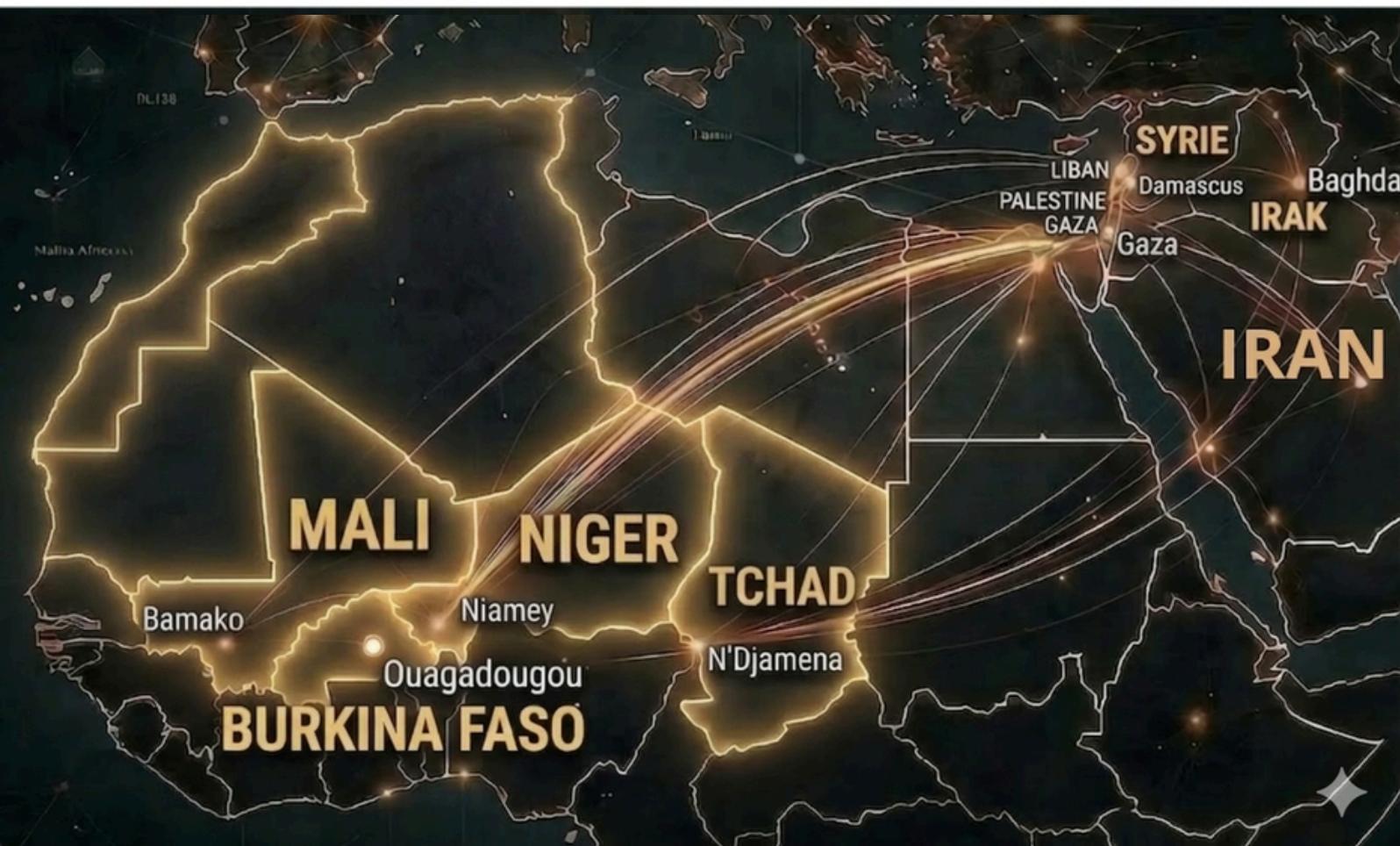


Observatory Letter

SAHELIAN NARRATIVES AND INFORMATIONAL ECHOES OF A WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST



11 March 2026

Introduction

Today, in order to fully understand changes in public opinion and representations of the international scene and its dynamics, it is necessary to break with, or at least supplement, traditional approaches with a genuine analytical netnography[1] approach for various reasons. Firstly, there has been a significant democratisation of access to information that shapes and forms African opinions at all levels, outside the confines of censorship and the mass media, but also, unfortunately, outside the confines of ethical control and repartee. Secondly, although the opinions expressed through social networks, which now determine the relationship with the West – whether real, imagined or fantasised – and its actions on the international stage, are not infallible indicators, they do reveal trends that call for a deep awareness of the changes in political and international relations in the era of digital activism and engagement.

The recent military escalation between Israel, the United States and Iran has sparked a wave of reactions around the world, mobilising both governments and public opinion in various geopolitical contexts. Although in a less assertive and more wait-and-see manner, West Africa and the Sahel have been no exception. Beyond statements of support or condemnation depending on the country, West African public opinion has not failed to seize on the conflict, framing it within its own geopolitical narratives. In this regard, the particular geopolitical configuration in which many countries in the region operate provides a key to understanding these reactions.

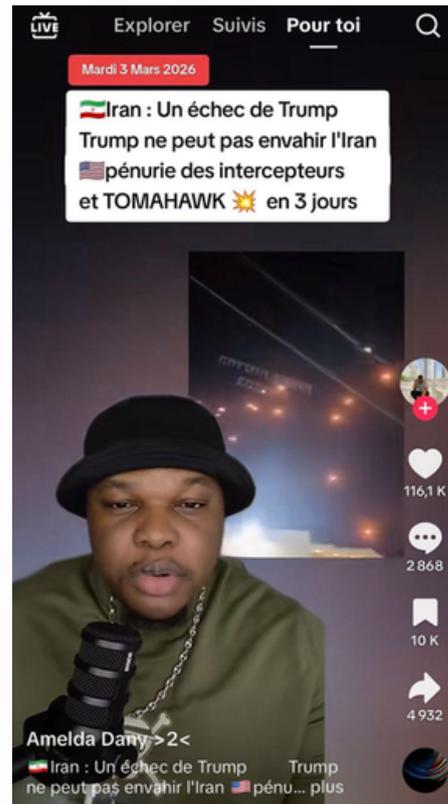
In a context of reconfiguring alliances, public opinion has actively reconstructed a narrative of national ‘sovereignty’ centred on “resistance” to what they refer to as ‘Western imperialism’. It is in this logic that conflicts between ‘the West’ (the United States, Israel, France, etc.) and a country of the ‘global South’ are reinterpreted through the prism of their own trajectories of rupture. Thus, with this conflict, Iran symbolically occupies a prominent place in the formulation of this imaginary. In this sense, in this representation, the American-Israeli-Iranian conflict is not so much a distant conflict in the Persian Gulf as an extension of a global geopolitical order already subject to criticism in the Sahel and West Africa.

The present analysis, based on different representations and imaginaries, through continuous information monitoring, highlights three narratives: 1) a demystification of Western power centred on the failure of American and Israeli military capabilities in the face of Iran; 2) Iran presented as a model of resistance to Western hegemony; 3) the narrative of double standards and hypocrisy on the part of the international community. Taken together, these narratives shed light on how a large part of West African public opinion projects its own sovereignist aspirations onto the global geopolitical stage.

[1] Method of analysing situations through Internet content and social networks, taking into account all ethical considerations based on the specificities and contexts of the subjects under consideration.

1. The narrative of the demystification of Western power

Within the discursive framework of this narrative, the conflict between Israel, the United States and Iran is viewed in terms of the flaws in the myth of American military superpower, the dissensions within the American-Israeli camp and the pro-Western information war at work. Thus, many publications insistently (and sometimes jubilantly) highlight the military setbacks suffered by the United States and its allies. In a video that clearly illustrates the demystifying logic at work, cyber-activist Amelda Dany states: 'A failure. Trump cannot invade Iran. In the US, there is a shortage of interceptors and Tomahawks in three days.' In the same vein, the platform Sahel Libre refers to an 'exhaustion of US stocks in the face of Iran'. Here, the narrative of a strategic weakness of the United States, incapable of sustaining a prolonged conflict, appears to be a figure of speech that seeks to present Washington as structurally fragile, relying on a hegemony based on coercion rather than real superiority. It is in this same vein that Burkinabe cyber-activist Modeste Bassono mocks the US military by relaying fake news about dummy planes painted on the ground by Iran to lure American missiles: "Believing they were neutralising fighter planes, the Americans dropped missiles costing more than \$3,000,000 on fictitious targets. Iran drew planes on the ground to lure Trump's missiles into the scenery. It was simply a decoy. And it boasts of being a great world power." The use of mockery and sarcasm is characteristic of a narrative pattern that seeks to project a sense of symbolic revenge against American power, as a symbol of arrogance and domination. This vein of scepticism is continued in the reaction of a lawyer specialising in democracy and governance issues (@Le Samourai), who states: 'Unbelievable! Against Iran: films and video games in videos of American strikes?' In this video, he raises the issue of the fabrication of war information, suggesting that the images presented by the American media as evidence of military success are in part sequences taken from films and video games. This desire to counter a media narrative perceived as false illustrates the widespread mistrust of Western media in West Africa to a certain extent.



On the other hand, many publications seek to highlight what are considered to be internal divisions within the American-Israeli alliance. These refer to differences between Trump and Netanyahu as evidence of strategic inconsistency on the part of the ‘Western camp’. Cameroonian blogger Dany Scorpio presents this narrative after a week of conflict: ‘Nothing is going well between Trump and Netanyahu. In just six days since their attack on Iran, the two bandits can no longer agree on the outcome of their own heist’. The vocabulary used (‘bandits’ and ‘robbery’) serves to delegitimise the American and Israeli leaders, signalling a clear rejection of any potential Western moral authority. On social network X, cyber-activist Sissoko Sora Damba extends this narrative on the flaws in the US-Israel coalition, arguing that Trump has been reduced to seeking help from unexpected partners: “After seeking help from the Europeans and receiving the blessing of the Gulf princes, Trump is now asking for help from the Ukrainian comedian to deal with Iranian drones. It just goes to show that sometimes arrogance and power are not enough. Perhaps there is a small lesson here for Trump, to whom Guide Khamenei repeated three times that he was no more arrogant than Nimrod and the Pharaoh.” By invoking these references, the cyber-activist seeks to place the conflict in a symbolic religious space that resonates in the Muslim imagination.

The final aspect of this narrative is the accusation of information manipulation, suggesting that the West is manipulating information to hide its defeats and deceive world opinion. In a video post, Dany Scorpio points out what he sees as a contradiction between the reality of the damage in Iran and the narrative of certain European media outlets: 'CNN reveals the damage inflicted on their country by Iran. Meanwhile, the Europeans are presenting us with the opposite.' This tension between CNN (perceived here as paradoxically more honest than the European media) and the European channels reinforces the idea of a hierarchy of disinformation in which Europe occupies the most problematic position. Nathalie Yamb, a well-known voice in pan-Africanist circles, ironically sums up the contradiction between Western discourse on Iranian women's rights and military action against Iran in a post purportedly showing bombings in Tehran: 'The American-Israeli axis of good so dear to Europeans is saving Iranian women by bombing Tehran.' By mocking Western humanitarian discourse (the 'liberation' of Iranian women), the Swiss-Cameroonian activist seeks to expose what she perceives as a cynical exploitation of human rights. In the same vein, the Burkinabe platform 'Révolution africaine en marche' (African Revolution in Progress) fuels this narrative by relaying unverified information about military events. The platform claims that 'Iranian state television is showing photos of 180 captured American soldiers'. Beyond the false nature of this information, its circulation illustrates a common dynamic in the information sphere during times of conflict, whereby the line between verified facts and desired facts is blurred for symbolic rather than informational purposes.

2. The representation of Iran as a model of resistance to Western hegemony

In this narrative, Iran is presented as a mirror and a projection of the geopolitical situation of many West African countries. In this respect, Tehran becomes a model country that refuses to submit to the hegemonic Western powers. The platform Actualité Hebdo expresses this idea with exemplary clarity: 'Iran has shown the world that it is possible to have sovereignty.'

This formulation projects the idea that the evolution of the conflict is a useful political lesson for ESA countries. Burkinabe influencer Romy226 echoes the same thesis in unequivocal terms: 'Iran defends its sovereignty.' In the same vein, Ivorian cyber-activist Zyastone suggests Iran's ability to retaliate militarily: 'Iran makes Tel Aviv tremble.' In this case, Tel Aviv, which embodies Israel's secure power in the global imagination, is presented here as faltering. This technical admiration for Iran's military capabilities is common: 'It's crazy, the Iranians have these unknown missile weapons,' says influencer Boulay Salam. The use of slang signals a discourse rooted in popular digital culture, aimed at a young audience.

Furthermore, several reactions establish a direct link between the foreign policy of the AES countries and the ongoing conflict. Thus, the AES's diplomacy with Iran is seen as an example of sovereignty. It is in this light that the February 2026 visit of the Burkinabe Minister of Defence to Tehran is reframed. The Soutien AES platform states: 'That's what sovereignty is all about, making a conscious choice to diversify our partners. We don't look to anyone else to forge our relationships (...) They want to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, while they themselves possess them. They want others to hate Iran as much as they do because they are unable to fight them.'

This assertion articulates the demand for Burkina Faso's diplomatic autonomy, a denunciation of Western double standards towards Iran and Israel, and the idea that the West is seeking to impose its own interpretations. In doing so, the phrase 'we don't look anyone in the eye to forge our relationships' is part of a culturally rooted lexicon.



Furthermore, the issue of Islamic solidarity is raised, albeit in a contradictory manner. For example, a Burkinabe citizen frames the conflict in religious terms: 'This war will result in victory for the righteous (Iran and its allies) and defeat for the arrogant (the US and its allies), Inshallah.' The semantic opposition between 'righteous' and 'arrogant' reveals an almost theological-political view of the conflict, in which Iran's potential victory is perceived as morally and spiritually guaranteed. Conversely, however, Burkinabe cyber-activist Cinkansene Sana questions the coherence of Islamic solidarity in view of Saudi Arabia's position: 'Saudi Arabia has stated that it will retaliate militarily against Iran if US bases in the Kingdom continue to be attacked. But where is Muslim solidarity?' This publication is of great interest in that it presents an analytical argument rather than a single narrative, in that geopolitical divisions within the Muslim world do not give way to the idea of a community of faith. Similarly, Modeste Bassono from Burkina Faso also addresses this aspect of the conflict, albeit in an ironic tone: "Even God is astonished by the human race. Despite the fact that we are in a period of piety, Christians and Muslims are tearing each other apart. Meanwhile, the môgô of 15 May are in a state of total serenity." Thus, by contrasting the warlike agitation of the 'Abrahamic religions' with the serenity of practitioners of African traditions (15 May is the day of customs and traditions in Burkina Faso), the cyber-activist introduces a spiritual reading of the conflict into an Afrocentric grammar. In addition, another religious interpretation is visible in the fact that the figure of former Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is elevated to the rank of martyr for the Islamic cause by a Senegalese internet user: 'He left in the middle of Ramadan after defending the entire Muslim community. Ali Khamenei remained a committed Muslim until the end.'

3. The narrative of double standards and hypocrisy in the international community

Finally, there is the narrative of double standards and hypocrisy in the international community. This is based on a comparative analysis that contrasts the international community's reactions to situations deemed similar, in order to deduce a double standard. First, many publications seek to reverse the roles of victim and aggressor as they are constructed, according to them, by the Western media. In this logic, the victims are Iran (or Russia) and the aggressors are Israel (or the United States). The AES Support platform provides the most systematic formulation of this: "This is what Westerners want us to believe: 1- Russia = INVADER / 2- Iran = TERRORIST / 3- USA = intervention to restore order / 4- Israel = they are defending themselves. But look at the current geopolitical situation: between Israel, the USA and Iran, who is attacking whom? Who is defending themselves? Between Israel and Palestine, who is invading whom? We live in a world where the oppressor plays the victim." With an accessible argument, the platform constructs a counter-narrative that lists the falsified equivalences of Western discourse by asking rhetorical questions that reverse these equivalences. The phrase 'We live in a world where the oppressor plays the victim' is effective in that it can simultaneously be applied in this logic to Palestine, Iran, Russia, and the Sahel itself in relation to France.



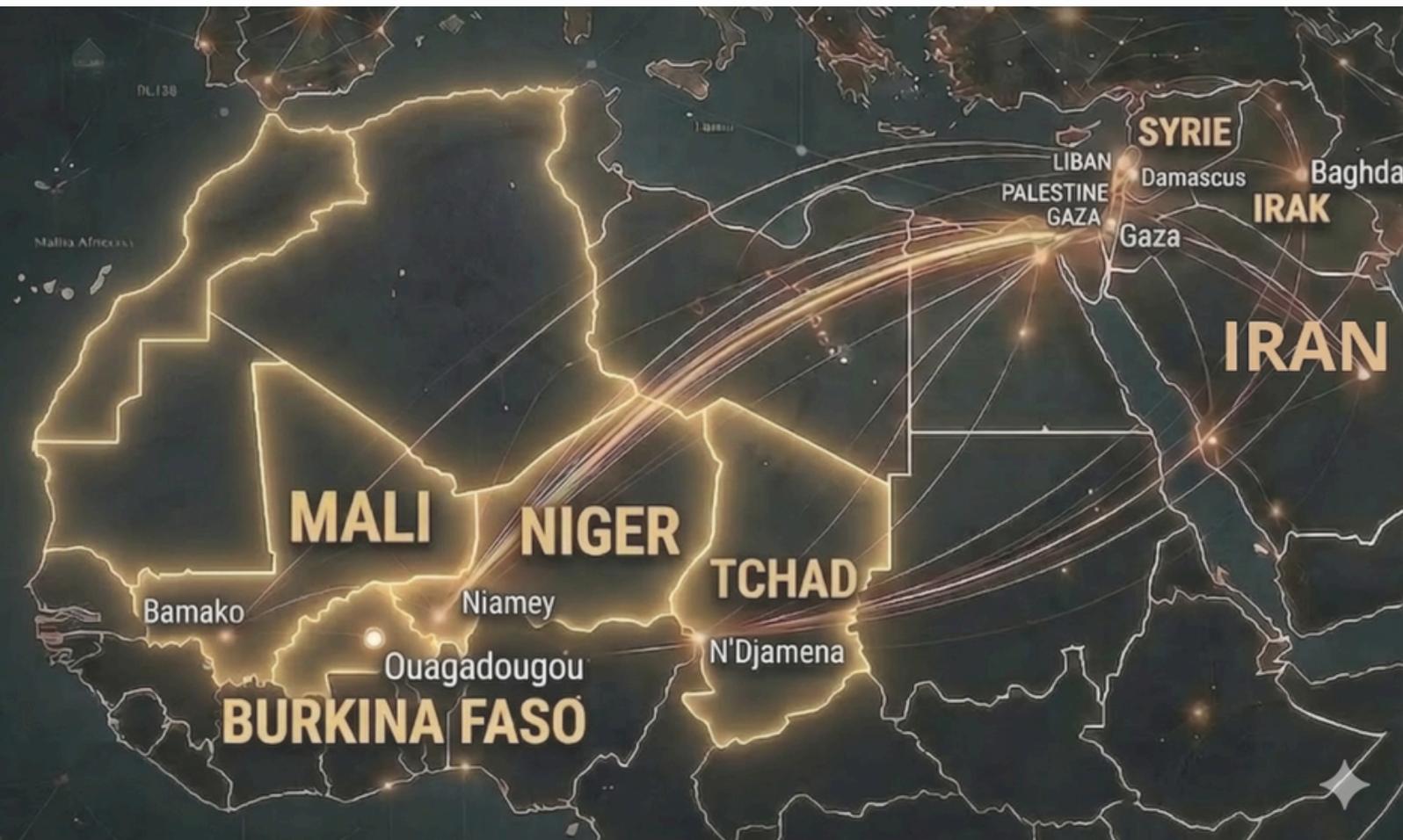
In the same vein, some point to what they see as differential treatment of civilian victims based on their geographical location and the identity of their perpetrators. Cyber activist Dany Scorpio makes this argument based on a specific fact: "More than 160 students killed by American bombing of a school, without condemnation from the IC. What if Russia had done the same thing in Ukraine?". This rhetorical structure is classic but remains effective. It poses the counterfactual question 'What if it were Russia?' in order to expose an asymmetry in the treatment of the international community, without formally demonstrating it. In addition, publications on the 'African Revolution in Progress' platform fuel the idea of defections within the American-Israeli coalition in order to present them as further signs of the failure of the American project: 'Iraqi Kurds reject Trump's call to fight Iran... a bitter defeat for the US'. Here, the non-intervention of the Iraqi Kurds is falsely presented as a refusal on their part in order to discredit the Israeli-American alliance by projecting the image of an American power incapable of mobilising its regional partners. Further proof that the conflict is being reinterpreted in the light of West African geopolitical dynamics, the BIR de la communication (a pro-AES digital influence network) does not fail to take a dig at its Ivorian neighbour, considered pro-Western. By stating 'that Iran should be aware that there is an American base in Côte d'Ivoire', the BIR is referring ironically to the strikes that Iran carried out against the American base at Al-Udeid in Qatar.

Conclusion

At the end of this analysis, it appears that the Iran-Israel-United States conflict constituted, in part of the Sahelian and West African digital space, not so much an object of information as a discursive operator, that is, an external event mobilised to produce, consolidate and disseminate a pre-existing political narrative. Thus, the three narratives identified function as an interpretative framework articulated around a binary opposition between a Western hegemony perceived as declining and illegitimate, and a global South in a position of counter-hegemonic resistance. The consistency of this framework across registers as varied as geopolitical analysis, derision, religious references and popular language attests to its roots in contemporary local socio-political imaginaries. Furthermore, it should be noted that this interpretation should not be confused with the majority of West African public opinion. In this sense, it more accurately reflects the dynamics specific to polarised digital spaces, where algorithms and cliques sometimes tend to amplify certain dominant discourses at the expense of dissenting voices. On the other hand, the industrial circulation of fake news invites us to treat these discourses less as factual sources and more as indicators of certain collective representations, which are reappropriated and reinterpreted in the service of a political-ideological project. However, the virtual absence of the religious dimension in these representations, apart from a few reactions in countries such as Senegal, heralds the emergence of a new narrative increasingly dominated by an increasingly sovereignist representation of international relations, even though the idea of a 'Global South' remains a utopia of elitist discourse. It is clear that this 'Global South' is today undermined by internal power relations, not to mention the economic interests that further divide the countries that claim to constitute it.

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