

## *Correspondence*

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### **South Africa**

TO THE EDITORS:

I read with both interest and gloom James Kirchick's excellent article ("Going South," *AZURE* 29, Summer 2007). In my own experience as the leader of South Africa's parliamentary opposition for the past six years (a post I voluntarily relinquished in May 2007), I can attest to the large and ever-widening gap between the African National Congress' (ANC) rhetoric on human rights and the sad reality of our government's cozying up to dictators and tyrants and propping up oppressive regimes and failed states, from Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe to the military dictatorship in Myanmar.

While I agree with Kirchick that there is an essential anti-Western fundamentalism that underlies much of our foreign posture, I would add that there is also a desire to recast the world order in a direction more favorable to the developed world. Of course there is much to commend the latter attempt, but it is doubtful whether the route we have chosen will do anything more than land South Africa in some very bad company.

Moreover, while the article notes how the South African government, and some of its leading officials, continuously took the side of Saddam Hussein's Iraq against the West, it does not deal with one of the more distressing moments of recent public life in South Africa. In July 2002, Tariq Aziz, then Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's deputy prime minister, made a visit to South Africa, where he was garlanded with honors by the country's then deputy president, Jacob Zuma, at the very moment that American President George W. Bush had identified Iraq as a member of the Axis of Evil.

While it is correct to note that a misplaced third-world solidarity seems to pervade our relations with tyrants around the globe, it is interesting to recall what a political colleague of mine, Jack Bloom, described as South Africa's own "Iraq moment": In September 1998, South African troops invaded the tiny neighboring state of Lesotho after a dispute had developed there between the king and the prime minister, and unrest and rioting had broken out following a disputed parliamentary election. The capital, Maseru, was heavily damaged, and South African troops remained in

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occupation for over seven months before withdrawing. Even our sainted president at the time, Nelson Mandela (who had become one of the foremost critics of President Bush over the Iraq invasion), described the operation as an “intervention to restore democracy and the rule of law. There is a responsibility to intervene when democracy is under threat.” As someone in my circle at the time put it, this was pure “Bush doctrine, three years before Bush himself had enunciated it.”

I could go on in this depressing vein with a long list to add to those grievances to, which Kirchick has drawn readers’ attention, but I think the point is plain: High-minded principle when the ANC was in opposition has given way to a lamentable and narrowly self-serving foreign policy that seems animated by settling old scores rather than by addressing the realities of the new world order and making modest but sensible attempts to change it.

Finally, it is noteworthy how the Middle East is a matter for continuous debate among the parliament’s National Assembly, even when not a moment of parliament’s time has been found to debate a disputed and highly controversial report on the last farcical parliamentary elections in Zimbabwe. Naturally, on the occasions when the South African legislature rouses itself to express concern and

condemnation for the violence in the Middle East, the resolutions adopted are uniformly critical of Israel and apportion no blame or responsibility to any other actor in that region. It was suggested to me that the reason for this lopsided approach was based on the fact that I am Jewish and married to an Israeli national and, therefore, the ANC can make a point of wrong-footing the parliamentary opposition (which is actually the largest party in the Western Cape, where a significant number of South African Muslims reside). This might, in part, be an explanation, but I think in the main, Kirchick’s analysis goes more to the heart of the matter.

**Tony Leon, MP**

Parliament of South Africa

TO THE EDITORS:

On the one hand, James Kirchick is absolutely right to take South Africa’s governing party, the African National Congress (ANC), to task for its hypocrisy on the issue of international human rights. Whether the subject is Zimbabwe, Myanmar, or Iran, the ANC has time and again failed to apply the very principles it fought for in the anti-apartheid struggle, namely freedom and equality for all. Kirchick is also right to attribute much of this policy to another of the ANC’s most cherished principles, anti-imperialism.

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On the other hand, I must take issue with several of the most important strands of Kirchick's argument. Above all, it is worse than meaningless to continue to use the term "anti-Western" (and its cousin, "anti-American") in intelligent discourse. "Anti-Western" as a concept is hopelessly vague, broad, and, in this case at least, inaccurate. Who is the "West" to whom Kirchick refers—every single citizen of the United States and every European country, or just the Bush administration? Moreover, of what does this anti-Westernism consist? Hatred and renunciation of every aspect of Western civilization, or mere criticism of certain policies practiced at certain times by certain Western governments?

To paint with such broad strokes obscures an awful lot, and illuminates virtually nothing. Most importantly, it obscures the many debates within both the "West" and what might be called the "non-West." Furthermore, it produces the very same reductionist Manichaeism that Kirchick rightly criticizes in the ANC's "anti-imperialism": We are all the same, they are all the same; we are right, they are wrong, etc.

Yes, the ANC is wrong to "cozy up to tyrants," but let us not forget that the American government and others in the West continue to cozy up to the likes of Musharraf, Mubarak, and the

Chinese government, at least when the latter is willing to play ball. To say this is not to excuse the ANC or to declare criticism of the ANC out of bounds. It is merely to point out that accusations of hypocrisy can go both ways. Maybe the best thing would be for both the ANC and the West—and everybody in the world, for that matter—to take a brief holiday from their exercise of moral indignation towards others and take an honest look at their own shortcomings.

Which brings us to "anti-imperialism." As Kirchick points out, all too often rhetoric of "anti-imperialism" has been used to justify the worst excesses of anti-imperialist movements and individuals during anti-imperial struggles and after independence has been achieved. The tyrant casts himself as an "anti-imperialist" to place himself above criticism, while his critics, and frequently his victims, are, according to the tyrant, just stooges for foreign governments trying to re-establish their empires. It is depressing to note how effective this rhetorical move has been in stifling dissent, time and again, working much as appeals to nationalism and patriotism have worked in every single country in the world throughout history.

But it does not follow from this that "anti-imperialism" itself is an "anachronistic," "outdated" leftover that should be consigned to the dustbin

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of history. While governments in countries like, say, the United States or France probably have no desire to annex other independent countries, they have shown themselves quite willing, even in recent times, to invade other countries, depose their governments, and install puppet regimes to do their bidding. More subtly, Western governments have used everything from economic pressure to Western-financed fifth column agitation to undermine the sovereignty of foreign governments. Imperialism, or, more accurately, neo-imperialism or neo-colonialism, is still a problem today. The tough part is figuring out when accusations of Western “neo-colonialism” are justified and when they are merely apologetics for tyrants, or (as is often the case) both. Either way, hopelessly blunt instruments like the concept of “anti-Westernism” do not make this task any easier.

One final note about Islam in South Africa: Muslims simply cannot have the sort of political pull Kirchick imputes to them, being that they are only 1.5 percent of the total population and marginal in every sense of the word. South African Muslims, and virtually all Coloureds and Indians, tend not to be ANC supporters, and are rarely politically active. In fact, Muslims who are supporters of the ANC tend to be Muslim in the same way that Ronnie Kasrils is Jewish. To

attribute the ANC’s anti-Zionism to pandering to South African Muslims is akin to the old, “There’s a Red under every bed” mindset that attributed almost every instance of popular protest or “anti-Westernism” to communism. South Africa is an overwhelmingly Christian country and is far more likely to develop a significant American-style Christian right (whenever the bulk of South Africa’s numerous but heretofore politically quiescent conservative Christians decide to become politically active) than to become a pro-Islamist state. The ANC’s anti-Zionism is rather simply an outgrowth of its own understanding of anti-imperialism.

**Michael Mahoney**  
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Yale University

JAMES KIRCHICK RESPONDS:

I appreciate the substantive and enlightening comments of Tony Leon and Michael Mahoney to my article. Leon, who has practical experience with the issues discussed in my piece, characterizes the ANC’s conception of its foreign policy as a “desire to recast the world order in a direction more favorable to the developed world.” In reality, the ANC’s foreign policy is one that, whatever its benign pretensions, shares an intellectual affinity with the regimes in Harare,

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Zimbabwe, and Tehran and with organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah. Not for nothing did the former Iranian ambassador to South Africa, Javid Ghorbanoghli, respond to the latter's backing down on its opposition to sanctions against Iran at the United Nations in an opinion piece entitled, "Mr. Mbeki, This Is No Way to Treat a Friend."

Professor Mahoney's main contention resides with my use of "the West" as a means of discourse. Whatever their differences, a common set of ideals and specific initiatives cohere between the foreign policies of democratic, liberal countries such as the United States, Australia, Western Europe, Israel, and several other nations, which can reasonably be labeled "the West," and *particularly* on the issues raised in my article. On the other hand, weakening support for terrorist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, and ending the regime of Robert Mugabe are all policies on which the nations that constitute "the West" *differ* significantly from South Africa, which has stood by Iran, propped up Mugabe, and granted legitimacy to Hamas and Hezbollah.

But it is not just critics of the ANC who adopt this rubric; South African President Thabo Mbeki speaks frequently of the "African Renaissance"

(which he envisions himself leading) and dismisses European and American—or Western—recommendations on issues from AIDS to Zimbabwe with the stubborn refrain, "African solutions to African problems." On the subject of AIDS, which has taken hundreds of thousands of South African lives on Mbeki's watch, the South African president has for years casually denied that HIV causes AIDS, sat in silence as his internationally disgraced health minister advised AIDS patients to eat beetroot and garlic to treat their disease, and has lashed out at critics of these irresponsible policies with accusations of racism. Moreover, high-ranking officials in the ANC government have denounced HIV anti-retroviral drugs—Western, as opposed to African "traditional" remedies—as "toxic."

Mahoney responds to the thrust of my article by invoking the history of American foreign policy adventures. Yet it is unreasonable and unfair to expect American critics of South Africa's foreign policy to defend the policies of the United States in general and the Bush administration in particular. And while a debate on the merits of American foreign policy is tangential, at best, to a discussion of South Africa's foreign policy, a reasonable case can be made in response to the specific allegations Mahoney makes regarding American dealings with Pakistani

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military dictator Pervez Musharraf, Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak, and the Chinese communists. First, the failure to support the former two leaders might possibly lead to the emergence of Islamist governments, and China is an emerging superpower that must be reckoned with, irrespective of its atrocious human rights record. Moreover, a direct comparison of South Africa's and America's dealings with tyrants neglects the fact that the United States is the world's only superpower, with all of the attendant responsibilities and difficult decisions such a role entails. The same rationalizations cannot possibly apply to a sub-Saharan African developing country's dubious support for terrorist groups half a world away that are committed to the destruction of a fellow United Nations member state, or its propping up of a neighboring genocidal dictator whose policies have led to the outpouring of millions of refugees. However, a debate over American foreign policy this is not, and it is unproductive to respond to criticism of the ANC's fondness for illiberal movements by offering condemnation of America, of which there is no shortage these days.

Finally, Mahoney notes (as I did myself) that Muslims account for only 1.5 percent of the population of South Africa. But they represent nearly 10 percent of the population in

Cape Town, the only major municipality that the Democratic Alliance controls, an observation for which I am grateful to Leon, who brought it to my attention. Whether or not the ANC's anti-Israel stance can be attributed to South Africa's increasing Muslim population, I would venture that the lack of an electoral explanation makes its position on the Arab-Israeli conflict all the more disturbing. Mahoney writes that "The ANC's anti-Zionism is rather simply an outgrowth of its own understanding of anti-imperialism." He is absolutely right, and it pains me to admit that the ANC's frequent denunciations of Israel are predicated not upon any particular set of controversial policy decisions Israel makes or has made, but rather upon the very legitimacy of the Jewish state itself.

## **Circumcision**

TO THE EDITORS:

In his article "Circumcision as Rebellion" (AZURE 28, Spring 2007), Ido Hevroni refers to the legendary debate between R. Akiva and the Roman governor Turanus Rufus, epitomized by the latter's question, "Why are you circumcised?" The debate, according to Hevroni, is "a symbolic clash, not only of two nations at war, but of

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two conflicting approaches to civilization.” In other words, what we have are two fundamentally different, and incompatible, worldviews. While the Jewish one champions “an image of man who alters, even creates, a world of his own,” its Roman-Latin counterpart sees the world as “closed... ruled by the blind forces of nature.” A consequence of this latter outlook is “the Hellenistic adoration of the body and concern for its completeness... the principled refusal of educated Hellenists to tolerate the deliberate injury the Jews carried out on their bodies and those of their children.”

Yet if the debate about circumcision truly revolves, as Hevroni argues, around the concept of rebellion, then we must consider another midrash that also deals with the Bar Kochba revolt, yet takes an entirely different approach from the one advanced in the story above. This can be found in the Jerusalem Talmud, Ta’anit 4:24, and in a somewhat similar version in Lamentations Rabba 2, both of which describe a certain aspect of the events in Beitar, a famous site in the history of the revolt:

R. Yohanan said, “Eighty thousand pairs of trumpeters surrounded Beitar. And each of them was in command of several companies.”

And Ben Kozba was there and with him two hundred thousand who had removed a finger.

They sent sages who said to him, “Until when will you make Israel a mutilated nation [missing a finger].”

He said to them, “That is how we can test them.”

They said to him, “Only someone who can uproot a cedar in Lebanon [a scholar] while riding on a horse [a rich man] can be numbered in your battalions.”

He had two hundred thousand of the one and two hundred thousand of the other.

On the simplest level, we may argue that the heroism of Bar Kochba and his soldiers is illustrated by their willingness to remove one of their own fingers in a show of solidarity with the cause. Yet the sages’ rejection of this act reveals another, problematic side to it: This “test of courage” in truth instills in the soldiers a sense of pride in their power. It was this pride, in fact, that the sages were intent on dampening; thus the image of the “uprooting of the cedar”—a well-known symbol of pride in midrashic sources. In contrast with Hevroni’s midrash, then, which praises a rebellion against an invader through the “mutilation” of the body, here we are presented with its very opposite.

This midrash would thus seem to belie a distinct reservation about the Jewish revolt against Roman rule. Indeed, by presenting the motivation of Bar Kochba’s soldiers as one of pride and machismo, this midrash would

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appear to fly in the face of Hevroni's assertion that the act of circumcision (or self-mutilation) is in fact an act of rebellion against the gods of circumstance. And certainly, there was much room for reservation about the failed revolt; after all, the fanatical, near cultish following of Bar Kochba led to his eventual portrayal as the messiah. Could it not be the case that this midrash stood as a warning to R. Akiva, Bar Kochba's most ardent supporter, to think more carefully about the man to whom he was lending his support? At the very least, it would seem that a more comprehensive survey of the writings of the sages on the matter of the Bar Kochba revolt reveals an emphasis on the need for *moderation* in considering one's support for or opposition to it.

Since Hevroni's article stresses the argument about the wholeness of the body, however, we must conclude by remembering that, in the final analysis, the balance is nonetheless tilted against the Romans, since the torments they imposed on the very body they went to such lengths to glorify led, in the case of R. Akiva, to spiritual wholeness.

**Yisrael Rosenson**  
Jerusalem

IDO HEVRONI RESPONDS:

Not surprisingly, perhaps, my essay gave rise to some controversy,

partly because of the first word in the title—"circumcision"—and partly because of the last—"rebellion." The commandment to circumcise is currently the focus of heated religious debate between those anxious to adhere to the legacy of their forefathers and those intent on changing it; and the term "rebellion"—at least in the context of the Bar Kochba rebellion—of a political one. Nonetheless, all those who responded to me presented, in one way or another, their alternatives to the ideas I identified in my article as fundamental Jewish principles. I must content myself here with a note on the place of such "alternatives" and their importance in the rabbinic literature.

It is a commonplace that for every talmudic opinion A, there exists a diametrically opposed but no less legitimate talmudic opinion B. The oft-quoted sentence on this matter is, "These and these are the words of the living God" (Eruvin 13b). Certainly, the rabbinic literature is the epitome of a variety of opinion, dissent, and dialogue. Yet, in the main, those using this quotation forget that "these and these" referred specifically to the long-running argument between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, and not, for example, to the one between Judaism and Christianity. Thus, one might certainly find disagreement among the sages about the time of Yom Kippur, but *not* about the time



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of the weekly day of rest; there may be disagreement about cooking chicken as opposed to beef in milk, but *not* about the permissibility of eating pork.

As for circumcision, whether you accept the testimony of the Bible concerning its divine source or prefer, like some scholars, the testimony of a Greek historian, it is evident that during the period discussed in my article, circumcision became a clear mark of Jewish identity. Not only is there no disagreement among the sages about its enforcement or interdiction, there is also no disagreement among Jewish groups *outside* the circles of the sages, not even during the hundreds of years of dispersion suffered by the Jewish nation after the Bar Kochba revolt. Indeed, even those scholars who question the view that setting the Jewish norm was always the prerogative of rabbinical Jewry—like, for example, E.P. Sanders—grant that circumcision is one of the basic principles that characterized the Jewish group in ancient times. Non-Jews, too, were of the same opinion: In Greek and Roman literature about Jews, “circumcised” is a synonym for “Jewish,” despite the fact that the Greeks and Romans knew of other nations whose custom it was to circumcise their male offspring.

Yisrael Rosenson’s letter, however, reveals a different aspect of rabbinic

thought from the one I identified in my essay, and for this I am grateful to him. Against the interpretation in my essay, which posits a revolt against an existing state, Rosenson interprets a different but related talmudic story as promoting an approach of moderation and preservation. His interpretation can be further supported by other stories describing how, during the revolt, R. Yohanan ben Zakai preferred to negotiate a surrender with the Romans laying siege to Jerusalem, contrary to the desire of the zealots who were fighting them to the bitter end, out of a wish to preserve the world of the Tora.

Undoubtedly, devotion to tradition and the preservation of the status quo sustained the Jewish people in the diaspora no less than did insubordination and rebellion. Together, these two poles made Judaism what it is today: The instinct for preservation helped Judaism survive innumerable revolutions and cultural, political, and religious changes that consigned more powerful nations to the history books; while the drive for change and rebellion prevented it from fossilizing.

Nowhere is this dialectic more strikingly evident than in the strict observance of the commandment of circumcision: On the one hand, circumcision represents—according to the interpretation I offered in my essay—the drive for change, and on

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the other hand, its observance is often attributable to the *opposite* trait—the stubborn devotion to tradition, and the need to preserve it unchanged.

Thus may Rosenson’s response illustrate a contrary, but no less legitimate, Jewish opinion to the one I examined in my article. The opinions of those opposed to circumcision, however, would most certainly not have been considered “Jewish” in the period under discussion. Is there a place for them in Judaism today? The readers will judge for themselves.

### **A Search for June 1967**

TO THE EDITORS:

Yossi Klein Halevi has written a touching and fascinating piece commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the Six Day War (“The Photograph: A Search for June 1967,” *AZURE* 29, Summer 2007). Reading the article, I thought of several news stories that also came out on the anniversary of the war, and how I had been struck by the way that, wherever Israelis quoted in those stories might have stood on the political spectrum, they shared a sense that the State of Israel, both in the fact of its existence and in the way it reveals itself in history, must have meaning

for itself and for the world at large. How many nations on the globe, I wondered, drive their citizens to pursue that kind of imperative? Thus is Klein Halevi’s probing commentary on a photograph not only a search for June 1967. It is also a commentary on and rendering of the pursuit of meaning that characterizes and distinguishes the Israeli reality.

**Michael C. Kotzin**  
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### **Sovereignty**

TO THE EDITORS:

Jeremy Rabkin, in his *Law Without Nations?* and Michla Pomerance (“Defending the S-Word,” *AZURE* 29, Summer 2007) both expose the myth that morality, peace, and human rights would be better served without national sovereignty. The slogans of “global governance” and “world federalism” emerged from the murderous extremes of European nationalism and racism during the twentieth century, in opposition to, rather than in support of, the principles of liberal democracy.

On this basis, the anti-democratic majority in the United Nations and the self-appointed moralists and

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ideologues who control wealthy non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have gained power without the accompanying accountability or responsibility. According to the dominant myth (called the “halo effect”), unelected NGO officials who control massive budgets are somehow morally superior, automatically credible, and immune to the private interests and dogmas of democratically elected representatives.

European governments (and, to some degree, Canada) are largely responsible for funding these political NGOs—a further reflection of the anti-sovereignty ideology. Aid agencies run by the European Union, as well as Britain, Sweden, France, Finland, Norway, Switzerland, and other countries (often funneled through church groups such as Christian Aid and DanChurchAid), provide millions of Euros in taxpayer funds to GNGOs (government non-governmental organizations). Europe is infatuated with “civil society,” based on the conceptually absurd belief that the officials of organizations that operate outside the system of checks and balances and are not subject to the democratic process are somehow less corrupt and more representative of the general welfare than elected officials.

These government funds are used to promote the private ideological agendas of NGO officials (including

the anti-Israel and anti-American campaigns in Europe), and in efforts to manipulate the civil societies of other democratic countries. European taxpayers, for example, support dozens of Israeli political NGOs that actively oppose and campaign against the anti-terror policies chosen by the Israeli public and their elected representatives. B'tselem, Gisha, Bimkom, Peace Now, Yosi Beilin's “Geneva Initiative,” and many more groups receive millions of shekels allocated by sympathetic European officials in order to initiate legal actions, publish reports, buy newspaper advertisements, and the like. The Israel Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD), a small NGO whose coordinator, Jeff Halper, travels the world demonizing Israel and supporting boycotts, received over 400,000 Euros under the misleading “EU Partnership for Peace” label.

The political power of politicized NGOs is particularly apparent in the “Durban strategy” adopted by the leaders of 1,500 organizations that participated in the infamous NGO Forum of the 2001 UN Conference on Racism, and in the vital role they played in legitimizing the 2002 Jenin “massacre” myth and promoting the UN General Assembly resolution that sent the “apartheid wall” to the misnamed International Court of Justice. Most recently, the Durban NGO network led the political war

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that accompanied Hezbollah's rocket attacks, with the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) obsessively publishing over thirty reports, press releases, op-eds and other statements condemning Israeli military actions, using "facts" largely based on the unverifiable claims of local "eyewitnesses" and sympathetic journalists who happened to be in areas of Lebanon controlled by Hezbollah.

These and many similar examples highlight the illusion of an international legal system that lacks the legitimacy provided by national sovereignty and the consent of the governed. Many of the institutions that claim to embody international law, such as the International Court of Justice, are political bodies that reflect the problems and limitations of global governance. And in this vacuum, and without authoritative decisions, highly ideological NGO officials have used their power and access to media to become the arbiters

of a highly particularistic version of international law.

While the campaign against Israel is the most damaging illustration of the impact of powerful NGOs working in concert with the majority of dictatorships in the United Nations, similar political wars are being fought against the democratically elected governments of the United States, Britain, Australia, and others. And NGOs are only one dimension of the efforts to promote institutions based on the amorphous and unaccountable "global governance" frameworks. Europe will eventually realize that while democratic sovereignty is far from perfect, it is (to paraphrase Churchill) better than all the other forms that have been tried. The question is whether this realization will come too late to preserve Europe's own sovereignty.

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*AZURE welcomes letters from its readers. Letters should be sent to: AZURE, 13 Yehoshua Bin-Nun Street, Jerusalem, Israel. Fax: 972-2-560-5560; E-mail: letters@azure.org.il. Letters may be edited for length and clarity.*

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