

The Relationship Between Armed Conflict and State Failure in Africa: Towards a Contemporary Analysis



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Abstract

This paper discusses the link between armed conflict and state failure in Africa. It argues that these concepts are not mutually exclusive but rather reinforce one another. The paper further argues that the inability of states to deliver public goods to a vast majority of citizens coupled with the failure to exert control over given territories provide a framework for generating both some proximate and root cause(s) of armed conflict in Africa. The paper found that peace, security and other accompanying development outcomes have over the years been undermined as a result of the effects of armed conflict and state failure. While there is no easy solution to ending armed conflict or resuscitating failed and collapsed states, an appreciation of both the internal and external forces that continue to shape and influence Africa's socio-economic and political landscape represents an important step towards finding a lasting solution to the problem.

Keywords: Armed Conflict, State, State Failure, Africa

Introduction

Africa is often viewed or portrayed as a continent synonymous with economic woes, diseases, political instability and above all armed conflicts. In the early 1990s, the outbreak and spread of armed conflict across the region assumed a worrying dimension considering the impact of such conflicts as well as their overreaching implications on peace and security across the continent and beyond. Armed conflicts have resulted in the breakdown of states and governments, leading to what has come to be known as weak' to 'failing' 'failed' and even 'collapsed' states.

Although the world has witnessed a steady decline in the outbreak of armed conflict within the last decade compared to the early 1990s, the risks and potentials of ethno-religious, social, economic and political violence continue to rise high in countries like the DRC, Mali, Cote D'Ivoire, Sudan, Chad, Somalia, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda and Mozambique. Different groups within these states are rising to challenge the powers of the central government over issues ranging from social injustices to political

marginalization. The popular revolt in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya has further heightened the risk of internal war as political instability in the hitherto peaceful Maghreb region seems in the past. Decades of political dictatorship, poor policy choices, bad governance and endemic corruption have left many African countries devastated and lagging on almost all indicators of human development.

Few countries in the continent have made steady progress in the last three decades. The current trend shows a continent increasingly entangled in a myriad of problems and challenges bordering largely on the question of underdevelopment, growing poverty and inequality, unemployment and the absence of critical infrastructure. As such, the poor socio-economic conditions that pervade some of these states may not only be viewed as indicators of failure but constitute a sufficient condition for the outbreak and spread of armed conflict. While the use of the term “state failure” elicits a lot of controversy given its derogatory connotations and the stereotype often associated with it, however, this paper adopts the term to merely describe the socio-economic and security conditions of nation-states in contemporary Africa as opposed to the roles and responsibilities a functional modern state system discharges on behalf of citizens. Within this analytical framework, I argue that states exist primarily to provide decentralized channels of delivering public goods to a vast majority of citizens on the one hand, and on the other, to exert legitimate control over a given territory. Both the former and the latter have overreaching implications on what constitutes state failure focusing on the interface between these two concepts, the paper seeks to show how considerations, the paper draws from a large gamut of literature ranging from inter-national relations to history.

Conceptual and Theoretical Explorations

The section provides a conceptual analysis of the terms that are central to this paper: ‘state failure’ and ‘armed conflict’. The discussion on state failure underscores the interface between patterns of authority, political control and institutional structures of a nation’s state and the extent to which it can deliver public goods to a vast majority of its citizens (Bates 2005). On the other hand, armed conflict denotes a situation of violence involving different warring factions within a nation state leading to death, internal displacements, refugee flow and human suffering (Brown1996).

State Failure

The concept and problem of state failure has received considerable attention in the social science literature which in some ways depicts the level of importance it has assumed since the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US (Clapham & Hersbtone, 2006). However, it must be noted that the phenomenon is not entirely a novel one. According to Tilley (1990) majority of states in Europe after 1500 have failed with a substantial of the units which got so far as to acquire a recognizable existence as states during those centuries (after 1500) disappearing.

Tilley (1990) went further to note that “of the handful which survived or emerged into the 19th century as autonomous states, only a few operated effectively regardless of what criterion we employ.” In our contemporary times, however, the study of state failure has become much more relevant given its growing security implications for a world that is ever-becoming complex, integrated and interconnected. For this reason, international organizations and institutions have within the last decade shifted attention from well-organized and functional states mostly found in the West to least organized, dysfunctional and often chaotic states found in the least developed South (Woodward, 2005). This is because failed and failing states not only portend danger to themselves and their immediate neighbours but constitute a serious threat to global peace and security (Badmus & Ogunmola 2009).

Preventing state failure as well as rebuilding those that have collapsed has not only become a matter of moral imperative but a strategic one. It is by no means easy to settle upon a satisfactory definition of state failure considering that the nature of the phenomenon varies from place to place. However, the term can be appreciated from two standpoints: The failure to control and to provide security and; the failure to promote human flourishing by the provision of social and economic opportunities (Dorff 2005; Rotberg 2004; Dearth 1996). Some scholars have strongly cautioned on the use of the term warning that the concept and measurement of it are not generally helpful for understanding the economic and political realities of countries in the developing world (John 2011).

Despite the lack of definitional consensus, there is a growing understanding of what constitutes state failure as opposed to the meaning of a functional Weberian state (Milken & Krause 2002). Functional states provide security in all parts of their territories while delivering a high order of public or political goods to their citizens (Gutierrez et al., 2010). These countries perform well when measured by international standard indicators such as the UNDP Human Development Index and Per Capita Income (PPP) etc. Strong states do not only provide physical security but ensure the safety of citizens from criminal violence, and human rights violations and at the same time create the enabling environment for the pursuit of human progress.

In contrast, failed and failing states are highly conflictual, tense and characterized by insecurity. These countries experience criminal and political violence as evidenced by a high level of kidnapping, extortions and political harassment by political thugs, a loss of control over regions and territories; ethnic and cultural animosity as manifest by the incessant outbreaks of ethno-religious violence and civil war; state repression and stifling of a supposedly democratic space; weak and dysfunctional institutions; high levels of corruption and nepotism; a collapsed health and educational systems; low life expectancy; growing poverty, desperation and misery (Rotberg 2003; Zartman, 1995; Ignatieff, 2002).

Similarly, the Brookings Institution defined a failed state as countries lacking the capacity and or will to foster an environment conducive to sustainable and equitable economic growth; to establish and maintain legitimate, transparent, and accountable political institutions; to secure their populations from armed conflict and to control their territory and; to meet the basic human needs for their population. It is important to note that the proper referent for understanding the phenomenon of state failure is not merely measured by a state's past, present or future performance in absolute terms but its performance relative to other states at any given point (Carment 2003). As such, understanding state failure is hinged on the manifestation of certain socio-economic and political conditions in which case the state is said to no longer be able to perform its basic security and development functions as suggested above. In other words, the state is incapable of projecting power and legitimate authority within its borders (Bates 2005).

According to Rotberg (2004), the absence of human flourishing in a failing state takes place across many dimensions encompassing issues of economic development, political representation, income distribution etc. Hence, he observes that 'nation-states' fail because they can no longer deliver positive political goods to their people consequent upon which the government is said to lose legitimacy in the eyes and heart of the growing plurality of its citizens. However, other scholars cautioned that the idea of the loss of control and the failure to deliver public goods should not be seen in an absolute sense considering that state failure also denotes a situation whereby a state successfully controls some of its territory but not all of it (Alao, 1999). In this sense, state failure can also occur across different dimensions albeit not simultaneously. In extreme cases, it may even occur in all dimensions simultaneously as witnessed in Afghanistan (before the invasion) of NATO forces, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Somalia.

In other cases, there is a wide variation in the extent to which a state 'fails' across different dimensions. In Angola, for instance, the state has been relatively impressive in macroeconomic management but has been unable to control large parts of its rural

areas where rebel groups and drug cartels hold sway. Uganda and Nigeria are two examples of countries that exhibit the common features of state failure along the dimension of failing to provide security in some areas within their borders. Yet these countries continue to exert relative control over large portions of their territories by sheer military size and capability to strike and inflict often disproportionate violence on armed groups contesting state authority in those areas. In recognition of this variation, it is therefore suggested that looking at the phenomenon of state failure from a purely statist lens or angle is less helpful. Rather, emphasis should be placed on appreciating the degrees of success and failure that exist.

For this discussion, state failure denotes a non-linear process of a relative decay predicated on a certain 'development continuum' where a nation-state is simply classified as being 'strong', 'weak', 'failed' and 'collapsed'. As such the failure to control and the failure to provide the public goods are viewed as two interrelated of state failure. In each of these cases, states weaken and fail when they are unable to provide basic functions for their citizens. The economy is weakened due to wrong policy choices, massive corruption and inefficiency. Education and health are underfunded and hence suffer deterioration or are simply non-existent. Physical infrastructures rot and decay coupled with growing levels of crime, endemic corruption and violence. These socio-economic conditions give rise to legitimate grievances by a section of the population which often leads to armed conflict and insurrections often exacting a huge toll in terms of both human and material loss.

Armed Conflict

Armed conflict is defined as open, armed clashes between two or more centrally organized parties, with continuity between the clashes, in disputes about power over government and territory (Smith 200). The Uppsala Peace and Conflict Data (UPCD) defines armed conflict as: "A contented incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year." Other scholars like Marshall and Gurr (2005) would rather settle for episodes of political violence that have reached a minimum threshold of 1,000 battle-related deaths as constituting armed conflicts. These definitions based on the threshold of battle-related deaths are however problematic especially when one takes into consideration the difficulty of measuring with accuracy the number of people who lose their lives in a typical war situation. Be it as it may, the suggested numerical threshold provides a good starting point for appreciating the nature, dynamics and human cost of armed conflict in Africa.

Different nomenclatures have emerged over the years to describe the typology, causes and nature of armed conflicts in many parts of the developing world, particularly,

in Africa (see for example Kaldor & Vashee 1997; Reno, 1998 & 2003; King, 1996; Stavenhagen, 1996; Berdal & Malone, 2000; Duffield, 2001). Some of these conflicts were described as “internal wars”, “civil wars”, “intra-state wars”, “new wars”, “ethnic wars” etc. and thus share a distinctive characteristic of having no precise beginning and neither a definitive end. Many of them lasted for decades with the majority of the actors being non-regular combatants with no defined set of doctrines, rules or centralized authority common with a regular army. These armed groups are often pitched against the state in an unconventional war characterized by the privatization of violence in ways that blur the line between genuine grievances and economic motives (Gleditsch, 1998; Collier & Hoeffler, 2000).

While, there is no single variable that can provide a sufficient explanation of the causes of armed conflict, however, different theoretical approaches are often employed to further our understanding of the proximate and root causes of conflict. Gurr's (1970; 1995) Relative Deprivation theory highlights the contrast between group access to political power and resources as a major source of armed conflict. He argues that a sense of relative deprivation generates grievances which ultimately feed into violence. Some of the underlying issues that led to the Rwandan Genocide of 1994; the war between Southern and Northern Sudan once described as Africa's longest civil war; the restiveness in the Niger Delta of Nigeria before the Amnesty programme are but a few examples of conflicts that resonate with the central underpinning of the relative deprivation theory of conflict.

Closely related to the relative deprivation theory, Rupesinghe and Anderlini (1998) allude to the idea of structural disorder as being central to the underlying cause(s) of armed conflict. They observed that stagnation and protracted income decline in poor and poor and middle-income countries, unequal growth and unequal distribution of resources are some of the major causes of armed conflict. This reality is even starker in many parts of Africa. Another interesting theoretical lens for explaining the causes of conflict in Africa is the controversial political economy of war thesis. The model explores the link between natural resources and armed conflict (Ross, 2003; Le Billion, 2000) and thus reinforces the logic of economic rationality in the onset and prolongation of violence (Berdal & Melone 2000). This model suggests that armed conflicts are not only induced or motivated by grievances such as ethnic discrimination and marginalization, inequality, and historical animosity but also by a deep-seated economic interest and hence, greed (Collier & Hoeffler, 1999). The Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil wars of the 1990s coupled with the conflict in the Niger Delta of Nigeria and the DRC clearly illustrates the potency of the “war economies” model in many parts of Africa.

Although, these theoretical perspectives are relevant to contemporary conflict analysis, however, they should not be taken as the most important causal variables at play in Africa's internal wars. This is because the decision to resort to violence or start a war is usually a very complex process involving both state and non-state actors who are also influenced by a wide range of socio-economic and political conditions, circumstances and considerations. Furthermore, Krasner and Pascual (2005) observed that the potential of state failure and collapse is ominous at the time immediately before, during, and after conflict. Thus, when chaos prevails, militancy, terrorism, the narcotics trade, a proliferation of small and light weapons, and criminal networks emerge and flourish. This scenario speaks volumes about what has come to be recognized as the distinctive features of a war or shadow economy (Crammer, 2006). Under strenuous circumstances or situations, subject to depredation, and access denial to basic services, citizens are likely to be swayed by the influence or exhortations of ethnic bigots, demagogues and hate mongers.

Pattern and Trend of State Failure and Armed Conflict in Africa

Of the 20 top countries captured in the 2012 Failed State Index, 15 are in Africa. These are Somalia (1), DRC (2) Sudan (3), Chad (4), Zimbabwe (5) Central African Republic (10) Ivory Coast (11), Guinea (12) Nigeria (14), Guinea Bissau (15), Kenya (16) Ethiopia (17), Burundi (18), Niger (19) and Uganda (20). African countries make up 35 out of the 59 states in the Index. States like the DRC, Somalia, Sudan (both North and South), Mali, Kenya and Nigeria experience different forms of instability ranging from low-intensity to high-intensity violence. Countries located in the Great Lakes and West Africa regions are in more critical conditions compared to other regions within the continent. The Failed States Index ranks the world's failed states on a continuum ranging from the most stable to the critical states. The parameters employed to qualify state failure are hinged on several criteria: uneven development, economic decline, de-legitimatization of the state, public service etc. Rotberg (2003) points to the persistence of political violence and instability as a key indicator of state failure. He described a failed state as “tensed, deeply-conflicted, dangerous, and bitterly contested by armed groups”.

In Rotbergs' definition, the absolute intensity of violence does not define a failed state, rather, it is the enduring character of the violence coupled with the direction of such violence against a national government and the vigorous characters of the political or geographical demands for shared power or autonomy that rationalize or qualify state failure. As such the incessant outbreaks of violence in the Kivu region

of the DRC, the almost decade-long conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan as well as the rebellion in the Central African Republic are good examples of African states that show how armed conflicts and state failure reinforce one another.

The shortage or absence of good governance and critical infrastructure on which the provision of equitable service delivery to all citizens is contingent on disenchantment from a segment of the society often leading to rebellion, criminality and general disorder. For example, the inability of the government of DRC to put a permanent stop to rebel activities in the eastern part of the country by addressing their legitimate grievances is thus an indicator of state failure. Similarly, until the introduction of the amnesty programme for the Niger Delta militants in 2009, the Nigerian state was facing a violent campaign by different armed groups based in the creeks of the Niger Delta. These armed groups claimed to be fighting for a fairer share of the oil wealth and the development of their region. Like most other African states, Nigeria continues to suffer from state failure which prevents it from acting and functioning as it should (Helman and Ratner 1992).

In October 2012, the African Insurance Organization described Nigeria as the "Kidnap-for-Ransom Capital of the World," accounting for 25% of global kidnappings. According to the rating, Somalia, which had been in the business of sea piracy and kidnappings long before other countries in Africa joined the 'league' is now overtaken by Nigeria. Consequently, the Global Peace Index ranked Nigeria as the sixth most dangerous African country to live in. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), released results of its 2013 Where-to-be-born Index with Nigeria ranked number 80 out of the 80 countries assessed.

Other striking features of state failure in Nigeria and other African countries include the incessant outbreaks of ethnic hostility and violence as witnessed in Northern Nigeria; the inability of states to exercise direct control over their whole territory and borders as is the case with Somalia, Mali, Central African Republic, Chad etc; a decline in the provision of social services: a widening gap between the rich and the poor (Sung 2004; De Mesquita, 2005). The latter captures the current situation in many African states albeit with a few exceptions.

Despite being endowed with enormous natural resources, Equatorial Guinea, Angola, Sudan and Nigeria have low per capita income, poorly maintained roads, weak human rights records, massive corruption, and flawed electoral processes. In no other region of the world is one confronted with the empirical reality of how mismanaged resource wealth leads to state failure and armed conflict like in these African states. The plausibility of the resource curse thesis is even more distressing and further indicates that when the central government succeeds in appropriating the wealth

generated by natural endowments, the government no longer strive to provide services for its citizens.

In Liberia and Sierra Leone, the effects of state failure in the early 90s led to two brutal civil wars in the history of the sub-region. While the causal factors responsible for the protracted wars are said to be multiple, similar patterns were observed in the processes that led to this decade-long civil war (Levitt 2005; Gberie 2006). One of them relates to the drying up of foreign direct investment (FDI) which led to growing unemployment and a decline in per capita incomes (Paulson 2002). Citizens in these countries saw their health, educational and logistical entitlements decline and, in some cases, living in abject poverty. Physical indiscipline coupled with massive corruption by members of the political elite exacerbated further tension among ethnic groups leading to the emergence of rebel groups fighting for control over certain territories and resources (Ibrahim 1999; Oluyemi 2001; Davis 2000).

A similar historical narrative characterizes Somalia. By every conceivable standard, the country exhibits all the defining features of state failure not only in Africa but in the whole world. For over two decades, Somalia has had no central state government and has lost control of all its territories with no legitimate police force or justice system in place. The country was ruled by recalcitrant and warring factions who continued to commit gross human rights violations and abuses with impunity. The total absence of public services coupled with a severe economic decline; and massive movement of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) has characterized Somalis descent from failure to total collapse. Despite the recent gains in the international effort to push Alshabaab out of Mogadishu, the situation in the country remains extremely precarious.

Discussing the causes of armed conflict and state failure in Africa will not be complete without a deconstruction of the structures and processes of post-colonial state formation in the continent. While this is not the primary concern of this paper, however, whether narrowly or broadly defined, armed conflict and state failure in African states are partly the fallout of the policies of colonial legacies that spread across the continent. Born out of shared postcolonial history is the "artificial nature of state institutions and political systems, borders and nationhood in Africa" (Schoeman, 1999). The boundaries that demarcate the current political landscape in the continent were drawn primarily to satisfy the colonial powers (Cornwall, 19996). This has not only contributed to exacerbating tension among and between different ethnic groups but has generated territorial disputes in some countries with some militant groups fighting for water resources (Thomsn, 2000; Ohaegbulam, 1995:).

The Rwanda genocide of 1994 and the violent conflicts in neighbouring Burundi are two examples of how a complex colonial legacy of discriminatory treatment for a different

set of ethnic groups by the then Belgian government led to state failure and a brutal civil war. Similarly, the conflict between the then mostly Christian and animist population in Southern Sudan and their Muslim Arab counterpart in the North could be understood by examining the colonial context in which Sudan was born. Thus, before it broke up in 2011, the country was ranked the third most critical state in the Failed State index, given the discriminatory and often repressive policies of the Arab-dominated government in Khartoum against the Southern people of Sudan.

Prevention and Pattern of Responses to Armed Conflicts and State Failure in Africa

Armed conflict and state failure present a grave danger to the peace and stability of neighbouring states as well as members of the international community. In an increasingly interconnected world, any crisis in one region of the world can instantaneously induce an impact in another part of the World. Such is the level of inter-connectedness and integration of nation-states in an international system that is increasingly shaped by the powers of globalization. In this sense, the effect of state failure and armed conflict in the continent goes far beyond the borders of African states. This is the premise on which international intervention efforts are developed and mobilized as a response to failed states and armed conflict. The idea of preventing states from failing as well as resuscitating those that have already failed has been the major preoccupation of the United Nations, European Union, African Union, the United States and other major powers.

Hinged on the notion of helping failed and failed states to reassert control over lost territories, international intervention often focuses on building states' capacity for human rights protection, human security and the rule of law. Furthermore, different approaches have been developed within the framework of preventive diplomacy, peacekeeping operations and other wider intervention efforts to address armed conflict and state failure in Africa. For example, international peacekeeping forces were deployed at different times to Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Sudan the DRC and Western Sahara with different mandates ranging from ceasefire agreements to building peace. Interestingly, most of these countries have for years occupied an ignoble spot on the failed state index.

International intervention in zones of conflict usually follows a particular pattern in order to secure a ceasefire agreement to be followed by the implementation of demobilize and reintegrating of former combatants into the society. In most cases, DRC programmes are accompanied by reforms in the security sector and this targets the judiciary and the law enforcement agents such as the police and prison officials in order

to enhance their capacity for dispensing and the maintenance of law and order. Moreover, development aid and assistance have also been deployed by the international organizations as a mechanism for arresting the downward trend of state failure and armed conflict in Africa. Southern Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda and a host of other countries within the region have been recipients of international aid and other forms of assistance as part of a frantic effort to arrest and prevent war recurrent.

Similarly, multilateral responses to peace and security issues in Africa have developed a framework of the neoliberal development. This approach underscores the importance of strengthening democratic institutions considered a viable framework for the delivery of social services and hence reducing the risk of state failure and armed conflict. For instance, the EU's current approach to integrating conflict prevention within the aid sectors including transport, education, water, budgetary and macro-economic support, particularly in Liberia and Sierra Leone is inspired by the liberal development framework. The idea is to assist post conflict countries to achieve structural equilibrium; hence, it has become a systematic strategy for reducing the risk of a war recurrence.

Conclusion

A review and analysis of state failure and armed conflict in African states reveals that the analytic and operational issues for understanding and preventing this problem is multifaceted and somewhat complex. The twin problem of armed conflict and state failure is not only interrelated but continues to undermine peace and development across Africa. Reversing this trend requires a lot of effort by African states along with the assistance of international development agencies. Furthermore, the risk of armed conflict and state failure cannot be prevented, resolved, or managed exclusively by preventive diplomacy, political negotiation, peacemaking, peacekeeping or the use of force alone but by influencing the choices African states make about their economic and political systems, good governance, rule of law, and human security.

The simplest way to explain most of Africa's problems is that the majority of the states have never known good government. This is not surprising when one considers the fact of how some leaders emerge in this region of the world. In many cases, credibility and competence are absent from the political processes. Moreover, most of the countries across the continent have experienced some form of prolonged period of dictatorship coupled with a flawed history of electoral processes.

Whether military or civilian rulers, African dictators have one common characteristic: They spend their entire careers plundering and amassing public resources

while impoverishing their people; they deploy resources as well as the apparatus of state control to intimidate political opponents while stifling the democratic space as well as manipulating the constitution to their end; they rule like royalties and draw no distinction between their personal property and the state; they are totally indifferent to public opinion and often resentful of public sentiments. These tendencies and attributes explain why the risks of armed conflict and state failure remain high in contemporary Africa.

The inability of governments to take full advantage of the globalization process is not necessarily a result of any gap in technological innovation or even the lack of resources as is often suggested, but the absence of strong and effective institutions that can empower these countries to negotiate favourably in the open market place of globalization. Thus, it is important for these countries to first look inward and focus on key structural issues that underlie state failure as well as influence the beginning and duration of armed conflict. Issues of poverty, unemployment, absence of critical infrastructures, inequality and above all good governance are not only indicators of state failure but cause and generate tension. These inadequacies can be corrected through the formulation and implementation of long-term social, economic and political measures, driven by a leadership that is credible and purposeful.

On the roles of external agencies and institutions, the question of imbalanced trade rules, external debt and the exploitation of natural resources must also be addressed. While growing poverty in Africa is often attributed to bad governance and incompetence, few take notice of the devastating effect of unfair trade rules in perpetuating poverty and underdevelopment. For example, the protracted WTO negotiations have shown the unwillingness of the developed nations to make concessions that could alter the playing field in Africa's favour.

In addition, accumulating external debts owed by African countries continues to deny African states the capacity to independently set agendas capable of enhancing the socio-economic wellbeing of their people. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Africa's failing states must also be critically addressed. Access to illicit arms by rebels and other militant groups has inhibited national, regional and international efforts to prevent armed conflict and state failure. More importantly, the used weapons are manufactured by the five most powerful members of the United Nations Security Council. The flow of illicit arms into Africa's most vulnerable countries fuels insurgency and further accelerates the drifting of states from fragility to total collapse.

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