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Contact:  
Dr. Ian Davis  
Email: [idavis@natowatch.org](mailto:idavis@natowatch.org)  
[www.natowatch.org](http://www.natowatch.org)

### **NATO ministerial meeting overshadowed by Israel-Hamas war**

#### **Analysis of the NATO Defence Ministers Meeting, Brussels, 11-12 October 2023**

By Dr. Ian Davis, NATO Watch

#### **Key decisions and activities:**

- Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy met with NATO allies and partners in the US-led Ukraine Defence Contact Group and received assurances of sustained military support.
- Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant briefed his NATO counterparts by videoconference on the war with Hamas. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg condemned Hamas' terrorist attacks and said: "Israel has the right to defend itself and as the conflict unfolds, the protection of civilians is essential".
- The recent deployment of hundreds of extra KFOR troops to Kosovo was discussed. The NATO Secretary General called on Belgrade and Pristina to "behave responsibly, refrain from destabilising actions, and re-engage in the EU-facilitated dialogue".
- The next steps in operationalising NATO's new regional defence plans were discussed, but no new information was provided on the assigned forces and capabilities being assembled. The plans cover the Atlantic and European Arctic; the Baltic region and central Europe; and the Mediterranean and Black Sea. They have not been made public or independently assessed.
- It was noted that NATO will start its annual nuclear exercise "Steadfast Noon" next week.
- The ministers expressed strong solidarity with Estonia and Finland as they work to establish the facts surrounding the damage to critical undersea infrastructure in the Baltic Sea. Secretary General Stoltenberg said NATO would have a "united and determined response" if it was proved the incident was a deliberate attack.
- Ten NATO member states agreed to further develop the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI), which aims to bolster European air and missile defence through joint acquisition projects.
- Two initiatives were signed to strengthen joint air power cooperation: Germany and the UK joined the NATO Flight Training Europe (NFTE) High Visibility Project, bringing the total number of participants to 12; and 13 member states and invitee Sweden signed an agreement to cooperate on cross-border airspace.
- Ministers expressed strong support for a speedy ratification of Swedish accession.
- Assistant Secretary General Thomas Goffus was appointed as NATO's first Special Coordinator for Counterterrorism.

## Summary of the meeting

The NATO Defence Ministers meeting took place on the 11-12 October 2023 at NATO Headquarters in Brussels. This was the first NATO ministerial since the NATO Summit in Vilnius in July. It had been largely intended as an evaluation exercise, looking at the state of the alliance ahead of its 75th anniversary summit in Washington, D.C., in July 2024. However, it took place against the backdrop not only of violent turmoil in the Middle East but also political turbulence in the US Congress, which has been holding up approval of aid for Ukraine, as well as breaking news that undersea gas and telecom links between Finland and Estonia had been disrupted.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky made his first visit to NATO headquarters since the Russian full-scale invasion in February 2022. He met with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and took part in the US-led Ukraine Defence Contact Group meeting, alongside more than 50 countries.

The ministerial meeting began on 11 October with a joint [doorstep statement](#) by the NATO Secretary General and the Ukrainian President. Stoltenberg told Zelensky that “your fight is our fight, your security is our security, and your values are our values. And we will stand by Ukraine for as long as it takes”. He indicated that “we will further strengthen our relationship and help Ukraine move towards NATO membership”. Zelensky said his main message to NATO defence ministers would be on “priorities for Ukraine” for “how to survive during this next winter”.

In the first morning of the ministerial, the NATO Secretary General and the Ukrainian President held a private bilateral meeting, and this was followed by a closed session of the Ukraine Defence Contract Group. Two further private bilateral meetings followed: between the NATO Secretary General and the US Secretary of Defense; and between the NATO Secretary General and the Ukrainian Defence Minister, Rustem Umerov.

In late afternoon, the NATO-Ukraine Council met in Defence Ministers’ Session, together with the Defence Minister of Sweden, to discuss the situation in Ukraine and NATO’s continued support. Aside from some brief [opening remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General, this was also a closed meeting. The first day ended with two signing ceremonies – for the Allies join NATO Flight Training Europe and an agreement that will build the legal framework for any future air defence purchases under the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI) – and a [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General.

The second day of the ministerial began with some brief [remarks](#) by the NATO Secretary General and the US Secretary of Defense. This was followed by two closed back-to-back meetings of the North Atlantic Council (NAC), first in Defence Ministers’ Session together with Sweden and the Defence Minister of Israel (via video link), and second, in Defence Ministers’ Session together with Sweden.

After an official photo a third closed meeting of the NAC took place with the participation of the Defence Minister of Sweden and EU officials. The ministerial concluded with a signing ceremony for the joint Airspace Management (AER) programme and a closing [press conference](#) by the NATO Secretary General.

The following more detailed analysis of key aspects of the ministerial draws on a combination of the above links, wider press reporting of the meeting and NATO Watch insights in attempt to fill the information gaps. Six main issues were discussed:

- NATO’s ongoing support for Ukraine;
- the situation in the Middle East in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks by Hamas against NATO partner Israel;
- NATO operations and missions, including in Kosovo and Iraq;
- the work underway to resource and exercise the military plans that leaders agreed at the Vilnius Summit to strengthen NATO’s long-term deterrence and defence;

- the recent damage to undersea infrastructure between Estonia and Finland; and
- ratification of Sweden's membership application.

## Support for Ukraine

### **Backstory**

On 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine in a major escalation of the armed conflict that began in 2014. Ukraine has now mounted a counteroffensive, but progress is slow and attritional, with little prospect of a breakthrough before the winter sets in. NATO member states are co-belligerents in the war, having provided significant quantities of weapons to Ukraine, including main battle tanks, missiles, ammunition. At the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest the alliance stated that Ukraine (and Georgia) would become members but avoided any specific timetable or pathway. NATO remains divided on the issue, and at the Vilnius Summit the issue was fudged once again with the promise to Ukraine of accelerated membership once things look better. Two of the agreed new measures for bringing Ukraine closer to NATO were the setting up of a NATO-Ukraine Council and removing the requirement for a Membership Action Plan.

In advance of the ministerial meeting, [political changes](#) in Poland, Slovakia and the United States suggested that support for Ukraine might be waning, with implications for future supplies of military aid. The US army [said](#) on 9 October, for example, that Congress needed to approve additional funding quickly to ensure the Pentagon's munitions production and acquisition plans can meet the needs of both Israel and Ukraine simultaneously.

### **Ukraine Defence Contact Group**

Speaking before the Contact Group meeting, President Zelensky positioned himself less as a rival for resources than as an empathetic ally of Israel. Having previously [criticised](#) Israel for declining to send weapons to Ukraine, he called for the support of the Israeli people and

made explicit comparisons between Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas. "Terrorists like Putin or like Hamas seek to hold free and democratic nations as hostages and they want power", he said.

Further military aid to Ukraine was announced, including F-16 combat aircraft and training, as well as air defences, ammunition and demining equipment. The largest commitment came from Germany, which [announced](#) it would send about \$1.1 billion in Patriot missiles and IRIS-T air defence systems, and 10 more Leopard tanks. The UK promised a £100 million [package](#) of military support that includes mine-clearing equipment and also announced a separate £70 million package that includes the MSI-DS Terrahawk Paladin drone destroyer. [Belgium](#) and [Denmark](#) pledged to deliver F-16 combat aircraft: the latter by Spring 2024 and the latter by 2025. The United States will [provide](#) more than \$200 million worth of air defence, artillery, and rocket ammunition, while Canada will [donate](#) winter clothing and equipment (worth \$25 million).

### **NATO Ukraine Council meeting**

Speaking after the first NATO-Ukraine Council at ministerial level, the NATO Secretary General said the alliance would provide more cold weather clothing, demining capabilities, fuel, and medical equipment "to help Ukraine weather another difficult winter". According to NATO's [news release](#), Ukraine's priorities on its path to NATO membership, including long-term interoperability with NATO and defence procurement, were discussed. However, no major decisions or security sector reforms were announced, with questions about Ukraine's path to NATO membership likely deferred until the Foreign Ministers meeting in November.

Stoltenberg also gave assurances that neither the infighting in the US Congress nor the progress of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, or the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians will affect support for Ukraine. He said he was confident that members of the military alliance would continue to support Ukraine as it was in their own security interests. "We have the

capability and the strength to address different challenges at the same time," he added. "We don't have the luxury of choosing only one threat and one challenge".

Similarly, the US Secretary of Defense [claimed](#) to be able to supply Israel with the capabilities it needs to combat Hamas as well as supplying Ukraine with the weaponry needed to defeat Russia. "We can and will stand by Israel, even as we stand by Ukraine", Austin said, adding "The United States can walk and chew gum at the same time".

Where the need for weapons could overlap between Ukraine and Israel, is in munitions and other ground warfare systems, if, as is expected, Israel launches a lengthy ground war in Gaza.

## Israel-Hamas war

According to a NATO [news release](#), Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant briefed ministers by video conference "on the atrocities by Hamas perpetrated against Israeli civilians and the nationals of several NATO allies", as well as Israel's ongoing response. The Defence Ministers and the NATO Secretary General condemned the terrorist attacks in the strongest possible terms, with Stoltenberg adding: "Israel does not stand alone".

Images of dead infants were included in a [video](#) played to the ministers. "They were horrific pictures of the attacks and the victims of the attacks", Jens Stoltenberg told reporters, saying it "confirmed the brutality of the attacks".

The ministers also made it clear that Israel has "the right to defend itself with proportionality", and they called for Hamas to immediately release all hostages, and for the fullest possible protection of civilians. NATO also made clear that no nation or organisation (the Secretary General in his press conference [cited](#) Hezbollah and Iran) should seek to take advantage of the situation or to escalate it.

When pressed to do so, the NATO Secretary General refused to say whether Israel's

response so far was proportionate, including cutting off supplies of fuel, electricity and water to Gaza and its civilian population. "NATO as an alliance is not directly involved", he [said](#) in response, and reiterated that as the "conflict evolves, it is important to protect civilians". He added, "There are rules of war. There are the requests for proportionality. And this was highlighted by many allies".

NATO and Israel have worked together for almost 30 years in domains such as science and technology, counter terrorism, civil preparedness, countering weapons of mass destruction and women, peace and security. In recent years, cooperation has grown, principally through the [Mediterranean Dialogue](#) a partnership forum formed in 1994 that aims to contribute to security and stability in the wider Mediterranean region. Currently, the following non-NATO countries take part in the Dialogue: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia.

As a result of this latest crisis in the Middle East, NATO will be obliged to give higher priority to counterterrorism and potential spillovers of political violence from Europe's southern neighbourhood. Some of these challenges were noted in the 2022 Strategic Concept and recent summits but were a lower priority than the war in Ukraine, the threat from Russia and competition with China. NATO will now need to adjust its priorities to resolve these competing demands.

## NATO operations and missions

NATO's [current operations and missions](#) include a peacekeeping force (KFOR) in Kosovo, three [maritime security](#) operations (Standing Naval Forces, [Operation Sea Guardian](#) and the [Aegean Activity](#)), an advisory and capacity-building mission in [Iraq](#) (which was expanded in February 2021 following a request by the Iraqi government), cooperation with the [African Union](#), [air policing](#) (a peacetime mission that aims to preserve the security of alliance airspace) and since February 2023, support for [earthquake relief](#) efforts in Türkiye.

For discussions on this topic, the ministers were joined by Pål Jonson, Sweden's Defence Minister, and Benedikta Von Seherr-thoss, Managing Director of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy. However, there were no details about the discussions, although the Secretary General's press conference indicated that recent developments in Kosovo were the main focus.

### ***Kosovo- Serbia tensions***

Prior to the ministerial, NATO had already [announced](#) that it was boosting KFOR from 4,500 troops to about 5,000—utilizing Bulgarian, Romanian and UK forces—in response to an armed attack at a monastery in northern Kosovo on 24 September that killed a Kosovar police officer and three attackers. Kosovo, which declared independence from Serbia in 2008 after a guerrilla uprising and 1999 NATO intervention, accused Serbia of arming and supporting the Serb fighters. Serbia, which has not recognised its former province's independence, blamed Kosovo for precipitating violence by mistreating ethnic Serb residents. The situation was further exacerbated by an alleged military build-up by Serbia on the border with Kosovo.

The NATO Secretary General described it as a "tense and difficult situation", adding "we are conducting more patrols in the north of Kosovo" and that these were "prudent steps to ensure KFOR has the forces it needs to fulfil its UN mandate impartially". He added that "Belgrade and Pristina must behave responsibly, refrain from destabilising actions, and re-engage in the EU-facilitated dialogue".

### ***Appointment of a NATO Special Coordinator for Counterterrorism***

The Summit in Vilnius agreed that NATO would establish its first Special Coordinator for Counterterrorism, as well as update its Policy Guidelines and Action Plan on Counterterrorism. A comprehensive review of the situation in NATO's southern neighbourhood (the Middle East, North Africa and Sahel regions) was also instigated for presentation at the next NATO Summit in 2024. At the defence ministerial meeting the NATO Secretary General [reiterated](#) that

"terrorism remains the most direct asymmetric threat to the Alliance", and he announced that Assistant Secretary General [Thomas Goffus](#), a former US government official, will serve as his Special Coordinator for Counterterrorism.

## **Strengthening NATO's long-term deterrence and defence**

### ***Backstory***

To fulfil NATO's three core tasks (deterrence and defence; crisis prevention and management; and cooperative security, as set out in the [2022 Strategic Concept](#)), the alliance employs a mix of nuclear, conventional and missile defence capabilities, complemented by space and cyber capabilities. At successive summits since 2014, NATO leaders have agreed a range of measures to enhance their deterrence and defence posture, including the establishment of an [enhanced Forward Presence](#). The 2022 Madrid Summit [further strengthened](#) conventional deterrence on NATO's eastern front in four ways: (a) a massive increase in the NATO Response Force (NRF) from 40,000 to 300,000 troops with the expectation that the NRF would be placed on high readiness during 2023; (b) more pre-assigned forces, with the eight battlegroups in the eastern part of the alliance (the Forward Presence) increased up to brigade levels—about 3,000 to 5,000 troops in addition to local forces—with foreign forces pre-assigned to specific locations, but not permanently deployed; (c) more pre-positioned heavy weapons, logistics and command-and control assets; and (d) an increase in the US long-term military presence in Europe.

Since February 2022, the United States had already deployed or extended over 20,000 additional forces to Europe in response to the Ukraine crisis, adding additional air, land, maritime, cyber, and space capabilities, bringing its total commitment to more than 100,000 service personnel across Europe. At the Madrid Summit President Biden [announced](#) additional long-term commitments to Europe, including a permanent US 5th Army Corps headquarters in Poland—the first



permanent US forces on NATO's eastern flank—and an enhanced rotational force presence in Poland, Romania and the Baltic region.

The Vilnius Summit reaffirmed the decisions at the Madrid Summit, including the scaling up of existing battlegroups to brigade-size units. It also confirmed that the eight multinational battlegroups are now in place and committed to demonstrating the ability to scale up NATO's military presence “through robust live exercises across the Eastern Flank of the Alliance”. In addition, the Vilnius Summit agreed a new “family” of three regional defence plans: The High North and the Atlantic (led by Joint Force Command Norfolk, in the United States); Central (covering the Baltic to the Alps, and commanded from Brunssum in the Netherlands); and South-East (covering the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, and commanded from Naples). Each plan reportedly sets out in more detail what is required given the geography of those regions to deter and defend against the threats. From those plans, force requirements are then drawn up setting out the capabilities required in all domains—space, cyber, land, maritime, and air—to execute those tasks. It is expected to take several years to execute the plans. All these military plans and concepts remain classified. (On criticism of the opaqueness of this process, see [here](#)).

### ***The new regional defence plans***

The NATO Secretary General [said](#) that the alliance is now taking the “next steps” to implement the regional plans, including “assigning the necessary forces, developing new capabilities, and adjusting our command and control structures”. But that was the extent of the disclosure. No new information was provided on the assigned forces and capabilities being assembled.

### ***Nuclear exercise, Steadfast Noon***

The nuclear component of NATO's deterrence strategy is mainly provided by US nuclear weapons, backed up by the ‘independent’ nuclear forces of the UK and France. In addition, NATO's nuclear deterrence posture also relies on US nuclear weapons forward-

deployed in Europe, under so-called [nuclear sharing arrangements](#). The Secretary General highlighted “the important role NATO's nuclear weapons play in deterring aggression” and announced that NATO will hold its annual nuclear exercise, [Steadfast Noon](#), next week.

Described as a “routine training event that happens every October”, this year the training will take place over Italy, Croatia and the Mediterranean Sea on 16-26 October. It [practices NATO's nuclear strike mission](#) with dual-capable aircraft and the B61 tactical nuclear bombs the US deploys in Europe, but does not involve any actual nuclear weapons. There are currently an [estimated 100 B61 bombs](#) deployed at six bases in five European countries (Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, and Turkey). Non-nuclear aircraft also participate in the exercise under NATO's so-called SNOWCAT (Support of Nuclear Operations with Conventional Air Tactics) programme, which is used to enable military assets from non-nuclear countries to support the nuclear strike mission without being formally part of it. According to the Secretary General, the exercise will “help to ensure the credibility, effectiveness and security of our nuclear deterrent”, as well as sending a “clear message that NATO will protect and defend all allies”.

### ***Russia's threat to revoke CTBT ratification***

NATO's nuclear exercise will take place despite the increased salience of the nuclear agenda. First, there is a steadily growing risk of a direct military confrontation between Russia and the United States/NATO that includes [concerns](#) of escalation to the use of nuclear weapons. (Although US officials have frequently said that there was no indication that Russia planned to use nuclear weapons to attack Ukraine). Second, in February Russia suspended participation in the [New Start treaty](#), the last remaining nuclear arms control agreement between the United States and Russia. Third, Russia has [begun](#) to station tactical nuclear weapons in neighbouring Belarus, seemingly mirroring NATO's own nuclear weapons sharing arrangements. In response, Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki [stated](#) that Poland wanted to join Germany, Belgium, Italy, the

Netherlands and Türkiye in hosting US nuclear weapons.

Most recently, Russia announced that it is thinking about revoking ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). “The aim is to be on equal footing with the US, who signed the treaty but didn’t ratify it,” Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia’s permanent representative to international organisations in Vienna, [said](#) on 6 October. He also clarified that “Revocation doesn’t mean the intention to resume nuclear tests”. President Putin ramped up his own nuclear rhetoric when he [suggested](#) that Russia could resume nuclear testing for the first time in more than three decades. The US warned that Russia revoking its ratification of the CTBT will endanger “the global norm” against nuclear testing.

The NATO Secretary General said this latest move “demonstrates Russia’s lack of respect, and the continued disregard for its international commitments”. He added: “This is reckless and endangers the global norms against a nuclear explosive testing”. Stoltenberg said the NATO allies have no plans to start testing again. He accused President Putin of trying “to use this nuclear rhetoric to prevent NATO allies from supporting Ukraine, but he will not succeed, because again it is in our security interest that Ukraine prevails”. However, with global stockpiles of nuclear weapons [increasing](#) for the first time since the end of the Cold War, and the risk of such weapons being used the greatest it has been in decades, NATO also appears to be part of the problem.

### ***NATO strengthens joint air power cooperation***

Two [initiatives](#) were signed in the margins of the NATO Defence Ministers’ meeting to strengthen NATO’s deterrence and defence in the air domain. First, Germany and the UK joined the NATO Flight Training Europe (NFTE) High Visibility Project, bringing the total number of participants to 12 (Belgium, Czechia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Spain, Türkiye and UK). NFTE aims to ensure that sufficient state-of-the-art pilot training is

available around Europe in a cost-efficient and interoperable manner. It will leverage existing national and multinational facilities in Europe and, where necessary, expand or create new training capacity to address training requirements for different types of pilots.

Second, 13 member states (Albania, Bulgaria, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Türkiye) and invitee Sweden signed an agreement for civil and military authorities to cooperate on cross-border airspace management. The aim is to facilitate “the use of larger volumes of national airspace by NATO” for training, exercises and other air activities in several regions of Europe.

### ***Further cooperation on procurement of European air and missile defence capabilities***

Defence Ministers from 10 NATO member states (Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands and Slovenia) [signed](#) a memorandum of understanding to further develop the European Sky Shield Initiative (ESSI).

Under Germany’s leadership, the initiative was set up one year ago, and includes 19 member states (including the Baltic states, several eastern European countries and the UK) who aim to buy air defence systems— such as the Patriot system (produced by US arms manufacturer, Raytheon) and IRIS-T (produced by German arms maker Diehl)—mainly off the shelf instead of developing new systems, to cut down on procurement times. German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius [said](#) he expected the first deals to be struck within three to four months. France, which favours the development of European systems, has declined to join the initiative.

### **Suspected sabotage of the Baltic-connector gas pipeline**

The ministers also addressed the damage to an undersea gas pipeline and communications cable connecting Finland and Estonia in the

Baltic Sea that occurred on the 8 October. Finnish authorities [said](#) on 10 October that it “could not have occurred by accident” and appears to be the result of a “deliberate ... external act”. Local media cited unnamed government sources as saying Russian sabotage was suspected, while regional security experts said a Russian survey vessel had recently been observed making repeated visits to the vicinity of the Baltic connector pipeline. A Finnish expert, Jukka Savolainen, [said](#) one possibility was that “a large ship” had dragged its anchor over the pipeline – either intentionally or, in stormy weather, unintentionally.

The incident happened just over a year after a series of [underwater blasts](#) burst three of the four pipelines that make up Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2, a major conduit for Russian gas exports to western Europe. The NATO Secretary General [said](#) if the latest incident proved to be a deliberate attack—and he added that it was too early to say exactly what caused the incident and whether it was an intentional attack—it would be met by a “united and determined response”.

Protection of critical infrastructure, such as gas pipelines, and power and internet cables, has been on the NATO agenda for several years. Earlier this year, NATO created a [Critical Undersea Infrastructure Coordination Cell](#) at NATO Headquarters in Brussels to improve information sharing and exchange best practices between NATO member states, partners, and the private sector. And to further enhance maritime situational awareness for the security of critical undersea infrastructure the NATO Defence Ministers launched the [Digital Ocean Vision initiative](#), which includes a broad range of assets from satellites to autonomous systems below, on, and above the sea.

## Sweden’s accession

Sweden’s historic move to join NATO following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has been blocked by Türkiye and Hungary. At the 2022 Madrid Summit, Sweden (and Finland) signed a 10-point [Trilateral Memorandum](#) outlining a path

for accession through progress on Türkiye’s security concerns. During the Vilnius Summit a new understanding was reached as set out in a [press statement](#) on the 10 July 2023. President Erdogan dropped his opposition after the Biden administration signalled it would allow Turkey buy 40 new F-16 combat aircraft from the United States. Ankara also received assurances from Sweden that it would help revive Turkey’s application to join the EU. On this basis, Türkiye agreed to work closely with its parliament to ensure ratification. However, a precise date by when the Turkish parliament must approve Sweden’s NATO membership was not agreed, and in recent months further [doubts](#) have arisen as to whether consent will be given.

The NATO Secretary General raised with ministers the need to move forward on ratification of Swedish membership, and [said](#) that he received assurances from the Turkish Defence Minister, Yasar Guler, that Türkiye stands by the agreement from Vilnius to finalize Swedish accession, adding “I now expect that the Turkish government will submit the accession protocol to the Grand National Assembly and work with the Assembly to ensure speedy ratification”.

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