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RESEARCH PAPER

SHADOWS OF BABYLON: POWER AND ORDER IN A FRACTURED MIDDLE EAST

From Hammurabi's Code to Nebuchadnezzar's
Siege in a Multipolar Age



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This paper argues that the Middle East has become the crucible of twenty-first-century imperial politics, exposing the collapse of legal universality and the resurgence of coercive empire. Through the archetypes of Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar, it analyzes how states invoke law rhetorically while practicing domination through siege, spectacle, and exclusion.

The United States, China, Türkiye, Israel, Iran, the European Union, and the Gulf monarchies all oscillate between Hammurabian appeals to codified order and Nebuchadnezzarian practices of coercion whether via sanctions, drone warfare, proxy militias, or monumental projects such as Saudi Arabia's NEOM megaproject and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). International law, once imagined as a universal constraint on force, has been hollowed out by selective enforcement and strategic exceptions: robust legal responses to Ukraine versus their systematic dismissal regarding Palestine; International Criminal Court (ICC) warrants embraced for Africa but rejected when applied to Israel.

Financial chokepoints, technological standards, and artificial intelligence infrastructures now function as modern Babylonian walls, enforcing hierarchy under the guise of universality. The Abraham Accords, Gaza's devastation, Saudi–Iran rapprochement, and China's expanding Gulf footprint illustrate how imperial bargains are struck: transactional, contingent, and often indifferent to legality.

The Middle East is not an outlier but a laboratory of empire in a multipolar world where alliances are transactional, sovereignty is perforated, and legitimacy is fleeting. The conclusion is realist: Hammurabi's dream of universality has fractured; Nebuchadnezzar's logic of coercion dominates. The region foreshadows a global order in which law is rhetorical, coercion systemic, and empire endlessly reinvented.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Middle East has always been a crucible of power, where law, religion, and empire collide to shape the destinies of nations. From the earliest Mesopotamian codes to today's contested frontiers, the region has embodied the paradox between the promise of order and the reality of coercion. In the twenty-first century, as the international system forged in 1945 unravels under the strain of great-power competition, the Middle East once again emerges at the forefront of this global fracture. It is here more than in any other region that the struggle between legality and force, legitimacy and domination, is most visible.

Two ancient archetypes remain instructive. Hammurabi, the Babylonian king of the eighteenth century BCE, sought to institutionalize justice through his famous code a vision of governance anchored in norms, rights, and codified obligations. In contrast, Nebuchadnezzar II, who ruled Babylon in the sixth century BCE, epitomized imperial ambition: expanding borders through conquest, enforcing submission by spectacle, and ruling through the language of fear. These dual logics law as a foundation for stability and power as a tool of subjugation are not relics of antiquity. They are alive in the contemporary geopolitics of the Middle East, where states invoke Hammurabi's rhetoric of law and order while deploying Nebuchadnezzar's methods of siege, coercion, and domination.

This tension goes beyond the region. It mirrors the wider collapse of a coherent international legal framework, already strained by repeated violations in Ukraine, Gaza, Syria, and Iran, and increasingly replaced by a "rules-based order" without rules fragmented, transactional, and subject to the discretion of power (Krasner 1999; Koskeniemi 2005). International law, once imagined as a check on raw force, has been hollowed out by selective application and systemic double standards. The Middle East has become the most visible theater of this erosion: a place where legality is invoked, but coercion decides outcomes.

The actors shaping this fractured landscape oscillate between Hammurabian aspirations and Nebuchadnezzarian practices:

- The United States continues to frame its presence in the language of international security, democracy, and a "rules-based order." Yet its reliance on unilateral military interventions, drone campaigns, and anticipatory self-defense doctrines illustrates the primacy of coercive action over legal restraint (Nye 2011; Foreign Affairs 2023).
- China, presenting itself as the champion of sovereignty and non-interference, cloaks its expanding influence in Hammurabian terms of partnership and economic development. Yet its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments and brokering of Gulf diplomacy also carry the unmistakable traits of imperial reach debt leverage, strategic ports, and transactional authority (Shambaugh 2013; Rolland 2017).
- Türkiye, invoking its Ottoman legacy, positions itself as a guardian of regional sovereignty while deploying military bases, energy leverage, and interventionist policies from Libya to Syria. Ankara's rhetoric of legitimacy masks a decidedly Nebuchadnezzarian pursuit of regional primacy (Barkey 2020).
- Israel justifies its actions in terms of self-defense, security, and historical legitimacy. Yet its practices preemptive strikes in Syria, siege and control over Gaza, and territorial expansion frequently bypass or defy international rulings (ICJ Advisory Opinion 2004; UN Human Rights Council reports 2023–24). Israel exemplifies the duality of invoking Hammurabi's legality while acting in Nebuchadnezzar's idiom of domination.

- The European Union champions international law and multilateralism, portraying itself as Hammurabi's heir in a fractured world. Yet its practice in the Middle East is shaped by expediency: while Brussels funds humanitarian aid and supports international courts, it often tolerates violations by allies, particularly in Palestine and Libya, to preserve strategic interests (Tocci 2020; Le Monde, June 2025).
- The Gulf monarchies present themselves as modernizers and guarantors of regional stability, with visions of development and reform in line with Hammurabian rhetoric. At the same time, their strategic use of sovereign wealth funds, military interventions, and financial leverage across the Arab world mirrors Nebuchadnezzar's imperial repertoire of coercion through wealth and force (Ulrichsen 2016).
- Iran invokes legality and justice against Western "imperialism" while expanding its influence through armed proxies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. Its claims of Hammurabian legitimacy, resistance, independence, and sovereignty mask a power strategy built on Nebuchadnezzarian projection of force through militias and coercive diplomacy (Ehteshami and Molavi 2017).

The result is a twenty-first-century imperial experiment, concentrated in the Middle East but resonating far beyond. It is an imperialism stripped of universality: no actor aspires to a coherent global legal order, but all practice forms of coercive control justified by necessity, history, or divine mandate. In this contested space, legitimacy is claimed through Hammurabi's symbols but enforced through Nebuchadnezzar's methods.

Thus, the argument of this paper is straightforward but urgent: the Middle East is experiencing the return of imperial logic, in which law functions as rhetoric and coercion as reality. This is not merely a regional phenomenon. It reflects the global transition from a post-1945 order to a fractured multipolarity, in which legality is instrumental and power defines legitimacy. As *The Economist* recently observed, the region is "a mirror of the new disorder: multipolar, fragmented, and transactional" (May 2024). To study the Middle East today is therefore to study the global condition itself: a world in which Hammurabi is cited, but Nebuchadnezzar rules.

II. HAMMURABI'S ORDER: LAW AS EMPIRE'S FOUNDATION

When Hammurabi codified his laws in the eighteenth century BCE, he sought not merely to arbitrate disputes but to enshrine legitimacy through predictability. His famous stele presents the king receiving authority from Shamash, the sun-god of justice, thus marrying divine right with the rule of law (Roth 1997). The code reinforced hierarchy, protected property, and demanded obedience to the crown. Yet it also established boundaries: a codified system that promised order amidst the fragility of empire. Law, in this conception, was the very architecture of power, stabilizing imperial rule by channeling violence into procedure.

The post-1945 world order drew consciously on this Hammurabian legacy. The United Nations Charter (1945) promised collective security and the sovereign equality of states. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) embodied a juridical forum where disputes could be adjudicated without resort to war. The International Criminal Court (ICC), established in 2002, went further by placing individual accountability at the heart of international justice (Schabas 2017). Like Hammurabi's stele, these institutions sought to universalize rules, to limit brute force with legality, and to embed predictability within global politics.

Yet, just as Hammurabi's laws were selective differentiating between nobles, commoners, and slaves the modern legal order is riddled with asymmetries and exceptions. International law was never neutral: it emerged through a Western-dominated system shaped by imperial legacies (Anghie 2005). Its application has always reflected hierarchy rather than equality.

- The United States invokes international law in some contexts while disregarding it in others. Washington mobilizes the UN Charter and Geneva Conventions to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Blinken 2022), but dismisses ICJ and ICC findings when they pertain to Palestine or U.S. drone campaigns in the Middle East (Charney 2019). This selective invocation reflects what Martti Koskenniemi (2005) has described as the "indeterminacy of law" a rhetoric deployed to cloak strategic interests.
- European leaders similarly uphold Hammurabi's vision in principle but undermine it in practice. The EU strongly supported the ICC's actions against African leaders such as Sudan's Omar al-Bashir (ICC 2009), yet reacted with hostility when the Court opened investigations into alleged war crimes by Israeli officials (Le Monde, June 2025). Germany's Chancellor Mertz remarked that Israel was doing "the dirty work" of Western security in the region, a statement that underscores the political selectivity of legal application (Friedrich Merz, interview with ZDF, remarks at the G7 Summit in Alberta, Canada, June 18, 2025).'
- The Middle East itself has become the starkest mirror of this erosion. From the ICJ's 2004 Advisory Opinion declaring Israel's West Bank wall the so-called "barrier" illegal, to repeated UN Security Council resolutions on Syria's use of chemical weapons, the region is replete with legal judgments and norms that remain unenforced. Law is invoked in speeches but abandoned in practice, rendering Hammurabi's order more aspirational than real.

Thus, Hammurabi's ideal law as the foundation of empire remains a mirage. The promise of universal equality before the law collapses under the weight of strategic exceptions and geopolitical privilege. The Middle East, perhaps more than any other region, reveals the tension between rhetoric and reality: a place where legality is claimed as moral authority, but coercion is the true arbiter of order.

III. NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S POWER: SIEGE, SPECTACLE, AND SUBJUGATION

Nebuchadnezzar II, ruler of Babylon in the sixth century BCE, epitomized empire as dominance through fear. He besieged Jerusalem in 597 and 586 BCE, destroyed its temple, deported large segments of its population to Babylon, and used forced migration as an instrument of control (Van De Mieroop 2015). His empire was not maintained by legal codes but by spectacle and subjugation: monumental works such as the Ishtar Gate and the fabled Hanging Gardens projected grandeur intended to awe both subjects and rivals (Kuhrt 1995). Nebuchadnezzar's vision of rule was less law than awe domination through siege, displacement, and the construction of symbols that made power visible, irresistible, and terrifying.

This imperial logic of spectacle and coercion has returned with striking clarity in the modern Middle East. Whereas Hammurabi's order promised predictability, Nebuchadnezzar's politics thrive on uncertainty and fear, with coercion, displacement, and monumentalism serving as instruments of imperial ambition.

- Israel embodies this logic in its recurrent bombardments of Gaza, its targeted assassinations, and its abjectly spectacular military operations, all televised as demonstrations of deterrence (UN OCHA

2023; New York Times, October 2023). The siege of Gaza, with its blockade and systematic destruction, recalls Nebuchadnezzar's methods of siege and demographic reengineering - a first glimpse of what a genocide looks like. The ICJ's ongoing proceedings on alleged genocide (ICJ 2024) underscore the gap between legality and practice: what matters in the field is not the rule of law but the projection of overwhelming force.

- Iran projects power through proxy militias across Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Its network of influence functions as a modern imperial architecture of domination entrenched by coercion, sustained by spectacle (parades of missiles in Tehran, drone footage of attacks on U.S. bases), and justified rhetorically as resistance (Ehteshami and Molavi 2017). Like Nebuchadnezzar, Iran uses displacement and sectarian engineering in Syria and Iraq to reshape demographics and consolidate influence (Phillips 2016).
- Türkiye, invoking its Ottoman legacy, engages in repeated incursions into northern Syria, combining military control, resettlement policies, and the construction of buffer zones. These strategies recall Nebuchadnezzar's forced deportations: they are deliberate attempts at demographic manipulation (International Crisis Group 2020). Ankara justifies its operations as counterterrorism, but in practice, they constitute an imperial strategy of territorial engineering and population control.
- Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies deploy both coercion and spectacle. The Saudi-led intervention in Yemen (2015–2022) inflicted catastrophic humanitarian consequences displacement, famine, and infrastructural devastation amounting to one of the world's worst man-made crises (UNHCR 2022). Meanwhile, mega-projects such as NEOM, the futuristic \$500 billion city planned for the desert (though reduced in scope), represent monumentalism as an imperial performance of power: architectural spectacle as a modern Ishtar Gate (Gulf Affairs 2021). The Gulf states' strategic use of sovereign wealth funds and monumental investments across Africa and Asia further amplify their Nebuchadnezzarian presence.

In all these cases, legality recedes into the background. The ICJ and ICC may issue judgments, and the UN may pass resolutions, but in the practice of power, what matters is deterrence, territorial control, demographic manipulation, and the projection of fear. Spectacle whether through drone strike footage, televised missile launches, or skyscrapers and artificial islands functions not merely as policy but as performance, designed to intimidate adversaries, impress domestic audiences, and engrave dominance into the geography of the region.

Just as Nebuchadnezzar used forced migration to consolidate control, today's wars generate waves of displacement that are not unintended consequences but are embedded in strategies of domination. The Syrian civil war displaced over half of the country's population, fundamentally altering its demographics and political economy (Ferris and Kirişci 2016). The protracted refugee crises in Syria, Iraq, and Gaza have entrenched dependency and shifted bargaining power across the region. Displacement, in this sense, is more than a humanitarian tragedy; it is a geopolitical instrument a modern echo of Nebuchadnezzar's deportations.

Thus, the Middle East illustrates with unsettling clarity the persistence of Nebuchadnezzar's politics of siege, spectacle, and subjugation. Law is invoked but marginal; what endures is the imperial grammar of fear, displacement, and monumental domination.

IV. THE COLLAPSE OF LEGAL UNIVERSALITY

The tension between Hammurabi's law and Nebuchadnezzar's power has always coexisted, but the international order of 1945 sought to enshrine the former. The UN Charter outlawed aggressive war (Art. 2(4)), codified the sovereign equality of states, and created mechanisms the Security Council, the ICJ, later the ICC to place limits on unilateral coercion. In theory, sovereignty was universal and conquest illegitimate. In practice, however, the system has always contained asymmetries, rooted in what Antony Anghie (2005) has called the imperial origins of international law. What is new today is not the existence of exceptions, but their normalization: universality itself has collapsed, replaced by the language of a vague "rules-based order" defined by power rather than law.

1. Double Standards and Strategic Exceptions

- **Ukraine vs. Palestine:** Western powers condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a flagrant violation of the UN Charter, upholding Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity (Foreign Affairs 2022). Yet the same powers excuse Israel's annexations, settlement expansion, and military sieges in Palestine, despite the ICJ's 2004 Advisory Opinion declaring the West Bank wall illegal. This dualism exposes what Martti Koskeniemi (2005) described as the indeterminacy of law: norms become instruments of justification rather than constraints.
- **Bombing of Iran:** In June 2025, Israeli airstrikes targeted Iranian nuclear and military infrastructure deep inside the country, followed within hours by U.S. strikes justified by the doctrine of anticipatory self-defense without UN authorization (New York Times, June 2025). Both governments framed the attacks as necessity-driven, not law-based, underscoring how legality now yields to strategic exception. German Chancellor Mertz's comment that Israel was doing "the dirty work" of Western security encapsulates the abdication: legality no longer restrains; it is rhetorically inverted to legitimize violence.
- **Iran's Responses:** Iran retaliated against U.S. and Israeli strikes by launching missiles at the Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar and at targets in Israel. The Qatar attack was largely intercepted and symbolic, while the strikes on Israel marked a rare direct confrontation. In both cases, legality was framed as "necessity," underscoring how Hammurabi's law has yielded to Nebuchadnezzar's coercion.
- **Türkiye in Syria:** Ankara has repeatedly violated Syrian sovereignty through incursions into the north, constructing "safe zones" and resettling populations. These actions contravene the Charter's prohibition on force but are justified domestically as counterterrorism and regionally as security imperatives (International Crisis Group 2020). Like Nebuchadnezzar's deportations, these resettlements amount to "demographic engineering", ethnic cleansing being another word that comes to mind, as strategy.
- **Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen:** The Gulf powers intervened without a UN mandate, framing their war as a response to Iranian influence. The conflict, which produced famine and one of the world's largest humanitarian crises (UNHCR 2022), reveals how legality is sidelined when strategic imperatives dominate.

2. The ICC, U.S. Condemnation, and Europe's Silence

The International Criminal Court once championed by Western capitals has been discredited by their own double standards. In 2025, when the ICC issued arrest warrants against Israeli officials for war crimes in Gaza, many governments responded with hostility or silence. Europe, often praised as a "normative

power” (Tocci 2020), undermined its credibility by privileging alliance politics over universality (Le Monde, June 2025).

Across the Atlantic, the United States escalated the reaction. The Biden administration “fundamentally rejected” the court’s decision, branding the warrants “outrageous” and insisting the ICC had no jurisdiction over Israel (Al Jazeera, Nov 2024; Brookings, Nov 2024). Within Congress, bipartisan moves targeted the ICC: the U.S. House passed legislation to sanction the Court, and the Trump administration imposed financial and visa restrictions on ICC officials, citing threats to U.S. and allied sovereignty (Reuters, Jan 2025; AP, Feb 2025).

Both Washington and Brussels thus reveal the enduring contradiction between Hammurabi’s rhetoric of legality and Nebuchadnezzar’s logic of power: a justice system embraced only when it aligns with strategic convenience, disavowed when it targets allies.

3. China’s Entrance: Law as Rhetoric, Empire as Economy

Into this fractured legal order has stepped China, which positions itself as the defender of sovereignty and non-interference, contrasting itself with Western interventionism. Beijing’s mediation of the 2023 Saudi–Iran rapprochement was framed in Hammurabian terms of stability and diplomacy. Yet its growing footprint through port acquisitions, BRI infrastructure, and debt leverage resembles Nebuchadnezzar’s imperial logic of economic subjugation (Shambaugh 2013; Rolland 2017). China champions legality discursively, but its practice reveals law as cover for transactional empire-building.

4. From Law to “Rules”

What ties these examples together is the discursive collapse of universality. Binding law has been replaced by the elastic concept of a “rules-based order,” invoked by Washington, Brussels, and others as an alternative to legal frameworks. As Ian Clark (2007) noted, rules-based orders are inherently hierarchical and exclusionary, privileging those who set the rules. In effect, the law no longer speaks as a universal code; it has been replaced by a rhetoric of rules shaped by power.

The Middle East illustrates this collapse most starkly. From Gaza to Damascus, from Riyadh to Tehran, legality is invoked but not enforced; universality is claimed but endlessly fragmented. Hammurabi’s ambition to enshrine predictability in law has yielded to Nebuchadnezzar’s vision: domination justified by spectacle, necessity, and exceptionalism.

V. CHOKEPOINTS AND SANCTIONS: INSTRUMENTS OF COERCION

In the twenty-first century, the instruments of empire are no longer confined to armies and physical sieges. They now include financial plumbing, energy corridors, digital standards, and maritime chokepoints a networked architecture of coercion that functions as the modern equivalent of Babylon’s walls. Just as Nebuchadnezzar exerted control through fortifications and blockades, modern powers use economic, financial, and infrastructural levers to constrain adversaries and shape global behavior.

1. The Dollar, SWIFT, and Financial Siege

The most formidable chokepoint is the U.S. dollar. While Washington does not directly control the Belgium-based SWIFT financial messaging system, its dominance over the global dollar-clearing network through the Federal Reserve, compliance regimes, and the threat of secondary sanctions gives it unrivaled leverage (Tooze 2021).

- In 2012, when Iran was cut off from SWIFT under U.S. pressure, its economy contracted by nearly 6%, oil exports halved, and inflation soared (IMF 2013). This was not a traditional siege but a financial strangulation with comparable outcomes.
- In 2022, Russia's partial exclusion from SWIFT and sanctions on its central bank after the Ukraine invasion froze nearly \$300 billion in reserves and disrupted global energy markets (European Council 2022). Moscow survived only by rerouting trade through China, India, and Turkey, underscoring both the power and the limits of financial imperialism.

Through the extraterritorial reach of the U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), Washington has built what amounts to a global financial police force universal in reach, unilateral in design. This is Hammurabi's codifying logic of rule by regulation, weaponized with Nebuchadnezzar's coercive intent.

2. Sanctions as Systemic Empire

Sanctions, once exceptional, have become systemic. Today, sanctions applied by U.S. and allied regimes touch nearly one-third of humanity, from Cuba to Venezuela, Iran, Syria, Russia, and North Korea (Council on Foreign Relations 2023).

- They bypass the UN Security Council, operating as unilateral imperial law.
- They devastate economies: Venezuela's GDP shrank by 70% between 2014–2021 (World Bank); Iran's rial collapsed under 'maximum pressure' campaigns; Syria remains crippled by restrictions that have outlasted military conflict.
- Yet sanctions often fail to deliver regime change, raising doubts about efficacy even as they entrench the imperial function of exclusion (Nephew 2017; Pape 1997).

Sanctions now serve less as tactical tools than as the grammar of modern coercion, structuring global hierarchies by denying access to capital, markets, and legitimacy.

3. Maritime Chokepoints: The New Ishtar Gates

Like Babylon's monumental gates, modern maritime chokepoints define the flows of global trade and energy:

- The Strait of Hormuz, through which one-fifth of world oil passes, remains a perennial pressure point, repeatedly threatened by Iran (EIA 2023).
- Bab el-Mandeb, the narrow entry to the Red Sea, became a frontline in late 2024, when Houthi missile and drone attacks forced major shipping companies (Maersk, MSC) to reroute via the Cape of Good

Hope, raising freight costs and exposing global vulnerability (Financial Times, Dec 2024).

- The Suez Canal, handling nearly 12% of global trade, illustrates another dimension: fragility without warfare. In March 2021, the Ever Given container ship ran aground, blocking the canal for six days. The disruption delayed consignments of goods worth billions, showing how a single mishap could paralyze global commerce (BBC, April 2021). This clarified that even without force, chokepoints are leverage points in the system of global dependency.

These examples show that chokepoints are not only weapons of coercion but also points of systemic fragility. Whether deliberate (Houthi) or accidental (Ever Given), they underline how the architecture of globalization remains vulnerable to siege logics.

4. Digital Chokepoints: The New Frontier

Beyond seas and banks, a new layer of chokepoints has emerged: digital and technological control. These are the twenty-first century's invisible gates.

- Semiconductors and AI chips: The U.S. export bans on advanced chips to China in 2022–23, expanded in 2025, created a de facto tech embargo (Bown 2023). By weaponizing supply chains, Washington uses access to high-end processors as siege tools to constrain China's AI and defense development.
- 5G and standards wars: China's Huawei rollout of 5G infrastructure was curtailed by Western bans, justified on security grounds. Competing standards bodies have become arenas of coercion. Hammurabi's codification of "rules" deployed as Nebuchadnezzar's exclusion from networks (Segal 2020).
- Rare earths and green transition: China, controlling 60%–70% of global rare earth processing, has periodically restricted exports, highlighting how resource chokepoints are now instruments of coercion in the era of decarbonization (IEA 2023).
- Digital finance and payments: The contest over central bank digital currencies (CBDCs) and China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS) alternative to SWIFT shows how states are building parallel architectures to escape U.S. leverage.

These digital chokepoints extend the Babylonian metaphor: walls and gates are no longer stone, but silicon and code. They determine who participates in the global economy, under what conditions, and at whose mercy.

5. Realist Implications

From maritime straits to microchips, modern instruments of coercion reflect a dual dynamic: Hammurabi's codification through financial rules, legal frameworks, and technological standards, and Nebuchadnezzar's coercion through blockades, exclusions, and spectacles of power. The U.S. and its allies still command disproportionate leverage, but the repeated use of these tools is eroding their effectiveness. Each sanction, exclusion from SWIFT, or export ban accelerates counterstrategies: China's BRI ports and digital corridors, Russia's de-dollarization drive, and the BRICS+ efforts to construct parallel financial and payment systems. In realist terms, dominance invites resistance; coercion creates the very alternatives that diminish hegemonic control.

As Adam Tooze (2021) warned, the weaponization of interdependence risks fragmenting the very system on which U.S. hegemony rests (see also Farrell and Newman 2019). The realist lesson is clear: chokepoints deliver immediate coercive power, but they accelerate systemic adaptation and the birth of rival architectures.

VI. THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS AND FRAGMENTED ALLIANCES

The Abraham Accords of 2020 initially between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain, later joined by Morocco and Sudan were hailed in Washington as a diplomatic triumph. Yet beneath the rhetoric of “peace,” the accords were transactional bargains: recognition and normalization exchanged for U.S. defense guarantees, arms sales, and access to Israeli technology (Miller and Sokolsky 2021). They did not end conflicts; instead, they reorganized the region into blocs shaped by containment of Iran and the entrenchment of U.S. influence.

For the Gulf monarchies, the accords were not Hammurabian universalisms but Nebuchadnezzarian bargains:

- Security for recognition: The UAE and Bahrain secured deeper U.S. security guarantees and arms deals, while Israel obtained normalization without making concessions on Palestine.
- Technology for silence: Israel’s surveillance and cyber tools were shared with Gulf partners, while Arab solidarity on Palestine was reduced to rhetorical gestures.

The Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, which conditioned normalization on Palestinian statehood, was effectively sidelined. The Palestinian cause once the keystone of Arab diplomacy was downgraded to a symbolic cause, invoked rhetorically but subordinated to strategic bargains.

1. Morocco: A Dual Logic of Territory and Principle

Morocco’s decision to join the Accords reflected a dual calculus. Rabat secured U.S. recognition of its sovereignty over Western Sahara a longstanding national priority (Boukhars 2021) but also maintained its symbolic leadership of the Palestinian file through the Al-Quds Committee of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and repeated affirmations of Palestinian rights. This duality illustrates the realist pragmatism of regional diplomacy: transactional in pursuit of core national interests, yet anchored in principle where domestic sentiment and legitimacy require continuity.

2. Gaza 2023–2025: The Limits of Normalization

The Gaza conflict of 2023–2025 has exposed the fragility of the normalization narrative. While Gulf governments maintained their commitments under the Accords, they did so at the cost of appearing insulated from their publics’ profound outrage. Unlike in earlier decades, large-scale demonstrations were limited and tightly managed. But the absence of mass mobilization should not be mistaken for indifference: Palestine remains a visceral cause across Arab societies, its resonance only deepened by images of devastation in Gaza.

The paradox was that the largest and most spectacular protests took place not in the Arab world but in

Western capitals London, Paris, Sydney, Madrid where tens or even hundreds of thousands marched. Western publics invoked Hammurabi's ideals of justice and human rights, while their governments pursued Nebuchadnezzar's realpolitik of alliances with Israel. This legitimacy gap underscored the moral bankruptcy of selective universality.

For Saudi Arabia, Gaza made the political cost of normalization prohibitive. Riyadh, which had been inching toward joining the Abraham Accords, froze negotiations in late 2023 (Al Jazeera, Nov 2023). Any deal with Israel during the ongoing war would have delegitimized the kingdom's claim to leadership in the Arab and Islamic worlds.

3. Fragmentation and Counter-Alignment

The Accords entrenched a normalization bloc Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco aligned with U.S. power and technological cooperation. Against it stands the Axis of Resistance Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, and allied militias which claims legitimacy not through law but through armed defiance. Both blocs rely less on legal principle than on coercive force, spectacle, and transactional bargains (Ehteshami and Molavi 2017).

The result is not stability but deepening polarization. The Accords have survived because they are elite bargains, shielded from public opinion and anchored in U.S. sponsorship. Yet their expansion has stalled: Gaza has made normalization politically toxic, even as existing deals have proved resilient. This demonstrates the dual character of Nebuchadnezzarian bargains durable in structure, fragile in legitimacy.

4. The Erosion of Multilateralism

The Abraham Accords embody the erosion of multilateralism. They bypassed the UN and the Arab League, sidelining collective frameworks in favor of bilateral deals shaped by U.S. mediation. They replaced Hammurabi's aspiration to universality with Nebuchadnezzar's logic of transaction and siege.

In realist terms, they are not a peace architecture but a balance-of-power maneuver. As Stephen Walt (1987) argued, Middle Eastern alignments are "alliances of convenience": fragile, temporary, and rooted in shifting threat perceptions. The endurance of the Accords amid Gaza shows their transactional solidity, but their halted expansion reveals the enduring force of the Palestinian question and the limits of imperial bargains.

VII. CHINA AND THE GULF: ORDER WITHOUT LAW

The rise of China has introduced a new layer of imperial logic in the Middle East, one that deliberately avoids the Hammurabian rhetoric of universality. Unlike the United States and Europe, which cloak their interventions in the language of law, democracy, or human rights, Beijing promotes a transactional order rooted in sovereignty and non-interference. Its message to Gulf rulers is clear: we will not judge you; we will trade with you.

The 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement, brokered in Beijing, was emblematic. China did not impose frameworks of legality or multilateralism; it offered pragmatic mediation, underpinned by its leverage as the region's largest energy customer. The deal bypassed Western diplomacy and showcased what

Nadège Rolland (2017) has called China's "Eurasian Century": order built not on norms but on networks of reciprocity, pragmatism, and strategic ambiguity.

1. The Gulf's Alternative Imperial Bargain

For the Gulf monarchies, China provides an alternative imperial bargain.

- Infrastructure for alignment: Beijing offers ports, railways, 5G networks, and digital corridors through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In return, Gulf partners give privileged energy access and political support on issues such as Taiwan and Xinjiang.
- Demand for hydrocarbons: China remains the single largest buyer of Gulf oil and liquified natural gas (LNG), ensuring that Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar view Beijing as an indispensable long-term partner (EIA 2024).
- Technology without lectures: Where Washington attaches conditionality on arms or governance, Beijing delivers surveillance technologies, smart-city infrastructure, and digital platforms without raising questions of human rights. For regimes weary of Western moralizing, this is a Nebuchadnezzarian pact: power traded for loyalty, prestige exchanged for silence.

2. Nebuchadnezzar's Monuments in a Chinese Key

China's imperial logic is more than just transactional; it is monumental. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the twenty-first century's Ishtar Gate: visible, infrastructural, and designed to awe.

- Ports: China holds stakes in key maritime nodes from Gwadar in Pakistan to Piraeus in Greece, with growing involvement in Gulf hubs, including Khalifa Port in the UAE and Duqm in Oman.
- Digital corridors: Huawei's 5G and AI infrastructure across the Gulf represent the new "Hanging Gardens" prestige projects that also lock partners into China's technological ecosystem (Segal 2020).
- Railways and energy grids: Gulf-China projects in renewable energy, such as Saudi-China solar ventures and Emirati hydrogen partnerships, anchor Beijing in the Gulf's post-oil transition strategies.

These investments are not neutral development; they are monuments of influence, embedding China structurally into the region's political economies.

3. Navigating Between Empires

The Gulf states are not passive recipients but strategic navigators. They oscillate between:

- U.S. security guarantees still indispensable for military protection and advanced weaponry.
- Chinese economic partnerships critical for energy demand, digital infrastructure, and the diversification of sovereign wealth portfolios.

This dual strategy reflects what Kristian Coates Ulrichsen (2016) called the "Gulf hedging doctrine": diversification as survival. By engaging with both Washington and Beijing, Gulf monarchies seek to maximize autonomy while minimizing vulnerability.

4. Realist Implications

China does not offer Hammurabi's legal universality. It offers order without law a realist architecture built on reciprocity, sovereignty, and monumental infrastructure. For the Gulf, this is attractive precisely because it avoids conditionality. Yet, it is still imperial: its ports, railways, and digital corridors are modern Nebuchadnezzarian monuments, symbols of prestige but also anchors of dependency.

The result is a hybrid imperial order: U.S. jets and defense umbrellas on one side, Chinese AI labs and green-energy corridors on the other. In realist terms, Gulf monarchies are no longer clients of a single empire; they are brokers between empires, leveraging fragmentation to preserve sovereignty. But the paradox remains: every Hanging Garden comes with strings, and every Ishtar Gate narrows the path of autonomy.

VIII. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE NEW FRONTIER OF CONTROL

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as the new imperial frontier. If Hammurabi codified law in stone and Nebuchadnezzar projected power through monumental architecture, today's empires codify their authority in algorithms, datasets, and digital infrastructures. Whoever sets the standards for AI will determine not only economic competitiveness but also the future of surveillance, censorship, and warfare.

1. AI as Monument and Siege

AI combines Hammurabi's and Nebuchadnezzar's logics:

- Hammurabi's legacy: digital codes aspiring to universality. The EU's AI Act (2024), the world's first comprehensive AI regulation, embodies this impulse seeking to standardize rights, risks, and accountability across sectors (European Parliament 2024).
- Nebuchadnezzar's legacy: algorithmic coercion. AI-powered surveillance, predictive policing, and autonomous weapons represent the digital equivalent of Babylonian sieges, designed to intimidate, control, and discipline.

2. The U.S.-China AI Rivalry

- The United States dominates frontier models (OpenAI, Anthropic, Google DeepMind), using export bans on chips and sanctions against China as tools of AI geopolitics (Bown 2025). The Pentagon integrates AI into targeting systems and command structures.
- China, pursuing its "AI by 2030" plan, embeds facial recognition, smart-city platforms, and censorship AI across the Global South (Ding 2024). Its CIPS payment system and AI-enhanced surveillance exports anchor Beijing's imperial reach in digital form.

This rivalry shapes the global AI order into competing ecosystems Washington's liberal veneer and Beijing's authoritarian pragmatism.

3. The EU: Hammurabi's Digital Code

The EU positions itself as Hammurabi's heir: codifying universal standards. The AI Act (2024) categorizes AI by risk levels and restricts "unacceptable uses," such as social scoring. Yet Europe lacks homegrown champions; its strength lies in regulation rather than innovation (Politico Europe 2024). In realist terms, the EU provides the rhetoric of law, but its dependency on U.S. and Chinese models undermines its autonomy. For Middle Eastern states, EU rules may set compliance frameworks, but Brussels is not the empire of AI; it is the scribe of Hammurabi, not the builder of Nebuchadnezzar's walls.

4. Israel: Nebuchadnezzar's Digital Siege

Israel exemplifies the Nebuchadnezzarian use of AI. Its defense sector integrates machine learning into Iron Dome, Hermes drones, and predictive targeting systems. In Gaza (2023–2025), Israel deployed AI-assisted systems nicknamed Habsora ('The Gospel') to generate targeting lists at scale, vastly accelerating bombardment campaigns (The Guardian, Dec 2023). Israel also exports surveillance technologies (Pegasus spyware, facial recognition for checkpoints) worldwide, embedding its algorithmic siege logic into fragile democracies and authoritarian states alike (Human Rights Watch 2024). AI is thus both a weapon of war and an export commodity: coercion packaged as technology.

5. Türkiye: Techno-Sovereignty and Drones

Türkiye sees AI as a path to strategic autonomy. Ankara has built a formidable drone industry (Bayraktar TB2, Akinci), integrating AI into targeting and reconnaissance, with exports from Ukraine to North Africa (Kasapoğlu 2024). Its domestic "National AI Strategy 2021–2025" seeks to position Türkiye as a regional hub for AI in defense, logistics, and health. For Ankara, AI is not Hammurabi's universalism but a tool of neo-Ottoman autonomy: sovereignty secured through indigenous capability, projected via drone diplomacy.

6. Iran: Asymmetry and Resistance

Heavily constrained by sanctions, Iran cannot compete with superpowers in frontier AI development. Instead, it leverages AI asymmetrically in three domains:

- Drone warfare: AI-enhanced loitering munitions such as the Shahed 136 ('Geran 2') provide low-cost swarm capability, delivered to allies such as Hezbollah for regional coercion.
- Cyber and disinformation: Iranian cyber units use AI-generated content and malware to conduct alleged influence operations including deepfake campaigns aimed at U.S. elections earning U.S. sanctions.
- Internal surveillance: With Chinese-made AI surveillance tools (facial recognition, social-credit-style systems), Iran monitors and suppresses domestic dissent, especially during mass protests.

In realist terms, Iran embodies the "weapon of the weak" model. It eschews universal law (Hammurabi) or grand monuments (Nebuchadnezzar), favoring instead AI as a stealthy amplifier of its asymmetric "Axis of Resistance," undermining adversaries' tech superiority through disruption and adaptation.

7. The Gulf Monarchies: Digital Hanging Gardens

The Gulf monarchies stand out as AI aspirants of empire.

- Saudi Arabia's \$40 billion AI fund (2024) is among the world's largest, aligned with NEOM's ambition to be an AI-driven "city of the future" (Wall Street Journal, 2024).
- UAE's Falcon 180B model (2023), the largest open-source LLM, has positioned Abu Dhabi as a serious player in AI innovation (MIT Technology Review, 2024).
- Qatar focuses AI on energy optimization, cybersecurity, and education.

For Gulf rulers, AI projects are digital Hanging Gardens monuments of prestige that also embed regimes in global tech ecosystems. They serve not only modernization goals but also authoritarian resilience, through predictive policing, surveillance, and social control.

8. Realist Implications

Artificial Intelligence (AI) sharpens the Hammurabi–Nebuchadnezzar divide:

- The EU as Hammurabi's scribe, codifying law without commanding empire.
- Israel as Nebuchadnezzar's digital fortress, wielding AI in war and siege.
- Türkiye as the autonomous hedge, using AI to buttress sovereignty and project influence.
- Iran as the asymmetric disruptor, turning AI into a weapon of militias and defiance.
- The Gulf monarchies as empire-builders of spectacle, blending U.S. security, Chinese tech, and AI monumentalism.

The realist lesson is that AI will not democratize power. It will entrench asymmetries, empower regimes to surveil and coerce, and fragment the global order into rival algorithmic empires. Hammurabi's dream of universal codes has been recast into digital protocols, but Nebuchadnezzar's logic of domination now finds its sharpest expression in algorithmic control of populations and battlefields.

IX. THE MIDDLE EAST AS THE IMPERIAL CRUCIBLE

The Middle East functions in the twenty-first century as the imperial crucible of global politics: the place where law, coercion, wealth, and spectacle are tested, broken, and reinvented. No other region so nakedly exposes the contradiction between Hammurabi's universalist ideal of codified justice and Nebuchadnezzar's imperial drive for domination. It is here that norms are invoked but rarely upheld, where monumental visions of modernity rise amid the ruins of endless conflict.

1. Selective Legality and the Hierarchy of Norms

The region epitomizes the unequal application of law. The Ukraine war triggered a robust Western mobilization of international law including ICJ rulings, ICC indictments, and unprecedented sanctions

regimes. By contrast, the Palestinian question, and particularly the Gaza conflict of 2023–2025, has revealed profound legal asymmetry. ICJ rulings on provisional measures against Israel, and ICC arrest warrants targeting senior officials, remain unenforced ignored or openly dismissed by the same states that champion legality in Eastern Europe. The message is clear: law is not universal, but hierarchical, contingent on imperial priorities. The Middle East exposes this hierarchy that corrodes the legitimacy of international law itself.

2. Financial Coercion and Imperial Infrastructure

The Middle East illustrates how finance functions as empire's nervous system. U.S. dominance of the dollar, reinforced through SWIFT access, secondary sanctions, and asset freezes, turns financial plumbing into a weapon of war. Iran remains the prime case: its economy strangled, its currency collapsing, its oil exports rerouted through opaque barter. Yet cracks are visible. Gulf sovereign wealth funds now experiment with yuan settlements, UAE free zones act as conduits for sanctioned trade, and China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS) is quietly tested in Riyadh and Doha. The region thus operates as a testbed of de-dollarization, where the outcome could reshape global finance far beyond the Middle East.

3. Proxy Warfare and the Limits of Sovereignty

The Middle East is also the global laboratory of proxy warfare. Iran's "Axis of Resistance" Hezbollah, the Houthis, the Iraqi PMF, Syrian militias functions as a state-like network of deterrence, blurring lines between sovereignty and subversion. The U.S. projects power through drones and cyber capabilities, striking targets without territorial presence. Türkiye, with its repeated incursions into northern Syria and Libya, applies a doctrine of buffer sovereignty, extending borders where its interests dictate. In this crucible, sovereignty has turned into a negotiated outcome of force and persistence, rather than a determiner of law, offering a realist preview of global norms where weak states are perpetually perforated by stronger neighbors.

4. Transactional Alliances and Flexible Geometry

The region is the epicenter of transactional diplomacy. The Abraham Accords reframed alliances around technology transfers and U.S. guarantees in exchange for silence on Palestine. The China-brokered Saudi–Iran détente of 2023 demonstrated that alternative patrons can reshape security landscapes without Washington's involvement. Gulf monarchies epitomize the pragmatism: simultaneously hosting U.S. military bases, signing defense memoranda with France, expanding digital partnerships with Huawei, and investing in BRICS+ financial projects. The Middle East thus pioneers a flexible geometry of alignments not alliances rooted in law or institutions, but shifting coalitions of convenience, deterrence, and economic diversification.

5. Monumental Projects and the Politics of Spectacle

Few regions embody Nebuchadnezzar's legacy of imperial spectacle like the Middle East. Saudi Arabia's NEOM, built on desert sands, is less a developmental plan than a political theater show of permanence. The UAE's AI hubs, Egypt's new administrative capital, and Qatar's sovereign wealth-backed global acquisitions perform the same function: monuments of power meant to outlast crises. China's BRI investments in ports, pipelines, and digital corridors anchor Beijing's imperial presence not through armies, but through infrastructure that locks in dependency for decades. These are the new Hanging

Gardens: projects that dazzle while silently reshaping geopolitics.

6. The Region as Global Mirror

The Middle East serves as the mirror of empire in the twenty-first century:

- Law is invoked, but selectively enforced.
- Finance is weaponized as infrastructure of domination.
- Sovereignty is perforated by militias, drones, and incursions.
- Alliances are transactional, not principled.
- Modernity is staged through monumental spectacle.

Each dimension crystallizes the duality of Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar: the language of justice cloaking the logic of force, the spectacle of development masking instruments of control.

7. Forward-Looking: The Template for Global Order

Whatever is tested in the Middle East rarely stays there. This crucible produces the playbook of new imperial practice, already diffusing outward:

- Africa is witnessing the same contest between U.S. sanctions, Chinese infrastructure, and Russian paramilitaries. Sudan and the Sahel echo Middle Eastern proxy patterns.
- Latin America faces selective legality, with Venezuela and Cuba enduring sanctions while Colombia enjoys Western indulgence despite abuses.
- Europe itself is fragmenting along Middle Eastern lines: financial coercion against Russia, Turkish-style buffer sovereignty in Ukraine, monumental EU projects like the Green Deal masking dependency on external energy and technology.

Ironically, the Middle East is not exceptional but in the vanguard. The contradictions playing out in Gaza, Riyadh, Tehran, and Ankara foreshadow the global trajectory of international politics: a world where law is contingent, finance coercive, alliances transactional, and spectacle substitutes for legitimacy.

For the realist, the conclusion is stark: the Middle East is not a periphery of empire but its laboratory. And the experiments conducted here whether in the form of sanctions regimes, proxy networks, or monumental projects are shaping the very architecture of power in the twenty-first century.

CONCLUSION: BETWEEN HAMMURABI AND NEBUCHADNEZZAR THE FUTURE OF ORDER

The Middle East, long dismissed as a periphery of empire, has re-emerged as the world's most revealing crucible. It exposes in raw form the contradictions now reshaping global power: law without enforcement, alliances without permanence, sovereignty without stability, and modernity without legitimacy.

If Hammurabi embodied the aspiration that power could be codified into enduring law, and Nebuchadnezzar the spectacle of domination through siege and monument, then the twenty-first century is defined by their collision rather than succession. The dream of universal law survives in the rhetoric of international courts, treaties, and declarations. Yet its practice has been hollowed out by selective enforcement: Ukraine versus Palestine, Russia versus Israel, weak versus strong. The 2025 ICC arrest warrants against Israeli officials, condemned outright by Washington and met with silence in Brussels, crystallize this erosion. What once claimed to be universal justice has become conditional, contingent, and strategically disposable.

Nebuchadnezzar, by contrast, thrives. His logic of force, exclusion, and spectacle finds expression in sanctions that strangle entire economies, in drones that erase sovereignty with the push of a button, in AI systems that govern populations through algorithms, and in mega-projects that project power through glass and steel. From Washington to Riyadh, Beijing to Ankara, empires no longer need to proclaim universal missions; they exercise control through transactional bargains and coercive infrastructures.

The Middle East demonstrates that what appears as chaos is in fact a structured disorder a world in which rules are contingent, order is plural, and power is negotiated through shifting alliances and chokepoints. It is not the absence of empire, but its mutation: empire without law, spectacle without universality.

For realists, the lesson is stark. The era of codified, universal multilateralism is fading; the era of competitive imperialisms has returned. But unlike the ancient empires, today's imperialisms do not aspire to replace one another with a singular order. Instead, they coexist uneasily, each building walls, monuments, and protocols of control, while leaving gaps where conflict seeps through.

The danger is not simply instability but permanent exception a world in which law is never fully absent but never binding, and coercion is constant but legitimacy fleeting. The ICC's discrediting in 2025 is not an anomaly but a symbol: Hammurabi's code fractured, Nebuchadnezzar's shadow ascendant.

And yet, as history teaches, empires are not eternal. Babylon's walls crumbled, its Hanging Gardens dried, its codes faded. The crucible of the Middle East today foreshadows the crucible of global order tomorrow. The question is whether the twenty-first century will rediscover Hammurabi's impulse for a minimal universality or whether Nebuchadnezzar's logic of siege, spectacle, and coercion will define the age until it too collapses under its own weight.

EPILOGUE: THE DESERT AND THE RUINS

On the plains of Mesopotamia, the ruins of Babylon still rise faintly from the sand. Hammurabi's stelae have been shattered, his code carved into broken stone. Nebuchadnezzar's walls, once thought impregnable, are dust. The Hanging Gardens, if they ever stood, are legend. What endures are not the monuments nor the laws, but the memory of a struggle that repeats itself in every age: between the dream of order and the spectacle of domination.

In today's Middle East, drones trace the skies where chariots once rolled, sanctions suffocate as once did sieges, and glass towers gleam where gardens may have bloomed. Even the modern stelae of justice crack: the 2025 ICC arrest warrants, hailed as Hammurabi's last attempt to carve law into stone, already lie fractured under Washington's condemnation and Europe's silence. Like the broken tablets in the desert, they remind us that law without universality cannot endure the weight of empire.

Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar walk again, not as kings of Babylon but as archetypes of power, their shadows cast across Washington, Beijing, Ankara, Tehran, Brussels, Tel Aviv, and Riyadh. The desert reminds us that no empire lasts forever. Law without universality crumbles into hypocrisy; power without restraint erodes from within. Yet while they endure, both carve deep scars into the world. The question for our century is whether we are condemned to live under Nebuchadnezzar's shadow, or whether fragments of Hammurabi's dream can still be pieced together into a fragile, imperfect, but necessary order.

Until then, the ruins of Babylon remain not just a memory, but a prophecy.

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Before taking up his Mashreq assignment, Mr. Belhaj served as World Bank Director for the Pacific Department (2009-2012), where he developed a regional strategy that scaled up Bank engagement in small and fragile states, and tripled lending operations of the International Development Agency, one of the five institutions under the umbrella of the World Bank Group that provides interest-free loans and grants for Low-Income Countries. From 2007 to 2010, Mr. Belhaj was the World Bank's Special Representative to the United Nations (UN) in New York, where he engaged with various UN agencies on a range of programs, mainly climate change, the Millennium Development Goals, fragile and post-conflict states and the global financial and food crises.

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The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank aiming to contribute to the improvement of economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and the rest of Africa as integral parts of the global South.

The PCNS pleads for an open, accountable, and enterprising "new South" that defines its own narratives and mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, as part of a forward-looking relationship with the rest of the world. Through its analytical endeavours, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give the floor to experts from the South. This stance is focused on dialogue and partnership and aims to cultivate African expertise and excellence needed for the accurate analysis of African and global challenges and the suggestion of appropriate solutions. [read more](#)

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