



Military regimes in the Sahel as recruitment sergeants for rebel governance¹

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Abstract:

Recent cases of the de-democratisation of Sahelian states, such as Mali and Burkina Faso, driven by the emergence of military regimes, have been presented as responses to severe security crises occasioned by the activities of transnational violent extremist organisations. Nevertheless, the existence of such regimes has not corresponded with drastic improvements in security outcomes, as evidenced by the rapidly escalating incidents of violence and human insecurity that have particularly impacted Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. In this paper, we employ a multiple case study design to present the argument that the proliferation of these regimes accelerates the decline of these states to the status of 'state failure-hood'. Regimes that attribute legitimacy to 'rebel governance', a notion epitomised by violent extremist groups like the Sahelian branches of transnational terrorist organisations like the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda, are closely associated with this process. This 'securitisation of peace' is achieved through the implementation of techniques that exacerbate the already poor relations between the state and civil society (see Njoku, 2020). We substantiate our arguments with qualitative data gathered from a triangulation of secondary data sources, and we conduct our analyses using Thematic Content Analysis (TCA).

Keywords:

Military regimes; rebel governance; Sahel; securitisation of peace; state failure; Thematic Content Analysis (TCA).

¹ DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59569/jceas.2024.4.2.287>

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Introduction

Over the past decade, numerous challenges to state authority have emerged in the Sahel region, turning it into a vast geographical expression of spiraling violence. Two prominent actors, the regional franchises of the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda groups, have continuously instrumentalised violence, which has escalated both horizontally and vertically, as a mechanism for re-negotiating political orders. This has deepened the region's crisis-laden status and disrupted regional governance and social dynamics (Boas & Strazzari, 2020), ultimately affecting the credibility of states as security providers (Berlingozzi & Raineri, 2023).

These challenges have, over the past twenty-four months, served as a pretext for the resurgence of military regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, with these regimes framing their existence on the promise of effective security. For instance, in 2022, two coups in Burkina Faso led to the replacement of the civilian government by the military regime of Christian Kabore, which itself was soon replaced. These coups were justified by the need to address the failures in tackling the 'security question' posed by escalating violent extremism and to restore Burkina Faso's territorial integrity and national security (Engels, 2022). In Mali, the military rulers claimed that their actions were necessary to prevent the country from sliding into 'chaos, anarchy, and insecurity' (British Broadcasting Corporation, BBC, 2020), while in Niger, the military figures responsible for the 2023 coup cited persistent insecurity as the reason for their ascent to power (McAllister, 2023). The coexistence of these military regimes with the very threats they claim to resolve has proven problematic. These regimes operate within a security environment characterised by the horizontal and vertical expansion of transnational terrorist activities.

The paper presents the argument that the existence of military regimes itself represents a 'security risk', exacerbating the regional insecurity complex. The proliferation of these regimes accelerates the descent of these states into 'state failure', as they legitimise 'rebel governance', exemplified by violent extremist organisations like the Sahelian franchises of the IS and Al-Qaeda. This occurs through the 'securitisation of peace' and the use of techniques that further strain already poor 'state-civil society' relations. Using a multiple case study approach, the paper shows that military regimes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have upended regional security and reduced the effectiveness of states by granting rebels greater power and relying on mercenary groups such as the Wagner Group as security supporters (see Romaniuk & Besenyő, 2023). Consequently, the relationship between the government and civilians has deteriorated. Documentary analysis of newspaper reports, academic literature, and grey literature forms the basis of the dataset. This data is triangulated and analysed using thematic content analysis.

The following sections form the structure of this paper: The first part conducts a brief review of the concept of rebel governance and its manifestations in the Sahel region. The second part briefly reviews the security context of the Sahel region, identifying the



dominant actors and emphasising the fragile state of conventional state structures, which both drive and are driven by the rampant violence that has turned the region into ‘a geographical expression of mass violence’. Part three of the paper delves into the connection between this dynamic and the resurgence of military regimes in the area. In part four, the paper argues that these regimes pose risks to human and political security through actions that often portray indigenous civil society as enemies, further deteriorating relations.

Rebel governance in the Sahel

Rebel governance is a dynamic and imprecise concept, with various definitions reflecting the perspectives of those discussing it. It has been defined as ‘the creation of institutions and practices by rebels that intend to shape the social, economic, and political life of civilians during civil war’ (Arjona et al., 2015: 3).

Rebel governance essentially involves non-state actors, or those oppositional to the state, assuming governing functions within conflict situations. These activities go beyond war-making to include the provision of social services and the building of political institutions (Cunningham & Loyle, 2021). These entities perform these functions by engaging in rule-making, rule enforcement, and the provision of public goods and services, often in armed confrontation with states (Loyle et al., 2021). They often use judicial processes as a strategy to mobilise support by employing either concessionary or coercive mechanisms (Loyle et al., 2021). Inherent in the idea of ‘rebel governance’ is a competitive struggle for attributes such as ‘legitimacy’, ‘capacity’, and territorial control (Loyle et al., 2021). A considerable number of regimes have emerged in modern history, empirically testing rebel governance. According to Albert (2022), nearly 64% of rebels between 1945 and 2012 engaged in governance through the creation of governing institutions.

The existence of rebel governance in the Sahel is not a matter of conjecture but a fact, as evidenced by the successful contestation of territorial control, which the state would typically hold. In Mali, for example, significant gaps in state control have been evident in the northern part of the country, creating ‘governance gaps’ that insurgent jihadi groups have attempted to fill. These attempts have historically created ‘states-within-states’ political orders, with such groups usurping state functions by providing security and youth education (Brujin & Both, 2017). The development of networks with local elite power structures (Boas et al., 2020) and judicial institutions, designed or presented as more effective and cleaner alternatives to those of the state (Rupesinghe & Boas, 2019), illustrates efforts at institution-building. The efforts to generate and consolidate legitimacy often involve the outright elimination of state-endorsed or affiliated structures, resulting in the murder or abduction of village chiefs who collaborate with these structures (Benjaminsen & Ba, 2019).

The dynamics of rebel governance in the Sahel occur in a region that has become, over the years, a vast geographical expression of violence, driven by years of exclusivist and identitarian politics and deeply rooted poor economic indices. Escalating political

violence has plagued the region since 2012, riding on the waves of the Arab Spring. The Sahel retains its status as a region beset by severe conflicts and has become a top hub of global terrorism, accounting for at least 40% of fatalities from terrorism globally (Pham, 2024). These dynamics underscore the region's transition from an 'exotic tourist paradise' to a troubled region beset by the loss of control over national spaces, creating 'ungoverned spaces' dominated by actors intent on propagating destabilising insecurity (Boas & Strazzari, 2020: 4).

The actor complex encompasses a wide range of organisational forms, with religious violent extremist organisations emerging as the dominant actors. The Islamic State – Sahel Province (ISSP) (previously known as the Islamic State Group in the Greater Sahara, ISGS), the Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) have consistently created a cyclical loop of violence that has overwhelmed various sub-national and national communities across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, establishing some semblance of state structure and functions. Collectively, these groups' actions have led to a fivefold increase in casualties since 2016, from 770 deaths in 2016 to more than 4,000 in 2019 (United Nations Office for West Africa, UNOWAS, 2020).

Both JNIM and ISSP maintain extensive control over rural and urban population centres across the three countries, exacting taxes and redistributing them (Dahiru, 2024), while also performing regulatory functions over illicit economic activities and providing 'effective security' against violent non-state actors (Ani, 2024). For instance, Human Rights Watch (HRW) estimates that violent extremist groups control more than 40% of Burkina Faso's territory as of 2022.

These groups often focus their security guarantees on threats like cattle rustling and banditry (International Crisis Group, ICG, 2019; Boas et al., 2020; Raineri, 2020). Instances of the regulatory functions assumed by these groups have also directly interfered with the social lives of inhabitants, imposing restrictions on entertainment choices and lifestyles, such as banning music, football, alcohol, smoking, prostitution, parties, and local festivals (Rupesinghe & Diall, 2019; ICG, 2020). Attempts at promoting welfare have included the distribution of material benefits, food, and money to communities in Mali and Burkina Faso (Maclean, 2019; Rupesinghe & Boas, 2019). The continued existence of these groups suggests a condition of 'shared, contested' sovereignty, wherein these groups act as co-present hubs of authority alongside state institutions, creating a political order that highlights the fragility of the Westphalian political order in the region. Boas and Strazzari (2020: 4) describe this perplexing condition as follows:

“...we prefer to understand Sahelian states through the prism of material and immaterial resources: they may not behave like states in a Weberian sense, but they do perform certain functions of a state-like character, along with different types of patrimonial and 'Big Man' politics. Therefore, they have a remarkable hybrid character: while they may control capital cities and surrounding areas, in

interior provinces and particularly in the most peripheral areas, the state tends to be one among several actors who compete for the role of effective, legitimate, and, ultimately, sovereign authority that people abide by.”

The continued existence of this socio-political reality across affected Sahelian states has triggered the development of various national, regional, and multilateral mechanisms aimed at regulating this perpetual cycle of violence. However, while certain operations have appeared to ‘freeze’ some aspects of the violence, the state’s inability to hold such spaces has seen the territories return to the control of violent extremist organisations (VEOs). For instance, counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism actions initiated by French forces in 2014 to stabilise Mali suffered setbacks when France withdrew its forces from Mali in 2022 due to tensions with the military government of Assimi Goita and deteriorating relations between the two governments. France’s withdrawal created a power vacuum that further plunged the region into chaos and opened new doors for both non-state and state violence, in what has been referred to as ‘state banditry’, resulting in the emergence of new state and non-state violence perpetrators (Boutellis et al., 2023).

‘The military turn in the Sahel’

In recent times, there has been a noticeable democratic backsliding in the Sahel region, characterised by the replacement of civilian elected governments with military regimes. The past few decades have witnessed an upsurge in coups. Events in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have highlighted the coup-prone nature of the Sahelian region since 2020 (see Besenyő & Romaniuk, 2024). In 2020, military officers overthrew the then-civilian president, riding on a wave of widespread resentment stemming from electoral politics and the government’s inability to manage the country’s threats.

The coup leader reflected these sentiments in their argument that their ascent to power was a response to the government’s inability and ineffectiveness in addressing widespread violence across the country (Fornof & Cole, 2020). The Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP), a group of military officers responsible for the coup, handpicked a civilian administration as a result. However, the regime that emerged from the coup also became a casualty of another coup, following a particularly acrimonious process of government formation that excluded two leading figures within the military ranks who were responsible for defence and security. Reports of tensions rationalised the August 2021 coup as a logical response to the incompetence of the civilian administration.

Burkina Faso, the next case study, followed this trend of military regimes in January 2022. Army officers, led by Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba, wrested power from the civilian administration, promising to address the worsening insecurity in the country (ICG, 2022a). The coup occurred after a string of deadly, high-casualty attacks on military installations and personnel in the Inata province of Burkina Faso (ICG, 2023). Captain Ibrahim Traoré, who criticised the previous regime’s lack of focus on the

counter-insurgency campaign and its ineffectiveness at stemming the tide of insurgent violence, soon led another coup attempt due to dissatisfaction with the regime's performance (Al Jazeera, 2022; Maclean & Peltier, 2022; Ndiaga & Mimault, 2022).

The 2023 military rebellion in Niger took place in the context of a potentially disruptive military reorganisation that was being planned by the civilian administration of Mohammed Bazoum. This restructuring was designed to replace military leaders and remove General Abdourahmane Tchiani, the chief of the Presidential Guard (International Institute for Strategic Studies, IISS, 2023). However, in justifying their actions, members of the military cited escalating insecurity caused by numerous violent extremist organisations operating in the country (Aksar & Balima, 2023; Mcallister, 2023).

In their political reconfigurations, military regimes consistently prioritise security as the fundamental value, implying a securitisation of peace. These regimes consistently present 'security' as a dominant concern to legitimise their control and governance in the name of safeguarding against existential threats (Romaniuk & Webb, 2015). The military is presented as the ultimate source of order and stability, an insurance against state disintegration and failure, by the consistent overthrow of civilian regimes on this basis. The assertion that military seizures of power are a necessary response to maintain peace is frequently made. The security governance framework has frequently been subordinated to military control by these administrations.

The ascent of these regimes to power has often resulted in the almost inevitable centring of 'military force' as the dominant paradigm for responding to security challenges. Such dynamics arguably reflect the inherent epistemic conception of security by military regimes, which tends to reduce the concept to arms and ammunition (Nweke, 1988), as opposed to a broader approach that considers security within the context of fulfilling human needs—a more nuanced conceptualisation of security as advanced by advocates of the Copenhagen School (see Fierke, 2010; Stritzel, 2014; Buzan & Hansen, 2018; Romaniuk, 2018; Neji et al., 2024). In this instance, military regimes have typically been the origin of dynamics that often make them a 'security risk'.

Military regimes as 'security risks'

The status of military regimes as security hazards is a result of their propensity to compound insecurity and perpetuate a cycle of violence and conflict through their actions and policies. The security risks generated by such policies often arise from their attempts to consolidate power and ensure the sustainability of their rule. The regimes surveyed demonstrate these dynamics in the cases of Mali and Burkina Faso.

Case study: Mali

The Malian military regime's ontological basis as a guarantor of effective security suggests that the regime's ultimate task is the protection of the Malian state from security threats. However, the regime has increasingly outsourced its capacity to external entities,

particularly the Russian paramilitary Wagner Group (officially, PMC Wagner) (see Besenyő & Romaniuk, 2024). This group has been involved in extensive rights abuses against the civilian population and has adhered to a transactional approach to operations (Neji et al., 2024).

The repertoire of crimes committed by the group includes sexual violence and large-scale violence. In Mali, such violence has encompassed massacres, such as the Moura market massacre of 2022, wherein hundreds of civilians were killed alongside extensive sexual violence (Africa Defense Forum, ADF, 2023a). More concerningly, outsourcing security responsibility to state actors has often undermined the regime's control over national security. The lack of sensitivity to local nuances has extensively documented the grievous effects on state-civil society relations in Mali.

As a way to stop attacks and build local support against 'jihadis', the Wagner Group's operational philosophy stresses the repeated and deliberate targeting of civilians in areas seen as 'jihadi strongholds'. This makes it challenging to differentiate between civilians and combatants, which leads to random violence (Nasr, 2022: 5). The Malian military's operations have institutionalised the brutal counterterrorism approach, emblematised by the Wagner Group. This institutionalisation is evident in the adoption of 'retaliatory violence' and 'collective punishment' strategies by the Malian armed forces, which have extended the trend of destabilisation and eroded trust between the state and its citizens, fostering conditions for further violence.

Case study to: Burkina Faso

The Burkinabe military has relied heavily on organised violence tactics, often deployed indiscriminately with little regard for human rights, in response to the escalating violence in the country. The Burkinabe government has used armed civilians as part of its counter-insurgency strategy, instrumentalising 'collective patriotism' to stem the tide of escalating violence. Quidelleur (2024: 3) writes that:

"The rise of insecurity since the mid-2010s, following the fall of President Blaise Compaoré, provided the political context in which armed mobilizations were initiated. Indeed, self-defense groups re-used old vigilant practices, mainly carrying out local policing activities. The best-known example is a group calling themselves Koglweogo, or Dozo hunters. These local initiatives take inspiration from attempts by the administration in the 2000s to establish decentralized and citizen-participation-focused public security policies: the "police de proximité", a sort of community policing. This policy aimed to integrate community participation into the operational mandate of internal security forces in managing law and order through the prevention of insecurity and crime."

These groups have become synonymous with rights violations. The ICG has documented that the increasing use of these groups, which are often poorly trained and supervised, has contributed to an ever-worsening cycle of violence through the various crimes

committed by their members. The actions of these groups overlap with and amplify existing social tensions inherent in Burkinabe society. As noted by the ICG (2023: n.p.):

“They have not yet restored peace, however, and have even spawned new kinds of instability in many regions. Although their sheer numbers, dedication, and local knowledge have benefitted the armed forces, they have also fueled communal tensions and exposed civilians to jihadist reprisals. The VDPs—tens of thousands of civilians armed with military-grade weapons—are a double-edged sword...”

The double-edged nature of the policy is also evident in the specific problems associated with the VDP recruitment process. Selectivism, which involves the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of certain sections of the population, has characterised the recruitment into the VDPs. This has resulted in the deliberate exclusion of certain ethnic groups, such as the Fulani and Tuareg, presumably due to their perceived ties to violent extremist groups operating in the country (ICG, 2023). This policy has facilitated the perpetuation of mass violence against certain communities. Massacres targeting ethnically Fulani residents in Nouna, Kossi Province, have manifested this violence, resulting in the deaths of over a hundred civilians (Amnesty International, 2023a).

The actions of these paramilitary groups parallel similar abuses committed by Burkinabe state forces. Since 2020, extrajudicial killings of civilians detained on suspicion of links to violent extremist groups and the perpetration of wanton violence have implicated Burkinabe state security forces. HRW has documented that between January and June 2020, Burkinabe security forces were complicit in or directly responsible for the executions of at least 81 civilians detained during counterterrorism operations, as well as the physical abuse of at least 30 Malian refugees (HRW, 2020). Members of the Burkinabe army summarily executed 220 civilians as recently as February 2024 (Turse, 2024), following an incident in Karma in April 2023 where they participated in the extrajudicial killing of over 140 people (Amnesty International, 2023b).

The paradox of the rise of military regimes in the Sahel lies in the conditions their rule has perpetuated. Attacks have not declined; instead, they have increased in lethality. Statistically, there has been a 56% increase in deaths from 2021 to 2024, with the Sahel region accounting for more fatalities than any other region in Africa. Burkina Faso alone contributes more than 48% of reported incidents of violent extremism and more than 60% of fatalities (African Centre for Strategic Studies, ACSS, 2024). Furthermore, 60% and 50% of territories in Burkina Faso and Mali, respectively, remain under the control of violent extremist organisations (ACSS, 2024).

Explaining the ‘recruitment sergeant’ argument

Misteps taken by various military regimes continue to correspond with a deterioration in security. In Mali, the actions of the regime, specifically its outsourcing of security provisioning to the Wagner Group, continue to fuel and sustain the insurgency. As Nasr (2022: 27) has correctly noted, ‘The deployment of the Wagner Group has



strengthened and energised jihadi groups, providing them with not only a recruitment tool but a much more favourable operating environment’.

As a result, the Malian government’s relentless implementation of anti-rights counter-insurgency/counter-terrorism tactics continues to act as a catalyst for civil society to mobilise resources in Mali’s volatile and remote communities for insurgent, violent extremist groups. Indeed, the Fulani community, a major demographic facing punitive state-led and Wagner Group-led counterterrorism operations in Mali, has experienced surges in recruitment activity (Mehra & Demuynck, 2023). According to data, at least 50% of civilian fatalities caused by military and allied paramilitary groups in Mali and Burkina Faso in 2022 were of Fulani ethnic stock (ADF, 2023).

There has been a deliberate attempt by insurgent groups, particularly JNIM, to harness feelings of persecution as a recruitment tactic, with documented recordings of a leading figure of the group positioning it as the protector and avenger (Cissé, 2020). Such messages have drawn extensive support within the ranks of the Fulani community, resulting in the mobilisation of positive and affirmative attitudes that have bolstered the ranks of extremist groups even across the border in Mali. Observing this fact, Bisson et al. (2021: 12) write:

“Particularly the FLM and Ansaroul Islam incorporate local grievances, as Fulani preachers concentrate on stoking Fulani herders’ feelings of injustice and resentment toward the government. The FLM, also known as Katiba Macina, has played a particularly effective role in destabilizing the region using rhetoric focused on Fulani grievances to fuel existing tensions. Emphasizing their domestic roots, they draw on narratives of the historical Macina Empire to gain popular support and allude to the reinstatement of the Macina Empire, dominated by the Fulani ethnic group and under Islamic rule. Their effectiveness stems from using radio to communicate in Fulfude (the native Fulani language), endorsing feelings of injustice and discrimination while calling for more equality of opportunity and political reform.”

There is a contradiction: the state’s actions and policies serve as a potent rhetoric for the radicalisation of communities that are supposed to be under state protection, thereby escalating the threat of insurgent violence. Once more, the dynamics associated with this radicalisation lead to a substantial disintegration of structures that the state could otherwise utilise to improve security outcomes. Cissé’s (2020) account of Fulani perspectives on the insurgency serves as an illustration of this decline. This demonstrates that the Fulani community leaders’ efforts to alter the radical and extremist perspectives of the Fulani people towards the Malian government frequently fail due to the dissolution of trust. According to Cissé (2020: n.p.), ‘critics feel [that] Fulani leaders did nothing at the height of their power to improve the lives of poor Fulani pastoralists’. Rising to defend the Fulani cause and appealing for nonviolence now, after the conflict

has already erupted, has not significantly swayed the opinions of many pastoralists. Quoting pastoralists, he writes:

“...in some cases, these calls have sharpened grievances. Some pastoralists speak scornfully of ‘sons of farmers’ in ministerial posts having responsibility for ‘every inch of rural land’ (implying the system favors farmers’ interests over those of pastoralists). This rhetoric has fanned the flames of old grudges between different members of the Fulani community itself. For instance, many Fulani pastoralists are wary of negotiations with the government since they feel that they never received the reparations promised them in deals struck back in the 1990s.”

Consequently, the conditioning of demographic groups towards membership in violent extremist groups increases the likelihood of state failure. According to the literature, this condition encompasses the inability of state institutions to maintain control over violence through the imposition of order (King & Leng, 2001) and lapses in state capacity (Hameiri, 2007). It also includes the absence of the rule of law, political instability, economic and social instability, lack of security, authoritarian rule, impunity, loss of territorial control, human rights violations, social cohesion, corruption, and a weak bureaucracy (Silva, 2014).

Already, the Malian state, beleaguered by repeated fatigue from battling waves of brutal assaults on state authority by violent extremist groups, has increasingly found it difficult to effectively manage the threat posed by irredentist movements operating within its territory. The country currently faces the prospect of a growing insurgency by the Tuareg ethnic group.

Conclusion

Violent contestations of the authority of Sahelian states are bound to aggravate and decline further. The failure of states to properly mitigate the dangers from violent extremist organisations (VEOs) has created an environment that military players have exploited to assert control over political structures. Yet, while such regimes have presented themselves as more ‘effective alternatives’ to previously inept civilian administrations, there remains little to suggest that these regimes, through their policies and strategies, have not become vectors of the very threats they seek to resolve.

This paper explored the connections between the existence of these regimes and their role as mobilisers for rebel governance. As the paper argues, in the Sahel region, particularly in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the prevalence of rebel governance has become increasingly significant. Insurgent groups have filled the vacuum left by the state, providing essential services such as security, social services, and even justice. These groups often form networks with local elites and establish alternative institutions, which are sometimes more effective and less corrupt than those of the state. This process results in the creation of parallel governance structures, also known as



‘states-within-states’, which challenge the authority of national governments and further entrench violent extremism.

The region has evolved into a primary hub of global terrorism, with various franchises of transnational terrorist groups establishing control over vast territories, collecting taxes, and enforcing strict social regulations. This erosion of state authority has contributed to the region’s instability, making it a fertile ground for extremist activities. The increasing trend of military coups in the Sahel has aggravated this issue, as the shift towards military governance has centralised power around the military, often worsening the security situation rather than improving it. These regimes tend to focus narrowly on security, sidelining broader human needs and perpetuating the cycle of violence.

Military governments in the region do more harm than good when it comes to addressing security concerns. In countries like Mali and Burkina Faso, the military has outsourced security functions to external actors such as the Wagner Group or relied on poorly trained civilian militias. This approach has led to widespread human rights abuse and further destabilisation, eroding trust between the state and its citizens and creating conditions ripe for continued violence and conflict. This constitutes a paradoxical situation: by relying heavily on military force and neglecting broader security concepts such as human security, these regimes have become part of the problem rather than the solution, deepening the region’s insecurity and undermining efforts to establish stable and democratic governance structures.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing or financial interests in the production and publication of this study. All disclosed information is correct to the authors’ knowledge.

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