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# Uprisings Jolt the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry

FREDERIC WEHREY

Saudi Arabia and Iran, long-standing rivals for influence in the Middle East, confront a strategic landscape under rapid transformation by forces largely beyond their control. The old distinctions of Sunni versus Shiite and Arab versus Persian, always somewhat malleable and fuzzy, have been overshadowed by a long-dormant but suddenly more salient dimension of Middle Eastern politics: the people against their rulers. Thrust into this terra incognita, Riyadh and Tehran are now scrambling to prop up wobbly clients and allies (respectively, Bahrain and Syria), vying for influence over Egypt's relations with Israel and the United States, and stepping up their involvement in long-simmering conflicts in Gaza, Lebanon, and Iraq—all while trying to insulate their own populations from the spillover effects of the revolts.

The Saudi and Iranian approaches to the Arab uprisings cannot broadly be labeled revolutionary or counterrevolutionary; instead, realpolitik considerations carry the day. Thus, both states buttress friendly regimes that face protest movements, but they also find themselves in the uncomfortable position of fanning opposition when it threatens their adversaries. In Bahrain, Iran is on the side of political change as a path to Shiite empowerment and a blow to its Saudi rival, while in Syria, Tehran stands firmly against change. In Riyadh's case, the reverse is true. Saudi Arabia sent troops to Bahrain to quash the revolt there, but in Syria it has called for the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Hypocrisy aside, Saudi and Iranian meddling aggravates a divisive, dangerous form of identity politics in fragile, vulnerable states. Local groups that receive Iranian and Saudi financial support and other forms of aid become more emboldened to press their claims, perhaps through militancy, while the regimes backed by the two powers

grow more unyielding and violent in their crack-downs.

The stakes for each player are enormous. The octogenarian rulers in Riyadh and Tehran, beset by domestic debates and looming succession crises, have hitched their sagging domestic legitimacy to their countries' regional roles as patrons of Arabism, Islam, populism, and “rejectionism.” For leaders in Tehran, the revolts represent an opportunity to escape their strategic loneliness and help shape a new order in their favor.

For the newly awakened masses in Cairo, Tunis, and Tripoli, however, the charade carried out by Iran and Saudi Arabia has been laid bare. Recent polling reveals that Arab popular opinion regarding both countries is at an all-time low. Crowds who cheered in 2006 for Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, or who lauded the economic benevolence in Lebanon of Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, now carry banners praising Facebook, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and, most significantly, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey. Indeed, the most profound and long-term effect of the Arab Spring on the regional balance of power may not relate to Saudi Arabia and Iran at all. Rather, the scales might tip in Turkey's favor, hastening Ankara's entrée onto the Arab stage.

## ROOTS OF RIVALRY

Iran and Saudi Arabia were engaged in competition long before the Arab Spring. They maintain radically different visions of regional order, and they both aspire to leadership of the Islamic world. Tehran regards Riyadh as America's henchman and as an obstacle to Iran's taking its rightful place as the region's preeminent power. Saudi Arabia harbors a deep distrust of Iran, stemming from the 1979 revolution and from Iran's attempts to overturn the Sunni Arab monarchical order. The 2003 collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, which empowered that country's Shiites, only intensified

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Saudi fears about an Iranian bid for region-wide dominance, as did jingoistic posturing in 2005 by Iran's "new conservatives" led by Ahmadinejad. Another concern for the Saudis, though a more distant one, is that any Iranian-US rapprochement could jeopardize the privileged position that Riyadh has long enjoyed vis-à-vis the United States due in part to its role in containing Iran.

The regimes in Riyadh and Tehran are divided not just by their well-known sectarian and ethnic differences, but also by divergent political ideologies. The rule of the al-Saud family rests on a careful symbiosis with the clerical establishment, but accords ultimate primacy to the monarchy. Iran's Khomeinist ideology is vehemently antimonarchical and formalizes clerical authority in politics.

In addition, the two states have differing agendas at the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), stemming from their disparate economic needs and demography. Saudi Arabia has the largest proven oil reserves in the world and is a major supplier to East Asia, the United States, and the rest of the world. Therefore it is willing to take a long-term view of the oil market. Iran, with its lower oil reserves and larger population, shows far less concern about the long-term stability of the oil market, and its immediate requirements are more pressing than Saudi Arabia's.

Despite these fundamental differences, tensions between the two states have ebbed and flowed, often depending on the character of the regimes in Riyadh and Tehran, the price of oil, and—most importantly—conflicts in the region. For both states, 2005 saw the emergence of leaders who adopted more activist, muscular foreign policies, which markedly changed the tone of the bilateral relationship. Added to this, the fall of Hussein's regime in Iraq opened a power vacuum that both states sought to fill—though admittedly, Riyadh came late to the game, falling far short of Tehran in cultivating Iraqi partners or even in developing a coherent strategy. The 2006 Lebanon War and the 2011 Arab revolts marked further turning points in the rivalry, opening up new theaters of contestation in each state's near and far abroad.

The sensational disclosure in October 2011 of an alleged Iranian plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington is only the latest chapter in the unfolding saga of deteriorating relations. Whether valid or not, news of the plot was a boon

for the Saudis—it helps repair the kingdom's previously rocky relationship with the Americans, casts the Saudis as victims, and perhaps most important, refocuses Washington's attention back toward the containment of Iran, rather than encouraging democratic reforms sparked by the Arab Spring. It will also have a galvanizing effect on the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), hardening their already confrontational position toward Iran.

## RED LINES IN THE GULF

Speaking in 2007, a Saudi official described the kingdom's strategy toward Iran as "engage in the Gulf, roll back in the Levant, and contain in Iraq." The broad contours of this approach still hold true, with the stark exception of Bahrain, whose uprising was cast by the Saudis and their Bahraini clients as an unprecedented encroachment by Iran into Gulf affairs. On March 14, 2011, Saudi and Emirati troops, ostensibly operating under the banner of the GCC's "Peninsula Shield," rolled into Bahrain to shore up its security forces.

This intervention met with surprising support from the smaller states of the GCC, which have usually resented Saudi Arabia's overbearing approach to Gulf affairs. For its part, Iran warned that it would not "stand with arms crossed" while Riyadh intervened in Bahraini affairs. And the Saudi foreign minister warned that the Saudis would "cut off the finger" of any state threatening their interests.

Evidence of Iranian involvement in the Bahraini unrest, however, has been slim to nonexistent. Bahrain's Shiite actors, both in the parliamentary bloc of the opposition group Al Wefaq and in the rejectionist Al Haq movement, have from time to time threatened to seek Iranian patronage if their demands for reform are not met. But such warnings are mostly bluster, intended as leverage over the ruling al-Khalifa family.

That said, the bogeyman of Shiite fifth columns operating on behalf of Iran has been frequently trotted out by jittery Gulf regimes and their allies among the Sunni clerical establishment. This was especially evident in early 2008, when Saudi Arabia's restive Shiites clashed with morality police in Medina, and in late 2010, when Kuwait and Bahrain arrested members of an alleged Iranian spy ring and Shiite oppositionists. Fear of Iranian influence had reached a fever pitch by the time the Arab Spring broke—and this proved useful for the

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Saudis in their efforts to discredit as sectarian and Iranian-inspired some scattered protests in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province.

But whether or not Saudi Arabia actually perceived Iran to be pulling strings in the Gulf is beside the point. The Saudi government saw its intervention in Bahrain—a country often described as Saudi Arabia's Cuba or Puerto Rico—as necessary to restore a modicum of prestige in the wake of setbacks it had suffered at Iran's hands in Lebanon and Iraq. The intervention was also calculated as a shot across the bow of the United States after the overthrow of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, Riyadh's ally against Iran, whom King Abdullah had accused America of discarding. A third audience may have been Saudi Arabia's own Shiite population and, more broadly, its domestic opposition.

For its part, Iran has played a clever game by limiting its support to rhetoric. It has carefully avoided falling into Saudi Arabia's trap of "sectarianizing" the revolts. Tehran can claim the moral high ground simply by pointing to Riyadh's military intervention in Bahrain (and also Yemen) as evidence of Saudi (and American) opposition to the Arab masses' aspirations. At the same time, it reaps benefit from having its clout over Bahrain greatly exaggerated by Gulf regimes, without having to expend any real capital. All of this occurs while Iran's real influence is exerted quietly, and much more malignly, in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.

## ROLLBACK IN THE LEVANT

The Levant, though far removed from each state's oil resources and lines of communication, has long existed as a sort of strategic prize for Riyadh and Tehran and an arena of violent proxy conflict. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have deep historical and cultural roots in the region. It is in Lebanon where Iran came closest to exporting its revolution among disenfranchised Shiites, while Saudi Arabia enjoys long-standing links with Lebanon's Sunnis, epitomized by its support for the late prime minister Rafik Hariri. Symbolically, Iran and Saudi Arabia also derive enormous prestige and legitimacy—both domestically and regionally—from being seen as patrons of the Palestinian cause.

Iran has long benefited from upstaging the Saudis through its support for rejectionist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah. The 2006 Lebanon War was a turning point on this front. Hezbollah, a Shi-

ite organization backed by Saudi Arabia's strategic rival, scored a stunning battlefield success against the vaunted Israel Defense Forces—a spectacle that electrified Arab publics while unsettling Sunni Arab regimes that had long opposed Israel but had little to show for it. Inside Saudi Arabia, Hezbollah's audacity stirred significant debate among the Salafist clerics and the royalty about whether to support Hezbollah, exposing deep tensions between the Saudis' rhetorical embrace of pan-Arab causes and the doctrinal rigidity of the country's Salafist establishment.

The war occasioned a new activism in Saudi policy toward Iran; much of this activism also coincided with the formal ascension to the throne of King Abdullah in 2005. A central target of this effort was Syria, Tehran's only state ally in the Arab world and its principal conduit into Levantine affairs. The Saudis have headed the Arab effort to reconcile with the Syrians, to coax them away from Iran and back into the Arab fold. To accomplish this, Saudi Arabia has pursued multiple initiatives—ranging from

soliciting Turkish leverage over President Assad as a form of "circular diplomacy"; to supporting an international tribunal investigating Hariri's assassination; to cautiously engaging Damascus in 2009 and 2010 on the management of

Lebanon in an effort to weaken Iran's control.

The results of these approaches have been mixed, and ultimately unsatisfying. Riyadh saw its Sunni clients humiliated when Hezbollah forces rolled into West Beirut in May 2008, and it suffered a further blow with the ascension of the pro-Syrian Najib Miqati as Lebanon's prime minister in 2011—an event that signaled Hezbollah's effective dominance over the government.

When the Arab Spring finally arrived in Syria, Abdullah was quick to lead a concerted GCC effort to isolate and undermine Assad. Further dissolution in Syria could provoke yet greater Saudi intervention as part of a region-wide proxy war. The kingdom enjoys long-standing links to Sunni tribes in eastern Syria (King Abdullah's own tribe, the Shammar, has branches in Syria) and historically has been a patron to Salafist and Muslim Brotherhood groups in Aleppo and Homs.

The protests in Syria and the subsequent crack-down there have stirred significant debate inside Iran about whether Assad is a strategic asset worth rescuing or a liability to be jettisoned. Meanwhile,

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Iran's standing in the Levant has taken a battering. As the violence in Syria escalated, reports and rumors circulated that Iranian and Hezbollah advisers were involved in the crackdown, and the protesters increasingly associated Tehran with the despised Assad regime.

In an apparent *volte-face*, Iran's foreign minister began calling for dialogue within Syria, but Tehran has continued abetting the crackdown through Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah advisers—acting, in effect, as both arsonist and fireman. This is a timeworn Iranian tactic and one that Tehran has played to great effect elsewhere in the region, particularly in Iraq.

## UNEASE OVER IRAQ

Saudi Arabia views Iraq as a contested arena in its larger geostrategic rivalry with Iran—that is, political gains by Iraqi Shiite groups are viewed as wins for Tehran and losses for Riyadh. Saudi officials have long accused the United States of handing Iraq to Iran, but the Saudis themselves have been surprisingly passive in countering Iranian influence. Privately, Saudi interlocutors bemoan the kingdom's lack of a strategy for post-Hussein Iraq; one former official conceded that “Iran had a plan and got the influence it deserves.” Others speak of having written Iraq off as a sphere of Iranian control since at least 2006, and of having pursued containment and damage control since then.

Even so, in late 2008 through 2009, a debate appeared to emerge within Saudi policy circles about the need for a more muscular Saudi approach in Iraq—a response both to the impending US military drawdown and to growing signals that Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki's government was less an Iranian proxy than previously assumed.

These signals included Maliki's resolve in quashing Iranian-backed militant groups starting in mid-2008; parliamentary ratification of the US-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement, despite extensive Iranian lobbying against it; and the decline in power within the government of the pro-Iran Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, after a poor showing in January 2009 provincial elections and March 2010 national elections. Riyadh appears to have realized that its policy of undermining Maliki was actually pushing him further into Iran's orbit and that the time was opportune to woo him back into the Arab fold.

In late 2010, King Abdullah extended an invitation to Maliki and his entire parliamentary coalition to meet in Riyadh to discuss the formation of the Iraqi government. Nevertheless, Riyadh

is hedging its bets by backing an array of Sunni groups; it has long-standing links to the Iraqi Islamic Party, the former officer corps of Iraq's army, and Salafist groups. Regarding Shiite parties, Riyadh has seen the utility of backing nationalist actors in the south, such as Fadhila, as a counterweight to Iran, and of using tribal intermediaries who have both Shiite and Sunni branches, such as the Shammar.

From Iran's perspective, Iraq is a means to offset its reliance on an increasingly unstable Syria and, for many in the Iranian leadership, a natural, non-negotiable sphere of influence. Given Tehran's extensive and robust influence over the country, Iran does not worry about Saudi involvement there to the extent that Riyadh worries about Iran's. Still, Iranian commentators are quick to denounce Al Qaeda attacks against Iraqi Shiite pilgrims as a consequence of Saudi Arabian involvement and frequently point to anti-Shiite fatwas of Saudi clerics as further evidence of this.

Iranian voices have also worried that the Saudi-Jordanian strategy of backing the Sunni tribes of Anbar province (the so-called “Anbar Awakening”) and Iraqi Sunni militias (the “Sons of Iraq”) against Al Qaeda militants could be replicated in southern and central Iraq, where nationalist Shiite tribes are pitted against pro-Iranian elements of the Sadrists and other Shiite groups.

## WILD CARDS

Among the new variables produced by the Arab revolts, the increasing assertiveness of Turkey and the shifting orientation of Egypt are the most salient to the Saudi-Iranian relationship. Turkey under Ahmet Davutoglu, its visionary foreign minister, has articulated a proposed new order in the Middle East, one in which Ankara's former allies Syria and Israel fall into isolation and the Saudi-Iranian dyad is replaced by a new Turkish-Egyptian axis of influence stretching from the Black Sea to the Nile.

In addition, many observers have hailed Turkey as the Arab Spring's ultimate winner because its ruling Justice and Development Party offers a balance of liberalism and Islam that is attractive to a broad swath of actors across the Arab world, particularly youth. It is too early to tell how much of this praise and admiration will translate into actual changes on the ground. Nevertheless, Turkey is effecting far-reaching changes to the regional landscape, changes that simultaneously weaken Iran and upstage Saudi Arabia.

In Syria, Turkey had previously cultivated ties with Assad, possibly believing that, like the Sau-

dis, it could woo him away from Iran. After Assad's repeated rebukes and his unfulfilled promises to halt his crackdown, Turkey has now begun hosting Syrian opposition groups and defectors from the country's officer corps. Further breakdown and civil war in Syria could spell Turkish intervention intended to safeguard its borders and staunch the flow of refugees.

In part because of Iran's stance toward Syria, Turkish-Iranian relations have deteriorated sharply, compared to a warming trend that began around 2007. Since the onset of the 2011 revolts, Iran's state and conservative media portrayals of Turkey have shifted markedly, with some outlets lambasting Ankara, ironically, as an "executor of Zionist policy." Meanwhile, Erdogan's mounting criticism of Israel and Turkey's suspension of military cooperation with Tel Aviv have earned accolades from Arab publics, in contrast to the apparent paralysis of the Saudis.

The dynamic state of Egypt's domestic and foreign policy is another new variable in the Saudi-Iranian struggle. Riyadh saw Mubarak as a helpful partner against Iran and, starting in 2008, there was growing coordination between the two Arab states on countering Tehran in Iraq and the Levant. Riyadh, now deprived of this ally, is alarmed at the warming of relations between post-Mubarak Egypt and Iran and at Cairo's more favorable disposition toward Iran-backed Hamas in the Palestinian occupied territories.

To counter this drift and to deny Iran any openings to exploit, Saudi Arabia has spent \$4 billion to shore up the provisional military government in Cairo, while at the same time reportedly bolstering the country's Salafists through aid to charitable networks. Signs are emerging that this checkbook diplomacy is paying dividends. Many analysts saw more than a coincidence when Nabil al-Arabi, an Egyptian foreign minister who called for normalizing relations with Iran, was replaced (after the brief tenure of Mohamed el Orabi) with Mohamed Kamel Amr, who was the former Egyptian ambassador to Riyadh and who adheres closely to the Mubarak-era status quo.

In addition to staving off any Egyptian-Iranian rapprochement, a crucial goal for Riyadh is diluting the power of the Muslim Brotherhood. From Riyadh's perspective, an ascendant Brotherhood would empower Hamas: Soon after the Brotherhood broke through in 2005 Egyptian parliamentary elections and won 20 percent of the seats in the lower house, Hamas eclipsed Fatah in the 2006 Palestinian vote. Riyadh is wary of Hamas not only

because it is an Iranian ally but also because it presents an alternative to the kingdom's more dogmatic and anti-electoral version of Salafist Islamism.

A caveat regarding these Saudi concerns is the actual part that Egypt played in the Saudi-Egyptian "bloc" against Iran. Even at the peak of Egypt's tensions with Iran—after the 2008 Gaza-Egypt border opening alerted policy makers in Cairo to the extent of Iran's involvement at their doorstep—Egypt played a limited role in helping Saudi Arabia counter Iran. Moreover, latent and unresolved tensions between the two Arab powers were exposed; these remain from their struggle for pan-Arab leadership in the 1950s and 1960s, and may emerge yet again.

Egyptian analysts privately concede that Mubarak had played up the Iranian threat to maintain Cairo's relevance in Arab affairs and they criticize Saudi Arabia for its heavy-handed approach toward Iran. For their part, Saudi officials in 2010 described Cairo as a junior partner that was too distracted by its internal problems and succession crisis to play an effective regional role. Now, despite likely shifts in Cairo's posture toward both Iran and Israel, domestic issues will probably consume Egypt's new rulers for quite some time.

## THE GEOMETRY OF POWER

In light of the Saudi-Egyptian tensions brought on by the Arab Spring, it is tempting to cast the kingdom as the centerpiece of a US containment strategy against Iran, with Riyadh deploying its vast financial resources and its diplomatic weight to rally local and global actors against Tehran. But such an assumption is problematic for several reasons.

First, it overstates Saudi Arabia's capacity to act as an Arab balancer and it understates the risks associated with such a proxy strategy—namely, increased sectarianism and the possible growth of Sunni extremism throughout the Middle East.

Second, it posits a degree of regional consensus regarding Riyadh's leadership that has never really existed, including within the GCC. Any such consensus that did exist has now been overshadowed by Turkey's new prominence.

Third, it reads Riyadh's current rivalry with Tehran as immutable, and glosses over periods when the two powers have coordinated and collaborated on such issues as Lebanon and the Gulf.

In short, the Saudi approach to Iran is more multidimensional than a Manichean cold war analogy would suggest. This complexity is rooted in Riyadh's perception of Iran as a strategic rival but also a neighbor and a fellow Islamic power.

In light of such nuance, US policy makers would do well to take the long view of the Saudi-Iranian relationship, recalling in particular the pre-1979 era—when Saudi Arabia and Iran were part of a “twin pillars” strategy and shared de facto leadership in the region—and also the mid-1990s, when reformers made inroads in Iranian politics and relations between the two countries warmed. These eras are instructive for what they reveal about the two nations’ capability to minimize ideological and structural tensions so as to reach an accommodation on regional order.

At the same time, they highlight two perennial truths about power relations in the Gulf, which apply regardless of US policy preferences and no matter the character of the regime in Tehran: Saudi Arabia maintains a deeply ingrained preference for some external power to balance Iran, and Iran desires a more indigenous Gulf security system whose acceptance by Saudi Arabia would imply a de facto recognition of Iranian primacy.

Within this geometry of power, another enduring fact is that weak and poorly governed polities in the region—whether Iraq, Gaza or, increasingly, Syria—invariably invite interference from Riyadh and Tehran as the two powers vie for supremacy in a zero-sum game.

## NUKES AND NERVES

Underpinning the rivalry is the looming specter of an Iran with nuclear capability. Saudi Arabia views Iran’s nuclear program in several ways: as a potential existential threat, as an enabler of greater Iranian militancy across the region, as a coercive tool in Gulf diplomacy, and as an affront to Saudi leadership of the Islamic world.

Much has been made of Saudi Arabia’s aspirations to acquire its own nuclear deterrent; it is beyond the scope of this article to address Riyadh’s political calculations or technical capacity regarding this option. What is clear is that such a step would signal a drastic break with Saudi Arabia’s principal security patron, the United States, thus upending 50 years of fruitful cooperation. If the Saudis grow dissatisfied with the assurances they receive from Washington, the nuclear option is a risk they might be willing to take.

For now, Saudi leaders support a variation of the US approach toward proliferation in the region, calling for a nuclear-free zone in the Persian

Gulf—a departure from their previous insistence on a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction, which implicitly included Israel. Still, Washington must account for the possibility that Riyadh could pursue a more unilateral path.

Thus far, the United States has employed diplomacy and security cooperation to assuage the Saudis’ unease about Iranian nuclearization and preempt any push by Riyadh to acquire its own nuclear deterrent. Washington agreed in 2010 to a \$60 billion package that will expand the Saudis’ arsenal of advanced fighter jets, attack helicopters, and missile defenses.

Among the levers that could potentially aid the United States in pressuring or isolating Iran, the so-called “oil weapon” is the most discussed. American officials appear hopeful that Riyadh’s energy resources will be leveraged to solicit China (which counts Saudi Arabia as its biggest supplier of oil) for its support of tougher United Nations sanctions against Tehran. According to this line of thinking, Saudi Arabia could offer China better commercial opportunities in the

petroleum sector than it currently finds in Iran. However, many analysts have downplayed this idea, citing differences between Beijing and Riyadh over joint-venture Saudi refineries in China

and Riyadh’s desire to maintain a monopoly in oil exploration within its territory.

Similarly, it is unlikely that the Saudis would use their excess production capacity (estimated at 4 million barrels a day) to depress oil prices, constrict Iran’s cash flow, and undermine the Iranian regime’s ability to satisfy an already discontented population. This option ignores Riyadh’s historical preference for maintaining solidarity with fellow OPEC members and its desire to avoid overtly provoking Tehran for fear of Iranian retaliation.

Meanwhile, the Saudi regime’s hasty announcement of \$35 billion in subsidies to address domestic dissent in the wake of the Arab revolts has created a budgetary constraint on the regime’s ability to deploy the oil weapon. That said, if it were faced with the imminent prospect of an Iranian nuclear weapon, Riyadh might be willing to withdraw these subsidies and accept the risk of domestic dissent—as long as it believed that the oil weapon stood a chance of halting Iran’s nuclear program or altering Tehran’s behavior. ■

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*The protests in Syria have stirred debate inside Iran about whether Assad is a strategic asset worth rescuing.*

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