

# LIBYA'S FUTURE WITH OR WITHOUT A TURKISH MILITARY PRESENCE?

MURAT ASLAN

SETA | ANALYSIS

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## SUMMARY

This analysis examines the developments in Libya in order to portray why the risks continue to exist, looks at the agendas of the foreign actors and why they are committed to shaping the political and security landscape in Libya, and discusses why the Turkish military presence is an opportunity for both Libya and its allies.

The political landscape in Libya has been heating up as the political process proceeds. The fragility in Libya remains due to the potential persistence of risks, while Western states sound demands along four main avenues. The first regards the foreign military presence and the mercenaries who are under pressure to leave Libya. The second demand regards the treatment of illegal immigrants in Libya and impeding their travel toward European coasts. The third is the smooth management of the political process that will conclude in a nationwide election. And the fourth regards the business opportunities that can materialize according to the success of the political process. Such opportunities push the state actors to seek out the biggest share and encourage backstage competition.

This analysis examines the developments in Libya in order to portray why the risks continue to exist, looks at the agendas of the foreign actors and why they are committed to shaping the political and security landscape in Libya, and discusses why the Turkish military presence is an opportunity for both Libya and its allies. The analysis concludes that Turkey may cooperate with other actors as far as the Libyan public welcomes them, and that the Turkish military presence in Libya is a guarantee for the sustainability of Libyan stability.

politicians, diplomats, and their moutpieces is to push Turkey and Russia out of Libya. Such a thinking equates legitimacy and illegitimacy, justice and injustice while disregarding opportunities. This analysis examines the developments in Libya in order to portray why the risks continue to exist, looks at the agendas of the foreign actors and why they are committed to shaping the political and security landscape in Libya, and discusses why the Turkish military presence is an opportunity for both Libya and its allies. The analysis concludes that Turkey may cooperate with other actors as far as the Libyan public welcomes them, and that the Turkish military presence in Libya is a guarantee for the sustainability of Libyan stability.

## INTRODUCTION

The political landscape in Libya has been heating up as the political process proceeds. The fragility in Libya remains due to the potential persistence of risks, while Western states sound demands along four main avenues. The first regards the foreign military presence and the mercenaries who are under pressure to leave Libya. The second demand regards the treatment of illegal immigrants in Libya and impeding their travel toward European coasts. The third is the smooth management of the political process that will conclude in a nationwide election. And the fourth regards the business opportunities that can materialize according to the success of the political process. Such opportunities push the state actors to seek out the biggest share and encourage backstage competition.

The major theme of statements regarding Libya has brought to the forefront the foreign military and mercenary presence in the country. The basic goal of these statements by Western

## THE CURRENT SITUATION IN LIBYA

The Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) voted for the Government of National Unity (GNU) in Geneva on February 5, 2021. Mohammad Younis Manfi's list was favored by 37 votes against that of the duo of Aqeela Saleh and Fathi Bashagha. In this sense, the new GNU assumed the responsibility and authority in Libya on March 16, 2021<sup>1</sup> in Tripoli and on March 21, 2021<sup>2</sup> in the eastern part of country. After a smooth transition process, the Dbeiba-led government gained the confidence of the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) with 121 votes by the 132 members in the disputed city of

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1 "Faiez Serraj Hands over Power to New Interim Authorities", *The North Africa Post*, 17 March 2021, <https://northafricapost.com/48340-faiez-serraj-hands-over-power-to-new-interim-authorities.html>, accessed on 7 May 2021.

2 Sami Zaptia, "Eastern Based Libyan Government Hands over to Unified Government of National Unity: Libya Finally Has One Government!", *Libya Herald*, 23 March 2021, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2021/03/23/eastern-based-libyan-government-hands-over-to-unified-government-of-national-unity-libya-finally-has-one-government/>, accessed on 7 May 2021.

Sirte. The ultimate goals of the government, according to the Presidential Council which manages the overall political process in two ways, are framed as facilitating the elections on December 24, 2021 and addressing the immediate needs of the Libyan public.

Long after Haftar's attack on Tripoli on April 4, 2019, the GNU was established as a representation of the hope for stability and the commencement of the political process, which had been absent for a decade, in Libya. The GNU, with its compromise-based strategy, started internal and external talks, negotiations, and meetings with all available actors to build an environment of consensus and co-existence. In this frame, the new composition of the GNU enabled contact with all actors in order to commence dialogue with the Tripoli government. This was an opportunity though; the latest events in April and May posed challenges in the defined goals of the new government contrary to the commitments of the UNSMIL-led LPDF and the Berlin Conference statements. The strategy of the GNU was to make all internal and external actors happy and satisfied by the ongoing political process; however, the fragility on the ground was a reminder of the difficulty of such a strategy.

Haftar has been at the epicenter of an escalation in Libya for the last two months. First, he proposed a project to build three cities around Benghazi for a total population of 12 million despite his inability to finance it and the fact that the predictions<sup>3</sup> in 2021 indicates the existence of a total of approximately 7 million Libyans as of 2020.<sup>4</sup> Libyans questioned whether

he intends to build his own community as an autonomous region in the east using Syrian and African mercenaries. The second escalation appeared due to an impediment in Dbeiba's visit to Benghazi that was perceived by the GNU as a challenge to the political process.<sup>5</sup> Haftar's attitude can be assessed in the frame of acting as if he has a leading role in shaping the political ground. PM Dbeiba's response to Haftar was to announce that he will hold a meeting in Benghazi in the near future, but for the purpose of the consultation only with the mayor and the police forces. Finally, in the third week of April, the HoR rejected the budget proposal by the GNU in parallel with the mentioned escalations. This rejection is important because the political process was encouraged after the demonstration in Tripoli and Benghazi as a result of the lack of services and the long-running electricity cuts. The rejected budget will stall the efforts of the GNU to provide services which will again affect the Libyan public. These events indicate that Haftar's intention is to challenge the overall political process until his demands are taken into consideration.

Haftar, backed by Russia and the UAE, did not stop fortifying the Sirte-Jufra line and conducting military exercises.

Other than Haftar's attitude, the essential question is if there has been any change in the composition of the Russian Wagner Group, and the hired mercenaries fighting alongside Haftar's

3 Sami Zaptia, "Libya's population was 6,931,061 in 2020: Census Bureau", 22 January 2021, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2021/01/22/libyas-population-was-6931061-in-2020-census-bureau/>, accessed on 18 May 2021.

4 "Haftar Launches Early Campaign for Libya's Presidential Elections", The Arab Weekly, 24 April 2021, <https://theArabweekly.com/haftar-launches-early-campaign-libyas-presidential-elections>, accessed on 7 May 2021.

5 "Libya PM Calls off Benghazi Visit After Security Turned Back", Africa News, 26 April 2021, <https://www.africanews.com/2021/04/26/libya-pm-calls-off-benghazi-visit-after-security-turned-back/>, accessed on 7 May 2021.

self-styled army.<sup>6</sup> Haftar, backed by Russia and the UAE, did not stop fortifying the Sirte – Jufra line and conducting military exercises. Hence there is an expanding military-militia formation at the eastern portion of Libya directly prepared not to defend but to attack the western frontlines. A probable course to eradicate such a situation is to unify all the Libyan military institutions, starting with a security sector reform and building a conventional security architecture. Such wishful thinking seems hard to achieve before the elections because Haftar still enjoys the support of external actors. The 5+5 Joint Military Committee is perceived as the mechanism to build a unified security structure although so far the only significant achievement of the committee has been to agree on a permanent ceasefire following pressure by the UNSMIL. After the establishment of the GNU, the Committee has achieved very little – as noted by its failure to open the Mistrata-Sirte coastal road.<sup>7</sup>

Other than military escalation, the political process has ignited a very interesting trend in Libya. The foreign incursion has changed its face and local actors have started to search for backing from foreign actors as a way to secure privilege in the elections. Despite the fact that it is Libyan people who will vote for the coming permanent political body, this is an effort of to project reliability in the eyes of the Libyan public. This attitude makes Libya vulnerable to foreign incursions and new types of frictions as the election process approaches its deadline. Meanwhile, the Libyan public may face the risk of voting for

the imposed candidates by the Western countries on election day – a development that could escalate the political tension. Such a risk could mobilize the armed groups in most cities to reject the elected individuals while Haftar might exploit the political turmoil to claim legitimacy and build supremacy with the support of his backers. This is especially likely if the candidates of the latter are not favored by popular vote in the western part of the country given that the bulk of the population lives in the northwest coastal region. This scenario indicates that the political process may ignite military mobilizations if any of the parties is not happy with the consequences.

## A NEW STRATEGIC BALANCE? THE STRATEGIES OF THE EXTERNAL ACTORS

External actors were at a crossroads about engaging with the Libyan folder during the conflict. Some of the external actors were hesitant about how to handle the situation before the political process while most were prone to side with Haftar. For instance, the USA claimed active neutrality to promote a “wait and see” strategy in order to benefit most from all possible outcomes. Stephanie Turco Williams confessed that former national security adviser John Bolton’s recommendation to Khalifa Haftar was along the lines of “do it quickly and reduce civilian casualties”<sup>8</sup> in reference to the Berlin Conference’s decisions to start a political solution. This double and contradictory strategy seems to be challenging the Russian’s Wagner-based engagement in Lib-

6 Dilara Aslan, “Russian Wagner Group to Send 300 Syrian Fighters to Libya”, Daily Sabah, 12 April 2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/africa/russian-wagner-group-to-send-300-syrian-fighters-to-libya>, accessed on 7 May 2021.

7 Sami Zaptia, “The 5+5 JMC Continues to Struggle to Reopen Coastal Road – Vexed Withdrawal of Foreign Forces Causing Delay”, Libya Herald, 29 April 2021, <https://www.libyaherald.com/2021/04/29/the-55-jmc-continues-to-struggle-to-reopen-coastal-road-vexed-withdrawal-of-foreign-forces-causing-delay/>, accessed on 7 May 2021.

8 Mohammed Ayesh, “Arabic Press Review: UN Official Says Libya Has 20,000 Mercenaries”, Middle East Eye, 26 February 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/libya-mercenaries-un-official-arabic-press-review>, accessed on 7 May 2021.

ya. The new administration continued Trump's strategy in so far as activating the acting chief of the UNSMIL, Stephanie Turco Williams, to push the Libyan actors while U.S. Ambassador Norman coordinates the ambassadors of the western state actors. The U.S. policy has been premised on filling the gap of the U.S. military presence on the ground through more pro-active diplomatic efforts and imposing figures on the Libyan political ground.

France, for example, preferred to provide direct support to Haftar while denying any involvement in the conflict.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, former Libyan minister of defense Salahaddin Namroush accused France of making a secret pact with Haftar.<sup>10</sup> Some unidentified flights during the conflict were reported as French aerial intervention in favor of Haftar while Macron openly received Haftar at the Elysée. The political process forced France to comply with the Berlin Conference, but with a continuous eye on Haftar. Any failure of the political process will force France to rethink its Libyan strategy. Libya, as the gate to Africa as a whole, is an inevitable geography for France to diffuse central Africa and former colonial interests while the dominance of Turkey in this region will hamper the French interests in the Eastern Mediterranean energy politics. As a result, France perceives Haftar as the more appropriate local actor to facilitate the French access to the region and sustain the postcolonial French order. The latter is vital for the prosperity of the French economy and social structure.

9 Jihad Gillon, "France-Libya: Marshal Haftar, The Controversial Friend of the Élysée", *The Africa Report*, 20 March 2020, <https://www.theafricareport.com/24823/france-libya-marshal-haftar-the-controversial-friend-of-the-elysee/>, accessed on 8 May 2021.

10 Gözde Bayar, "French Support for Haftar Is Shame: Libyan Minister", *Anadolu Agency*, 12 December 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/france-support-for-haftar-is-shame-libyan-minister/2074325>, accessed on 8 May 2021.

The other actors which are involved in Libya, with the exception of Italy, were clearer in their strategies before the commencement of the political process. Italy was aware of the French intentions in Libya and played a mediating role with a special emphasis on relations with Tripoli. However, Italy did not hesitate to contact Haftar during the conflict with a low-level delegation. The political process made the Italian strategy more focused on business opportunities and on competing with France and the UK via intense diplomatic relations with the GNU. Apart from Italy, Greece was more involved in the Eastern Mediterranean question and assumed its role by building direct links to HoR Speaker Aqeela Saleh and Haftar as an extension of countering the Turkish political maneuvers. Finally, the UK was heavily involved in BREXIT and the Libya case became an issue of an opportunistic approach after the political process facilitated direct diplomatic links to the GNU. In this sense, the UK ambassador frequents the Libyan institutions and pledges support to the election process. If the overall European Libya strategy is reviewed, there appears to be a coordinated strategy to shape the military and political landscape of Libya through the EU and the UNSMIL while competing with each other for further gains once the political process moves forward.

The UAE is financing all expenses, and mainly those of the pro-Haftar mercenaries and the Russian private military company, Wagner Group. The reason why the UAE is heavily involved in the crises in the Middle East, Africa, and the Eastern Mediterranean Sea is questionable. But there is evidence, due to Wagner's presence in Libya, that the UAE continues to fund Haftar, most probably, to be prepared for the worst-case scenarios in Libya. For this reason, the UAE-funded Russian Wagner Group, and Syrian and African mercenaries are still in Libya.

The contradiction in the U.S. strategy is that it is against the Russian military presence and, at the same time, it is silent on the UAE strategy in Libya.

Russia, among all countries involved, has proven to be the smartest by realizing a military presence in the Mediterranean Sea while being funded by Dubai. At the same time, Russia can deny its responsibility in Libya since Wagner disguises itself as a private company. On the other hand, apart from China, Russia sells a vast number of arms and military equipment to Haftar's self-styled army. These sales offer a financial breath to the weakening Russian economy and create a dependency on the Russian defense industry. To date, we have not seen any countermeasure by the USA while the EU-led Operation IRINI was not interested in the weapon flow to Haftar but to Tripoli.

In this new type of Great Game, only Turkey and Qatar favored the legitimate Tripoli government while Turkey's military assistance to Tripoli's GNA challenges all the aforementioned actors' calculations.

In this new type of Great Game, only Turkey and Qatar favored the legitimate Tripoli government while Turkey's military assistance to Tripoli's GNA challenges all the aforementioned actors' calculations. In other words, Turkey's involvement has facilitated the start of a political process while the Berlin Conference statement can be referred to as a milestone in the conflict. The Turkish military support facilitated an ordered advance by the western armed groups against Haftar and, most significantly, proved that Libyan security can be restructured with

committed and unbiased efforts. The psychological effect of the Turkish presence on the armed groups of western Libya indicated that Libya can establish a central authority upon the scattered armed groups, which is a matter most Libyans complain about. This reality will actually facilitate a reformation of the security sector after the elections, while Turkey appears to be a crucial element in this process.

Haftar's defeat and his withdrawal from the south of Tripoli and, finally, from the cities of Tarhuna and Bani Walid led the external actors to review their Libya strategies. The countries that provided a strong support to Haftar searched for a political process that could marginalize Turkey and Russia as seen in the joint letter by the USA, France, Italy, and Germany to the GNA. The UNSMIL has become the pushing organization under the leadership of Stephanie Turco Williams. It is used for its legitimacy by the Western states to justify and support their policies. The UNSMIL acted in a smart way by establishing alternative negotiation mechanisms in Geneva, Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt. Consequently, the LPDF, which was accused of being imposed by the West with an unidentified representation formula, succeeded in building a government and started a political process, with whose terms Haftar had complied. Put another way, the Turkish military presence facilitated the UNSMIL initiative. Alternatively, we would be discussing how Haftar took revenge on Tripoli.

The discourse is concluded by a quest of the involved states to benefit from their new status. For instance, the USA, along with the EU and member states, has identified a goal of taking Russia and Turkey out of Libya to secure their shares in the "Libya pie." The countries that were hesitant to intervene in the Libyan crises, along with the ones that pro-

vided support to Haftar, started to form a new strategy to shape Libya politically despite the fact that they were unable to achieve their desired outcomes militarily. In this calculation, the Libyan public is not a part of the agenda of the external actors who are still flexible in terms of identifying a local actor and escalating a conflict. Hence, the fragile security environment is not only a result of the local dynamics but also of the projections of the external actors. The Western states have security-oriented approaches despite the contradictions that are present. In this frame, the USA and France are worried about Russian mercenaries while having chosen to favor Khalifa Haftar in the conflict. From the U.S. perspective, the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) has been drafted to deal with Russia and Iran, while the UAE has not been sanctioned – and not even named – for their funding Russian mercenaries. As a result, external incursion is coordinated among the western states, while contradictions and flexibility prevail in favor of a new strategy, which is very hard to understand.

The political process in Libya has given rise an avenue other than cooperation in the Western world. There appears to be a competition for infrastructural projects and business opportunities that has taken center stage. The ambassadors and ministers of Italy, the UK, France, and Germany have intensified their efforts not only to present their expectations from the political process and the withdrawal of foreign military presence, but also voice their desire to “assist” Libya. The assistance is, for sure, not a pledge, but a proposal with a price. The U.S. has preferred a higher profile engagement like starting a security sector reform and being included in the finance and energy sector. Such commitments by the U.S. come with a hefty price tag.

The business competition, on the other hand, has not affected the political strategic communications of Western states. The common themes of ‘recommendations’ to the GNU are as follows:

- To keep up with the political process and hold elections.
- To observe the arms embargo through Operation IRINI.
- To improve the conditions of the illegal immigrants.
- To expel the foreign military presence and mercenaries from Libya.

In accordance with these recommendations, the political process is actually the basic expectation that both internal and external actors agree on. But the issue in realizing such an election is not to intervene in the process covertly by favoring a political strand or individual. For instance, Khalifa Haftar, or his son Saddam, is expected to be a candidate in the elections despite the fact that both are accused of war crimes in Libya.<sup>11</sup> Operation IRINI did not focus on denying arms transfers to Haftar but to Tripoli. A concern, however, that seems to be agreed by all is the issue of Illegal immigrants - the purpose being to isolate them in Libya and stop them from reaching Europe. On the other hand, if they cannot leave Libya, illegal immigrants form a labor force to be employed by Haftar in mercenary units.

The foreign military presence and mercenaries are also worded into the scripts of announcements by western officials. Russia and Turkey have become the focus of this argument despite the obvious contradictions of equating Turkey with Russia or Haftar's mercenaries. The next section looks at the discourse of

<sup>11</sup> According to Libyan laws, Khalifa Haftar cannot be a presidential candidate.

the projections on Libya in an effort to discern possible developments in the country in the coming year.

## COMPARISON AND DISCUSSION OF THE PROJECTIONS ON LIBYA

The military and militia capacity of Khalifa Haftar is still persistent in Libya. Russia and the UAE continue to provide support Haftar while still presenting him as an alternative to the internationally backed political process. In this sense, Haftar's military preparedness has been expanding to include the capacity to start an attack on Tripoli in the case the political process fails or loses its validity. The Western states have focused on adapting themselves to comply with the political process, but with vigilance. They all agree on defecting the Turkish and Russian military presence in Libya, but are not prepared to protect the political process or the GNU militarily. Furthermore, some states are more prone to provide further support to Haftar in the case that a military escalation hinders the political process.

If the Libyan elections on December 24, 2021 is the desired outcome by a smooth transition period through the GNU, the challenges that could impede the political process need to be checked and balanced. The EU's military wing in the region, Operation IRINI, is there to observe the arms embargo and illegal immigration,<sup>12</sup> despite the fact that the mission was premised on preventing arms and militia inflow to Libya. The question appears to be who and how will balance

the Russian military presence and Haftar with his self-styled army and mercenaries in order to assure the sustainability of the GNU. The role of Turkey, as a NATO member, starts at this point. The USA and the European states which are also NATO members are not inclined to be directly and militarily involved in the Libyan crisis. They can provide aerial support to deny the challenging actors, but it is not clear if they want to engage with Russia and which local party would best suit their interests. Operation IRINI's biased attitude is clear proof of the intention of isolating the GNA and of paving the way to have it toppled after the Berlin Conference by Russia's and Haftar's forces in 2020.

It was only Turkey that supported the legitimate GNA, upon their invitation and written request, and facilitated the political environment to start a political process. Actually, Turkey was the last chance for the GNA and for the Libyans living mainly in the country's northwest. Meanwhile the Turkish presence eased the coordination of the armed groups of the West and brought an order to their commitment to the goals of the Tripoli government stemming from their acceptance and respect toward the Turkish military. Armed groups should not be excluded from the strategic calculations because they hold the power in the Libyan cities through the military councils. Insofar as the armed groups feel that they are mistreated, the chaos will be much worse than that caused by Haftar's attack on Tripoli. If Turkey leaves Libya, the armed groups will not be controlled efficiently which will benefit Haftar. Then the question is whether Western actors want Turkey to leave Libya in order to facilitate Haftar's efforts to achieve what he attempted after April 4, 2019. Such a scenario would see the mass graves that appeared in Tarhuna, this time, make an appearance in Tripoli and Mistrata.

<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile no commitment was made for saving illegal immigrants. Emma Wallis, "Irin Mission: One Year, No Migrant Rescues", InfoMigrants, 7 April 2021, <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/31367/irini-mission-one-year-no-migrant-rescues>, accessed on 8 May 2021.

Another issue is the refugee flow, both, towards and from Libya. Libya is a transit route to reach Europe and every year, receives more refugees who arrive with the hope of a better life. Western policies in African countries are the main causes of this flow of refugees. However, there seems to be an additional risk in Libya. If the political process fails and Haftar starts another attack on Tripoli, Europe may witness new refugees on the coasts of Malta, Greece, and Italy. Two-thirds of the Libyan population lives in the northwest, mainly in Tripoli and Misrata. A potential success by Haftar will either push the residents of cities to flee Libya for more secure countries or they will be slaughtered by Haftar's self-styled army.

The final projection is the effect of security on the infrastructure projects that the Libyan public are insistently expecting to enjoy. The Turkish military presence in the northwest has facilitated the start of infrastructure and construction projects. If Turkey leaves Libya, the GNU may not be capable of institutionalizing the armed groups, which could challenge the projects depending on who implements them. This projection will complicate the security situation and the provided services since the GNU would not be capable of imposing its decisions.

A course to satisfy the expectations and projections of the regional powers and the external actors would be to observe the political process. Turkey can cooperate with the regional states, such as Egypt, or transform the assumed mission under NATO's umbrella to ensure the overall process. The demand of Western states and certain Libyan politicians that Turkey leave Libya is not realistic. On the other hand, the inclusion of certain coun-

tries in a mission in Libya will irritate the Libyan public since they had provided support to Haftar.

## CONCLUSION

Libya is still fragile in terms of sustainability of the political process and being in a position to enjoy a secure environment. In this context, the attitude of Haftar and the presence of mercenaries and the Russian military (see Wagner Group) indicate their intention of challenging the GNU. Other than Turkey, there is no balancing actor with a military readiness to protect Tripoli and the Libyan public. Western states are more involved in securing a share of the business opportunities while shaping Libyan politics with a disregard for the expectations of the Libyan public. Even the elections in December, if they can be realized on time, will not be able to end the current fragility in the near future.

Under the clout of potential risks, the Turkish military presence is an opportunity to sustain the secure environment in the most populated regions of Libya. Other states can cooperate with Turkey as long as their intentions are not affiliated with Haftar's self-styled army or the Russian Wagner Group. The Turkish role should be expected to include a training, educating, coordinating, and mentoring mission in order to achieve more efficient Libyan security forces. It is without a doubt that mercenaries should leave Libya. This must start from the east because it is Haftar, the Wagner Group, and African/Syrian mercenaries who challenged the legitimate government and committed crimes as was witnessed south of Tripoli, in Tarhuna, Bani Walid, and Sabha.

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This analysis examines the developments in Libya in order to portray why the risks continue to exist, looks at the agendas of the foreign actors and why they are committed to shaping the political and security landscape in Libya, and discusses why the Turkish military presence is an opportunity for both Libya and its allies. The analysis concludes that Turkey may cooperate with other actors as far as the Libyan public welcomes them, and that the Turkish military presence in Libya is a guarantee for the sustainability of Libyan stability.

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