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'I'll take two.' Migration, terrorism, and the Italian military engagement in Niger and Libya

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'I'll take two.' Migration, terrorism, and the Italian military engagement in Niger and Libya

Michela Ceccorulli and Fabrizio Coticchia

ABSTRACT

In January 2018, the Italian parliament approved a new military operation in Niger and an extension to the existing deployment in Libya. Italian leaders explicitly cast this as a 'pivot' to Africa, a 'relocation of troops' from Afghanistan and Iraq to the Sahel and Northern Africa. What factors underlie this strategic shift? Despite the importance of this question, to date, little analysis of the decision-making process underpinning the recent change has been forthcoming. The article seeks to address this gap through an analysis of the parliamentary debates on the missions. Specifically, it examines the 'relative importance' of the two threats/challenges motivating the interventions: irregular immigration into the EU (and the related smuggling phenomena) and transnational terrorism. The article contributes to the ongoing debate on the evolution of the Italian foreign, security and defence policy in the broader Mediterranean, offering insights for comparative analyses with other states engaged in those contexts.

RIASSUNTO

Nel gennaio 2018, il Parlamento italiano ha approvato una nuova operazione militare in Niger e un'estensione dell'impegno in Libia. I leader politici italiani hanno espressamente fatto riferimento a un 'ri-orientamento strategico' verso l'Africa, un ricollocamento di truppe 'dall'Afghanistan a Sahel e Nord Africa'. Quali sono i fattori alla base di questo cambiamento strategico? Nonostante l'importanza di questa domanda, ad oggi, sono poche le analisi del processo decisionale alla base di tale recente cambiamento. Il paper cerca di colmare questa lacuna attraverso un'analisi dei dibattiti parlamentari sulle missioni, esaminando in particolare l'importanza relativa delle due minacce/sfide alla base delle stesse: immigrazione irregolare verso l'UE (e i relativi fenomeni di traffico di esseri umani) e terrorismo transnazionale. Il paper contribuisce al dibattito in corso sull'evoluzione della politica estera e di difesa italiana nel 'Mediterraneo allargato', offrendo spunti per analisi comparate con altri stati impegnati nell'area.

KEYWORDS Italian defense policy; Terrorism; Migration; Libya; Niger; Mediterranean

PAROLE CHIAVE Politica di difesa Italiana; Terrorismo; Immigrazione; Libia; Niger; Mediterraneo

1. Introduction

In January 2018, the Italian parliament approved a new military operation in Niger and an extension of the existing mission in Libya. These decisions were in line with the vision outlined in Italy's 2015 White Paper on defence, which

identified the 'enlarged Mediterranean' as the central area of strategic interest for Italian defence and security going forward. The discourse reflected this 'pivot to Africa' as Italian leaders identified a clear 'relocation of troops' from Afghanistan and Iraq to the Sahel and Northern Africa in support of local states in the fight against terrorism and migrant smuggling/trafficking (Di Feo 2017). The then-Minister for Foreign Affairs, Angelino Alfano, applauded – before the Joint Defence and Foreign Affairs Commissions (15 January 2018) – Italy's new strategic activism in North Africa (especially, in the Sahel), while the majority coalition presented the government's 'pivot to Africa' as the 'distinguishing feature' of Italy's contemporary defence posture (Moscatt, Democratic Party – PD, Joint Commissions, 15 January 2018). Even as they offered several pointed criticisms of the government's approach, the opposition parties nevertheless acknowledged the impact of the 'strategic shift' towards the Sahel and the reality that this region will largely determine 'the future of Italian foreign and defence policy over the next ten years' (Palazzotto, *Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà*–SEL, Chamber of Deputies, General Assembly, 17 January 2018). At the same time, Italy has retained its robust Mediterranean naval engagement, which seeks to address the steady flow of migrants departing North Africa for the perilous sea journey to Europe. Italy is a key entry point for Europe-bound migrants from the region, thousands of whom have reached Italian shores in the last decade.

Italy has been engaged actively in military operations abroad throughout the post-Cold War era, providing significant contributions to almost every prominent global security crisis in recent decades, from Iraq to Somalia, the Balkans to Afghanistan, and from Lebanon to Libya (Ignazi *et al.* 2012; Carati and Locatelli 2017). However, after years of active engagement, the number of troops deployed abroad has recently decreased. Some of this reflects the winding down of earlier significant operations (e.g. I.S.A.F. in Afghanistan ended in 2014), the dramatic failure of others (Iraq 2003–2006), and the effects of the financial crisis (post-2008), which saw large cuts in Italian public spending. After years of relatively muted strategic reflection, these recent developments have prompted a wide-ranging re-examination of the entire system of national defence in Italy (Coticchia 2018). The above-mentioned White Paper (2015) was one key output from this new strategic debate, which has focused on the mounting security challenges from the 'enlarged Mediterranean'.

However, despite a growing literature on the evolution of post-Cold War Italian defence policy (Coticchia and Moro 2016; Carati and Locatelli 2017), this most recent 'strategic shift' has yet to receive sustained scholarly attention. Against the backdrop of a discussion that has long recognized the region as a general source of chronic instability and risk, what specific challenges have emerged in the debate at this time such that support has swung decisively behind substantive operational deployments? Have all

concerns received equal attention in the debate and if not, what share of the 'air time' has each taken?

This article seeks to shed much-needed light on these crucial questions, focusing on Italy's military operations in Libya and Niger. Our starting point is the Italian government's explicit presentation of the two issues – irregular immigration (and the related problem of people smuggling) and terrorism – as intimately connected challenges and its claim that recent deployments form part of a broad comprehensive strategy aimed at improving security in the region (and concurrently at protecting the national interest) by addressing both simultaneously. In contrast to this official position, we contend that irregular immigration has largely outpaced terrorism as the principal driver in the Italian political debate.

The simultaneous consideration of Libya and Niger is valid, as largely confirmed by the analysis of the political debate. First, the contexts are contiguous with respect to the transnational threats to be addressed. They also mirror Italy's geographical demarcation of its national interest and reflect the apparent connection of the two geographical areas in the broader international debate. As well, both have occurred in the context of a new (case-by-case) scheme of mission approval and were decided once parliament had been dissolved for new elections. Finally, both originated from explicit requests from the states concerned.

The [article](#) makes four key contributions. First, by addressing the above-mentioned questions, we open up a new stream of research on the drivers of the new Italian military engagement in North Africa and the Sahel. Second, we contribute to the growing literature on the evolution of Italian defence policy more generally, through the lens of parliamentary debates on military missions. In so doing, we [home](#) in on the 2016 comprehensive law (n.145/2016) that has made it possible for parties to express votes on individual missions for the first time. Specifically, under the procedure set down in the '*legge quadro*' (comprehensive law), the government is required to table before the parliament a detailed report (*scheda*) with costs, aims, assets, and length of missions to deputies and senators, who must be given time to debate and deliberate on each mission – and to vote accordingly (Ronzitti [2017](#)). Historically, the Italian parliament has played only a marginal role in debates and oversight on overseas deployments, mainly through annual authorization – via a single re-financing act – of all current operations. In the 2018 Niger and Libya mission debates, Italian Members of Parliament (M.P.s) voted according to the new procedure for only the second time ever (there was a narrower debate using the new system in 2017). Thus, we (finally) have the opportunity to assess the specific votes and attitudes of all parties on individual Italian operations abroad. Our analysis also sheds much-needed light on the parliamentary behaviour of Italy's newly ascendant 'challenger parties' – namely, the Five Star Movement (M.5.S.) and the Northern League

(L.N.), which formed a coalition government after the 'populist storm' (Baldini and Giglioli 2019, 2) unleashed at the 2018 national elections. Third, we provide a detailed analysis of two as yet unexplored operations and (at least in the case of Niger) a new strategic context for Italy. Fourth, the research paves the way for a comparative analysis of the drivers of military engagement with respect to 'new' security challenges that loom large in unstable regional contexts. For all these reasons, the (understudied) case of Italy deserves detailed attention. 130

The article begins by examining why military engagement in new regional theatres has emerged as the principal way to tackle perceived security challenges like migration and terrorism. It focuses closely on Italy, looking at the country's progressive engagement in that geographical context. Then the research design of the article is presented. The empirical analysis is based on interviews, official documents and transcripts of parliamentary debates (December 2017–January 2018). The conclusion summarizes the main findings and advances potential hypotheses that can be tested in further studies. Indeed, Niger and Libya can be considered hypothesis-generating case studies (Levy 2008). 135 140

Q1



2. Military engagement to address irregular immigration and terrorism

The debate on the use of military force to address 'new' challenges (Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2015; Biscop and Rehrl 2016) illustrates the problematic demarcation between foreign and domestic policy (Lavenex and Wichmann 2009; Longo 2013). The leading defence, strategic, and foreign policy guidance produced at both the national and European levels clearly highlight the inevitable domestic repercussions of unstable situations abroad (European Union 2016; Ministero della Difesa 2015). Especially in the post-Cold War era, the military has increasingly been understood as a key instrument in addressing instability, promoting state capacity-building and in training of local security forces to address the relevant issues and challenges on the ground (Buzan and Hansen 2011). 145 150 155

Q2

Q3



As key sites of ongoing instability, North Africa and the Sahel (in particular) perfectly reflect these dynamics. It is thus no surprise that recent international efforts have focused on these regions. France's 'Operation Barkhane' in the Sahel, active since 2014 and recently joined by the UK, has targeted Jihadist groups there. The U.S.A. has been sending troops to the region for training and equipping purposes against terrorism since 2002, with an intensification after the jihadi occupation of Northern Mali in 2011–2012 (Lebovich 2017). The European Union's (E.U.) engagement in the region is similarly focused in large part on these two threats. The E.U. is the largest donor to the Sahel multinational military force known as the 'G5' (comprising troops from Niger, Chad, Mauritania, Mali and Burkina Faso). The 'G5' programme seeks to 160 165

strengthen members' security apparatuses, building capacity in tasks ranging from anti-terrorism to border control.

At the same time, countering people smuggling – long recognized as a 'profitable business for criminal networks' that causes 'serious human rights violations and deaths'¹ – has become the new mantra for cooperation between the E.U. and third countries. Starting in 2017, efforts at strengthening Libya's security forces have also expanded; the country is seen as a potential transmission belt for criminal activities to the E.U. If countering terrorism is widely considered a legitimate end of military operations – and sufficient justification for authorizing them – reducing irregular immigration through armed force is clearly more problematic, although equally challenging (Roberts 2018). Recently, irregular immigration has come to be framed primarily as a source of instability and poor security governance in specific geographical contexts, such as the Sahel (Raineri and Strazzari 2015). Its purported connection with people smuggling has not only made cooperation with third states more viable but has also paved the way for legitimate interventions abroad to strengthen security and control apparatuses. As explained in the E.U.'s 2016 Global Strategy statement, Common Security and Defence Policy (C.S.D.P.) missions and operations 'can work alongside the European Border and Coast Guard and E.U. specialized agencies to enhance border protection and maritime security in order to save more lives, fight cross-border crime and disrupt smuggling networks' (European Union 2016, p.20). Addressing cross-border dynamics in what is referred to as the 'enlarged Mediterranean' has thus become a critical objective for the security of the E.U. and both Libya and Niger loom large in this overall strategy.

Against this background, Italy's engagement has been noteworthy. After the civil war erupted in Libya in 2011, Italy briefly deployed a training mission (code-named 'Cyrene') there. Italy also contributed three police units to the European Union Border Assistance Mission to Libya (E.U.B.A.M.), collaborating with the Libyan authorities to support local border management, law enforcement and penal justice. Italy deployed three soldiers as part of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (U.N.S.M.I.L.), with the aim of supporting the implementation of the political agreement between the warring factions (Senate 2017a). The humanitarian military mission 'Mare Nostrum' (2013–2014) was set up to strengthen an existing mission, 'Constant Vigilance', which had helped save many lives at sea (Panebianco 2016; Dessì and Olmastroni 2017). Italy's presence in the Mediterranean also includes Operation 'Mare Sicuro', a mission tasked with securing Italy's national interests by preventing terrorism, covering units engaging in rescue activities at sea, and protecting merchant vessels. According to then-Minister of Defence Roberta Pinotti, the mission's initial brief was to protect the assets of the Italian oil and gas company E.N.I., which maintains platforms in international waters close to Libya.² Italy also provided command under Admiral Enrico Credendino for the European Union Naval Force Mediterranean Operation

(E.U.N.A.V.F.O.R. M.E.D.) – code-named ‘Sophia’ – that has been ongoing since 210
 2015 (but which naval component has been suspended at the moment). ‘Sophia’
 is an E.U. C.S.D.P. anti-smuggling operation. Admiral Credendino’s appointment
 as commander reflects the influence of the Italian government in directly ‘shaping
 the mission’.³ ‘Sophia’ was planned mainly to ‘fight and disrupt the business
 model of smugglers’.⁴ 215

The Italian engagement in Libya has also been important in the fight against
 terrorism – especially the efforts against Daesh in Sirte, led by the local Misrata
 militias (Droz-Vincent 2018). According to Droz-Vincent, Libya was affected by
 ‘the rising threat of the Islamic State (Da’esh) in 2014–2015, [and by] the return
 of Libyan fighters from Syria (one of the strongest contingent of foreign fighters 220
 in relation to the size of Libya’s population)’ (2018, p.450). While not providing
 air strikes as it had done in 2011, Italy offered support to local actors through
 ‘Operation Ippocrate’. The main goal of the mission was to guarantee medical
 support to injured fighters, via a field hospital at Misrata airport.

With the support of European institutions, and with the objective of 225
 reducing the flow of migrants – which had reached 180,000 by 2016 with
 more than 4,500 deaths at sea (Dipartimento Libertà Civili e Immigrazione
 2017) – the Italian government has undertaken a range of complex initia-
 tives, especially in 2017. These were articulated around the objectives of
 pacification, stabilization, improvement of local development opportunities, 230
 counter-smuggling and counter-terrorism, capacity-building, and humani-
 tarian protection. Here, it was assumed that restoring sovereignty in the
 country goes hand in hand with reducing migrant flows towards Italy.
 Personnel from the Guardia di Finanza (Fiscal Police) rejoined a bilateral
 counter-smuggling/counter-terrorism mission with the Libyan Coast Guard 235
 (Senate 2018). This move was aimed at completing the protocol of coopera-
 tion signed between Italy and Libya in 2007 and to provide for the main-
 tenance of four naval units given to Libya before the civil war and then
 repaired by Rome. On 1 August 2017, the Italian government tabled a report
 in the Chamber of Deputies (Joint Defence and Foreign Affairs 240
 Commissions) on the situation in Libya. The Minister for Foreign Affairs,
 Angelino Alfano, explained that the unity and stability of Libya were key
 elements of the Italian national interest (p.6) and hence Italy’s efforts would
 be geared towards a comprehensive international reconstruction agenda
 for the country. It is worth noticing how this effort was to be accompanied 245
 by projects financed at the national level (the Africa Fund plus Ministry of
 Interior funds) in addition to mechanisms at the European level under the E.
 U.’s emergency Trust Fund for Africa.

As clarified by the Italian Ambassador to Libya, Giuseppe Perrone, the first
 Italian objective in Libya is stabilization and security, after which development 250
 programmes aimed at supporting the local economy and cooperation to
 reduce flows through the training of the Libyan Coast Guard can begin

(Tomassini 2017). According to former Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni, the advance of peace, development and stabilization by Italian soldiers abroad is central to fighting terrorism and human smuggling (La Mattina 2018), also with a view to addressing other traffic in illicit goods (drugs, weapons, oil, uranium). Q4 5

Regarding Niger, Italian political involvement is of more recent provenance. As summarized recently in *The Guardian*, 'Niger is strategically located in the middle of the Sahel, its borders crisscrossed by extremists and traffickers' (Maclean 2018). The Italian military engagement has thus entered a very complex scenario, where multiple actors are active. According to Penney (2018), Niger's achievement in reducing the number of people moving to Libya in 2017–2018 occurred at 'considerable cost' – including the re-routing of migrants towards riskier and more deadly paths. Moreover, the promised projects to convert former smugglers into entrepreneurs has still not been realized, raising security concerns also over the perceived attempt to prioritize the 'desire to stop migration over Niger's national security interests'. 260

The U.S.A. has 6,000 troops in Africa, 800 of whom are deployed in Niger. At the beginning of October 2017, four American soldiers were killed in an ambush near the Niger–Mali border (International Crisis Group 2017). As part of its counter-terrorism mission 'Operation Barkhane', France has 500 soldiers at its base in Niamey, with further bases in Madama and Aguelal. Germany has 50 soldiers in Niamey to support the UN peacekeeping force in Mali and is expanding accommodation 'to cater for more on the airbase it shares with France' (Maclean 2018). 270

In 2017, Italy decided to join the US and other European actors in stepping up its commitment in the region. The country opened an embassy in Niamey in February (De Giorgio 2018) and has devoted a considerable share of the national development budget to Niger (*infra*). Italy contributed a couple of units to Brussels' European Union Capacity Building Mission Sahel Niger (E.U.C.A.P.), ongoing since 2012, to 'support the local authorities against terrorism and organized crime in the Sahel'. Indeed, the E.U.'s financial contribution to the Niger mission has been particularly noteworthy, with a commitment of roughly €1 billion for the period 2017–2020. The E.U., which deployed also the operations E.U.C.A.P. Sahel (training and advice for the Malian security forces, and the training mission E.U.T.M. Mali), supported the G5 Sahel countries with €50 million to 'improve security and cross-border cooperation in the region'. 275

3. The Italian missions and the parliamentary debate

3.1 Research design

This article looks at the political debate over the proposals for the new missions in Libya and Niger, weighing the salience of the migration and counter-terrorism arguments within it. In so doing, it clarifies the different 290

perceptions among key political actors on the role – and the relative importance – played by terrorism and irregular migration, as the main challenges to the Italian national interest. Thus, the empirical analysis draws on official documents, transcripts of parliamentary debates, and semi-structured interviews with relevant political leaders, experts, and military officers. 295

As a first foray into the topic, the primary goal of the manuscript is not to test alternative hypotheses on the causes that led Italy to intervene. Rather, the article aims to unpack the complex connection between the threats posed by terrorism and irregular migration because the struggle against these – sometimes apparently indistinguishable – challenges was presented as the official objective of the missions. In other words, the manuscript carefully searches for ‘relationship and patterns’ (Hartwick and Barki 1994, p.447) proposing at the end plausible hypotheses on the Italian strategic shift towards North Africa and Sahel that can be tested in further studies. Indeed, while the focus is on threat perceptions, future research could examine the role of humanitarian norms or the influence of allies or economic interests (e.g. oil and gas) in the national decision-making process. 300

As already explained, based on the existing literature (Panebianco 2016; Castelli Gattinara 2017; Varvelli 2017; Gianfreda 2018), we assume that migration rather than terrorism, represents the most relevant perceived challenge and goal of the missions in Libya and Niger. The above-mentioned literature has illustrated empirically how Italian decision-makers – in line with public opinion – have foregrounded the struggle against irregular immigration and the protection of national borders accordingly, as the principal goals of foreign and defence policy 310

(Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2016). Thus, we expect some differences with respect to allies’ military deployment in the region, which is instead mainly justified and explained in terms of counter-terrorism. In other words, we expect M.P.s, party leaders, and ministers to devote much more attention to the challenge posed by irregular immigration and to emphasize it as the key motivation behind the missions. A range of factors inform this assumption, including the increasing relevance of migration in the public and political debate in Italy (Eurobarometer 315

2016, 2017, 2018), the growing importance of anti-smuggling activities by the 320

Italian armed forces (Ceccorulli and Coticchia 2016), the constant – bipartisan, and yet paradoxical – attenuation of the combat/pure military dimension in Italian political rhetoric on defence (Ignazi *et al.* 2012), and the surge of irregular arrivals in Italy in last years (after 2011, and especially after 2015). Assuming this is all valid, arguments that foreground irregular immigration warrant further investigation, to explore whether claims that the irregular immigration problem is really a people smuggler problems (dominant in E.U. discourse) is maintained or, instead, if the discourse returns framing irregular immigration as a challenge per se. Such an analysis will shed much light on the type of military intervention Italy is likely to support in the future. 325 330

3.2 The missions in Libya and Niger

335

The January 2018 parliamentary debate on Libya concerned strengthening of the existing missions and their mainstreaming into the 'Bilateral Mission of Assistance and Support in Libya' (M.I.A.S.I.T., launched at the beginning of 2018). A component of this reconfiguration effort included the aforementioned 'Operation Ippocrate', approved by the Italian parliament in 2016 after a request from Italy's government. 'Ippocrate' entailed the deployment of a field hospital in the Misrata area in 2017. Other components of the mission included technical and maintenance tasks supporting the Libyan Coast Guard using some of the naval units employed in Operation 'Mare Sicuro' (initially a technical and logistical support unit and a patrol vessel), a mission authorized by the Council of Ministers on 2 August 2017. An explicit request by the Libyan government for an intervention aimed at countering people smuggling and illegal immigration was made on 23 July 2017. For this type of intervention, the access of Italian vessels into Libyan waters and ports was required, especially in and around Tripoli, as explained by former Minister of Defence Pinotti before the Chamber of Deputies in 2017.

Thus, Italy's August mission was intended to comply with U.N. Resolutions 2259 and 2240 of 2015 calling for technical aid, economic, security and anti-terrorism assistance for Libya. The resolutions called specifically for assistance to counter criminal exploitation of migrants in the vacuum caused by Libya's shattered security and control apparatuses. M.I.A.S.I.T. was thus cast as Italy's contribution to a broader international effort at stabilization of the country, which would, in turn, help Italy counter illicit activities, security challenges and irregular immigration.

On 28 December 2017, the Italian Council of Ministers presented its plan with a detailed report (Scheda 1, 2018) of aims, assets to be deployed, and costs for Italy's participation in military operations over the first nine months of 2018.⁵ The plan appeared entirely coherent with the new focus on the country's backyard (the Mediterranean, North Africa and the Sahel), in line with what has been defined as Italy's 'Mediterranean identity and vocation' (Senate 2017b). Parliamentary publications document the view of these regions as central to Italy in its efforts to counter the aforementioned threats, in a worsening security scenario (Senate 2017b).

Most of the activities planned for 2018 M.I.A.S.I.T. included were aimed at 'capacity-building'. The objectives of the mission were to provide sanitary assistance; training, guidance and mentoring to Libyan security forces and government institutions; boosting equipment; and the overall support and facilitation of capacity-building in Libya (Senate 2017b). A maximum of 400 soldiers (an average of 375) would be employed in the first nine months of 2018 (slightly more than in 2017). Planned expenditure was €34 million in the

first **nine** months of the year, the most expensive among new missions out of a total planned expenditure of €83 million on missions.

Turning now to Niger, the former Prime Minister, Paolo Gentiloni, as summarized the aim of the mission as helping to 'defeat the trafficking of humans as well as terrorism' (Kington 2017). Niger is the country of origin of most of the migrants arriving in Italy via Libya (Albanese 2017). On 28 December 2017, the Council of Ministers (Doc. CCL-bis, n. 1 e doc. CCL, n. 3) presented the (bilateral) mission to support the Republic of Niger (M.I.S.I.N.). In the 'Scheda 2 2018', the government detailed aims and features of the operation, whose area of intervention will be enlarged also to Mauritania (for training activities in the Defence College), Nigeria, and Benin (for reasons related to logistics, namely access to the harbour at Cotonou). The official aim is to help the Nigerien government – within joint E.U. and U.S. efforts – to develop the Nigerien security forces and enhance their capabilities to combat illegal trafficking and other *security threats*; contribute to border and territorial surveillance; and help boost the country's air-patrol capabilities (Scheda 2, 2018). It is worth noticing that terrorism can be defined under the rubric of 'security threat', but does not have in the official definition the same relevance as 'illegal trafficking', the combatting of which is explicitly stated as the primary objective.

According to the document approved by the Council of Ministers, the mission will 'develop progressively throughout the year [2018], providing for staffing of up to 120 personnel in the first half and a maximum of 470 by the end of the year' (Scheda 2, 2018, Council of Ministers, Doc. CCL-bis, n. 1 and doc. CCL, n. 3). The planned contingent includes: reconnaissance and command and control teams; trainers (two to be based in Mauritania); medical staff; engineers to aid in infrastructure work; a chemical-biological threats-radiological-nuclear (C.B.R.N.) unit; logistics support; a force protection unit; and unit for information collection, surveillance and reconnaissance in support of operations. Pinotti (Joint Commissions, 15 January 2015) carefully stressed how the intervention in Niger was 'not a combat operation', but rather a training mission. One-hundred and thirty '*mezzi terrestri*' and two 'aircrafts' were to be deployed on the ground. UN Security Council Resolution 2359 (2017), the bilateral agreement with Niger (27 September 2017) and the formal request for assistance by Niger (note 3436/MDN/SG 1st November 2017) were indicated as the legal bases of the operation (Kington 2017).

However, Italy's only deployment initially was an advanced team (of around **forty** personnel) stationed at the U.S. air base in Niamey to 'prepare for the arrival' of the remaining troops (Maclean 2018). Later, some humanitarian aid (mainly medicine) arrived. The hold-up was because some ministers of the Nigerien government (such as Mohamed Bazoum, Minister for the Interior) expressed opposition to the complete deployment of Italian troops on the ground. A formal S.O.F.A. (Status of Forces Agreement) with Niger

went unsigned, impeding the arrival of the bulk of the Italian soldiers for many months. Only at the end of 2018 were Italian troops actually deployed on the ground.

3.3 Assessing the weight of migration and terrorism in the political debate

While Italy's activity with respect to Libya increased in importance throughout 2017, Niger appeared as a 'new' engagement, to the point that not only the Commissions in charge but the entire Chamber of Deputies was required (at the request of 5SM, LeU, S.I. and the Northern League) to participate in the vote on the mission. As underlined by Antonino Moscatelli of the Democratic Party (P.D.), the key objectives underlying Italy's engagement in Africa are the *management of migratory flows* and contributing to the stability of the relevant countries. The latter was to be advanced through *the fight against international terrorism* and support and training for Libyan forces (Joint Defence and Foreign Affairs Commissions, 15 January 2018). Italian participation in international missions was discussed and approved by the Chamber of Deputies on 15 and 17 January 2018 in the framework of the Joint Commissions on External Affairs, Emigration and Defence (for the Senate) and External and Communitarian Affairs and Defence (for the Chamber of Deputies). Table 1 illustrates the results of the votes on the two missions.

Table 1 reveals the vote in favour of the main parties of the centre-left (the P.D.) and the centre-right (Forza Italia [F.I.]). Both parties stated the missions were salient to the fight against irregular immigration and terrorism within a

Table 1. Votes on resolution n. 6-00382.

Gruppo	Favorevoli (Maggioranza)	Contrari (Minoranza)	Astenuti	Assenti	In missione
Alternativa Popolare-Centristi per l'Europa-NCD-Noi con l'Italia	12	0	0	1	9
Articolo 1 - Movimento Democratico e Progressista - Liberi e Uguali	0	35	<u>1</u>	4	2
Democrazia Solidale - Centro Democratico	8	0	0	1	3
Forza Italia-Il Popolo della Libertà	43	0	0	11	2
Fratelli d'Italia-Alleanza nazionale	6	0	0	4	2
Gruppo Misto	37	7	4	9	3
Lega Nord e autonomie	0	0	18	2	2
Movimento 5 stelle	0	69	0	15	4
Noi con l'Italia-Scelta civica per l'Italia-MAIE	10	0	0	4	2
Partito Democratico	239	0	<u>1</u>	20	22
Sinistra Italiana - Sinistra Ecologia Libertà - Possibile	0	17	0	0	0
Totali	355	128	24	71	51

Source: OpenParlamento. In details the parties voted on the (majority coalition) Garofani et al, Resolution n. 6-00382, which comprises also the 'schede' 1/2018 (M.I.S.I.L. - Libya) and 2/2018 (M.I.S.I.N. - Niger). The figures underlined in yellow show the votes different from the party.

more general effort to contribute to the stabilization of the country. The Five Star Movement (M.5.S.) and the parties to the left of the PD – namely, SEL, Articolo 1, and Liberi e Uguali – opposed the resolution. M5S justified its ‘no’ vote on the grounds that the resolution was too fuzzy with respect to the mission in Niger (which was not supported by the party anyway); the left voted against claiming that it was the work of vested interests seeking to benefit from the fight against irregular immigration and transnational terrorism. The Northern League (L.N.), as for all the other operations, abstained on the grounds that the missions did not go far enough to combat irregular immigration, the main concern for the party. Detailed analysis of the debates, which we present in the next sections, reveals the (different) motivations behind each party’s decision.

3.4 Libya

Minister of Defence Pinotti explained before the Joint Defence and Foreign Affairs Commissions (15 January 2018) that the engagement in Libya was nothing new but required further efforts to progressively improve local authorities’ capabilities in implementing essential tasks, such as the control of territory and Libya’s territorial waters. The aim of rationalizing the different missions in Libya, according to the Minister, was also conceived as part of a call by the Libyan government for more flexibility in addressing core requirements (health and sanitation and new naval, air and land equipment to assist in de-mining).

The key points in the debate were as follows. First, the government coalition tried to frame the intervention as part of a comprehensive strategy to advance Italy’s national interests by stabilizing Libya. Fabrizio Cicchitto of the Nuovo Centro Destra ([N.C.D.] in the governing coalition) recalled that the intervention in Libya, ‘was in perfect continuity with what had already been done’ – that is, contributing to the rebuilding of the country’s economy and social fabric (Chamber of Deputies, General Assembly, 17 January 2018). Andrea Mancinelli, an MP from the PD, made it clear that ‘in addition to controlling *migratory flows* arriving from Africa, [Italy] had to address the potential risk of a weakening in the stabilization of the country and the consolidation of political institutions of Libya’, something which would clearly affect the overall security of the Mediterranean and thus Italy’s national interests (Joint Commissions, 15 January 2018).

Second, those parliamentary groups that prioritize the fight against irregular immigration over all other objectives criticized the government’s proposals. Senator Divina (L.N.) expressed his doubts about the credibility of the new mission, saying: ‘it is former Mare Sicuro naval assets that are proposed to be deployed to this task. We already saw how that mission went, and we are told that from tomorrow (with the same system, probably the same

command structure) the resources from that mission will be re-directed to tackling illegal immigration. However, we know that these vessels have rules of engagement that prioritize on-sea rescues in emergency situations' (Joint Commissions, 15 January 2018). Thus, the L.N. opposed the proposal on the grounds that any resources re-deployed with the same rules of engagement would never be able to prioritize counter-migration. 485

Third, some opponents of the resolution charged the government with blatant hypocrisy, pointing to the counterintuitive logic of the official explanations of the mission. Eraso Palazzotto (S.E.L.), remarked that 'migration – which the government uses to legitimize the new operations in Africa, is, in fact, only marginal to the real interests behind these missions' (Chamber of Deputies, General Assembly, 17 January 2018). More likely, Palazzotto asserted, the real intent was 'neo-colonial' – namely, to protect the welfare of Italian businesses in a region in which other European states were already busy acting to secure their respective national economic interests. 'The presence of warships in the port of Tripoli ... does not contribute to the stabilization of that country but will instead increase instability' (Joint Commissions, 1 August 2017). Palazzotto also asserted that 'the freedom of choice of fragile governments such as those we are talking about, with respect to the enormous amount of money our government is offering, casts doubt about whether their requests were truly self-determined' (Joint Commissions, 15 January 2018). 490 495 500 505

Another critical position with respect to the executive's alleged justification for the mission was that the use of military assets to train the Libyan coastguard would only help to send migrants back to the 'hell in the southern Mediterranean country' as Donatella Duranti (S.E.L.) explained (Chamber of Deputies, General Assembly, 17 January 2018). Further, she argued they would simultaneously convince the general public that the best way to stop migrants from arriving in Italy is through force. Duranti maintained that 'there is a structural disequilibrium between the financial resources devoted to international cooperation and development and those devoted to military force – in favour of the former' (Chamber of Deputies, General Assembly, 17 January 2018). This, she argued, clearly belied the stated objective to contribute to Libyan stabilization and to improve the conditions of people fleeing war and famine. Seemingly questioning the logic of the Italian intervention, Massimo Artini – an M.P. from Alternativa Libera (having defected from the M. S.5. earlier) – asked for clarification on the need for so many personnel to be sent to Libya, given the fact that 'Operation Ippocrate' had already addressed much of what was laid out in Libya's original request for assistance (Joint Commissions, 15 January 2018). 510 515 520

A fourth point of the debate focused on the framework within which the operation was conceived. Some MPs complained about the timing of the vote since the Chamber of Deputies was no longer in formal session pending fresh 525

elections. 'A strategic choice of this type will condition the foreign policy of this country for the next ten years', explained Palazzotto (Chamber of Deputies, General Assembly, 17 January 2018). Minister Pinotti replied a timely resolution was crucial (even with the Italian political situation in some turmoil) since *security imperatives* demanded a response, lest Libya revert to a quagmire (Joint Commissions, 15 January 2018). She also noted the Libyan government had petitioned Italy on precisely those grounds. 530

On 17 January, the Chamber of Deputies approved the decree after a debate that hued closely to the arguments presented above. Michele Nicoletti (P.D.) reiterated that the Libya and Niger missions were entirely focused on a deep commitment (and not a quick fix) to resolving critical threats *such as human smuggling*, reiterating the clear national interests at stake in the process (Chamber of Deputies, General Assembly, 17 January 2018). FI and Fratelli d'Italia (F.d.I.) voted in favour, arguing this was in the interests Italy's security. What we see here, then, is a clear focus on *curbing irregular immigration* to forestall the possibility that the criminal groups profiting from this business model might end up funding *terrorism* and even be exploited by terrorists to sneak into Europe. Giorgia Meloni, leader of the F.d.I., explained the party's support for missions with the aim to *alter* 540

Q10 *the inflow of immigrants* reaching Italy through Libya (La Mattina 2018). According to Northern League M.P.s, who abstained from the vote, the contribution of the action to counter *irregular immigration* was not sufficiently clear, a puzzling statement, according to the journalist La Mattina (2018), recalling Salvini's pledge to support 'any intervention aimed at countering *clandestine immigration*, even in Iceland'. Nicola Fratoianni (S.E.L.) criticized the way the government had 'forced' the resolution on the parliament, justifying the party's no vote on this ground, but also because of the nature of the two new missions in Libya and Niger, as reflected in the comments of representatives of his party detailed above (Chamber of Deputies, General Assembly, 17 January 2018). The M5S also voted against, its opposition focused specifically against the mission in Niger (see below). 550

In sum, it is clear from the positions expressed above, that the main concern for the mission was to reduce irregular immigration. This is despite the fact that the government framed it as part of a general stabilization effort to forestall potential security threats. Some parties made this point explicitly (F.d.I., which voted in favour, and S.E.L. and L.N., which voted against), while others did so indirectly in so far as they underscored the role of the mission in undermining people smugglers (P.D. and F.I.). 560

3.5 Niger 565

While, as noted above, the military operation in Libya was a sort of rationalization of previous missions, the military engagement in Niger was a new

operation altogether. Moreover, as a forward deployment in a part of Africa with no traditional Italian ties it represents a considerable novelty in Italian defence and security policy. For this reason, perhaps, the public debate (even at the international level) focused mainly on this intervention. National and global media frequently highlighted the *struggle against illegal migration* as the main goal of the Niger operation, sometimes combining this with counter-terrorism, which was however never presented as the primary aim of M.I.S. I.N. According to *The Times*, 'Italy deployed 'hundreds of soldiers to a desert fort in Niger to confront people-traffickers who send Africans across the Sahara and the Mediterranean' (Kington 2017). Similarly, for *La Repubblica* (2018), the Italian Parliament approved the mission in Niger, sending '470 troops against human trafficking'.

Pundits and experts mainly focused on a broader perspective, emphasizing the strategic shift in Italian defence towards North Africa and the Sahel. The apparent necessity to (finally) join allies⁶ already on the ground was foregrounded, as was the general aims of stabilization of the area affected by multidimensional challenges as very much in the Italian national interest (Varvelli 2018).

Prime Minister Gentiloni, as quoted by the press, affirmed that the mission would help to 'defeat the trafficking of human beings as well as terrorism' (Kington 2017). Minister Pinotti stated that the operation in Niger is the fruit of a strategy pivoting to the 'extended Mediterranean' and that this African territory 'is of fundamental importance for Italy, both in terms of the battle against terrorism and the neutralization of the criminal network that controls illegal migration' through the Mediterranean (Morandi 2017).

Analysis of the parliamentary debates allows us to paint a more detailed picture of the relative salience of each of these stated challenges in large part due to the 2016 law on authorization of missions abroad, which – as mentioned above – for the first time permits the parties to take a stance on individual missions (n.145 2016). As noted above, the opposition strongly criticized the whole procedure because it occurred while the parliament had been dissolved pending new elections and was thus only supposed to convene for standard business (*affari correnti*). Thus, the question of why a vote had to be held when a new parliament with a fresh mandate was about to be elected arose. Garofani (P.D.), answered that the operations required a quick decision and that Italy had commitments in the international scenario that could not wait (Joint Defence and Foreign Affairs Commissions, 15 January 2018). Apart from this procedural controversy, four additional elements that emerged in the debate warrant close scrutiny.

First, the members of the executive – as well as of the government coalition – emphasized the 'strategic relevance' of the mission in Niger for Italian defence policy in the broad sense. As mentioned, the entire focus of Italian foreign and security discourse and policy has been shifting in recent

years to migration and counter-terrorism.⁷ Manciuilli (P.D.) stressed how the growing Italian role in the Mediterranean was related to 'asymmetric threats (such as terrorism, and illicit trafficking) and instability' that required a 'comprehensive approach to crises' in the 'enlarged Mediterranean' (Joint Commissions, 15 January 2018). As stated by the then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Alfano before the Joint Commissions (15 January 2018): 'our interests and our security are directly involved in the Mediterranean and in the Sahel', thus justifying the focus of future training activities in these places. The main challenge of Europe in Africa, in this view, is addressing 'fragility', and the operation in Niger was to be interpreted through this lens.⁸ Because many countries in the Sahel are not able to effectively control their territories, Italy focuses on capacity-building: for Manciuilli (P.D.), 'Italy does what the local actors need', for increasing capabilities (Joint Commissions, 15 January 2015). The Minister of Defence, Pinotti, pointed out that *both* criminal activities and terrorism confront Niger today on account of its 'porous frontiers' (Joint Commissions, 15 January 2015). The risk of a further 'Somalization' of Niger (with Libya and Mali already in chaos), where all kinds of illicit traffic (weapons, drugs, migrants, uranium) might proliferate, was considered plausible.

Q12 This explains the motivation of the Italian intervention (Grignetti 2018b)

Q13 Semprini 2018), as stated by Minister of Defence Pinotti (Martirano 2018)

namely, to train Nigerien forces in border control, and to forestall any dangerous relationship developing between terrorist groups and human

Q14 smugglers operating in Libya (Venturini 2017).

Second, and more important for our purposes in this *article*, the strategic salience attributed to Niger and Sahel is more often connected with the need to address *migration flows*, rather than counter-terrorism. In fact, the perceived 'need to stabilize' the whole area, is often associated – in the coalition government's speeches – with 'the *challenges posed by migration*' (Santerini – *Scelta Civica*, Chamber of Deputies, General Assembly, 17 January 2018). According to Minister of Foreign Affairs Alfano, the mission in Niger aims to 'oppose illicit trafficking'. He continued that 'we have specifically invested in Niger because it is a strategic partner *in the struggle against the root causes of migration*' (Joint Commissions, 15 January 2015). Therefore, in line with Nicoletti (P.D.), both missions in Libya and Niger are aimed *primarily* at 'thwarting *human smuggling*' (Chamber of Deputies, General Assembly, 17 January 2018). The aim, for Cicchitto (N.C.D.), is to create an 'upstream filter against migration flows' (Chamber of Deputies, General Assembly, 17 January 2018). *Migration* is recognized as the crucial factor behind 'dynamism' in the Sahel and in sub-Saharan Africa more generally (Joint Commissions, 15 January 2015). The commitment in Niger is viewed as part of the broader government policy to oppose the smugglers who benefit from migration flows. According to Alfano, 'helping the Nigerien armed forces to control the northern frontier with Libya, where criminal actors run free, is in line with our

interests' (Joint Commissions, 15 January 2015). For him, Italian assistance is expected to help Nigerien security forces 'more effectively oppose illicit traffic, including *people smuggling*, in the whole Sahel region' (Joint Commissions, 15 January 2015). For the purpose of this work, it is crucial to highlight opposition M.P. Erasmo Palazzotto's (S.E.L.) claim that the 'central issue of the debate is *irregular migration*' (Chamber of Deputies, General Assembly, 17 January 2018).

Third, at points, the two official aims of the operation ('to thwart human smuggling and terrorism')⁹ were presented jointly, especially if related to the need to reinforce local actors' capabilities to control territory. For instance, Moscatt (P.D.) asserted that the 'management of migration flows and providing stability (e.g. with counter-terrorism operations or training of local forces)' as two 'connected goals in the missions (Joint Commissions, 15 January 2015). However, the M.P. recognized how Libya was the 'main focus' of the Italian engagement in Africa. At the same time, it should be noted that terrorism was often raised in the context of risks that groups (such as Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb – A.Q.I.M.) might exploit the business model for financial gain. Thus, in conformity with Manciuilli (Joint Commissions, 15 January 2015), the missions in Libya and Niger are strategically aimed at forestalling any dangerous dynamic link forming between terrorism and criminal activities.

Finally, regarding the votes expressed by the political parties, the M.5.S. – which voted in favour of the E.U.B.A.M. Libya and E.U.N.A.V.F.O.R. M.E.D. 'Sophia' missions – opposed the (more militarily oriented) missions 'Mare Sicuro' and E.U.C.A.P. Sahel Niger, voting against the resolution presented by the majority coalition (see Table 1). The M.5.S. stressed that only 18 per cent of migrants crossing the border between Niger and Libya travel on to Europe and that attempting to halt such flows could create tensions between Italian troops and the local population, since the fight against terrorism on the ground would inevitably produce casualties (document prepared by the M.5.S., Chamber of Deputies, Joint Commissions, 16 January 2018). In contrast, the parties to the left of the P.D. (such as S.E.L.) have always opposed the operations in Niger. The M.P. Di Stefano (who will become Undersecretary of Defence in the next M5S-Lega government) stressed the risks posed by the presence of the ground in Niger, denouncing the subordinate role of Italy to (Chamber of Deputies, General Assembly, 17 January 2018). In voting on the resolution, he also asserted that the real aim of the government was to '*externalize the control of the frontiers*, forgetting the principles of integration'. The text of the resolution openly questions the political decision to allocate 40 per cent of the entire national development budget in Africa to Niger for 'security-related policies', rather than addressing the root causes of migration. As revealed by Frusone (M.5.S.), the party was not opposed to intervention in Niger per se,

but rather the specific contours of this mission, given it was geared to the 'surveillance of the desert to *thwart migration flows*' (Chamber of Deputies, General Assembly, 17 January 2018). In the same speech, Frusone also asserted that additional efforts to help Libya secure its southern border would prove far more effective in the struggle against illegal migration. The Northern League supported the mission (in theory), based on its aim of '*thwarting illegal migration*'. Nevertheless, the party rejected the resolution to deploy troops to Niger, arguing – in the words of Divina (L.N.) – that the stated goals of the operation were 'masks for other aims' (Joint Commissions, 15 January 2015).

4. Findings and conclusions

In our interview, former Minister of Defence stressed that the 2015 White Paper was crucial for the re-structuring of Italian defence towards the 'enlarged Mediterranean'.¹⁰ According to an M.P. from the P.D., Italy has invested in a 'new pivot to Africa'.¹¹ In sum, according to the former executive, the (new) operations in Libya and Niger should be examined within the framework of this shift in the Italian strategic approach.

Generally speaking, it was the Niger operation, and not the Libya mission, that was the source of controversy in the 2018 votes. However, in both cases, the debates exposed in the starkest terms the different positions endorsed by the political parties on the broader question of the salience of security challenges. The executive has tried to explain military interventions as part of a comprehensive, long-term strategy aimed at facing critical challenges in Africa with implications for Italy and Europe as a whole. In its words, irregular immigration, its exploitation by smugglers and the proliferation of terrorist activities were all facets of a single problem – namely, a lack of stability and security. Italy – as a security provider in line with its strategic rethinking after the end of the Cold War – thus had a vital stake in becoming involved.

However, the parliamentary debate (and the ensuing vote) exposed the different layers of this overall argument. Across all the parliamentary debate on Libya, the four main arguments made by the ruling coalition (Libya's instability, human smugglers further contributing to such instability, smugglers' potential links to terrorist organizations, and the exploitation of irregular immigration) were mostly never discussed as a unique set of related challenges. Even the connection between irregular immigration and human smuggling, emphasized by the executive and following the established E.U. narrative, struggled for 'air time' in the debate. Hence, the debate focused on threats perceived to be closest to Italy. In fact, the approval of the F.I. and F.d.I. 'yes' votes for the mission are explained primarily by its purported aim to counter irregular immigration. The debate centred on irregular immigration also with respect to critical positions. For some (right-wing) opposition M.P.s,

the mission in Libya was inadequate to meet the key Italian interest – curbing irregular immigration. In contrast, other (left-wing) opposition figures presented the stated reasons as a cover – namely, security and law enforcement as a disguise for new colonial efforts to protect primarily economic interests. The emphasis on capacity-building, according to these critics, was obscuring the problematic issue of how migrants and refugees are actually treated in those countries; their situation might actually be worsened through Italian policy. More importantly for the present research, terrorism did not really enter the debate, and then only as a secondary concern, and more often connected directly to irregular immigration (e.g. the shipping foreign fighters towards Italian shores).

For the Niger operation, the central relevance of *migration* emerged clearly in the parliamentary debate. Even the definition of the operation focused on illegal trafficking as the main goal, along with a broader and general reference to ‘*security threats*’. Moreover, the new strategic importance attributed to the Sahel, as well the perceived national interest in the region, was deeply linked with the aim of dismantling the criminal networks that foster irregular migration towards Europe. Even the opposition recognized the strategic novelty of the mission, focusing – albeit from a critical perspective – on the logistics of addressing the struggle against human smuggling. Finally, the terrorist threat was frequently addressed in terms of the potential exploitation of the profits from the people smuggling networks by terrorist groups.

In sum, the qualitative analysis of the parliamentary debates over the M.I.A. S.I.T. and M.I.S.I.N. deployments has shown that migration – rather than terrorism – was the principal concern of Italian political leaders concerning the missions, as well as the most relevant perceived goal of the operations. We can thus fairly exclude ‘the fight against terrorism’ as a driver of the Italian engagement, while the purported need to support North African and Sahelian states in fighting human smuggling/trafficking per se can be developed as a plausible hypothesis to be further tested to explain the new strategic shift of Rome in the region. Future studies could test this hypothesis against other potential (international and domestic) explanatory variables such as the role of allies, economic interests or humanitarian norms.

The present work also paves the way for additional research on the connection between the recent strategic shift and the ‘new’ foreign policy adopted by the Italian ‘populist government’ (Garzia 2019) between the Five Star Movement and the Northern League. The first parliamentary debates under the new government, as well as their initial strategic documents, appear to indicate that both parties acknowledge the relevance of the ‘enlarged Mediterranean’ as the principal area of Italian strategic concern and the various engagements deployed in the region before they formed government (Nelli Feroci 2019). However, additional research is needed to better assess continuity and change in their foreign and defence policy as

well as the relevance of irregular immigration in supporting them (expected to be at the forefront with respect to the previous government's wider depiction of the strategic situation in Libya and the Sahel). Finally, further analyses should investigate, also with different research methods, the Italian decision-making process, also from a cross-time and/or a cross-country perspective. 785

Notes

1. See https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/irregular-migration-return-policy/facilitation-irregular-migration_en. 790
2. Author's interview with Roberta Pinotti, former Italian Minister of Defence, Genova, March 2018.
3. Author's telephone interview with Domenico Rossi, former Undersecretary of Defence, 26 June 2017.
4. Author's interview with E.U.-Navfor Med – Sophia Command (Spokesperson and Chief of Media Cell and the Legal Advisor). Rome, 10 July 2017. 795
5. The nine-month window applied to all missions for one simple reason: financial support/authorization ('*copertura finanziaria*') extends only to this length of time and no longer.
6. Varvelli (2018) talks about logics of 'competitive collaboration' with allies such as France and the U.S. 800
7. Author's interview with Stefania Panebianco, Italian Professor of Political Science, expert on migration, 24 May 2017.
8. Author's interview with Roberta Pinotti, former Italian Minister of Defence, Genova, March 2018.
9. Locatelli (Socialists), Chamber of Deputies, General Assembly, 17 January 2018. 805
10. The Mediterranean was 'the strategic goal of Italy'. Author's interview with Domenico Rossi, Undersecretary of Defence, 26 June 2017.
11. Author's interview with Andrea Manciuoli, former Deputy-President Defence Commission, Italian Parliament, Florence, February 15, 2016.

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