

Funding higher education in the Arab States: Thoughts and reflections on the topic

A. El-Hawat

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by
Ali El-Hawat
Professor of Sociology,
Faculty of Literature, Sociology Department
University of Al-Fateh
Tripoli, Libya
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya National Commission for UNESCO

I. Objectives

In this paper an attempt is made to achieve three inter-related objectives:

- The *first* objective is to draw a *comprehensive image* of the funding strategy of higher education (HE) in Arab States.
- The *second* objective is to account for the *growing changes* in this funding strategy. These changes are seen in the partnership of the private sector in higher education and the growing forces of globalization. However, the trend has a significant impact on both higher education in the form of institutions and on the Arab society at large, particularly in the scientific, social and political arenas.
- The *third* objective of this paper is to see how Arab higher education planners and decision-makers look for *ways and means* to fund higher education outside the public sector and to re-orient it in order to produce better-trained graduates and knowledge that serve the need for their development in a very dynamic, twenty-first century global society.

It should be noted that it is difficult to cover all Arab societies in this short paper. Therefore, the focus and analysis are directed only to the general trends of funding higher education in Arab societies and the possible impact that could be seen as a result of these changes.

Finally, this paper will seek to make recommendations toward financing the growth and development of HE in Arab societies in the twenty-first century, especially with regards to developing the quality of higher education and the knowledge base that is required to help secure a truly global society, culture, and economy as well as a global mind and vision of the Arab student.

II. Methodology

In order to achieve the objectives of this paper, the methodology utilized is based on situation analysis, and the assessment of the prevailing conditions of Arab higher education in broad terms. For this purpose, some indicators and classifications are designed to analyze the growth of higher education in Arab countries, and to evaluate the changing patterns and/or the expected changes in the funding of higher education. There is growing change and this will have its strong impact in the near future. This change might be more noticeable in areas other than at present, but it is growing fast with regard to the funding strategies of higher education. The author's long experience as a university staff member in an Arab society is included in this paper's methodology, analysis and interpretation.

III. Funding strategy

During the 1950s and 1960s after their independence, most Arab countries struggled to develop systems of higher education that would enable their societies to build education systems that would flourish and grow. The search to develop such education systems was consistent with a global trend in which the expansion of higher education was the most important single post-war trend worldwide (Abdalla Abu Batana, 2006).

Arab governments have rapidly established a great number of universities in recent decades. In 1950, there were no more than ten universities scattered across the Region. Today, however, the Arab Region has more than 200 higher education institutions, universities, and colleges, and has witnessed an unprecedented increase in enrolment rates in higher education institutions. This increase resulted from a growing social demand for education and the governments' commitment to render higher education as

accessible as possible. However, all of these higher education institutions were funded through public sources (Ahmed Hassan Mohammed, 2006).

Most Arab governments spend between 10 to 20 per cent of their annual budgets on education, including HE. Arab governments have many other competing obligations, some of which include building a modern state, ensuring equal opportunities to citizens, and the offering of free basic and secondary education 'free for all' to citizens (as stipulated in the constitutions of most Arab countries). However, this trend can no longer be sustained due to several constraints such as: (i) population growth; (ii) limited financial resources; (iii) foreign debt and (iv) political problems in the Region, which draw significant amounts of capital for buying arms to the detriment of building schools, hospitals and providing social services. As a result, higher education in the Arab Region has fallen short of meeting its social and economic goals. Some of the main factors that have been identified as putting a strain on higher education in the Region include the following:

1. Increased population growth and the massification of secondary education.
2. Inadequate financial resources.
3. Inflexible and centralized management.
4. Lack of diversification in the programmes/ and institutions of higher education.
5. Inability to meet students' needs; and
6. Weakness of the links between higher education institutions, general and secondary education institutions, local communities and societal and human development needs.

These factors formed the basis for policy-makers at the Arab Region Conference on Higher Education in Beirut 1998 (UNESCO, 2003), in preparation for the World Conference on Higher Education, to state the need for:

- (1) New teaching and learning methods and processes.
- (2) New education technologies.
- (3) New scientific and analytical thinking skills; and
- (4) New ways and programmes for financing and managing HE institutions.

In addition, the most notable change in the last two decades has been the establishment of a sizeable number of new providers of higher education both at the university and the technical levels. In fact, of the 203 universities in the Arab Region today, 62 were established during the fifteen year period from 1975 to 1989, while 54 were established during the 1990s, and 32 since 2000. To these, one should add the numerous community colleges, technical higher education. Institutions and colleges of technology established in many Arab countries show that almost 30 per cent of all such institutions were established during the last decade, totalling no less than 170 institutions throughout the Arab States with a concentration in Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, Palestinian Territories, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates.

Another feature of this new trend is that a large number of the institutions constitute private non-governmental institutions, many of which are being established in partnership with American or European institutions of higher learning, and most of which are for-profit institutions and, therefore, are accessible only to those who can afford them.

During this period, the number of students has also grown from less than some thousands to more than 5 million university students at the present time. This development in the number of universities and students has rendered Arab governments unable to find financial resources to manage such an education system alongside other social services such as health and social welfare programmes.

Arab governments, including oil producing countries, find themselves in a difficult situation since they are committed, at least in theory, to providing equal opportunities in education. But in reality they are no longer able to provide or offer such education freely. The cost is very high, requiring budget cuts for other social services like health care and social welfare programmes. As a result of such strains and pressures Arab governments have attempted, to:

- *Allocate* a percentage of their national budget to higher education and scientific research; however, this budget is very small and does not exceed 5 per cent of the national budget. This decrease in financial resources has led to budget cuts on different

higher education programmes, including reform programmes related to the quality of higher education and programmes related to infrastructure development.

- *Limit* the admission of students at the higher education institutions, so as to limit and reduce the total cost of higher education.
- *Integrate* some public universities and colleges in one university, in order to reduce expenditure. For example, Libya adopts this strategy and has reduced public universities from fourteen to nine universities, but is allowing private universities.
- *Impose* fees on students, especially those relating to registration, library services, books, and other social services.
- *Reduce* expenditure on some scientific research programmes, especially, research that does not serve development. Theoretical, and basic research, as a result is very much reduced and therefore is absent in Arab universities.
- *Request* financial funds from foreign countries and international organizations like UNESCO, the World Bank, and other Arab development organizations, especially Arab oil countries like Libya, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States.
- *Obtain* income from consultative services offered by universities to different organizations, public or private, and reinvest this income in higher education programmes. Such a strategy is adopted in many Arab countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia.
- *Reduce* daily management expenditure such as office furniture, transportation, paper and building maintenance. [Information concerning these strategies is taken from ISESCO (2003)].

All these strategies have had a direct effect on higher education and scientific research, but translate to a lack of funds for higher education growth, especially with regard to its quality and knowledge production. In addition, this change of funding on higher education will affect students from poor families and low socio-economic classes in Arab societies, which means creating more social gaps between different groups of the society, especially students who can and those who cannot access private higher education. The best thing families can hope for is to pay for their children's education, but most poor families will be unable to afford the cost of sending their children through higher

education, thus many of these children are likely to enter the labour market at a very young age or end up without work as is the situation in many Arab countries today.

IV. Growing changes and higher education (HE)

Arab societies and their education systems are facing dramatic changes. To account for such changes, the following trends can be observed:

- *Encouragement* of the private sector, local or foreign, to invest in higher education.
- *Insufficiency* of budget allocations to social welfare programmes including higher education.
- *Imposition* of fees on higher education, and other social services.
- *Unemployment* of many university graduates. Employment in the Arab States is at least in the range of 15-20 per cent of the labour force, a great percentage of which pertain to graduates of different educational levels.
- *Lack or delay* of many plans of reforming higher education, especially aspects of quality, and introducing modern educational technology.
- *Widening* of the gap between the university curriculum, and the labour market, especially in the modern sector of the economy which depends heavily on the knowledge economy and information technology.
- *Growth* of religious fundamentalism among university students, and the absence of cultural dialogue among different groups in Arab societies.
- *Brain drain* of educated graduates looking for a better lifestyle, income, and better opportunities for self-development, and personal freedom.

V. Funding higher education: changes and crises

Funding higher education in Arab countries is facing new challenges and requires new funding sources to continue in size and quality. These challenges are growing mostly for the following reasons:

1. In general, higher education is under-funded, except in some Arab oil countries. At present, most higher education institutions are unable to meet the increasing social

demands for higher education or the support which is necessary for reforming and modernizing the programmes in order to cope with the challenges imposed by globalization and socio-economic develop.

2. In view of recent national and international development, the role of the state in developing countries to finance public services, including higher education, is diminishing. Recent national and international reports refer to a continuous decline in financing higher education, especially in countries implementing a new structural adjustment and/or privatization (Abdalla Abu Batana, 2006).

3. Instead of concentrating on improving higher education infrastructure and research projects administrations focus more on the daily management of HE budgets in many Arab States. Furthermore, this problem is being exacerbated by increasingly crowded classrooms, a lack of modern education technology, unqualified staff and high drop-out and repetition rates. Under such circumstances, higher education has become a real challenge to making way for development and to policy-makers, rather than becoming a tool of development. Perhaps only now it is becoming a veritable tool for social and political instability in the region.

4. The crisis is building up and the private sector has now become an alternative to HE funding. Many private or semi-private universities have sprung up in Arab countries without sufficient planning, capital, or qualified personnel. The problem is that these private universities were not created following the models of western countries. Instead, they were established in haste to try to solve a social problem rather than to improve higher education research activities and the quality of education.

Consequently some remarks should be brought to light and noted concerning these new private universities in Arab countries. They were not well-planned and could be compared to fast-food stands in the crowded streets of western cities; whose role is to provide food to appease hunger.

Another major problem should be pointed out and that is the lack of available transparent reliable statistics on the private funding of higher education and research activities in Arab countries, even as the number of private universities increases. However this type

of education is severely criticized and opposed by many, on the grounds that private higher education will create many social and cultural problems. The most important of these criticisms is that:

1. Some consider private education to be against social justice because private higher education will lose its role as a mechanism for social mobility in Arab societies and as a tool for improving the low standards of living of vulnerable groups, for the simple reason that only the wealthy can afford to pay for their children's higher education
2. Some also see it, right or wrong, as a cultural privilege for the wealthy. It will also introduce other cultural values and norms that are different from the national culture, especially in the case of foreign-funded universities, and higher education institutions.

As a result, it is believed that Arab governments are still reluctant and hesitant to accept private HE especially those which are totally funded, and supported, by foreign capital and funds. Furthermore, Arab governments may put considerable preconditions on opening private universities of higher education. In addition, the private sector's contribution to education, including higher education, is something new to the Arab mindset and the value structure of the Region. Wealthy Arabs and organizations usually invest in land, real estate and trade but never in education and higher education. Therefore, the private sector is quite hesitant to invest in higher education. This is contrary to what is going on in western countries, especially in Canada and the US.

Also, it could be considered that those Arab governments which encourage private sector investment in HE do not wish to acknowledge their social, economic and cultural influences. It will take a very long time to convince wealthy Arab businessmen, individuals or organizations to put their capital in human development projects (HDP). Unless the Arab mindset changes and accepts investment in education, Arab higher education will continue to depend on government sources and will continue to face *financial difficulties and challenges of quality* relevant to societies' contemporary needs.

VI. Changes of funding patterns: impact and consequences

There are changing patterns of funding higher education, be it:

- reducing public allocations;
- decreasing the financial services for education;
- allowing the private sector to take up the responsibility of HE.

Higher education will be affected as an institution; and society at large also. As an institution or a system it will be distanced from achieving any higher education excellence, and will not be able to admit and/or meet growing social demand. The impact can be observed in the following three areas:

1. Social impact

- a. The absence of the role of higher education as a mechanism to upgrade the social mobility of many vulnerable groups especially the poor, women, and rural populations.
- b. The reproduction of illiteracy – at least in the sense of technological illiteracy and modern specialities.
- c. An increase in unemployment, which will lead to more poverty in the Arab modern society, simply because the youth lack modern technological education necessary for the modern labour market whether inside Arab societies or abroad.
- d. Widening the gap between Arab societies and advanced developed societies worldwide. This gap will further isolate Arabs from modern economy and culture.
- e. A growing prevalence of social problems in Arab societies, such as crime, social disorganization, corruption, possibly religious fundamentalism, and political unrest.
- f. The widening gap among people who benefit from university education, and people who are unable to do so. The result is a lack of consensus among the

citizens of one nation: the immediate result of which is backwardness of nation building in the modern sense.

2. Scientific impact

Decreasing funds for higher education limits and even prevents necessary reforms especially in the areas of quality and knowledge production. If the alternative is private higher education, this will foster moreover the type of knowledge and reform that serves its goals and economic interests. So the dilemma in supporting only the public sector is that HE will not receive the funds needed to carry out its needed reform, and the private sector will care only for certain aspects of reform that serve its goals and interests. For example, the public sector cannot finance major reforms in educational technologies and education infrastructure such as good libraries, advanced laboratories and educational university campuses while the private sector does not take into consideration the cultural and social role of HE in the overall development of the country. The private sector is usually motivated by *profit* or *ideological interests*. This is exemplified by the Arab student who studies in a private university and is not trained for the real needs of his society. He is usually trained to benefit foreign economy and not society operating in his home country; consequently he will go abroad to live and work in the west.

As for the consequences of the lack of funds for HE, the unqualified teaching staff and limited resources available for research activities, the result is twofold: a *slowing down* process of building knowledge-societies in the Arab World and a system that *remains traditional* and incapable of preparing students in the modern technological sciences. Instead it will concentrate on social sciences, art, law, and classical sciences which are not really needed in the modern labour market as mentioned previously. Private universities will tend to concentrate only on limited subjects that serve their goals for-profit or serving certain social and cultural purposes. A typical example is that many private universities in Arab countries teach only business administration, social science and some technological sciences that are needed either in the local labour market, or on the international market. While these subjects are, indeed, needed, development and nation-building still demand a wider range of specialties and subjects.

3. Political impact

Lack of public funding for HE has led to encouraging the private sector to invest more in same. And this, in itself, has led to relaxing the heavy hands of governments on the minds, curricula and research activities of the universities. Also it has opened the way to different cultural effects of higher education, in particular, the influence of foreign capital, which has resulted in a gradual change in HE of its goals, roles and purposes. Perhaps as a result, Arab societies are now divided into two opposing political forces – the national goals of nation-building and the international interests of the global market and economy. Also, the HE system becomes a platform for political debate and, to some degree, a forum for ideological conflict between global views and local national views.

However, scarcity of funds may have several consequences:

- (1) Diversification of political culture inside universities, especially between public and private higher education, especially if the private is funded by foreign capital.
- (2) Growth of a sub-political culture within the national culture. This sub-culture may have different views and come from different walks and talks of life, which vary from the prevailing national culture.
- (3) Growth of new political concepts relating to human rights, women's freedom, democracy and freedom of the individual and the economy, while these concepts may be spreading not due to HE, but rather because such concepts *gain more strength* in private higher education institutions than in public universities.

Again, the encouragement of the private sector to invest in higher education is very recent in Arab countries. It is not fully adapted in Arab education systems as many planners, policy-makers, and the public oppose it on the grounds that private universities will widen social differences among people (i.e. between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' in society), that their motive is for-profit and not quality higher education, or that they seek to gain some ideological influence. Whatever the case, the foreseen results of private higher education will be the commercialization of higher education rather than its

protection as a human right. It will become a commodity, subject to market laws and mechanisms.

The outcome is that education will no longer be a tool for human development, but rather a tool for profit and injustice in Arab societies. Probably 60 per cent of the Arab population is below the poverty line by international standards. So how can this widespread population adopt a better standard of living, free from economic poverty if public funds dry up in education and other human development areas?

VII. Funding higher education and scientific research: plans and actions

In the light of a possible further scarcity of state funding caused by certain inescapable factors such as the inability of states to increase financial allocations, foreign debt and the gradual disappearance of covering social services including education, health and social insurance, efforts must be directed to diversify sources of funding.

However, the World Conference on Higher Education (Nettleford, 1998) and its subsequent meeting of partners (WCHE+5, 1998) affirmed that while seeking the contribution of all stakeholders, including the private sector in the development of HE, states and governments should fully pursue their responsibility and engagement for its support not leaving higher education to be shaped solely by the market, because this will create an unpredictable situation (UNESCO, 1998).

In view of the previous comments, the author identifies three scenarios that could help deal with the problem of funding HE and scientific research in the Arab States.

Scenario 1: Maintain the prevailing funding pattern as such, but supervise closely the management of higher education budgets, reverse the spending from daily administrative cost such as salaries and transportation etc. in order to improve the quality of higher education – especially in teaching technology and research activities.

In this scenario, it is important to take further legal and financial measures to re-direct expenditures, the most important of which includes the following policies:

1. Impose new taxation on luxury goods and invest the revenue on the development of HE; and create more infrastructures to meet the growing social demand on higher education.
2. Allocate more financial resources from the public budget to higher education and scientific research.
3. Use the revenue of obligatory aims (*Zaqaat* in Arabic) in HE development.
4. Allocate part of the oil revenue in oil-producing countries to developing public education in general and particularly in higher education; and
5. Establish a national fund for higher education and scientific research. This fund should only be confined to HE and research projects.

Scenario 2: Create a higher education system owned by both the public and the private sectors. In this scenario, higher education institutions should be established, financed and managed in a partnership arrangement.

To ensure this, certain measures have to be taken:

- a. Students should pay reasonable fees but within the financial abilities of their families.
- b. Students from low socio-economic categories should be supported by the state as a way of developing society; and
- c. Local economic establishments, companies, banks and businessmen should contribute to HE development according to pre-arranged conditions – or contracting out research to benefit them and the students.

Scenario 3: Allow the establishment of private universities that are financed either by local markets, or through foreign capital. These private universities should put emphasis on high quality HE and scientific research. In these universities, students would have to pay fees and have obtained higher scores in secondary education prior to entry. Brilliant

students who come to study in these universities should be excused from paying any fees (through scholarships from their countries or even from foreign sources).

These universities must take the following measures:

1. Teach Arabic, Arab history and cultural heritage, though other foreign language courses may be part of the curricular..
2. Conduct advanced research related to national or internal economy.
3. Ensure that their boards are represented by national governments and the national economy especially from the manufacturing, agriculture, trade and new technology sectors.
4. Ensure that the presidents of the universities or vice-presidents are nationals of the country hosting the university.
5. Establish scientific and teaching relationships with national or international institutions and admit a percentage of students from foreign countries. Likewise, this applies to developed or developing countries.

As for the practical implementation of these three scenarios, and in author's order of preference:

Scenario 1: 'The Prevailing Funding Pattern' could be implemented as follows:

1. ***Design*** a five-year strategy, at the end of which all three scenarios are to be put into practice.
2. ***Set up*** a national fund implementing these scenarios. This fund receives financial allocations from the state and other national allocations earned from luxury goods taxation.
3. ***Receive*** capital from the revenue of research done by the university and its research centres.
4. ***Set up*** a national board, or authority in charge of implementing all stages, and changes demanded by these scenarios.
5. ***Issue*** administrative and legal programmes required by these scenarios.

6. **Organize** workshops, conferences, and expert meetings to make the public aware of this alternative to higher education and to evaluate the outcome of implementing these scenarios.

Scenario 3: 'Private universities' could be implemented as follows:

1. **The state** should free itself completely from HE responsibility, and leave the 'job' to both the national or foreign markets.
2. **The state** shall only monitor higher education from the perspective of quality assurance (QA), and other legal aspects such as a company working, or investing, on its territories.
3. **The state** shall offer scholarships to its students to study in these universities.
4. **The state** should have neither control over the curricula, nor the teaching staff. But it is obligatory that these universities teach national history, culture and language.
5. **A university** could be established as a branch of a foreign one, teach in any language and conduct any desirable research.
6. **Along** with these scenarios, the state should establish a national system of the community college type of HE. This system should be funded, managed, and geared towards the national needs of labour, and the national social and cultural aspirations of the country.

Scenario 2: ‘Partnerships of Both the Public and Private Sectors Fora’ could be carried out as follows:

1. **Design** a five-year strategy at the end of which this scenario should be implemented.
2. **Create** a capital for this type of higher education through transferring universities into corporations of higher education, but with restricted and defined profit for their services.
3. **Sell and transfer** the capital of these universities into bonuses on the national and international market.
4. **Admit** only brilliant students who can contribute to research, and knowledge production.
5. **Establish** a national board for over-seeing these universities academically and also policy-wise.
6. **A total** of 50 per cent of the board members, and the presidents of these universities, should be nationals of the Host Country.

Deciding the preference among these three scenarios constitutes a difficult decision, and may, therefore, require further research and thinking, but primarily Scenario 1: ‘The prevailing funding pattern’, is, the author believes, the most suitable one for Arab society, culture, and economy.

The rationale behind such a choice can be explained given the following considerations:

1. Arab societies need to invest more money, effort, time and thinking on education in order to meet the needs of the twenty-first century, including achieving better standards of human development. At present, there are more than 70 million illiterate persons in Arab countries, eight million of whom are children.
2. Higher education is the road map to building knowledge-societies in the Arab States, and constitutes the only way to establish *knowledge-societies* and *knowledge-economies* – and train modern nationals to think, live and work in a global world.

3. Private higher education is a good choice in any society, but the majority of the Arab population lives below the poverty line and cannot afford to pay for their children's education, so there is no choice but for the state to contribute to its citizens' education, at least for the poorest and most vulnerable.
4. Higher education is always a public affair, so the private sector can contribute to higher education, the state being responsible only legally and morally by offering education to its citizens, especially in Arab societies where the citizens can hardly manage to live as dignified human beings.

In addition to the aforementioned scenarios, one of the ways to minimize social demand on higher education is to encourage the public and the private sectors to establish higher education of the *community colleges* type. These colleges should be linked directly to local labour markets and the community and in accordance with the social and economic needs. These colleges can be financed in cooperation with or owned and managed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These colleges should be somehow between university education and secondary school education. Their main purpose is to admit students who seek some kind of higher education and who are keen to enter the labour market as soon as possible and become good, hard-working citizens of their local communities.

As higher education in the Arab Region is generally, with some exceptions, of lower quality and similar to that of many developing countries, any strategy for funding higher education in Arab countries must be devoted to quality assurance (QA). Arab higher education should also introduce many reform programmes in curricula and teaching technology.

In addition, Arab countries should design plans and programmes for creating higher education institutions in order to meet the growing social demand on higher education, update the university and provide different programmes of HE and university programmes.

VIII. Summary and concluding remarks

This paper attempted to discuss the funding of higher education strategies and scientific research in Arab States. It can be concluded that Arab higher education is undergoing drastic change and transformation due to the forces of globalization and the dynamics of the twenty-first century. This trend affects not only funding patterns but also every aspect of Arab higher education. In order to cope with societal patterns and demands, Arabs must adapt their traditional higher education systems in not only terms of funding patterns, but also in almost every aspect of the education system. Perhaps the most urgent area besides funding is the quality of higher education (HE) and teaching methods.

This paper is concerned primarily with funding strategies and has concluded that funding strategies, carried out in any form will have major impacts on both HE and society at large. As for higher education itself, it must be transformed in philosophy and practice, and if it continues as it is now, it will become an education system serving *society in times past*, not *modern society of today*. In addition, such higher education will create more social problems than offering solutions to these problems. Unless the whole education system, higher education included, is transformed and modernized, further development, in other domains, of Arab countries will be of no avail.

The major conclusion reached in this paper is that *reform/funding strategies* of higher education, whether as a result of shrinking funds or the participation of private sector, will have over the long-term three major impacts:

- I. **A social impact** as observed as some kind of disorganization and the growing gap between different social groups.
- II. **A scientific impact** as already observed by the growing gap between knowledge-societies and poorer knowledge-societies; and
- III. **A political impact** as observed in the growing political unrest and lack of stability

Finally, this paper holds the assumption that it is too early to evaluate the situation, but that regardless as to whether Arab societies adopt private or public higher education it is thought that three scenarios could be followed:

- The *first* to maintain the public higher education as it is but to allocate more funds to meet the needs of quality and social demands on higher education.
- The *second* to have higher education funded and managed by both the public and private sector.
- The *third* scenario to allow the private sector to open private universities that are designed basically to produce knowledge and modern technology, and possibly to establish community colleges to satisfy the needs of the labour market and promote good citizenship. These community colleges can be established by either the public sector or the private sector provided that they correspond to the ‘Social, Cultural and Economic Needs for Development of Arab countries’ in the twenty-first century.

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