

THE ROLE OF THE GREAT MARCH OF RETURN IN THE PALESTINIAN STRUGGLE AND THE END OF THE BLOCKADE

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Abstract:

The Palestinians have adopted the method of popular resistance in all phases of the Palestinian struggle. This method was readopted in Gaza through starting the Great March of Return on March 30, 2018. The study aims to better understand the context in which the idea of the March emerged, realize its importance and objectives, and recognize its strengths and weaknesses. That will be achieved through addressing two claims: 1) Principles and General Policies, 2) and Results and Challenges; with a conclusion at the end. In this study, the researcher follows the survey methodology, benefiting for his personal observations, following the readable and visual media tools, and analysing documents. The study concludes that the Great March of Return is a popular and national work, and an old method of struggle against the Israeli occupation. It also emphasized to the Israeli occupation, the USA and the entire world that the resettlement of the refugee's plans are absolutely rejected by the Palestinians. Moreover, it succeeded in attracting the Palestinian people coming from different religious, political and cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: Great March of Return, End of Blockade, Gaza.

INTRODUCTION:

The Gaza strip is located at the south of Palestine on a total area of 365 km. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, its population, until the middle of 2021, is estimated at 2.11 million. After Hamas had won the Legislative Elections with vast majority in January 2006, the Israeli occupation, along with Arab and international parties, imposed a severe blockade on the Gaza strip, which affected all life aspects. Thus, it exerted several attempts to end the blockade; one of which is the Great March of Return.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

TOPIC ONE: PRINCIPLES AND GENERAL POLICIES

In this section, the concept of the March, its importance, objectives, principles, the Palestinian community's position, and the Israeli Occupation response will be presented.

First: General Introduction to the Great March of Return

Historical Background:

The Great March of Return is not new to the Palestinians. It, in fact, comes from a long history. On April 30, 1998, the Association for Defense of the Rights of the Displaced People in occupied Palestine initiated an annual march for displaced Palestinians who were forcedly displaced from their villages in 1984. The first march was towards Al-Ghabisiyya village to the east of Akka. Each year, thousands participated and visited the destroyed village on the

anniversary of the Nakbah to raise awareness among the new generation about the history and identity of the land¹.

In 2011, the Refugees Affairs Department in Hamas presented a detailed plan for the Great March of Return to be held in the eastern borders of the Strip. It was intended to be peaceful in nature and to activate popular resistance amidst the failure of negotiations. The sub-objectives of the March were mainly to stress the Right of Return. According to the document, the plan called for the formation of a committee that supervises the organization of the March and follows up with its events. It also specified the role of ministries such as the Ministry of Endowments, Education, Health, Youth and Sports and Interior; and the role of municipalities, unions, departments and committees in Hamas. This also included the Union of Artists and Popular Work, and, of course, the Department of Refugees Affairs².

The idea did not receive real attention until 2018 when the siege worsened. Young activists on social media websites started calling for taking the fight with the Occupation to the borders of the Strip, so the slow, unheard-of death of Palestinians becomes visible to the world, especially considering the circumstances other Arab countries were and are going through.

The first call for the March was by the political activist Ahmed Abu Artema³ when he posted on January 7, 2018 on his Facebook page, “What if 200,000 protestors joined a peaceful march and broke past the wire fence surrounding east Gaza? And entered a couple of kilometers into our occupied lands raising the Palestinian flags and the return keys? What if they are observed by international media and then they hold tents there and establish a city? Let’s call it the city of the Sun Gate. What if thousands of Palestinians from the ‘48 Palestinians join them and they all decide to stay there peacefully without turning to any form of violence? What could the heavily armed occupation do to those peaceful people?”⁴.

It is clear, then, that this idea and the youth’s interaction encouraged the Refugees Affairs Department to reopen its old proposal. On January 27, 2018, it called for what was named ‘the Return Advance’ in a letter it sent to Hamas. Such proposal, as was clear, came as a response to Trump’s declaration of Al Quds as the capital of the Israeli Occupation. The document stressed the demands of the proposed movement and stated, “The world’s recognition of Al Quds as the capital of Palestine, the return of the refugees to their lands (the refugees in Syria to be the first), doubling the UNRWA budget and the end of the Israeli occupation”. As for the areas where the March would take place; Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria⁵ were suggested.

Concept of the March:

The proposed suggestions and visualizations for the March contributed to its launch after it had been organized into work schedules. Popular committees were formed to supervise such national project in Palestine, Turkey, Malaysia, Britain and Switzerland⁶.

This popular advance is a march organized by the Organizational Committee of the Great March of Return supported by all Palestinian factions. The preparations began on March 17, 2018, and it started on the commemoration of the Land Day⁷. The tents were held in 5 camps

at about 700m from the borders of the occupied lands. They were held in the eastern areas of the five governorates of the Strip⁸.

It was decided that the March gradually approaches the borders; that it would start in the Gaza Strip but would be soon followed by the West Bank and the 1984 lands; and then Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, the USA, Europe, Chile and others. Happening worldwide, the March would exercise pressure on the world to find a solution for the issue of refugees⁹.

It's Importance:

As above-mentioned, this March is but an old method. However, its seriousness, tactics, time, place and mechanism of work have helped it continue for over a year and a half.

Time:

The March is held on Friday of each week. This day is particularly special for Muslims. During the Friday prayer ceremony, awareness is raised among the people, and the people are encouraged to participate in the weekly March.

Place:

The eastern borders of the Gaza Strip hence exercising pressure on the Occupation, which is provoked by the popular protest and closeness to its soldiers. The clashes are no longer with the Palestinians in the occupied West Bank but with the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip as well.

Work Mechanism:

Individual and in-group marchers. It can be said that different groups of the society coming from diverse religious, political and cultural backgrounds participate in the March.

Objectives:

The objectives of the March as specified by Ahmed Abu Artema, member of the National Committee of the Great March of Return, are as follows:

1. Raising awareness about the Right of Return since significant historical turning points must be paved for through triggering people's memory and protecting facts from loss or manipulation.
2. Engraving the issue of Return in the minds of the coming generations.
3. Attracting the world's attention to the slow-death of the people of the Gaza Strip.
4. Depriving the occupation from the feeling of stability¹⁰.

Esam Hammad, Deputy of the International Organizational Committee of the Great March of Return and member of the Legal Committee and International Communication at the Supreme National Committee of the Great March of Return and Breaking the Siege, listed the objectives as follows:

1. The main objective is the return of the refugees.

2. The tactical objective is to stand against Trump's decision to relocate the Embassy to Al Quds.
3. The end of the siege imposed on the Gaza Strip.
4. Attempts to stand against the targeting of refugees through cutting any UNRWA support.
5. Attempts to prevent any resettlement plans of refugees which aim at ending the Palestinian cause¹¹.

As for Ismael Haniya, Chief of Hamas' Political Bureau, he listed the objectives as follows:

1. Stressing on the Palestinian people's clinging to the Right of Return which had been approved internationally and remains engraved in every Palestinian.
2. Rejecting Trump and the American Administration's decision to relocate the American Embassy to Al Quds.
3. Declaring that Gaza will not accept the slow death it is going through and will continue to demand for immediate lifting of the siege¹².

It can be noted, then, that the objectives are not unified by the leaders of the movement, and hence this is considered a problem. The clarity of objectives facilitates their realization and progress or evaluation.

General Principles:

The principles of the March are the following:

1. It is a popular March where all participating entities must maintain its popular nature and must unite under one flag, the Palestinian flag.
2. It is a national March that embraces everyone and surpasses all disagreements. The entire civil and political society is asked to effectively participate in it and contribute to its success.
3. It is a peaceful March that will not adopt any other form of struggle. It aims at achieving the return in a peaceful manner.
4. It is legal as it follows international laws, the most prominent of which is law no. (194) issued by the UN. It clearly states that Palestinian refugees must return to their villages and towns as soon as possible.
5. It is an unofficial popular movement, where all entities and individuals can participate creatively in-line with its general guidelines without waiting for anyone's approval.
6. It is a March for rights. It aims at realizing the Right of Return. It does not have any political agendas for whatsoever entity. Its only motto is the peaceful return of the refugees.
7. It is a series of events and is not limited to one-day activity, or a commemoration of a particular anniversary. It has already started and will only end when the refugees safely return to their homes.

8. For this March to succeed, it needs great efforts exerted by the media, the civil society, the law, the diplomats and others from the moment the mobilization begins to introduce this March and its objectives to the world. This is the duty of all believers in this idea, no matter what their position is.
9. The March is not limited to one geographical area. In fact, it includes all places where Palestinian refugees live, whether in Gaza, the West Bank, Al Quds, the 1984 lands, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and others. It aims at having the displaced Palestinians protesting near the towns from where they were forced to leave.
10. All free people of the world are invited to participate and mobilize. Peace and stability in this area and around the world is directly attached to ending the issue of refugees and their return to their homes.
11. The people of Palestine are invited to start a series of events and peaceful protests to pave the path for the Great March of Return near the 1984 occupied lands at a considerable and safe distance from the wire. The purpose is to prepare the people for the March and not clash with the forces of the occupation.
12. It is aspired that all Palestinian entities become involved and participate and still maintain the popular nature of the March. It must not be politically-based to prevent the occupation from making any excuses. This March is entirely popular and peaceful¹³.

THE PALESTINIAN COMMUNITY'S POSITION ON THE MARCH AND THE ISRAELI VIOLENCE

The Palestinian community's position on the March can be understood and observed from the massive public involvement, especially during the first months. As for the Israeli assault, it was clearly understood from the premeditated murder of the peaceful protesters.

Community Participation and Involvement:

Various groups of the Palestinian community in Gaza from different age groups (children, elderly, men and women) participated in the March. Whole families also participated, the displaced actively reacted, the Gaza citizens took part, and official and popular institutions and the national factions participated as well.

There were various types of activities that attracted a plethora of people. The local and international media also closely covered the events and activities. The activities were related to the culture, heritage, sports and others. The participants in the March would gather and eat popular foods, or raise and wave with the Return Keys, land ownership documents, and names of villages and cities from where they were displaced.

As for the tools the participants used as a form of popular resistance, they included flying kites, lighting up tires, flying burning balloons which caused the Israeli occupation economic losses, and having a night confusion unit which is responsible for disturbing the occupation's soldiers near the eastern borders. However, none of that changed the peaceful nature of the March.

The Palestinian Center for Human Rights stated that despite the occasional burning of tires and throwing of stones, the Israeli occupation was not exposed to real danger. There was not any form of military action in any of the March's locations¹⁴.

According to the UN Independent Commission of Inquiry on Protests in Gaza released report, "The demonstrations were civilian in nature, with clearly stated political aims. Despite some acts of significant violence, the Commission found that the demonstrations did not constitute combat or military campaigns."¹⁵

Israeli Violence:

The increasing number of martyrs and wounded in the Great March of Return is very notable. In a report by the Ministry of Health, the number of martyrs since the March first started until September 7, 2019 reached 312, 300 of which are men and 12 are women. From an age-based classification, around 61 of the martyrs are less than 18 years old, 234 of them range from 18-39 years, 15 range from 40-59 years and 2 are 60 years and above¹⁶.

As for the wounded, their number reached 34,282 people. The injuries referred to the hospitals reached 54.4%, and on-field treated injuries reached 45.6%; the latter were treated in medical points and at primary healthcare centers. Percentage of injured women reached 7.4% (that is 2,537 women), and 18.2% injured children (that is 6,239 children) of the total number of the wounded¹⁷.

Focusing on cases of amputation, which are the hardest and most unbearable, the number of amputees reached 158 (i.e. 78.5%): 124 people lost their lower limbs, 4 lost the upper limbs, and 30 lost their fingers. Classified based on their age, 29 of the amputees are less than 18 years old, 125 range from 19-55 years and 4 more than 55 years. As for paralysis, 26 cases were diagnosed with paralysis, 42.3% of them are paralyzed from the waist down¹⁸.

UNRWA documented the Israeli assaults on its students. In a report it issued a year after the Great March of Return, it said that the occupation forces' response to the March led to injuring more people than the last aggression they waged on Gaza in 2014 summer did. This resulted in pushing the health system to the abyss. UNRWA documented the martyrdom of 13 students registered at its schools. It also offers treatment at its health centers for 2729 people injured in the Great March of Return¹⁹.

The report also included that about 20% (i.e. 533 people) of the treated people from the Great March of Return were children under 18, 95% of which were boys. 80% of the total number of children treated by UNRWA suffered from gunshot wounds²⁰.

Regarding the assault on medical teams, a report by Al Mezan Center for Human Rights on the violations committed since March 30 to August 12, 2018 stated that 3 health team members were martyred, 99 were injured and 64 vehicles were partially damaged. The injuries were mostly from the medical teams of the Civil Defense and the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, two of the main healthcare providers²¹.

As for the assault on the journalists, in a report by the Governmental Information Center on the violations since the beginning of 2019 until August of the same year, 2 journalists were martyred, more than 350 were injured, and 104 were shot with live bullets and shrapnel²².

SECOND TOPIC: EVALUATION OF THE MARCH AND ITS FUTURE

For any work to succeed and achieve its goals, especially a March such as the one the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip are doing, it is necessary to undergo the evaluation and assessment of the researchers and observers. This is important in order to reach the desired results as soon as possible and at the least costs. Therefore, this part of the research tracks the accomplishments, failures, evaluation and visualization for the future.

First: Accomplishments and Failures:

For nearly 88 Fridays, along 22 months, several national successes have been accomplished. It is, at first, the doing of Allah and, then, the Palestinian people, the martyrs and wounded, who continued to participate in its events all along. As there were accomplishments, there were also failures. The following is a list of both:

Accomplishments

Accomplishments can be classified at three levels:

a) At a Palestinian level:

- **Reactivating the role of peaceful resistance:**

Mustafa Ibrahim, political analyst and author, says, the Palestinians have restored what is called 'peaceful resistance' in their methods of resistance; considering how for years the resistance was rather armed-based, and several Palestinian sectors were restrained from participating. However, the peaceful resistance has allowed greater numbers to become more involved²³.

- **Achieving Palestinian Unity**

According to Mustafa Ibrahim, the Palestinians successfully united under one decision as all parties, including Fatah, participated in this March; though the latter withdrew at a later stage²⁴.

- **Reminding of the Occupation's Terrorism**

The researcher believes this is important as the March successfully exposed the crimes of the Israeli occupation which suffocates more than 2,000,000 people in the Gaza Strip, who suffer from the greatest and worst siege in modern human history.

- **Reinforcing the National Identity**

Days and months of narrated stories about the land are never more impactful than going to the borders with the grandparents at the borders, and seeing the land with their own eyes.

- **Improving the Living Conditions**

The living conditions somewhat improved; for example, the electricity crisis was partially addressed, the workers and graduates were offered job opportunities, financial aid was given

to tens of poor families, exportation was increased, the fishing distance was also increased, and trade with Egypt became better²⁵.

b) At an International Level

• Reaffirming the Right of Return

The Great March of Return has repositioned and reprioritized the Palestinian cause internationally, and has reaffirmed the Right of Return once again²⁶.

The Israeli occupation, as known, seeks to eliminate the Right of Return. Unfortunately, some Palestinian officials have shared such interest when they negotiated attaining such right. They even reached unbelievable compromises on this issue. This movement, the Great March of Return', has succeeded in tampering such plans, especially that the Deal of the Century is currently presented as a solution.

c) At an Israeli level

• Causing Confusion

The Great March of Return has become a source of anxiety to the Israeli occupation which feels endangered. The idea of a popular movement has been opened as a case addressed by Israeli occupation government. The times and dates of the March have been marked on the Israeli occupation army's agenda, and the occupation has set plans and prepared tools to face such movement²⁷.

Some believe that the Israeli occupation with the assistance of working powers has managed to contain the March after a few months of its launch, and has succeeded in minimizing its effects to a bearable amount. Therefore, it does not pose any danger, but in fact it has become a burden to its participants²⁸.

• Causing Economic Damages

The March has caused great economic damages to the surrounding areas of the Strip²⁹, and disturbed the settlers who have never witnessed similar conditions.

• Reinforcing Israeli Division

The marches and confrontations with the occupation have reinforced the internal division among the Israeli occupation, and have made Avigdor Lieberman, Defense Minister of the Occupation, resign upon the clashes with the Gaza Strip³⁰.

• Weakening the Israeli Position

The marches have weakened the position of the occupation forces internationally and have exposed the weakness of their arguments and justifications of their policies and crimes against the Palestinian people. The self-defense claim has no longer become convincing or believable to several international entities³¹.

• Failures

Regarding the principles and procedures of the March, the following can be noted:

a. Unshared Objectives

According to Esam Hammad, the objective of the March is not lifting the siege though this, he says, is a legitimate political move. However, the higher purpose of the March is the return of the refugees to their homes, and this is what the Palestinian factions missed to understand. There was a great gap in the work strategies and mechanisms hence the March lost great support from abroad³².

From the beginning, there were different objectives of the March causing the disparity in the followed methods. The field work of some youth and their actions did indicate their desire to break the siege.

Among the members of the International Organizational Committee, it was clear that they themselves did not agree on specific objectives. Ahmed Abu Artema, for instance, says, “Raising awareness about the Return”, while Esam Hammad says, “The return of the refugees”.

The researcher believes that ‘the Right of Return’ is a big issue and should not have been enlisted as an objective so the public would not fall apart if it is not achieved. Indeed, the Right of Return, strongly believed in by all Palestinians, will only be achieved through comprehensive resistance: military and popular. This, of course, does not undermine the importance of popular resistance, represented by the March of Return. However, each method of resistance is bounded by time and objectives. It is wrong to overburden the marches, especially that the international support, despite its importance, will not necessarily offer a fair solution for the refugees.

b. Over-raising Expectations

In this regard, Ahmed Abu Artema says that over-raising people’s expectations by focusing on half of May had created a closely anticipated time of great achievements, and harmed the concept of ‘continuity’. He adds, “If the March of Return had happened without a specific time of launch, it would have allowed a slow rise and continuity to truly drain the occupation. In addition, promoting the idea of crossing over without detailed planning pushed the public to go towards the barbed wire fence, and caused panic among the Israelis. Therefore, they turned to that level of violence. The 14th of May, Day of Crossing as was named by the activists, passed without actual crossing and at unnecessary high costs even if the objective at the time was to send a message³³”.

Although this March is tightly connected to the land, the researcher believes that its main objective is breaking the Israeli siege, which is not, at any level, a problem. The Gaza Strip suffers from extreme poverty, high unemployment rates, lack of job opportunities, and destruction of public facilities such as healthcare, water and sanitation facilities. The UN already warned that by 2020 Gaza could become uninhabitable³⁴.

c. Hate Speech

The use of hate speech against the occupation forces diverted the March from a highly important principle: its peaceful nature. As a result, the occupation uses it as an excuse for further violence against the protesters.

Second: Challenges:

1. Challenges

a) Rising number of victims

Based on the previously mentioned information, the number of casualties, and the high number of martyrs and wounded can be clearly noted. This was deemed one of its flaws. It has become normal to see injured youth everywhere.

It is a religious must and a popular demand that people's souls are protected and kept safe. The ongoing bloodshed will result in future disadvantages as this March requires continuity in order to succeed. In addition, treating the wounded requires great potentials and budgets, which are unavailable to begin with.

According to various authors and analysts, the March organizers should have carried out awareness campaigns and presented guidelines to the people in order to limit the number of casualties³⁵.

b) Palestinian Authority position

The Palestinian Authority's position on the March was negative. It tried to hinder the Egyptian efforts to reach calm, which created a great challenge for the achievement of the March's objectives³⁶.

c) Limited to the Gaza Strip

Despite the announcements, the March took place only in the Gaza Strip. However, other limited attempts were silenced immediately by the Authority of Ramallah and other Arab regimes³⁷.

In the interview, the researcher asked Esam Hammad about the reason behind not involving the refugees abroad. He answered that such issue was not followed up with by the officials of the factions, holding them responsible for such failure³⁸.

d) Individual acts

Despite the organizing committees' attempts to maintain order in the field, some individuals' acts were done spontaneously thus negatively affecting the peaceful nature of the movement³⁹

As a result, such acts posed a challenge to the peaceful nature of the movement, which is called for by all committees, citizens and organizers.

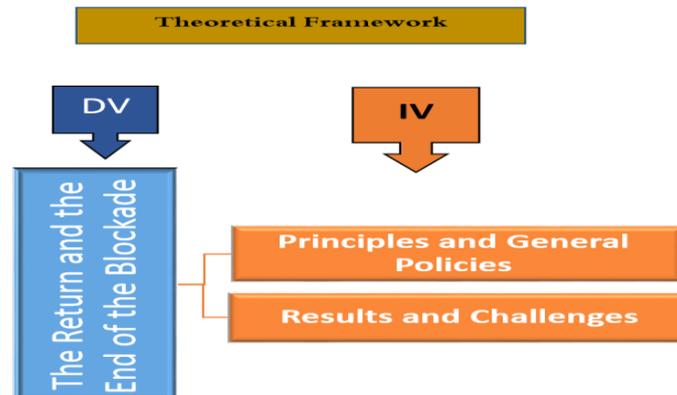
e) Monotony

The last few months have been monotonous for the March despite some exceptions⁴⁰.

METHODOLOGY:

The researcher follows the survey methodology, benefiting for his personal observations, following the readable and visual media tools, and analysing documents.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK



DISCUSSION:

The continuation of the Great March of Return for more than a year and a half indicates that the Palestinians perceive it as one of the main tools of resistance amid the Palestinian complicated reality and the changing Arab conditions. However, the long duration, the failure to achieve its goals, the escalation of the March's events and the continuity of Israel's attacks against the protestors made most of the Palestinian citizens reluctant to participate. That was obvious when the number of participants started to decrease, compared to remarkable presence at the beginning of the March. After about 22 months of the March's age, there is no way to talk about the failure of the popular resistance. Instead, the light should be shed on the gap between the reality and the ambitions, as the goals must be aligned with the available tools and resources, and the international, regional and local conditions must be taken into consideration.

It would have been helpful if the March's objectives were determined as follows:

1. Maintaining the right to return, especially amid the attempts to eliminate the Palestinians' right to return.
2. Improving the living conditions of the Palestinians in Gaza. If this goal was achieved, it is, indeed, an achievement amid the severe Israeli blockade.
3. Mobilizing the official and popular international solidarity with the Palestinian cause.

CONCLUSION:

First: Results

1. The Great March of Return is a popular and national movement, and an old method of struggle against the Israeli occupation.
2. It is a peaceful march that calls for legitimate rights: The right of clinging to one's land and identity coming at first.

3. It emphasizes to the Israeli occupation, the USA and the entire world that the resettlement of the refugees plans are absolutely rejected by the Palestinians.
4. It succeeded in attracting the Palestinian people coming from different religious, political or cultural backgrounds.
5. It helped shed light on the Palestinian people issue and, most importantly, the Right of Return.
6. It reminded the world of the occupation's terrorism as it surrounds more than 2,000,000 Palestinians in a small area, the Gaza Strip.
7. It revived the Palestinian popular heritage through the events held at the March.
8. It accomplished several national achievements including reducing the severe effects of the siege.

Second: Recommendations

The researcher recommends:

1. Reformulating the objectives of the popular resistance and turning them to realistic and practical objectives.
2. Finding means to reactivate the marches like holding activities among families, masjids, institutions and villages.
3. Calling upon institutions and committees around the world to hold events for the Great March at the same time and continuing doing so for a while. The events could be held at different countries every time in places like Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia and other European countries.
4. Preparing a realistic discourse that focuses on the injustice the Palestinians suffer from and their right to live freely and in dignity.
5. Inviting Arab and international media outlets to cover the humanitarian activities held there such as football matches, wedding parties and others.
6. Avoiding overemotional discourse such as 'these marches will not stop until we return to our lands'. We know that the march is a form of resistance and it will end when the objectives are achieved; and we will return to our lands. However, it requires the joint work of all supporters of the Palestinian cause and the use of all methods of resistance.
7. Avoiding threatening phrases such as 'we will eliminate the occupation soldiers' and 'we will blow up the zionists' heads'. This diverts the March from its peaceful nature and affects its reception by the public opinion of the world. As for the Israeli occupation, it gives it excuses to target the protestors.
8. Inviting authors, researchers and cinema directors from around the world to prepare written and visual materials on the marches and offer the necessary requirements for doing such work.

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