



# Displacement and Securitization in the Dadaab Refugee Camp in Kenya

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**Abstract:** *This study interrogates the nexus between terrorism threats and the securitization of refugee migration in Kenya's Dadaab refugee camp. More specifically, it analyzes how security risks associated with terrorism, i.e., foreign fighter penetration, radicalization, and border permeability between Kenya and Somalia, influence state response and migration policy. Using a mixed qualitative design, the study collected information through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis to achieve a rich understanding of host community and refugee lives. The results show that securitization practices such as encampment, enhanced surveillance, and control of mobility, although intended to prevent terrorism, have unintended consequences: reinforcing socio-economic marginalization, limiting access to essential services, and straining Kenya-Somalia diplomatic relations. The research concludes that while securitization addresses immediate security requirements, it exacerbates exclusion and vulnerability that have the potential to enhance radicalization threats. It recommends balanced migration policies that converge humanitarian protection with security requirements through inclusive communal engagement and evidence-based counter-terrorism policies.*

**Keywords:** *Refugee, Refugee securitization, Kenya, Somalia, terrorism, border, marginalized*

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## 1. Introduction

The movement of refugees has increasingly been associated with cross-border conflict and regional instability (Lohrmann, 2000; Betts, 2021). While migration was traditionally framed within humanitarian and development perspectives, it is now increasingly linked to concerns about radicalization and extremism (Schmid, 2016; Adepoju, 2022). In the Kenyan context, these evolving narratives are shaped by the persistent threat of Al-Shabaab in Somalia, which has significantly influenced how refugee flows are perceived and governed.

This paper argues that the refugee security crisis in Kenya is not only driven by terrorism but is further exacerbated by the securitization of refugee populations. Securitization refers to the process by which political actors construct certain issues or groups as existential threats requiring extraordinary state intervention, often representing an extreme form of politicization (Baysal, 2020; Wæver, 2018). Through political discourse and institutional practices, refugees are increasingly framed as potential security risks, resulting in policy responses that intertwine refugee management with counterterrorism objectives (Buzan, 2018; Ogbonna et al., 2023).

Border dynamics along the Kenya–Somalia frontier further complicates this relationship. Refugee migration and settlement patterns are highly dynamic, often shifting in response to changing security conditions, particularly under the influence of Al-Shabaab (Williams, 2023). This raises critical questions as to whether Al-Shabaab directly shapes refugee movements or opportunistically exploits them to consolidate power. The study therefore examines the interaction between refugee securitization, border governance, and state security dynamics within this volatile context (Jaji, 2013; Reuben et al., 2021).

The analysis is guided by three key dimensions: first, the conceptual link between terrorism and migration; second, the mechanisms through which securitization is operationalized; and third, the implications of these processes for policy at national, regional, and global levels. In Kenya, securitization has generated legal and social ambiguities that heighten refugee vulnerability. These include deportation anxieties, family separations, and restricted access to essential services such as healthcare and education (Gitonga, 2018; Voppen, 2017).

Focusing particularly on contexts such as Dadaab refugee camp, the paper critically reflects on how securitization shapes both refugee experiences and national security outcomes. It concludes by emphasizing the need for comprehensive policy frameworks that integrate local, national, and regional perspectives while prioritizing refugee protection and security (UNHCR, 2024).

## 1.1 Statement of the problem

Terrorism linked to Somalia, particularly from groups such as al-Shabaab, has intensified security concerns in host countries and heightened tensions around migration. The *Global Terrorism Index Report (2023)* notes that Sub-Saharan Africa has recorded the fastest rise in terrorism-related deaths, increasing by 8%. This escalation has driven large-scale displacement, with about 3.8 million Somalis forced to flee due to conflict and insurgency (UNHCR, 2023). Kenya hosts a significant share of these refugees, approximately 300,000 Somalis within a broader population of 700,000 asylum seekers, placing pressure on its social, economic, and political systems. Consequently, public anxiety has influenced stricter policies that frame migration as a security issue.

While existing literature links perceived threats to policy responses, limited attention has been given to how local perceptions shape national approaches. This study addresses this gap by examining how economic constraints and security concerns influence community attitudes, particularly in Dadaab, to inform balanced and context-sensitive migration policies.

## 1.2 Objectives of the study

Examine the security risks associated with terrorism, i.e., foreign fighter penetration, radicalization, and border permeability between Kenya and Somalia, influence state response and migration policy.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

Securitization theory, as a theory put forward by Buzan, de Wilde, and Wæver (1998) and more recent publications by Ogbonna et al. (2023), re-conceptualizes security as a socially constructed experience shaped by political actors who frame issues in terms of existential threats. This expansion of the concept encompasses non-traditional security threats such as refugee migration, disputed within political arenas (Balzacq et al., 2015). Securitization is a strategy, in the form of policy, employed to enhance unique governance policies, towards new emerging issues.

Within East Africa, open borders facilitate economic and security issues like arms trafficking, human smuggling, and terrorist movement (National Crime Research Centre, 2018; Aniche et al., 2021). The Kenya-Somalia border is a disputed area with hybrid societies, where Somali clans traverse geopolitical boundaries to create transnational social relations (Jaji, 2013; Reuben et al., 2021). Scarcity of state presence increases openness while complicating security governance.

Beck (2017) argues that securitization risks essentializing refugees as threats, compromising humanitarian values and social cohesion. Similarly, Schmid (2016) and Williams (2023) point out that simplification of migration-terrorism links conceals intricate socio-political complexities and can feed into reactionary security approaches.

Kenya's counter-terrorism policies, for instance, the formation of specialized squads like the Anti-Terrorist Police Unit (ATPU) and operations in the Kenya-Somalia border, reflect efforts to counter Al-Shabaab but have been a source of human rights concern and have violated refugee freedoms (Wasike, 2021; Accord, 2016). Ogbonna et al. (2023) posit that available governance mechanisms do not adequately weigh security against refugee protection.

### 2.2 Theoretical Framework

Securitization theory serves as the basis for this study of Kenya's political securitization of refugee migration (Mlambo, 2021; Buzan et al., 1998). Three pillars need to come together: realization of an existential threat,

legitimation of emergency governance measures, and significant effects on inter-unit relations. Kenyan authorities cast refugee flows as threats linked to potential militant penetration and socio-economic destabilization, making exceptional policies like encampment legitimate (Balzacq et al., 2015; Agwanda, 2022).

Securitizing agents, politicians, and security institutions exercise institutional power to de-segregate these stories beyond the traditional political arenas (Ogbonna et al., 2023). This framework accounts for the political and social reasons behind refugee securitization in Kenya.

### **2.3 Kenya-Somalia Border Nexus**

The Kenya-Somalia border is a very representative example of an ultra-permeable, complex border, as a Somali clan, a Kenyan ethnic group, and other East African communities (Jaji, 2013; Reuben et al., 2021). Where state control is limited, illicit trade, smuggling, and militant mobilization thrive (National Crime Research Centre, 2018). This permeability creates security challenges with migration. Terrorist tactics utilize border mobility, strengthening the securitization of refugee communities living in camps near the border (Jaji, 2013).

### **2.4 Refugee Life in Dadaab**

Dadaab, established in 1991, is one of the world's biggest refugee complexes with a majority of Somali refugees but also South Sudanese, Ethiopians, and Eritreans (Freeman, 2019). The refugees suffer from overcrowding, lack of resources, bad healthcare, and a shortage of education (Bashir, 2018; McSweeney, 2012).

Humanitarian access is restricted by securitization-driven bureaucratic and security measures, including curfews and enhanced policing in response to Al-Shabaab penetration (Amnesty International, 2017). Limits on refugee mobility also impact economic livelihood and market access, further enhancing dependency.

### **2.5 Constructing Refugee Securitization**

Securitization reframes refugee migration in terms of national security, often trumping humanitarian priorities (Gitonga, 2018). Political rhetoric, media depictions, and policy are informed by refugees' perceived threats, legitimizing practices that include detention, deportation, and surveillance (Voppen, 2017).

This type of securitization is pro-exclusion, pro-stigma, and pro-vulnerability and tends to negate refugee access to

protection and minimum services (Schuster, 2011). It can limit refugees to security concerns rather than rights-holders.

## **3. Methodology**

This section outlines the methodological framework adopted to investigate the securitization of refugee displacement in Kenya, with a specific focus on the Dadaab refugee complex. It describes the research design, sampling strategies, data collection tools and procedures, methods of data analysis, and ethical considerations that guided the study. Anchored in a phenomenological approach and informed by securitization theory, the methodology was designed to capture participants lived experiences while ensuring rigor, credibility, and contextual relevance. The section provides a systematic account of how data were generated, managed, and analyzed to address the research objectives and contribute to a nuanced understanding of the migration–security nexus.

### **3.1 Research Design**

The study adopted a phenomenological research design to explore lived experiences surrounding the securitization of refugee displacement in Kenya. Phenomenology focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and make meaning of shared experiences within a specific context (Creswell & Poth, 2022). Guided by securitization theory, the design enabled a holistic analysis of how terrorism concerns shape migration policies and Kenya–Somalia relations. A mixed-methods orientation was applied, with qualitative methods forming the core approach, while quantitative techniques were limited to analyzing demographic characteristics. This design was appropriate given the evolving and context-specific nature of securitization in the Kenya–Somalia border region, allowing for in-depth, descriptive insights grounded in participants lived realities (Neubauer et al., 2019).

### **3.2 Sampling and Samples**

The study was conducted in the Dadaab refugee complex in Garissa County due to its proximity to the Kenya–Somalia border and its relevance as a major refugee-hosting area. The target population comprised refugees, host community members, and state officials involved in border management and security. Participants included community leaders, business representatives, residents, immigration officers, and security personnel.

A multistage sampling strategy was employed. Purposive sampling identified key informants with relevant expertise, while snowball sampling facilitated access to influential

community actors. Convenience sampling was used to recruit readily available participants. Inclusion criteria required participants to have resided in the area for at least five years and to be proficient in Kiswahili.

Sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, defined as the point at which no new themes emerge (Guest et al., 2020). The study included two focus group discussions (FGDs) comprising 6–12 participants each and 12 in-depth interviews, resulting in a total sample of 36 participants. This ensured both depth and diversity of perspectives.

### 3.3 Data Collection Tools

Primary data were collected using an interview guide and FGD protocols. The interview guide enabled structured yet flexible engagement, allowing for probing and clarification of complex issues. FGDs were conducted separately for refugees and host community members to capture shared experiences and group dynamics (Krueger & Casey, 2021).

Pilot testing was undertaken to refine the instruments, identify ambiguities, and enhance clarity. Pretests involved experts in migration and security, ensuring contextual relevance and validity. Trustworthiness was enhanced through credibility and confirmability measures, including prolonged engagement, triangulation of data sources, and maintenance of an audit trail (Nowell et al., 2017; updated applications discussed in Stahl & King, 2020).

### 3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection followed a systematic and structured process. Pre-field activities included identifying participants, scheduling interviews, and organizing logistics. During fieldwork, participants were provided with detailed information about the study, and informed consent was obtained before participation.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted using the interview guide, with responses documented through note-taking and audio recording where consent was granted. FGDs were facilitated in controlled settings to encourage open and interactive discussions. All data were transcribed verbatim to preserve accuracy and contextual meaning.

Secondary data were obtained from scholarly articles, policy documents, and organizational reports to complement primary findings. This triangulated approach enhanced the validity and comprehensiveness of the study (Flick, 2022).

## 3.5 Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed thematically through coding, categorization, and interpretation of emerging patterns. The analysis focused on identifying relationships between migration, terrorism perceptions, and policy responses. Quantitative data, primarily demographic information, were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, and tables.

Integration of qualitative and quantitative findings enabled comprehensive interpretation and strengthened analytical rigor. Data were presented descriptively, supported by comparisons and inferences aligned with the research objectives. This approach ensured coherence between empirical findings and the theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

## 3.6 Ethical Concerns

Given the sensitivity of terrorism and security-related issues, strict ethical standards were upheld throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained to protect participants from potential risks.

The researcher ensured that questions were framed carefully to avoid distress or harm. A research permit was obtained to legitimize the study process, and all data were securely stored and used solely for academic purposes. Ethical principles such as respect for persons, beneficence, and justice guided the entire research process (World Health Organization, 2021).

## 4. Results and Discussion

The study indicated that securitization of refugees in Dadaab is terrorism-related risk factor-driven but has implications beyond national security into humanitarian and diplomatic realms. Four findings were made:

### 4.1 Factors heightening Terrorism links

It was noted by respondents that foreign fighters getting entangled in refugee flows, porous borders, and the radicalization of alienated youth are the most significant threats. Spillovers of criminality, including clannism and smuggling, further entrenched insecurities. These findings confirm Schmid's (2016) assertion that displacement settings are susceptible to being manipulated by terrorist networks but also suggest securitization discourses

overemphasize refugees' threat profile, perpetuating stigma on the broader population.

Interviewees underlined that the intersection of refugee movements with foreign fighters poses a complex security dilemma in the region. Many youth who have become displaced, and face socio-economic exclusion and limited opportunities are compelled to radicalization and enlistment in extremist groups (Hassan, 2021). Permeable borders, which enable unregulated flows, further complicate refugee dynamics, as militants exploit those movements as infiltration covers into host states. The intersections of escalatory factors create a multi-layered and complex security threat, requiring policy responses beyond the narrowed gaze of securitization to include social inclusion and community resilience programs (Mwangi & Otieno, 2022).

Beyond direct threats to security posed by militants fast-tracking into host country systems, spillover criminality in the form of clannism, and smuggling activities increase regional insecurities. Where extremist activity, criminality, and poor governance intersect, hybrid security threats erode existing systems of governance and economy (Schmid, 2016). However, securitization discourses tend to deepen the perceived threats of refugees themselves, heightening the vulnerabilities and stigmatizing the entire communities, not to mention the non-security threats faced by residents (Abdi & Yusuf, 2020). The mischaracterization of refugees weakens the possibility for productive and constructive efforts of cooperation between states, regional communities, and displaced persons, indicating the necessity of understanding policy discourses rather than fear-based narratives.

## 4.2 Effects of Securitization on Refugees

Kenya's counterterrorism policies, encampment, mass arrests, and vetting of the police were experienced as limiting, exclusionary, and dehumanizing. Refugees saw restriction of movement, cut-off economic opportunities, and the slowing down of aid delivery. Bashir's (2018) and Amnesty International's (2017) agree with these findings, where they note that securitization chokes humanitarian space. Importantly, exclusion can breed resentment, and this can feed into radicalization, hence creating the same insecurity that securitization is seeking to mitigate.

The study adds to our understanding of how securitization functions in practice in Dadaab. The research revealed that securitization is more than just rhetoric; it manifests in relationships of governance that have an impact on access based on the provision of services, livelihood and legal protections. In particular, respondents identified the

Kenya–Somalia border as a site of overlapping vulnerabilities: porous points of crossing, informal trade routes, and a limited state presence generate permissive pathways for militant actors and illicitly networked actors (Jaji, 2013; National Crime Research Centre, 2018). Evidence from the field suggests that movement across these boundaries often involves actors who are almost indistinguishable from ordinary refugees, an aspect that complicates security screening and encourages sweeping policies that render community members suspect (Schmid, 2016).

Humanitarian actors in Dadaab repeatedly highlighted how operational space was shrinking due to security priorities. Aid convoys needed police escorts, registration processes became prolonged, and movement restrictions meant humanitarian donors were unable to deliver essential food and medicine. These findings align with warnings from Amnesty International (2017), which noted that securitization policies choke off humanitarian space. The reduction in provision of services was damaging not only to the refugees but also had a spillover effect on host communities, who relied on the refugee economy for trade and services. As such, securitization diminishes not only refugee welfare but also wider regional development goals.

A further dimension is the gendered impacts of securitization. In focus group discussions, women expressed how they were disproportionately burdened: curfews and limited mobility affected their capacity to access markets, school, or health services. This finding was echoed in the work of McSweeney (2012), who argued that environmental and security pressures compound vulnerabilities for women and children in situations of displacement. Including a gender perspective, therefore, extends our conversation around securitization because it signals that not everyone experiences securitization equally, and instead, existing social inequalities intersect with securitization.

## 4.3 Refugee, host relations and Resource Competition

Policies of securitization have deepened tensions with host communities over matters such as water, grazing land, and any aid resources, raising the fear of sparking localized violence. In a positive light, informal trade and solidarity amongst both host and refugee communities emerged. This portrays a sense of reconciliation despite systemic constraints. These perspectives as Jaji's (2013) notes, highlight that securitization can destabilize social unity while promoting adaptive coping.

The perceptions of the host communities also demonstrated a securitized conception of refugees. Local community

members often articulated competition for scarce resources, water points, pastoral land, and humanitarian flows of money as key tensions (Jaji, 2013; Voppen, 2017). Political framing that elevates narratives of threat also encourages exclusionary practices at the county and national level and shapes an atmosphere where achieving social cohesion is difficult. It is important to emphasize that these tensions were not singular: many host community actors expressed solidarity and called for joint development interventions that would reduce competition and build shared economic opportunities, suggesting a policy space for at least some reconciliation if adequately resourced and politically endorsed (Bashir, 2018).

Insights from qualitative data, including focus groups and key informant interviews, indicate sources of securitization as mechanisms of impact upon daily life in the camp. Security-led policies, such as enhanced curfews, identity checks, and police accompany aid operations, restrict economic activity and refugees' ability to pursue typical livelihoods (Amnesty International, 2017; Bashir, 2018). These situations reduce some immediate threat vectors while ultimately facilitating the accumulation of grievances and frustrations within idle contexts. Relatedly, several informants noted heightened vulnerability to extremist messaging and recruitment by networks seeking to exploit social isolation and economic vulnerability (Williams, 2023; Aizawa, 2020). In addition to this, the interviews noted that encampment as a policy instrument both stigmatizes refugees and further reduces the possibility for informal integration into the host economies. Together, these realities contribute to enhanced risk of radicalization as both stigmatization and marginalization are historically linked to risk of radicalization (Lischer, 2017; Musau, 2021).

#### **4.4 Kenya–Somalia Relations and Regional Security**

Restrictive refugee policies have diplomatic consequences. For Kenya, the approach through securitization frequently tests bilateral relations with Somalia, which makes interventions such as AMISOM coordination more difficult, and interferes with cross-border trade. Respondents highlighted that although securitization deters infiltration, it is also hurtful to regional cooperation and trust. These facts echo Agwanda (2022), who points out that securitization devoid of cooperative diplomacy is likely to ensure insecurity throughout East Africa.

In addition, Kenya's restrictive encampment approach to refugees must also be framed in the broader geopolitical context of the Horn of Africa, where conflicts, land, and competition for natural resources can aggravate tensions. The border between Kenya and Somalia is porous,

allowing for not only cross-border ethnic and clan ties but also contributing to the difficulty of contesting groups like Al-Shabaab. Elmi (2023) observes that strict security measures to control refugee movements can push displaced populations into more vulnerable and clandestine conditions, creating conditions conducive to radicalization and creating barriers to regional peace efforts. In the end, balancing states' regional security needs with humanitarian needs necessitates integrated regional strategies that promote collaborative engagement and social responsibility among states in East Africa.

Theoretically, the Kenyan case illustrates the flexibility of securitization theory by demonstrating that refugees can be both victims of actions and threats. This complicates binaries in security studies that consider refugees only as either passive humanitarian subjects or as active threats to security. The phenomenon of refugee lives demonstrates, as evidenced, that they are complex actors: lacking full rights of inclusion but also exercising agency through informal trade, transnational networks, and political activism. Understanding this complexity is important for conceptualizing just and reasonable diplomatic policies (Brown & Smith, 2021).

### **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

#### **5.1 Conclusion**

The findings paint a picture of a paradox: on the one hand, securitization is intended to protect the state from terrorism; on the other hand, it excludes refugees, widens social divisions, and discourages regional relationships. Evidence suggests that securitization is not a neutral response to security threats but a politically constructed practice that can increase vulnerabilities. Intertwining humanitarian protection with authentic security issues requires participative policymaking, transboundary cooperation, and civic engagement.

Additional findings added to the argument and understanding of securitization were that, because of the porous nature of the Kenya-Somalia border, there is the transfer of foreign fighters and illegal weapons that augment the securitization discourse. Respondents indicated that the mass encampment policies often normalized cycles of exclusion that made young men more vulnerable to radicalization. The study also found that humanitarian agencies faced restricted access due to security protocols to provide food aid and medical assistance, which took time. This made refugees even more vulnerable to insecurity and created a sense of resentment for the state. Similarly, host communities saw refugees as competing for limited resources, thus creating a sense of competition and tensions. These examples suggest that the

idea of securitization was meant to operationalize security but it paradoxically creates new insecurities for both refugee and host communities.

The research demonstrates the opposing impact of securitization on refugee governance in Kenya. Securitization processes exclude refugees from governance based on protecting freedoms, increase competition for resources, and negatively contribute to refugees' welfare and social cohesion in the efforts of counter terrorism. Sustainable refugee protection involves a balance of securitization and human rights. A multi-dimensional and collaborative strategy can assist Kenya in meeting its dual challenge of security and humanitarian protection.

## **5.2 Recommendations**

The findings point to the need for a more balanced and grounded approach to refugee governance, one that takes security concerns seriously while also responding to the everyday realities of refugees and host communities. Rather than treating these priorities as competing, policy and practice should deliberately integrate them.

### **1. Government-led inclusive policy reform**

The Government of Kenya, through the Ministry of Interior and relevant agencies, should lead the development of inclusive refugee policies that actively incorporate the perspectives of both refugees and host communities. This can be done through structured consultations, local forums in Dadaab, and participatory policy reviews. The aim is to ensure that lived realities inform security measures and do not unintentionally deepen marginalization (Jaji, 2013; Bashir, 2018).

### **2. Economic empowerment through multi-actor partnerships**

County governments, NGOs, and development partners should jointly implement economic empowerment programmes targeting both refugees and host populations. These should include vocational training, access to microfinance, and small business development support. Practical delivery can involve local training centres, mobile financial services, and mentorship programmes. Strengthening livelihoods in this way reduces economic strain and lowers vulnerability to crime and radicalization.

### **3. Investment in essential services in host regions**

National and county governments, supported by international agencies, should scale up investments in healthcare, education, sanitation, and water infrastructure in refugee-hosting areas. Service expansion must benefit

both refugees and local communities to prevent perceptions of inequality. This can be achieved through joint service delivery models and integrated planning at the county level.

### **4. Strengthening social cohesion at the community level**

Local administrators, civil society organizations, and community leaders should facilitate regular dialogue platforms that bring together refugees and host communities. These can take the form of peace forums, joint cultural activities, and conflict resolution committees. Such initiatives help reduce mistrust, address misinformation, and build everyday cooperation.

### **5. Shift from blanket securitization to intelligence-led security**

Security agencies should prioritize intelligence-led border management and targeted counterterrorism operations over broad restrictive measures such as mass encampment. This involves strengthening surveillance systems, community policing, and cross-border intelligence sharing with Somalia. A more precise approach enhances security without unnecessarily restricting refugee rights.

### **6. Expand refugee integration opportunities**

Government and development partners should expand access to education, skills training, and financial inclusion for refugees. Allowing refugees to participate meaningfully in local economies reduces dependency and social exclusion. Clear policy guidelines and implementation frameworks are needed to operationalize integration in practice.

### **7. Improve humanitarian access through coordinated systems**

Relevant authorities should streamline security procedures affecting humanitarian actors to avoid delays in aid delivery. This includes establishing clear protocols, faster clearance systems, and coordination desks between security agencies and humanitarian organizations to ensure timely and efficient service provision.

### **8. Enhance Kenya–Somalia cooperation on migration and security**

Both governments should strengthen bilateral frameworks for managing migration and addressing cross-border security threats. This can include joint border committees, shared intelligence platforms, and coordinated responses to displacement and extremism, while maintaining commitments to refugee protection.

## 9. Institutionalize continuous policy review and learning

Finally, policymakers and research institutions should establish mechanisms for regular monitoring and evaluation of securitization policies. Using evidence from local contexts, including Dadaab, policies can be adjusted to minimize harm and prevent unintended consequences such as increased alienation or radicalization (Ogbonna et al., 2023).

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