

# The monthly briefing | December 2014

International political and security risk updates

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## Africa

*Civilian rule returns to Burkina Faso but armed forces retain considerable power; Nigeria further destabilised by attacks in northeast of country; hope for political resolution of conflict in South Sudan despite suspension of peace talks.*

**Following violent protests in Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou, and other cities on 30 October, the long-time president, Blaise Compaoré, resigned.** On 31 October, a lieutenant colonel of the presidential guard, Yacouba Isaac Zida, assumed power. A transitional government was established on 23 November under interim President Michel Kafando, with Zida holding the position of prime minister. It will maintain power until the proposed election in 2015. The new government will consist of a 90-member cabinet, including 30 members from the former opposition, 25 members from civil society, 25 member from the armed force, and 10 members belonging to the Compaoré faction. Notably, the army has received six major governmental positions, including those of foreign affairs and defence, both of which will be chaired by Zida.

The change in government creates a number of potential domestic and international impacts. Under the rule of former president Compaoré, Burkina Faso was a reliable ally of the West. It was considered to be a mediator in the region and a contributor to regional stability. Both the United States and France have strategic interests in the state, as both countries have special operations groups based in Burkina Faso. On an economic level, the shift in government will have little international impact. The main exports of Burkina Faso are gold, cotton and livestock, with a total export value of approximately \$2.8 billion. The most notable impact of the new government has been the announcement that the minister for mining, Colonel Boubacar Ba, will be reviewing a number of mining permits issued by the former president. However, the 23 tonnes of gold mined annually accounts for only approximately 1% one global gold output, and an interruption in mining in Burkina Faso will have minimal impact on global prices.



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Considering the short timeframe in which power has been returned to a civilian institution, the makeup of the new interim government, and the strong outside influences of the African Union, United Nations and Western allies, such as the United States and France, it is likely that the elections scheduled for November 2015 will take place successfully. However, the relatively significant involvement of the armed forces in this process, and the proportionally high number of armed forces personnel serving as members of government, may represent a cause for concern should the electoral process fail to form a legitimate government. If realised, the remote possibility of an interim military government emerging would threaten both the democratic progress of Burkina Faso and the stability of the region.

**A high number of attacks over the past month have further destabilised northeastern Nigeria.** The most devastating attack occurred in Kano on 28 November: two bombs were detonated in a crowded mosque, and gunmen then attacked survivors in the surrounding area. The total death toll is currently estimated at 120, with another 400 people injured. While no one has yet claimed credit for the attack, it is highly likely that Boko Haram is responsible. The attack on the Central Mosque came shortly after an attack on a bus station in the northeast of the country in which 40 people, including five soldiers, were killed. Further attacks throughout November included the capture of Damassak, located near the border with Niger, resulting in approximately 50 fatalities; the raid – of a dynamite depot owned by a French mining company; and a roadside attack resulting in 35 fatalities.

While government forces have been able to make some limited progress in recapturing towns held by Boko Haram, success has often only been possible with the support of armed civilians. It appears that Nigeria's security forces are struggling with the insurgency despite having the largest standing army in the region. This is likely attributable to inadequate training and aging equipment. The continued fighting in the region has also increased the number of internally displaced people (IDPs), with perhaps close to one million people having been displaced. Critical for Nigeria has also been the falling oil prices generated by OPEC's decision not to cut oil production, and a corresponding devaluation of the Naira. Nigeria has been hit particularly hard by the falling oil prices, and the finance minister, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, has admitted that the natural resource saving accounts are now conspicuously low on funds due to excessive spending over the recent years of conflict.

Attacks in the north of the country have increased over the past month, and it is likely that the number and severity of attacks will continue to increase. Due to the inability of the Nigerian security forces to secure the region, militants – most likely from Boko Haram – have been able to secure explosives and weapons in high numbers, which will enable them to carry out more dramatic operations. It is highly likely that Boko Haram will attempt to disrupt the February 2015 elections through sustained attacks in northeastern Nigeria. The growing economic pressures created by the dropping oil prices and a devaluing currency may impose financial constraints on the military, resulting in a reduced capacity to operate and an increase in insecurity that will likely catalyse the territorial expansion of Boko Haram.

**On the 18 November, the South Sudanese government suspended talks with rebels from the Blue Nile and South Kordofan states.** However, leaders from all were optimistic that progress had been achieved during the negotiations. A mediator from the African Union commended the progress and expressed his confidence that the talks would continue soon. Despite these positive developments, reports of inter-tribal confrontations have surfaced. The Awlad Omran and Al-Ziyoud, two Arab tribes in West Kordofan state, have attacked each other, resulting in 100 people being killed and more than 100 wounded according to tribal leaders. The conflict is fuelled by disputes over land rights and natural resources.

Like several other African states, South Sudan has been impacted by the decreased crude oil price. Due to the price decrease, the South Sudanese government has restricted the sale of currency, including the US dollar, in order to ensure that enough currency remains within the country. The protracted conflict has disrupted oil production in South Sudan, which has decreased from 245,000 bpd in December 2013 to the current level of 160,000 bpd. This is severely impacting the country's economy.

If the peace talks progress, there is the potential for a successful political resolution; however, this will ultimately rely the wider political and economic stability of this relatively fledgling country. With tribes in many regions of the country possessing considerable arsenals, it is likely that inter-tribal disputes over land rights and natural resources will threaten the reconciliation process. The danger is that a resurgence of violence following the comparative peace of the rainy season could harden political dialogue, resulting in the collapse of negotiations, and a slide towards armed conflict once again.

## Americas

*Mexico's president running out of options to address crises in states affected by drug cartels; illegally mined Peruvian gold increasingly exported through Bolivia; negotiations between FARC and Colombian government likely to continue following release of kidnapped general.*

**Angel Aguirre, the governor of Guerrero state, Mexico, stepped down from his position on 23 October following a string of protests over the fate of 43 students who went missing in September.**

The students from the Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos teachers college in Ayotzinapa were assaulted by members of the police on the night of 26 September in the town of Iguala, Guerrero state. While the details remain unclear, the official investigation concluded that once the students had been arrested they were handed over to the Guerreros Unidos ('United Warriors') drug cartel and presumably killed. The scandal produced international outrage, and resulted in violent protests in Guerrero. Although he does not presently face formal charges, Aguirre is blamed for having turned a blind eye to links between local officials and the cartels. The former mayor of Iguala, José Luis Abarca, and his wife are suspected to have ordered the attacks on the students. The couple went on the run, but were arrested in Mexico City on 4 November. The kidnapping and presumed murder of the students is the most serious crisis yet in President Enrique Peña Nieto's near two-year term. He is coming under increasing fire for the country's dreadful human rights record and lack of respect for the rule of law. Following the arrest of several police officials, the government has sent federal troops and police to Iguala and a dozen other municipalities.

Aguirre is the second governor to resign from his position during Peña Nieto's mandate, after the governor of neighbouring Michoacán state stepped down in June. The crisis in Guerrero has once again revealed the malfunction of local government in Mexico, and has led to discussions over the ability of the executive to dismiss a governor from his or her functions. This legislated power is established in Section 76, Article V, of the national constitution, but has not been used since the Hidalgo case in 1975. However, the voluntary resignation of Aguirre, who remains eligible to run for the post in the upcoming 2015 election, has underscored the incapacity of the executive to assert itself in domestic matters. One reason for this is the deep-seated affiliation among Mexican politicians. Aguirre, who has spent most of his political career with the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), maintains close ties with the government. Hence, the political costs for Peña Nieto of dismissing Aguirre would have been dramatic. Not only would he have lost some his allies in Aguirre's party, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), but he would also have been required to undergo a tedious legal process.

The issues of rampant insecurity and the lack of rule of law in Mexico are structural, and relate as much to a perverse political culture as to the absence of an appropriate legal framework. The voluntary and unapologetic resignation of Aguirre is unlikely to resolve the current security crisis, which would require a much broader effort to increase accountability and transparency across municipal and provincial governments. The reality is that the Peña Nieto administration is running out of options to address the crises in Guerrero, Michoacán and other states in which drug cartels and other criminal organisations thrive.

**The heavy-handed approach to illegal gold mining adopted by Peruvian President Ollanta Humala has caused new smuggling routes to be created through the country's porous border with Bolivia.** The Peruvian government launched a series of drastic measures late last year to control illegal gold mining, which costs the government around \$250 million annually in lost tax revenue, and severely damages the environment in affected areas. However, according to new data released by the Bolivian authorities, much of Peru's illegal gold is now being channelled through Bolivia and being exported from the capital, La Paz, on to the United States. Bolivia's official gold exports in the first seven months of 2014 increased threefold on last year's level (reaching a total of 24 tonnes), despite the absence of any new mining developments. Most of the smuggled gold is transported through the jungle near Titicaca Lake, which is located on the border between Peru and Bolivia.

The proliferation of smuggling routes through Bolivia underscores the difficulty national authorities face in controlling the expansion of the illegal gold market, which has surged in the past decade due to a global rise in gold prices. About 20% of Peru's gold exports are produced illegally, with most of the mines situated in the administrative subdivisions of Madre de Dios, Puno and Arequipa. This year, the Peruvian government estimates that 112 tonnes of gold extracted from the country's soil, with a total value of \$3 billion, is of illegal origin. However, the length of Peru's border with Bolivia, which spans over 1,000 kilometres (620 miles), and its tropical environment, makes it very difficult to monitor. The lucrative trade in illegally-mined gold also involves international criminal organisations from various countries, and last year two illegal Peruvian mines were traced back to a Russian oligarch.

The issue of illegal gold trade in the region also creates the need for further collaboration between states in matters of border security and money laundering. Following the publication of the Bolivian data, the US Department of Homeland Security has reported that it is discussing with the Peruvian authorities the investigation of asset laundering associated with the illegal gold trade. But in the current climate, it seems unlikely that the development of illegal gold mining and trading in Peru will come be halted soon.

**The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) agreed on 26 November to release a general and four other hostages in a move aimed at resuming the halted peace talks with the government.**

The kidnapping on 23 November of General Rubén Darío Alzate, together with an army corporal and a defence ministry civil servant, by the rebel Marxist group in the remote western province of Chocó derailed the negotiations, which are the most advanced talks so far towards ending the conflict that has gone on for over five decades. In 2012, FARC publicly renounced kidnappings for ransom; however, they remained committed to targeting members of the military. At the beginning of the year, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos secured a second mandate on a political platform that focused on resolving the conflict with FARC.

Alzate's kidnapping is the most serious setback for the peace talks yet. However, the willingness of FARC to quickly resolve the issue highlights their enduring commitment to the success of the talks. In addition, Santos has ordered an investigation into why the general allegedly violated security protocols by being dressed as a civilian near a 'red zone' territory and was away from his armed escorts.

The negotiations, which were launched in October 2012, focus on a five-point agenda that includes land issues, participation in politics, drug trafficking, disarmament and restitution for conflict victims. So far the government and FARC have agreed on three of the five points – land reform, political participation and illicit drugs. At the start of November, a partial agreement on the political future for the guerrillas was announced; however, this represents probably one of the most contentious issues on the agenda, and Colombians are sharply divided between those who are willing to forgive FARC for their crimes and those who demand justice. Despite this, it is likely that the issue will be successfully tackled in the not too distant future, as FARC appear increasingly committed to the success of the talks.

## Europe

*Ukraine's move towards West likely to provoke greater Russian involvement in east of country; Concern over territorial expansion after Russia signs treaty with Georgian breakaway territory of Abkhazia; increased tension between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the breakaway territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.*

**On 27 November, in a decisive move towards the new government pursuing a European-integration line of policy, the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada (parliament) elected Volodymyr Groysman – an ally of President Petro Poroshenko – as speaker and re-elected Arseniy Yatsenyuk as prime minister.**

Poroshenko also appealed to Rada deputies to repeal the 2010 law that legislates Ukraine's non-aligned status. The president believes this policy does not guarantee Ukraine's security and territorial integrity, and has urged lawmakers to support the government's plans to pursue NATO membership. After the parliamentary election on 29 October, two key policies have been enacted by the Ukrainian government: a priority has been placed on increasing the capacity of the Ukrainian army, and the decision was made to cut off state aid to eastern Ukraine, where the ceasefire agreed between the Ukrainian military and pro-Russian separatists on 5 September continues to be regularly violated.

Although the ceasefire still stands in theory, it is clear that it has not ended the violence in eastern Ukraine. A UN monitoring team reported that 1,000 Ukrainians soldiers and civilians have died since the ceasefire began – representing 13 people killed each day. The Ukrainian army has recorded 3,412 ceasefire violations during this period. As of 20 November, the number of internally displaced Ukrainians had risen sharply to 466,829, compared to 275,489 reported on 18 September. NATO monitors have identified an increase in Russian movement on the border and Russian convoys carrying heavy armour, fighters and ammunition crossing into the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The Ukrainian military have reported that 7,500 Russian troops were stationed and fighting in Ukraine. Both sides continue to fight around the airport in Donetsk – a highly strategic area.

The conflict between the Ukrainian military and the rebels in eastern Ukraine is becoming increasingly entrenched. It is highly likely that it will become another of the ‘frozen conflicts’ of the countries of the former Soviet Union. According to the United Nations, there has been a total breakdown of law and order in Donetsk and Luhansk, where parallel systems of governance have emerged. The decision by Kiev to cease supplying eastern Ukraine will increase the authority of the separatists over the region, and Russia is likely to increase the provision of aid convoys to bolster the rebels influence. Kiev’s plans to join NATO are highly likely to further encourage Russia to increase support to the separatists, as the NATO charter disallows the granting of membership to countries that do not have complete territorial integrity. While the United States has so far resisted plans to supply Ukraine with arms, the new congress may push for a change of policy, especially considering the senate-proposed Mendenez-Kirk bill, which seeks to step up sanctions against Russia and grant Ukraine military aid. Should the bill be passed and not vetoed by President Barack Obama, it is highly likely that the conflict will become significantly more intense.

**On 24 November, Russian President Vladimir Putin and the leader of the Georgian breakaway territory Abkhazia, Raul Khadzimba, signed a treaty under which Russian and Abkhazian forces will form a joint force led by a Russian commander.** The Georgian foreign ministry called the deal a ‘step toward the de-facto annexation’ of Abkhazia into the Russian Federation. Under the agreement, Russia will also double its economic aid to around \$200 million from 2015 onwards. The United Nations, the European Union and NATO have all refused to recognise the treaty, and have criticised Russia’s actions.

Russian troops have been stationed in Abkhazia since the war between the breakaway territory and Georgia in the early 1990s. However, this recent treaty gives Russia much greater influence and power in Abkhazia. Significantly, the deal comes shortly after a change in leadership in the territory. The previous leader, Alexander Ankvab, was forced to step down after a series of protests that local media have speculated were devised by the Kremlin. Ankvab had resisted pressure from the Kremlin to allow Russia to buy assets within the territory. The current leader, Khadzimba (a former KGB officer), was elected in August in elections that Georgia does not recognise. These latest developments lend support to Western claims that Russia is seeking to expand its territory into lands of the former Soviet Union.

Through this treaty and the annexation of Crimea in March, Russia now has substantial territorial control over the Black Sea region. With control over the territory's foreign policy, it is likely that Russia will seek to gain international recognition of Abkhazia's legitimacy, as the Kremlin has done with Crimea. It is also possible that Russia might reach a similar agreement with the other Georgian breakaway territory, South Ossetia. The territory already receives financial and political support from Russia, and there is a fairly strong sentiment from Ossetians in North Ossetia (which is in the Russian Federation) and the South Ossetians to unite. Georgia has so far vowed to appeal to international organisations, such as the European Union and the United Nations. The most dangerous scenario would be a military intervention by Georgia into Abkhazia. However, this is highly unlikely after the Georgia-Russia war of 2008, which caused a political crisis in Georgia. The political situation in Georgia is currently unstable, with a number of ministers resigning, and it is highly unlikely that the Georgian government would consider such a move.

**There has been heightened tension between Armenia and Azerbaijan over violations of the ceasefire between the military forces of the two countries in the breakaway territory Nagorno-Karabakh in November.** This was exacerbated by the downing of an Armenian helicopter by Azerbaijani military forces on 12 November, in which three Armenian soldiers were killed. The Armenian defence ministry called the shooting an 'unprecedented provocation'. However, the Azerbaijani defence ministry reported that their forces had detected two helicopters that they believe planned to shoot at Azerbaijani personnel on ground.

There have been no formal diplomatic relations between the two countries since the end of the war in 1994, when the OSCE Minsk Group brokered a ceasefire over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. The media reports violations of the ceasefire daily; however, the number of violations has risen sharply from approximately 10 to 50 per day since the downing of the Armenian helicopter. There was also a notable increase in violence during the summer, when more than 20 Armenian and Azerbaijani soldiers were killed.

In the short term, it is likely that participants in the OSCE's Minsk Process (co-chaired by France, Russia and the United States) will seek to lower tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan through talks. The German foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, and French President François Hollande have met with the leaders of the two countries, though neither of these efforts at dialogue made a breakthrough. Concerns have been raised by the mediators of the Minsk Group that Armenia and Azerbaijan may seek to resolve the ongoing crisis militarily. This concern was heightened by a statement from Azerbaijan that claimed that the country would seize Nagorno-Karabakh if diplomacy failed to resolve the territorial dispute.



## Middle East

*Al-Sisi's strategy in Sinai thrown into doubt by proliferation of attacks across Egypt; Taliban attacks force United States to rethink role of troops in Afghanistan post-2014; conflict with Islamic State in Syria becomes increasingly complex.*

**There was an increase in the number of explosions throughout Egypt during November, including in Cairo and its surrounding districts.** Many of these attacks targeted critical infrastructure, such as metro stations in Menufiya province on 5 November, central Cairo on 13 November, and Beni Suef on 23 November. Although Egypt has experienced a number of small-scale terror attacks since the ousting of President Mohammed Morsi in 2013, these have largely been confined to the restive Sinai Peninsula. Two further infantry battalions have been deployed to that region following discussions with neighbouring Israel, honouring the 1979 peace treaty between the two countries. In a bid to relieve pressure along the border, Egyptian forces reopened the Rafah crossing with Gaza, enabling the repatriation of Palestinians who had been unable to return home following the closure of the crossing in late October.

Despite the proliferation of attacks across the country, there is no indication that terrorist groups within the region are beginning to coordinate. Rather, the recent attacks indicate a growing frustration with Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's presidency and the government's current security policies. Al-Sisi faces considerable challenges. When the attention of the military was turned towards stabilising Cairo during the revolution, rebel groups were able to exploit the power vacuum left within Sinai and seize critical infrastructure. Al-Sisi's current policy is to this, with military attention very much focussed on regaining control and creating stability in Sinai. The latest wave of terrorism across the country raises questions about al-Sisi's approach to combatting the domestic terrorist threat and whether it can achieve his promised reform of the security situation.

Sinai has been subject to unprecedented security measures in the last few weeks, including resettlement and the bulldozing of homes. However, it remains a hotbed of extremism and violence, and the security measures have so far been unsuccessful in addressing the insecurity. Nevertheless, there is likely to be a continuation and extension of this military approach, as al-Sisi signed a new arms deal worth \$1.24 billion with French President François Hollande on 26 November. It remains to be seen if this policy will eventually be effectual, or if the increased military presence in Sinai's problematic districts, such as al-Arish, will push groups such as Ansar al-Maqdis closer to the Islamic State. The unification of the regions various Islamist terrorist groups is a significant risk. However, it is one the international community is cognisant of, and as such, military alliances with al-Sisi should be expected in the coming weeks.

**In an embarrassing, if not expected, turn of events, the Taliban have forced the United States to re-evaluate its position on the role of troops in Afghanistan.** The latest wave of attacks follows the staged withdrawal of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops from the country, passing combat roles to the Afghan security forces. In a visit to Kabul on 6 November, NATO Security General Jens Stoltenberg declared that international forces had succeeded in making the country safer for the civilian population, reducing acts of terrorism and limiting the scale and control of the Taliban. However, only 17 days after Stoltenberg's visit the country experienced its deadliest attack of the year. A reported 57 people, mostly civilians, were killed in the country's eastern province of Paktika on 23 November. Furthermore, amongst the numerous suicide bombings the country has experienced throughout November, Kabul's diplomatic district has been targeted – an area housing many foreign embassies and expatriate compounds. A convoy to the British mission in Afghanistan was also targeted, alongside security bases in Helmand Province.



The attacks raise questions over the ability of Afghanistan's forces to maintain adequate levels of peace and development in light of the country's fragile domestic security situation. NATO members, such as the United States and United Kingdom, have reaffirmed their commitment to support the national forces, and will remain in the country for reconstruction and training purposes for the coming months. In a reversal of the United States' original position, President Barack Obama announced that some of the 9,800 troops to remain in the country at the end of this year will be engaging al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Indeed, the increase in attacks may, in part, be in response to the latest coalition announcements and the expansion of their planned involvement after the self-imposed deadline for withdrawal.

While the Taliban have claimed responsibility for a number of the attacks, the exact scale of their operations remains unknown. It has widely been speculated that many Mujahideen fighters fled to neighbouring Pakistan during the 13-year conflict to areas where they have been relatively immune from military targeting. The withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan is likely to lead to an increase in attacks throughout the country's east, together with disruption in the capital, Kabul. The newly established government of Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah will need to tackle corruption outside of Kabul in order to effectively address the Taliban's control. Ghani has stated his intent to engage Taliban leaders in dialogue in a bid to secure peace; however, the Taliban's position on communication with government officials remains unchanged. As such, failure to address corruption and to secure military support could spell disaster for the country in 2015. Should the Afghan National Army and local police forces prove ineffectual, the resulting security vacuum could allow the Taliban to wrestle control of major territories from the government.

**An Islamic State (IS) propaganda video purportedly showing the beheadings of US aid worker Abdul-Rahman (Peter) Kassig and at least 18 Syrian soldiers emerged on social media on 16 November.** The footage features British-born 'Jihadi John', who denounces Western interference in the region. Differing from previous execution videos, however, the latest footage shows the unmasked faces of IS members in a bid to demonstrate the group's international makeup. The footage contains six minutes of propagandist history relating to the crusades, victimisation of Muslims and the strength of Wahhabi ideology. Earlier in the month, US and coalition air strikes successfully targeted Islamic State convoys in Iraq close to the strategic Mosul dam. Speculation remains over the health and whereabouts of the IS emir, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi; however, the group later released audio confirmation that al-Baghdadi had not been injured in the strikes.

What remains abundantly clear is the Islamic States' willingness to continue their fight for territory across Iraq and Syria, with fierce battles occurring across strategic hotspots, such as the border town of Kobane in Syria and the essential infrastructure of Iraq's Haditha and Mosul dams. UN figures estimate the terror group has now amassed and seized weaponry that would allow IS to fight for a further two years. While foreign intelligence has assessed the number of IS fighters to be in the region of 32,000, Kurdish leaders have warned the group now has access to over 200,000 recruits given the territory it has regained.

It remains to be seen how far the international community, and the United States in particular, are willing to go in the military battle against the Islamic State. The White House and US Senate remain divided over the role of the US military in defeating the regional threat of IS. Airstrikes and intelligence gathering will, however, continue in a bid to strengthen the position of local armies. Whereas support and munitions have been granted to the Kurdish Peshmerga in Iraq, the picture remains more complex within Syria, as political and sectarian divisions continue to escalate. Although airstrikes have supported the retention of areas in western and central Syria by forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad, criticism of Assad's leadership remains. Where Islamic groups within Syria, such as the al-Nusra Front, continue to engage the Islamic State, it remains to be seen how the role of Western allies whom, unintentionally, may support Assad's regime will affect this dynamic. Islamic State will continue its battles for territory, which will further impact on civilian areas. Moreover, the importance awarded to international hostages remains a concern for many. There is a danger that as the conflict continues poverty will lead to a greater number of kidnappings by splinter groups selling their hostages on to the resource-rich Islamic State.

***Apologies for the lack of Asia-Pacific and Polar regions analysis this month.***

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