza and an ongoing deterioration of living conditions among the Palestinians in the West Bank. While the issues are complex, at the centre is the demand by the Israelis for an end to Palestinian violence and the Palestinian demand for a return of their lands—to the pre-1967 borders. But the Israeli national security establishment has been consistently averse to negotiating any territorial status changes and in general favours a military solution to Palestinian resistance to this state of affairs. Arguably, at this juncture, any Israeli commitment to Palestinian talks appears to be window dressing to freeze the status quo and legitimise Israeli intransigence. Positions have hardened on both sides, while among some Palestinian factions there is a palpable sentiment that the only solution must be through violence.

While it is always possible that Israel will soon see it in its interest to seek a long-term solution which trades land for peace, the greater likelihood is that any movement in this direction in the short term will come about only through outside pressure on all sides to engage with the serious issues blocking such a solution. Of all the external actors in the conflict, including regional players such as Egypt and Syria and "Quartet" representatives like the European Union and Russia, the key role is still in the hands of the US - if it is willing to fill it. While Europe has some economic leverage - which it could put to better use than it has in the recent past - Washington has considerably more financial, economic and political clout with Israel and can therefore wield potentially decisive influence with Tel Aviv. The US is the only country that has the possibility of holding Israel's feet to the fire regarding the settlements, for example, or of demanding a serious refocusing on the peace process with the Palestinians.

Yet, for most of the past eight years, the administration of George W. Bush has fundamentally ignored the issue, leaving Israelis to take a hardline, confident that the US would not object. For the present, the US has lost whatever credibility it may have had as an intermediary or "honest broker" in the dispute. The overriding question now is whether a new government in Washington after 20 January will be able to alter the dynamics of the conflict and end the bloody stalemate.

A homogenisation of attitudes?

John McCain, although promising to engage more directly with Middle East dynamics than the Bush administration, has given no indication that he would change the assumptions of US policy toward Israel. A rock-ribbed US western conservative, he still infuses his speeches with patriotic references, praise for the military and Bush-era phrases such as: "Our purpose is to keep this blessed country free, safe, prosperous and proud ... liberty is a right conferred by our Creator, not by governments ... [and] the state's function is to minimise its sway over the

society while pursuing its first obligation: protecting the liberty and property of its citizens.” He has frequently alluded to radical Islamic extremism as the chief international threat the US faces and places national security and the war against terrorism and national security, almost to the extent that Bush has, at the centre of his foreign policy. He is an unambiguous defender of Israel’s security and his generally hardline military views resonate well in Israel despite Israeli reservations about the possibility of greater US involvement in its Palestinian conflict.

However, even with an Obama presidency, there is little expectation for a change in the basic direction of US policy on Israel—at least in the immediate future. Obama is well within the “pro-Israel” mainstream of today’s Democratic Party. Lines between Republicans and Democrats are also blurred. Political shifts of the past two decades have resulted in a homogenisation of attitudes on Israel, making it virtually impossible to distinguish among the uniformly supportive policy positions of political candidates and members of Congress.

The new administration will have to grapple with the conflict in a much more vigorous and focused way than has been the case in the previous eight years. Clearly, the Middle East, together with Afghanistan, will represent the biggest immediate foreign policy headaches for Washington in 2009. But one thing is certain: whether a Republican or a Democrat sits in the White House, Israel will not see intensified US engagement in their neighbourhood as an unalloyed good, having grown accustomed to being left alone to manage the Palestinian conflict according to its own lights.

Not since the early 1990s has there been a US administration willing to stand up to Israel and pressure it to change policies in line with US concerns—especially with regard to West Bank settlements. Neither Clinton nor Bush exhibited any serious disagreements with Israeli policy or the intention to use US aid as leverage, as did Dwight D. Eisenhower in the 1950s, Jimmy Carter in the late 1970s and George H.W. Bush in the early 1990s. During the last fifteen years Washington has become increasingly unreserved in its backing of Tel Aviv’s security policies; these attitudes have now crystallised into a rough political consensus. Today, even moderate Jewish politicians, like New York Congressional Representative Jerry Nadler, oppose any exertion of direct US pressure upon Israel.

Given the contemporary political environment in the US, it is not surprising that Obama and McCain have taken nearly identical positions on Israel, offering enthusiastic support for Israeli security and Israel’s right to defend itself against all threats—big and small—while articulating a reluctance to “second guess” Israeli political leaders. Both candidates, for example, have approved the construction of the barrier wall along Israel’s borders, justifying it as legitimate self-defence. Their positions on the conflict flow rather seamlessly from the George W. Bush years, with little variation. So far, neither candidate appears willing to cancel the “blank checks” issued to Israel by the current administration, including the acceptance of Israel’s promotion of or acquiescence in the establishment of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. While campaign rhetoric is never written in stone, positions taken prior to the election offer insight into policy directions and impose some accountability once in office.

The subtle differences

This does not mean that there are no subtle, underlying differences between Obama and McCain, or even between them and the performance of the Bush administration. For example, McCain, although heavily favoured by the Israelis, is not fully trusted in Israel because he is perceived as more apt to involve himself in the details of Israeli policy than the Bush administration has; McCain admitted to an Israeli newspaper in 2006 that as president he would try to “micromanage the Middle East peace process,” unlike the hands-off approach of the current administration.

While the Arizona senator is a staunch conservative and has generally supported Bush's foreign policy, Obama was ranked the most liberal lawmaker in the US Senate in 2007 by the National Journal. Nearly all McCain's foreign policy advisers come from the neoconservative war establishment. Those foreign policy experts who signed on with Obama, rather than Hillary Clinton, found him - in the words of the New Yorker magazine's Nicolas Lehman - "the bolder, more visionary candidate, the one who understood how profoundly the world had changed and how completely American foreign policy has to change, too." His advisers tend to be from the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, although they prefer not to be ideologically labelled. They profess to transcend past assumptions and prejudices in order to deal more effectively with the emerging forces, challenges and threats of the twenty-first century and thus the new coordinates in US international relations.

Among the Republican and Democratic contenders for the White House in 2008, Obama is the only one with even a modest record of displaying a broader understanding of the issues confronting both sides in the conflict. Before he became a presidential candidate, Obama reminded an audience that the right-wing Likud party is not synonymous with the state of Israel. On more than one occasion he commented that the Palestinians are among "the most oppressed people on earth" and that Palestinian concerns need to be addressed with fairness and impartiality.

These comments have aroused suspicions among some pro-Israel constituencies. Moreover, several of his advisers, even if their role has been informal, have worried the Israelis and their hardline supporters in the US. Among the most controversial were Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security adviser under Jimmy Carter, and Robert Malley, former Special Assistant to President Bill Clinton for Arab-Israeli Affairs and conflict resolution expert at the International Crisis Group. Both men question the degree of influence that the American-Israeli Political Action Committee (AIPAC) has on US foreign policy and take a more even-handed approach to the Israeli-Palestinian dilemma than mainstream US policymakers. Their prescriptions for moving forward a peace process include, for example, the idea of direct talks with Hamas. These ideas place them squarely in the realistic European centre, but some Jewish groups, accustomed now to Washington's unconditional support, roundly criticised Obama during the primaries for these contacts and his previous remarks. Obama has thus struggled with the appearance of being less than fully committed to Israeli policies and correspondingly too sympathetic to the Palestinians. Not surprisingly, Democratic rival Hillary Clinton, more hawkish and stridently pro-Israel, generally won the Jewish vote in the spring primaries (US Jews still vote overwhelmingly for Democrats in the general elections).

The test: Hezbollah and Hamas

The perception of Obama as soft on Israel's enemies persisted despite Obama's frequent, pointed and unambiguous declarations in defence of Israel. Like McCain, Obama refuses to condemn the settlements on the West Bank or promise to hold the Israeli government accountable regarding ongoing settlement expansion. During the July-August 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah war in Lebanon, eventually characterised by Israel's disproportionate military response to Hezbollah border attacks which precipitated the conflict, Obama vociferously insisted on Israel's right of self-defence. He then co-sponsored a Senate resolution deploring Iran and Syria's involvement in the war, and opposing any pressure on Israel for a ceasefire that did not deal with the threat of Hezbollah missiles—a position held by the Bush administration which served to prolong the Israeli air and ground campaigns and multiply Lebanese civilian casualties.

While Israel indirectly engages Hamas—mainly through Egyptian mediation—neither candidate feels it has the political luxury of advocating discussions with the radical Palestinian

party. In April, the McCain campaign was quick to blast former US president Jimmy Carter's talks with Hamas leaders and called on Obama to do the same. Obama obliged, disagreeing with Carter's overtures toward Hamas, declaring that the talks "were not helpful," and saying he would not talk to the Islamist group until it recognised Israel and renounced terrorism. On the left, there was some muted grumbling that Obama appeared to contradict his position that talks with foreign adversaries should never be ruled out. In the spring of this year he publicly disassociated himself from Brzezinski and also severed all contact with Malley (who is of Jewish descent) after Malley's admission that he had met with Hamas leaders. Suggestions that Israel should talk to Syria are also avoided despite Israel's announcement, shortly after Carter's trip, that it was in fact engaged in discussions with that country.

AIPAC and political zionism

There are still those in the US Jewish community, particularly among older people, who remain sceptical about Obama's commitment to the Jewish homeland. Hence, since the end of the primaries in June, Obama has worked steadily to allay the misgivings of pro-Israeli elements in US society. Notably, he made his first public appearance after securing the Democratic nomination before AIPAC to deliver a speech that could have been given by anyone in the Bush administration. Of course, speeches of politicians or aspirants for higher office at AIPAC are ritual genuflections before one of the most powerful lobbies in Washington and should not be confused with studied policy positions. But for the time being they are part of the record we must examine.

Obama offered no words of caution as he had in the past regarding Israeli policies or misgivings about its relentless settlement and wall construction and the checkpoints and closures that make life unliveable for millions of Palestinians. In his AIPAC speech he went well beyond US policy—and even exceeded the position most current Israeli leaders would take - by declaring that "Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel and it must remain undivided." Israeli television's Channel 2 editorialised that the statement is something "reminiscent of the days of Menachem Begin's Likud." Palestinians, many of whom have pinned their hopes for a breakthrough on an Obama presidency, were disappointed. But Nimer Hammad, spokesman for Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, noted more realistically that he was not surprised by the AIPAC speech. He reminded everyone that "...anyone participating in Jewish conferences in America tries to be more a Likud member than Likud members themselves." Finally, in August, Obama chose Senator Joseph Biden as his running mate. Biden is a centrist on foreign policy, considered a "friend of Israel" in the Senate and has declared that "Israel is the greatest strength for us in the Middle East." He ended a recent speech affirming "I am a Zionist."

Dialogue or war with Iran

What most distinguishes Obama and McCain with respect to Israel is the difference between the candidates over how to deal with the Shiite Republic of Iran. Israelis place less importance on the candidates' stance on US aid to Israel, the peace process, or settlement expansion than their position on the growing threat of a radical - and at times grotesquely anti-Israel - Islamic republic in the possession of nuclear weapons. Today, the "pro-Israel" credentials of US politicians are suspect if Israelis believe they have not put forward a serious policy for preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear power.

Israelis (and many US politicians in both parties) argue that a nuclear Iran would not just represent a military threat to Israel. In a larger context, such an occurrence would shift the balance of power against other countries in the Middle East like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, increase ethnic tensions between Shia and Sunni populations and boost the prospects of radical anti-western forces and terrorism practitioners like Hamas, Hezbollah, and Al Qaeda.

This, more than any other factor, accounts for the Israeli preference for McCain.

Iran has been served well and grandly empowered by the Bush administration's arrogant, clumsy and short-sighted policies in the Middle East over the past eight years. The US invasions of neighbouring Afghanistan and Iraq effectively removed two of Iran's enemies: the rival Afghan Taliban regime and the Sunni-dominated government of Saddam Hussein, this latter opening the door for Iranian collaboration with the Shiite majority there. At the same time, the wars have tied down the country Iran has referred to as "The Great Satan" and weakened US capacity to respond militarily elsewhere. For its own geopolitical reasons, after the attacks on the US of September 2001, Iran had been willing to cooperate with the US to track down and combat Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and elsewhere. The twin mistakes of invading Iraq (adamantly opposed by Teheran), then gratuitously threatening Iran (the lynchpin of Bush's "axis of evil") assured that the Iranian government became a dedicated enemy. This correlation of military favours, menacing behaviour and ultimate weakness provided the perfect rationale for Iran's nuclear program.

The dilemma for US policy at this juncture is that on the one hand, Washington feels it cannot permit Iran to develop a nuclear weapons capacity. On the other hand, with two wars still in progress—one, Afghanistan, perhaps entering into crisis - the US can ill afford a war with Iran or sanction the Israelis starting one. A direct or covert attack—even if successful - would likely provoke retaliation among Iraq's Shiites. Moreover, Iran's nuclear installations are scattered across the country and not completely known to US intelligence. Teheran's first response would likely be to attack Israel, against which it can retaliate from missiles it has cached in Lebanon. Iran has military leverage with militias in Iraq—a number of whom trained in Iran—and could also count on the militant reaction of Iran's Shiite allies there. Finally, rising Iranian nationalism assures that such an attack would likely rally the populace to the hard-line anti-Israel elements in Iran, including the present government, and solidify its support for acquiring nuclear weapons.

With regard to Iran, McCain has basically pledged to continue Washington's official policy of not negotiating with what is perceived as a "rogue government." He speaks only of organising a concert of nations to apply sanctions and other punishments until Iran disavows its nuclear ambition and changes its rhetoric on Israel. He accuses Obama of not taking seriously the threat to Israel and the entire Middle East posed by Iranian nuclear ambitions. At times McCain has appeared to the right of Bush and Cheney on Iran - more strident, belligerent, and inflexible. Voters may remember his silly insinuation that we should employ an air strike against Iran (punning to the lyrics of the Regents' rock and roll classic Barbara Ann: "Bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb Iran"). Despite the release in November 2007 of the declassified National Intelligence Estimate, reporting its "high confidence" that "in fall 2003, Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program," McCain's position on Iran appears to be fundamentally indistinguishable from the hard-line bellicosity of the Bush-Cheney team.

"Never fear to negotiate"

Obama, like McCain, has often spoken out about the seriousness of the Iranian threat and would not rule out the use of force. He often uses the same rhetoric as the Republicans to describe the threat from Teheran. Obama, for instance, in a speech to AIPAC in 2007, called Iran "one of the greatest threats to the United States, Israel and world peace." He has also declared that no option, including the seriously unthinkable option of war with Iran, should be taken off the table.

The Illinois senator has also co-sponsored a bill to impose further sanctions on Iran and supported the Bush administration's strictures on the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

However, unlike John McCain, he refused to support the Kyl-Lieberman Amendment adopted by the Senate in September 2007. The bill declared that the United States should designate the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps as a foreign terrorist organisation and place the Guards on the list of “Specially Designated Global Terrorists,” with appropriate sanctions. In addition, its most serious provision, and what Obama said had triggered his opposition, was found in the paragraph stating that “it should be the policy of the United States to stop inside Iraq the violent activities and destabilising influence of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, its foreign facilitators such as Lebanese Hezbollah, and its indigenous Iraqi proxies.” Elsewhere it was stated that military instruments may be used to prevent these activities. The language regarding the Iranian and other groups was designed to further the larger goal of amalgamating all terrorist groups in the region into a common enemy and a monolithic threat.

Obama declared that he opposed the amendment because “it tied our presence in Iraq to an effort to counter the Iranian threat.” In the first place, this would give a green light to premature military action against Iran, and in the second place, provide a rationale for keeping US troops in Iraq, thus undermining Obama’s goal to end US military presence there sixteen months after taking office in January 2009. Obama missed the vote but vice-presidential nominee Senator Joseph Biden voted against it along with only twenty-one other senators. Although McCain was not present for the vote, he publicly supported the amendment and his website criticises Obama’s rejection of it.

But Obama’s chief contribution to the debate has been to chart a new course that breaks with the Bush-McCain approach to Iran - based on his fundamentally different vision of international relations. In mid-2007, he proposed that the United States should engage Iran with tough diplomacy, but without any previous requirements, negotiating the nuclear issue directly by offering economic and political incentives in tandem with the threat of stringent sanctions and not “taking the threat of military action off the table.”

Obama has maintained for some time that the US needs to rely on more than the hammer—however formidable—found in the United States’ foreign policy toolbox. In particular, Washington must resuscitate its moribund diplomatic approach and never reflexively foreclose the possibility of talking to even its bitterest enemies. Obama maintains that it is illogical and vitiates US security goals for the Bush administration to demand that the Iranians end their nuclear program before we sit down with them. In effect, it is asking them to capitulate on the central point of the negotiations and then sit down to talk when in fact there is no longer anything left for the Iranians to negotiate. Such a position has the effect of scuttling the talks before they begin and is a clear sign that diplomacy is not being taken seriously.

Both Senator Hillary Clinton, Obama’s Democratic rival for the Democratic nomination, and John McCain repeatedly pounced on Obama, calling him naïve for saying he would talk to leaders without preconditions in such countries as Iran, Syria, Cuba, Venezuela and North Korea. Obama later qualified his remarks by saying that his position did not imply that preparation should not precede discussion and, of course, he would orchestrate such meetings with due diligence. Obama believes that it is precisely with our adversaries in the world that there is an imperative to talk. He is fond of quoting President John F. Kennedy when he said in the context of the cold war: “Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.”

Obama would capitalise on Washington’s “big sticks”—its military force - in order to offer Teheran the prospect of some valuable economic and political carrots, including trade credits and membership in the WTO. Aggressive diplomacy would be designed to delay Iran’s nuclear bomb-making ability, and use the time to try to encourage political change within Iran—which, arguably, may be the most effective and least dangerous way of preventing the use of nuclear weapons. Even the Bush administration recently softened its approach to Iran. In a move

ignored by McCain, the White House appeared to break with their diplomatic moratorium by sending a high-level envoy from the US Department of State to meet with European and Iranian diplomats in Geneva - the most significant US diplomatic contact with Islamic republic since 1979—regarding Iran’s nuclear program.

Obama’s greater willingness to talk to Teheran has not endeared him to much of the Israeli security establishment; the Israeli public favours his rival by a three-to-one margin. It has provided additional fodder for attacks from US hardliners. In the end, despite the rhetorical overlap regarding the danger of a nuclearised Iran for the US and the Middle East, Obama’s stance on negotiations is a significant departure from McCain’s classic neoconservative boilerplate and his inability to devise an Iran strategy that moves beyond the manifest failures of the Bush years. At this point, Obama’s approach has the virtue of being low risk but offering a high potential reward. If after a decent interval, serious negotiations do not produce results, the US can always return to more muscular policies and not lose any more time than is being lost with the current policy. In short, there is little to lose and quite possibly much to gain with Obama’s plan. And bear in mind that this approach is the product of both the judgment of very knowledgeable experts and the lessons learned from the disastrous consequences of Bush’s Middle East policies.

The challenges

Campaign rhetoric and even legislative positions on foreign policy are slender reeds upon which to hang a surmise about whether and how a John McCain or Barack Obama administration might shift US policy in the Middle East. Certainly, campaign promises, geared to the demands of a variety of electoral constituencies, are usually written in soft chalk. Sometimes the clues offered by this time in an election season can lead one wildly astray. Just think back to George W. Bush’s frequent campaign pledge to roll back the Clinton years and pursue a “humble” foreign policy. The grist for speculation will always be imperfect, whether copious or sparse; the exercise of speculation, however well-grounded, is by its nature always a risky one. In the absence of harder data, the intangibles of character and personality may help highlight positions and weigh possibilities. This final speculation is offered in the spirit that despite the pitfalls of an analysis coming this early in an embryonic administration, some tentative observations may be useful.

Despite his recent adoption of Obama’s mantra about change, John McCain has voted with Bush over 90% of the time and only when the economy underwent its worst shock since 1929 did he pointedly separate himself from the Bush administration. With the exception of his misgivings on torture (on which he recently waffled) and his belated criticism of the management of the war (placing him with 85% of his fellow citizens), McCain has fully embraced Bush’s foreign policy. The only change from Bush’s Mid-East policy that McCain offers is a vague promise to mind the store more carefully.

Apart from his call for leaving Iraq and his willingness to negotiate with unsavoury regimes, Barack Obama is often quite mainstream in his foreign policy thinking. Even on Iraq, where he has been most forthright, Obama has now stretched out the timetable for troop withdrawals well beyond his positions of one and two years ago. In Afghanistan, his absence of new strategic thinking and his proposal for US and NATO troop increases conforms closely to the Bush Administration’s position, as well as that of the neoconservative advisers who surround John McCain. Thus, Obama could very well end up adopting a politically safe, Clintonesque/centrist approach to Israel that would look a lot like current policy - differing, like McCain, only in the amount of attention paid to the issue.

Obama’s pronouncements during the past year and a half in support of hard-line Israeli policies

have disappointed progressives hoping for a change in Washington's unqualified backing of Israel in recent years. But these comments may not be totally faithful representations of future policy. During the hard-fought primaries and general election this year, the Obama campaign was surely exerting some damage control. His advisers undoubtedly concluded that with Obama having to surmount racial bias as well as his association with sharp critics of US government policies and American society, the charges of abandoning Washington's staunch Israeli ally and of implicit anti-Semitism, however facile and unfounded, represented an additional complication they could do without.

While Obama has shown himself to be pragmatic and vulnerable to pressure from the right, more so than McCain, he has at times thought through the implications and consequences of international positions and been open to broader, less politically and emotionally charged arguments. The choices of thoughtful, relatively progressive advisers inform and ratify his approach. For example, he is among the minority in the Senate (and again alone among the major candidates for president) sponsoring actions to protect worker and human rights in Latin America. Obama has not been afraid to discuss Mideast politics over dinner with the late Palestinian intellectual Edward Said in Chicago or imply that he would meet with Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. And in the past he has acknowledged the suffering and grievances of Palestinians. His opposition to the Iraq war as early as 2002 set him apart from any other serious presidential candidate.

Thus, there may be something more than Obama's background at work in the fact that three-quarters of the Israelis prefer McCain and three-quarters of the Palestinians support Obama (although public dissemination of this hardly benefits Obama as it does his rival). To the extent that an Obama presidency would modify US-Israel policy, it is not likely to happen quickly. There are other more pressing issues and Obama will need to establish his credibility as a leader before undertaking any bold moves on an issue as sensitive as the US relationship with Israel. Whatever hope for new thinking or at least a modification of US policy for Israel and the region lies in the emergence of two possibilities: first, an Obama victory, preferably a comfortable one combined with strong Democratic majorities in both houses and perhaps a filibuster-proof Senate.

The second possibility is a less quantifiable circumstance. In the context of the political security implicit in the first possibility (and maybe given some time to solidify his presidency), Obama may just override his cautious pragmatic side and summon those qualities of compassion, understanding and inclusiveness which the public has glimpsed in the past. Successfully shifting gears to jump start a serious peace process would also entail establishing the legitimacy and credibility of the US as an "honest broker" in the region. The first step is to refurbish its tarnished international image as a militarily powerful, but insensitive and blundering actor by underlining that it is now one committed to the defence of human rights and social justice. And Obama must demonstrate his toughness and determination to translate such efforts into an effective process for a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

The long term security of Israel (and the US) will never be secured until there is justice for Palestinians; the two goals are inseparable and must be pursued in parallel. Given the right set of circumstances, an Obama presidency may be able to elaborate a new internationalist vision—absent in the past eight years - for jointly achieving these goals. The Illinois senator then needs to muster the will to pursue this vision as fiercely as he has undertaken his quest for the presidency. In contrast to the unilateralist assumptions of the Bush presidency, the thinking behind this vision would converge more or less with the approach Europe has toward the conflict. Should such a scenario come to pass, it will be crucial for Europe to be prepared to collaborate with the new administration to strengthen its hand in advancing a serious vision for peace in this troubled region.

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