

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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The Civilizational and Cultural Project of the Algerian Revolution 1954–1962

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Abstract

This research paper attempts to present the cultural and ideological aspect pursued by the Algerian War of Liberation (1954–1962 AD) in parallel with the armed struggle. This is set against the long criminal action undertaken by the French colonial administration to erase the components of Algerian identity for more than 120 years, which affected the elements of the Algerian personality, such as the Arabic language, Arab-African affiliation, the Islamic religion, customs and traditions, and everything that symbolizes the authentic Algerian person prior to being subjected to the hateful French colonialism.

Keywords Algerian War of Liberation, Cultural Project, Ideology of the Algerian Revolution, Algerian Identity, F.L.N

Introduction

The Algerian Revolution is considered one of the greatest national liberation revolutions in the twentieth century, due to the numerous experiences and diverse ideas it produced, which differed from its counterparts in other countries of the world. It adopted various theoretical and intellectual visions and conceptions, which it attempted to embody from its very inception, and which were expressed through its numerous covenants and conferences, or through the statements and activities of its senior leaders, each according to their endeavor. Each party endeavored to raise its slogan, trying through its own personal convictions and inclinations to embody the dimensions of the revolution from its own specific perspective.

On this basis, it is incumbent upon us to re-examine the reading and understanding of the premises and objectives of this blessed revolution from an academic, scientific historical perspective that is free from subjectivity, because a scientific historical view influenced by subjectivity only leads to the perpetuation of superficial thinking, and thus the revolution becomes merely a narration of individual events and sacrifices, far removed from any civilizational project. This necessitates that we go beyond mentioning individuals, evaluating positions, and narrating events. We must also address the proposition that the French colonialism in Algeria had an alien cultural project, which was translated into several projects since the beginning of the French campaign on Algeria, and which continued until independence was regained and the last of the French and European settlers were definitively evacuated in 1962 AD.

From here, the following question can be posed: Did the Algerian Revolution succeed in achieving its civilizational project? And was it able to realize all its gains?

1. The French Project to Destroy the Algerian Personality

The first step taken by the French occupation, just a few months after occupying the city of Algiers, was the issuance of the decree of September 8, 1830, by which France seized all Islamic waqf properties (endowments) throughout Algeria. On December 7, 1830, the occupation administration issued another decree granting itself the right to dispose of those Islamic endowments. It proceeded to seize most of the important Islamic mosques and convert them into churches, cathedrals, barracks, and other uses. The process of converting them into churches, police stations, and barracks then continued, leaving only four mosques out of 160 mosques and zawiyas in the capital alone¹. The entire purpose of this was to eliminate the effective role of these mosques in leading the popular revolts and Jihad against the oppressive French colonial system in Algeria.

From the outset, French policy carried a cultural colonial project aimed at erasing the past of the Algerians and everything that connected them to their history, the components of their belonging, and their culture, as well as eliminating Islam and the Arabic language. Therefore, France was quick to integrate Algeria and Algerians into France as an annexed piece from the beginning of the occupation. It worked to impose the French language as the language of communication and education. Christianization and missionary operations also played a role in this context. For this reason, France sought to realize its project of attempting to integrate a

nation that was ethnically and nationally different from itself into the French nation proper. This policy dates back to the first half of the nineteenth century, when General Bugeaud proposed the idea of the complete integration of the Algerian people and their dissolution into the newly settled European element, reversing the policy of partial occupation and applying full occupation².

Christianization in Algeria was linked to the French occupation; it was merely a means to serve French colonialism and a media and propaganda mouthpiece to galvanize enthusiasm and prepare French and European public opinion to support the French military and political presence in Algeria to complete the colonial picture. France's goal was to eradicate the Islamic roots of Algerian society by spreading Christianity or at least unsettling the faith of the Algerian Muslim. For this purpose, the French campaign on Algiers in 1830 included a number of priests and Christian clergymen who were specially brought for this objective, which is evident in the subsequent practices of the French destruction policy. In the city of Algiers alone, there were more than 150 mosques in 1830, according to the writings of the French themselves, and almost all of them were plundered or converted into churches³. Among the mosques are the Ketchoua Mosque and the Sayyida Mosque, which are currently a cathedral and a church in the Bab El Oued district. Historically, we recall six other mosques: the Port Mosque (Mosque of the Fishermen), the Great Mosque, the Qashkoun Mosque, the Mosque of Salah Bey in Constantine which was converted into a cathedral, and the Mosque of Sidi Boumediene in Tlemcen. This gives an impression of the greatness and richness and bears witness to the degree of advancement of the Islamic civilization reached by our ancestors in the history of Algeria⁴.

A majority of scholars studying the colonial history of Algeria may find variations regarding the existence of more than one cultural project that accompanied the French campaign on Algeria. Through its projects, France attempted to establish a rational authority in place of the local authority by settling European social entities in Algeria governed by laws alien to the Arab-Islamic Algerian society⁵.

These colonial projects focused on creating a political system based first on conservative monarchy and then on republicanism. The ideologues of this system were strong and influential figures in France, such as De Polignac, De Bourmont, Bugeaud, Napoleon III, and Viollette, among others⁶. They exerted all their efforts on the basis of annexing Algeria to France and destroying the Algerian state. Not even the Algerian personality was spared from this, as a settler-colonial educational project was applied to it, beginning with the destruction of Algerian

institutions. The forms of these French projects multiplied, including Napoleon III's Arab Kingdom Project in 1863, the Blum-Viollette Project of 1936, the Constantine Plan of 1958, and the project to separate the Algerian Sahara from the North⁷.

French policy in this area was based on control and subjugation despite the significant and continuous national reaction throughout all periods of the occupation. This is what led France to pursue its colonial policy in order to achieve its goals. Its recent attempts, by proposing the slogan "French Algeria," confirm its colonial thesis that Algeria is a French province. For this reason, French writings supported by the colonial school that promotes the myth of "French Algeria" seek to legitimize the aggression of 1830⁸.

French educational policy was based on three foundations: Francization, Christianization, and Integration. In the latter, we find the Catholic project based on proselytizing and reviving the glories of Rome. Among its pioneers are Landonau, Lavigerie, and De Foucauld, who converted many mosques into churches, in addition to several projects led by the liberal, Saint-Simonian, and Masonic currents. All these currents leading these projects supported the policy of annexation, colonialism, and the destruction of the Algerian entity⁹.

For this purpose, France exploited the school to achieve its goals, and its policy in dealing with education varied. Initially, it aimed to eliminate all the basic structures of the indigenous Islamic schools, which was clearly evident in France's destructive policy towards most cultural centers, including schools, mosques, and zawiyas, and the seizure of their funding sources, foremost among them the "Waqf institution" (endowments). The colonial hand also extended to plundering the Arab-Islamic heritage and aimed to prohibit the teaching of the Arabic language¹⁰. This leads us to accuse the barbaric French colonialism of being behind the decline of the Arabic language and its intense eagerness to obliterate its radiance in various scientific, cultural, and literary fields, resulting in stagnation and backwardness compared to other languages.

Francization means replacing Arab culture with French culture in Algeria with the aim of severing ties with the Arab-Islamic sphere, such as the Francization of cities like "Chlef" and other Algerian cities, in addition to the establishment of the Civil Status Service starting from 1882, which perpetrated administrative and moral massacres against the Algerian people through the contemptuous and distorted names it bestowed upon Algerian surnames with the aim of devaluing them.

2. The Distinctiveness of the Algerian Nation

The Algerian Revolution focused on the identity of the Algerian Nation, which is deeply rooted in history. This is evident through a collection of archival documents written during the Revolution, which articulate the specific characteristics of the Algerian Nation within its historical political boundaries. These documents convey the authenticity and justice of its cause in international forums and its historical existence through all the stages and epochs that Algeria passed through, highlighting its legitimate right to regain national independence by dismantling the French colonial system, which sought to give its presence in Algeria a false historical legitimacy. This legitimacy is refuted by Algeria's long political history and the ancient Algerian people, distinguished by their Arabic language and their Islamic faith.

The Algerian Revolution refuted the French claims propagated by the colonial historical school, which sought to provide historical and civilizational legitimacy for its presence in Algeria. This was particularly relevant during the phase of total war, a bloody period in which France practiced killing, brutalization, and genocide in various forms, and legislated a systematic policy of murder, exile, and displacement to ensure the elimination of the original Muslim element. This policy continued to increase and escalate, culminating in the massacres of May 8, 1945, following the popular national resistance movements that spanned the country during the nineteenth century, from the resistance of Emir Abdelkader to the resistance of the Ouled Sidi Cheikh, Mokrani, and Haddad, among others. Despite the technical and military superiority of the French army, which forced the Algerian people to temporarily abandon armed combat, they nevertheless continued to lead the struggle to regain their independence until the ignition of the War of Liberation on November 1, 1954¹¹.

The Algerian Nation experienced glorious and distinctive eras, reaching its peak and grandeur in some historical periods. Among those time periods were the states of the Almohads, the Almoravids, the Fatimids, and the Banu Zayyan. The cities of Tlemcen, Bejaia, and Algiers served as the capitals of these states. This country had its poets, thinkers, historians, philosophers, scholars, its crafts, and its Arabic literature, which embodied its greatness and the greatness of the Arab-Islamic civilization to which we belong. Documents indicated that a nation is not defined by the strength of the government or the political and social system, but is somehow much deeper than that, and may appear superior to such a system. Therefore, the survival, in light of this definition, and the existence of the Algerian Nation is an indisputable fact¹².

The Algerian Nation suffered from the French occupation, which violated its sovereignty and independence, and which attempted to justify this heinous act by falsely claiming the non-existence of a deeply rooted Algerian nation. Meanwhile, evidence confirms the existence of an ancient civilization before the Christian era, during the Roman occupation, and before it. This leads us to state that Algeria already possessed a national spirit since the eighth century AD, which was further refined after Islam settled in the hearts of all Algerians. This gave rise to a strong Algerian society whose specific characteristics were the Islamic religion, the Arabic language, and its deep Arab-African affiliation.

In reality, the Algerian spirit never ceased to be alive and active despite the French invasion that deprived it of its right to exist as a nation for nearly a century and a half. Algeria's long civilizational history in the Mediterranean basin and the world, and the services it rendered to France itself in its modern history, advocate for the Algerian people to enjoy independence and sovereignty permanently. This Algerian Nation, which has produced great figures and prominent symbols throughout history, contributed to the revival of its power and its flourishing and advanced political and civilizational unity. This fundamental pillar of the concept of the nation was also clearly manifested in the Algerian collective consciousness, through the sacrifices, pains, sufferings, and joys that the nation experienced together or inherited from previous generations, particularly in the form of common ideals that must be achieved as such. Faced with all this history, France cannot rely on a trivial myth claiming that "Algeria is French," which France itself is barely convinced of, let alone others, regarding its right to annex Algeria as a French province with the aim of legitimizing the aggression of 1830¹³.

French colonialism attempted on all occasions to cast doubt on the existence of the Algerian Nation. However, the latter provided many examples demonstrating the existence of Algerians bound by a shared historical past, common aspirations, and language. In its attempt to obscure this truth, colonialism always practiced a policy of division and sowing distrust to incite Algerian Muslims against each other. But thanks to Islam, which was one of the strongest religious currents in human history, a true cultural society was formed, which in turn contributed to the destruction of this colonial scheme that denied the existence of the Algerian Nation, one way or another¹⁴.

The Algerian people possess all the essential components of a nation, both materially and morally. This component is what enables the understanding of the Algerian national sentiment that has developed and become a real force today. The very existence of the Algerian Nation

provides us with the true interpretation for the periodization of national history, which was challenged by spiteful French politicians such as the thesis of Maurice Thorez, who denied the existence of the Algerian Nation and presented a false thesis claiming that Algerian unity was incomplete and that the Algerian Nation was in the process of formation. Needless to say, they support the ridiculous thesis of colonialism, which never ceased exploiting the divisive indigenous policy and the policy of the White Fathers (Pères Blancs) with the aim of disintegrating the Algerian people into Arabs, Chaouia, Kabyles, and Mozabites, while Algerian national unity was achieved over centuries of shared history in the struggle for independence¹⁵.

3. The Algerian Revolution's Confrontation of the French Project

The Algerian Revolution erupted as a national liberation movement—a historical imperative against the colonial system that sought the civilizational liquidation of the Algerian Nation. Thus, the Algerian Revolution also sought to condemn and destroy the colonial system. This system, whose principles were consistent with its actions, represented a barbaric, savage political order. It was the result of the law of the survival of the fittest, thus denying the sacred rights of man and not stemming from human idealism. This was evident through its attempt to eliminate the fundamental components of the Algerian personality, which created a difficult historical crisis whose effects we still suffer from today.

The leaders of the Algerian Revolution understood the importance of restoring the Algerian personality in fighting French colonialism and routing it in the cultural battle as much as in the military one. The wheel of history cannot be stopped, nor can the natural development of free peoples be impeded. Therefore, colonialism must be destroyed for the sake of global peace, and preserving the honor of humanity is fundamental. The bankruptcy of French colonialism in Algeria is extremely clear, and for good reason the Algerian people despise it and hold it responsible for all their calamities and social stagnation. To overcome these effects, the Algerian Revolution attempted to revive the Arab-Islamic values of the Algerian Nation within its political entity and civilizational identity¹⁶.

The Algerian people were subjected to various forms of cultural stripping by the French colonial administration, which attempted to impose the components of the foreign Western French culture, aiming to dismantle the social structure of Algerian society, especially the Islamic religion that sheltered it. After the act of occupation and the French colonial imposition

of its influence over Algeria, it focused on combating the authentic Algerian culture and personality and the Arabic language in all areas of life. It removed Arabic from the administration, and French became the official language even in the southern Sahara regions inhabited by a small number of Algerians¹⁷.

The national struggle against the methods of colonialism to achieve the necessary conditions for national liberation was directly linked to the problem of organizing action. Objectively, the Algerian people lacked the organization of action for a long period, and it is clear that the concepts of organization and action are the essence of life and complement each other. Organization without action or action without organization is inertia and loss of power, but these concepts were still far from being embodied by Algerians during that period. One must believe that the success of the revolution guarantees the transformation of the specific into the general and principles into theories. This phase, which could have been preliminary, began on November 1, 1954, and was realized through military activity. It was born on the same day as the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the National Liberation Army (ALN), which would complete the liberation of the homeland¹⁸.

As evidenced in its literature, represented by its fundamental references, such as the Proclamation of November 1st, the Revolution worked to unify the ranks and establish a free, democratic Algerian state based on Arab-Islamic principles. This was also embodied in the Soummam Conference and in the formation of the Provisional Government, which called for the political thought advocating for complete independence and national unity, and the reformist thought aiming at the formation and education of generations. In this, the Revolution was characterized by an ideology that included intellectual, civilizational, social, and religious conceptions, and thus the Revolution expressed the hopes of the oppressed person everywhere¹⁹.

The Algerian Revolution set principles for itself inspired by Algerian history and the struggle of humanity, based on liberation through both force and faith, collective leadership, and material social transformation without sacrificing spiritual factors, and achieving social justice without entering the labyrinths of class struggle. This confirms the civilizational dimension of the Algerian Revolution, in contrast to other revolutions in America, Australia, and South Africa that separated from Europe and formed states with a European character²⁰.

All the literature of the Revolution confirmed this, condemning the policies of restriction practiced by France against the Arabic language. It expressed this position at its first conference in Soummam on August 20, 1956. This was reaffirmed by *Al-Muqawama* (The Resistance) newspaper, which denounced the policy of closing free schools, imprisoning and exiling teachers, and undermining members of associations, emphasizing that this policy aimed to obliterate the personality of the nation. Returning to the first document of the Revolution, the Proclamation of November 1st stipulated that the main goal of the Liberation Front was independence through the reconstruction of the sovereign Democratic and Social Algerian State, within the framework of Islamic principles and respect for all freedoms without racial or religious discrimination. It appears that with this stance, the Algerian Revolution intended to respond to France's attempts to obliterate Algeria's Arab-Islamic affiliation²¹.

Based on this premise, the leadership of the Revolution took upon itself the task of teaching the Arabic language among the masses and the soldiers of the Liberation Army. This matter was the subject of instructions issued by the Front to commence Arabic education. Perhaps the most important point that draws our attention in the Tripoli Program is: "Algeria is a part of the Arab Maghreb and belongs to the Arab nation, with which it is linked by fourteen centuries of history, Arab-Islamic culture, and common struggle against colonialism."²²

Perhaps this conviction in the unity of belonging to the national identity and working to consolidate this affiliation is what generated belief among the drafters of the November 1st Proclamation in the possibility of realizing Arab solidarity with the Revolution and relying on this solidarity to win the diplomatic battle. The FLN and the ALN also gave Jihad its civilizational dimension among the popular masses, but avoiding the declaration of a holy war against Christians prevented the Algerian Revolution from falling into the trap of religious or racial fanaticism. This earned it an international reputation that garnered the sympathy of all countries of the world, making it an inspiration for liberation movements globally through its ideas. Although the ideologues of the Revolution were not on a single ideological path—with some adopting leftist and liberal thought, others convinced by Islamic principles, and others with an inclination towards Nasserite nationalist ideas—they united around one demand: the independence of Algeria and the expulsion of the colonizer²³.

It was difficult for any Algerian movement at that time to win over all segments of Algerian society, including students, workers, and the general public, but the Revolution succeeded in doing so. Most of its leaders hailed from the class of farmers and workers who

became revolting patriots against injustice and oppression under the settler-colonial regime. According to the historian Abu Al-Qasim Saadallah, this characteristic resulted in a balance between action and thought, but during the Revolution, action often led thought. This is why the Algerian Revolution differs from some other revolutions in being a popular revolution.

The National Liberation Front was not unaware of the French colonial endeavor. Therefore, alongside the armed struggle, it organized the countryside and worked hard to eradicate illiteracy and promote revolutionary ethics based on Arab-Islamic values. This is because the civilizational project of any people is one that seeks to form a single collective opinion and define the features of national sovereignty with the aim of rebuilding a strong state. This is embodied in the goal of the Revolution, which began its civilizational project by liberating the people from Western colonialism and differentiating its identity from other identities²⁴.

4. Critique and Evaluation of the Revolution's Gains

It is a common error to believe that the Algerian Revolution achieved all its objectives and completed its mission merely by attaining independence. Although independent Algeria fulfilled its role in providing the material foundations and objective premises for building Algerian society, it remained deficient in decisively settling its options for achieving a civilizational resolution and formulating cultural liberation. Here, we point out that the decision-makers in the Algerian state after independence prioritized economic and social development issues as the basis for building any state. As time passed, they distanced themselves from the principles of the Revolution and even allowed for the subsequent liquidation of its gains through deliberate postponement of considering existential issues such as national identity. This led to the emergence of a pressure group that adopted French thought²⁵.

The historian Nacer-Eddine Saïdoune observed the absence of a societal project that could serve as a vessel to protect the Revolution's gains, as the saying goes, "If you don't have your own project, you'll be vulnerable to the projects of others." The reason for this lies in the focus on the material aspect and the neglect of the psychological and cultural aspect of the Algerian people's civilizational aspirations. Consequently, human aspirations limited to the stomach overshadowed the aspirations of thought and mind, causing the society to grow organically but remain intellectually impaired, which led to a psychological and spiritual crisis within society.

The concentration in education on the scientific and technical aspect and the neglect of the humanities and social sciences has generated a shortfall in theorization, analysis, understanding, and creativity. Moreover, it encouraged emulation of foreign and Western civilization at the expense of the cultural heritage of the Arab-Islamic civilization, which resulted in the ideas and gains of the Revolution being subjected to a process of domestication and diminishment.

Today, there is an urgent necessity to clarify certain ambiguities and remove misunderstandings regarding issues that have remained unresolved since independence, particularly concerning the question of identity. The evolving circumstances of the state have imposed new realities that necessitate broadening the concept of Jihad in order to put an end to opportunists who do not hesitate to profane the sacred nature of this subject. Efforts must be made to address this in order to fill the cultural, literary, and legal vacuum and block the path of all charlatans²⁶.

Conclusion

Algeria was Muslim before the French colonization, remained Muslim during the period of colonization, and after it. Therefore, the Islamic religion, with the doctrine, methodology, thought, language, conduct, customs, and traditions it entails, and the organic link it imposes with the Islamic world, clearly emerged in a popular national revolution. This definitively established the features of the Algerian personality within the framework of a purposeful national sentiment aimed at preserving dignity and freedom. What remains today for the generation of independence is to reinforce this gain. Here, we can only reiterate the necessity of bringing the Revolution and its principles out from behind dark walls and the domain of empty slogans, into the public sphere of culture and education, making them a powerful weapon for building an integrated society—a provision for thinkers and equipment for intellectuals—to overcome the current situation. Thereby, Algeria can complete its cultural, social, spiritual, and material independence within its Arab-Islamic affiliation.

Footnotes

¹ Albert Devoulx: *Les Edifices religieux de l'ancien Alger*, Ed. Typographie Bastide, 1870, p. 3

² Charles Robert Ageron, *Histoire de l'Algérie Contemporaine* (Contemporary History of Algeria), Publications Oueidat, Beirut, 1986, p. 52.

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- ³ Repetici Chanoine P: *L'Algérie Chrétienne, Esquisse Historique 1830-1930*, Librairie A Nostre Dame, 1930, p. 64.
- ⁴ – SHAT, 1H1646, *HISTOIRE DE LA NATION ALGERIENNE* (History of the Algerian Nation), 1960, p. 6.
- ⁵ Claude COLLOT: *Les Institutions de l'Algérie durant la période coloniale* (Institutions of Algeria during the Colonial Period), Ed. OPU, Algiers, 1987, pp. 6-7
- ⁶ Galal Yahya, *Al-Maghrib Al-Kabir* (The Greater Maghreb), *Modern Ages and the Attack of Colonialism*, Vol. 3, Dar Al-Nahda Al-Arabiya, Beirut, 1981, p. 133
- ⁷ Charle André JULIEN, *Histoire de l'Algérie Contemporaine, La conquête et les débuts de la colonisation (1827 - 1871)* (Contemporary History of Algeria, The Conquest and the Beginnings of Colonization (1827 - 1871)). T. 2, Paris, P.U.F, 1964, p. 425
- ⁸ – SHAT, Op. cit, 6.
- ⁹ Mostefa Lacheraf, *Algeria: Nation and Society*, Dar Al-Qasaba, Algiers, 2007, p. 23.
- ¹⁰ Yahya Bouaziz, *The Policy of Colonial Domination and the Algerian National Movement 1830-1984*, Algiers: University Publications Office, 1985, p. 10
- ¹¹ SHAT, Op. cit, 6.
- ¹² Ibid
- ¹³ Ibid
- ¹⁴ SHAT, 1H1646, *LA NATION ALGERIENNE* (The Algerian Nation), 1960, p. 6
- ¹⁵ Ibid
- ¹⁶ Ibid
- ¹⁷ Rabah Turki, *Al-Ta'leem Al-Qawmi wal-Shakhsiyya Al-Wataniyya 1931-1956M* (National Education and National Personality 1931-1956 AD), *An Educational Study of the Algerian Personality*, National Publishing and Distribution Company, Algiers, p. 93.
- ¹⁸ SHAT, 1H1646, *HISTOIRE DE LA NATION ALGERIENNE* (History of the Algerian Nation), 1960, p. 6
- ¹⁹ *The Essential Texts of the National Liberation Front (1954-1962)*, Ministry of Information and Culture, Algiers, 1979, p. 6.
- ²⁰ SHAT, Op.cit, 6.
- ²¹ Proclamation of November 1st, 1954
- ²² *The Essential Texts of the National Liberation Front (1954-1962)*, Ministry of Information and Culture, Algiers, 1979, p. 6.
- ²³ Mohamed El-Arabi Zoubir, "The National Movement in the Stage of Maturity 1942/1954," *Al-Ru'ya Journal*, No. 2, Algiers, May 1996, p. 97.
- ²⁴ Abdelhamid Mehri, "A Reading of the Proclamation of November 1st," *Awwal November Journal*, No. 168, Algiers, July 2006, p. 16.
- ²⁵ Association of November 1st for the Commemoration and Protection of the Revolution's Legacies in the Aurès, Mustapha Ben Boulaïd and the Algerian Revolution 1954, Dar Al-Houda, Algiers, 1999, p. 1.
- ²⁶ Abdelhamid ZouZou, *Mahattat fi Tarikh Al-Jazā'ir* (Stations in the History of Algeria), Dar Houma, Algiers, 2004, p. 337.

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