

## Case Study

# Israeli Government Policy on Non-Israeli Construction Workers

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### **Abstract**

*In Israel, there has been a severe shortage of housing units for several decades, due, among other things, to a shortage of skilled construction workers. The industry employs Palestinian labourers (since 1967) and migrant workers, mainly from Eastern Europe and China (since the 1990s). The Israeli government has changed its policy on the employment of non-Israeli workers several times. This article reviews these changes and discusses their successes and failures. The findings show that the shortage of workers in the construction industry in Israel might justify an increase in the quota of non-Israeli workers in the short term. However, in the medium and long term, measures must be taken to ensure implementation of planned reforms to reduce Israel's dependence on non-Israelis and encourage the integration of Israeli workers in the industry. This should be achieved mainly through technological improvements and a transition to industrialized construction.*

**Keywords:** Construction industry; Migrant workers; Palestinian workers; Construction wet works; Housing shortage

### **Introduction**

In recent decades, the combination of increased life expectancy and a high birth rate has led to a steady growth of the population of the State of Israel. The population of Israel increased between 1995 and 2020 by 66% (Even, 2021) and life expectancy increased during this period by five years (CBS, 2021b). These demographic data explain the increased demand for housing in Israel in recent decades. Combined with socio-economic changes such as a decrease in the interest rate, increased internal migration, and more, this population growth has led to increasing demand for residential apartments, and a cumulative shortage of them, especially in the central region of the country. According to the Ministry of Construction and Housing (2020), a significant increase in the volume of new construction in Israel is required to bridge the gap between the growing needs and the relatively small supply. Adding to the supply of apartments requires, among other things, increasing the number of workers employed in the construction industry.

According to the Ministry of Construction and Housing (2020), it is very difficult to recruit Israeli workers for the construction industry, especially for "wet" works. "Wet works" include five basic construction professions – formwork carpentry, ironwork, building, plastering, and flooring, jobs carried out in a wet environment of materials such as concrete and plaster – compared with jobs described as "dry works," such as electricity, air conditioning, elevators, frames, drywalling, and others. Wet works are considered to be difficult, dirty, and dangerous

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(the 3Ds). Therefore, these jobs are performed mainly by non-Israeli (Palestinians and migrant) workers. However, the state limits the number of non-Israeli by setting maximum quotas and imposing levies and fees, which increase the cost of their employment and reduce the viability of their employment. This has resulted in a shortage of workers in these occupations.

Due to the difficulty of recruiting Israelis for wet works, the Ministry of Construction and Housing has supported raising the quotas for employment of non-Israeli workers. In contrast, the Ministry of Finance opposes the employment of migrant workers, claiming that this policy discourages the employment of Israeli workers in the construction industry, delays its industrialization, and creates various socio-demographic problems associated with the employment of migrant workers (Eckstein Committee Report, 2007).

Over the years, the State of Israel has changed its policy several times; this is discussed later in the article. The latest policy, set in 2021, increased the number of permits for non-Israeli workers in the construction industry by an additional 29,000 workers (15,500 Palestinians and 13,500 migrant workers) (Government of Israel, 2021). In this study, we examined the policy changes regarding the employment of non-Israeli workers in the construction industry in Israel over time, the justification for increasing the number of non-Israeli workers employed (the need for working hands), and past failures and problems associated with employment of non-Israeli workers. We also examined whether a decision to increase the number of non-Israeli workers should be addressed by employing more Palestinians or, alternatively, more migrant workers.

The present examination of the policies pursued by the Israeli government over the years was based on a review of theoretical literature and examination of numerical data on the number of workers employed in the industry and the scope of actual construction. To focus on the shortage of workers in wet works rather than the total number of employees in the industry, we developed a model to estimate the number of such workers needed to meet the Israeli housing targets.

In addition to its academic contribution to recent research in the field of labour migration, this research included development of an applied tool that could inform the Israeli government's development of a policy to change the scope of employment of non-Israeli workers in the construction industry in response to the ongoing housing crisis.

The article begins with a review of labour migration in the world as a whole, and a detailed overview of labour migration in the construction industry in Israel. This is followed by information on the housing market in Israel and examination of the shortage of migrant workers in the construction industry. The second part of the article is devoted to discussion of the subject based on relevant theories and numerical data.

## **Literature Review**

### **Labour migration in the world**

Labour migration has significant economic, social, moral, legal, cultural, and demographic impacts on both countries of origin and host countries (Maurizio, 2014). The most common models in this field are economic; they explain labour migration based on economic factors of attraction and stimuli related to the workers' desire to earn wages and benefit from favourable conditions in the host countries (Kushnirovich and Raijman, 2014).



The employment of migrant workers has positive and negative economic effects on the labour market in the host country. The main beneficiaries of the employment of migrant workers are the employers in industries that are granted permits to employ them. The impact of migrant workers on local jobseekers depends on their respective skill levels (Borjas, 2006). The influx of unskilled migrant workers has a negative effect on the turnover of local unskilled workers, which is reflected in a decrease in wages and a decline in employment in the latter group (Altonji and Card, 1991). In contrast, the entry of unskilled migrant workers has a positive effect of complementing the local skilled workers, which leads to a raise in the wages and increased employment in this group (Gottlieb, 2002).

From a social perspective, the negative effects of employing migrant workers are mainly reflected in the expansion of the centres of neglect and distress. In addition, the growth of minority groups in a population whose affinity for a loose national identity could undermine social cohesion, and highlights moral and legal questions concerning the status of workers (Abdul-Rahman et al., 2012; Canetti-Nisim and Pedahzur, 2003; Ida, 2012).

In view of the fear that local unskilled workers will be pushed out of the labour market and that of migrant workers will establish a permanent presence in the host country, many states, including Israel, have imposed restrictions on the employment of migrant workers, such as definition of fields of employment for which work permits are issued, maximum length of stay, and the like (Brownell, 2010; Ida, 2012).

### **Employment of migrant workers in the construction industry in Israel**

A review of the development of employment in the construction industry shows that until 1967 all the work was done by Jewish and Arab Israelis. Beginning that year, with the entry of Palestinian workers, a gradual and continuous exit of Israelis from the industry began, initially due mainly to the decline in wages for this work. In time, the construction sector acquired an image of "dirty work," identified with Palestinian workers (Spivack and Amir, 2010).

Until the 1990s, the government refrained from allowing the employment of migrant workers in Israel (Ida, 2004). This stemmed from a concern about the potentially serious negative effects of the entry of migrant workers on the employment and wages of local workers (Borjas, (2006), and socio-demographic effects that might jeopardize the national Jewish character of the State of Israel (Ida, 2012). Another fear was that the employment of migrant workers at relatively low wages would negatively impact technological development and capital investment, such as, for example, the promotion of industrialized construction, because investing in capital to replace workers would become unprofitable (Zussman and Romanov, 2003).

In the early 1990s, due to the uprising of Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, there was a severe shortage of workers in Israel, especially in the construction and agriculture industries. At the same time, many immigrants from the Commonwealth of Independent States (the former Soviet Union) moved to Israel within a short period of time (about one million people over a decade), creating an acute shortage of ready-to-live-in apartments. Under pressure from employers, the government decided to allow the limited entry of migrant workers into Israel (Ida and Talit, 2015).

To minimize the negative consequences of employing migrant workers, the state established an extremely restrictive employment arrangements compared with those in other countries

(Dahan, 2001; Fischer, 1996). First, it was decided to allow the employment of migrant workers only in industries that suffered an acute labour shortage: construction, agriculture, and industry, in quotas, and the caregiving industry according to need only. Second, the maximum period of stay was limited to 27 months, during which an employee was allowed to work for a specific employer, which was granted a permit for this purpose. This arrangement became known as the "binding arrangement". The "binding arrangement" had a negative side effect on the well-being and employment conditions of these migrants, particularly those in the construction industry: they were required to pay large brokerage fees for a work permit and in many cases they earned low wages and suffered poor employment and living conditions (Ida, 2004).

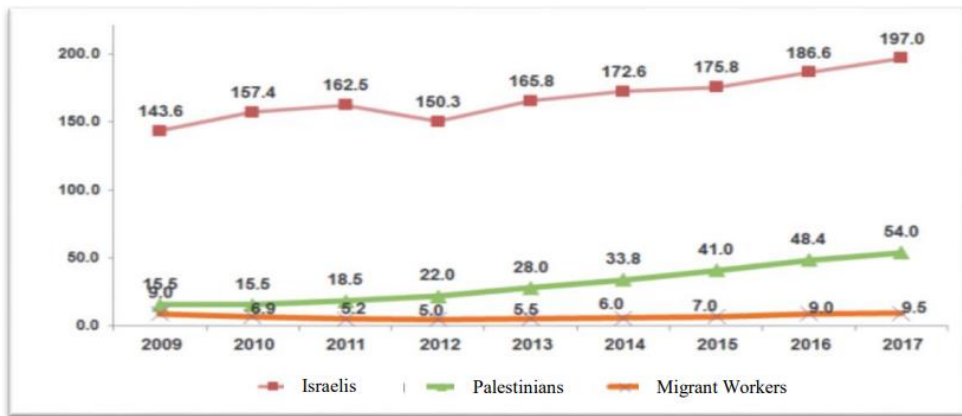
The poor employment conditions in the construction industry and the increased scope of illegal employment of migrants formed the basis for a joint petition by several human rights organizations, headed by Kav La'oved, to the High Court to abolish the binding arrangement (HCJ, 2006). In 2004, immediately after the petition was submitted to the High Court, the government of Israel established the Andorn Committee to examine an alternative employment arrangement for migrant workers.

The committee recommended on a new employment arrangement known as the Corporations Arrangement (Andorn Committee Report, 2004). According to this method, licenses were allocated to a limited number of corporations to serve as labour employers for migrant workers in the construction industry, under strict government regulation and stringent threshold requirements. At the same time, the maximum employment period was extended from 27 months to 63 months, during which the workers were allowed to move from one authorized corporation to another once every three months, and in special cases, more often (Ida, 2012). To reduce the number of employees and increase the cost of employing them, corporations were required to pay fees and levies, as well as a monthly deposit for each employee registered with them, ensuring the employee would leave the country at the end of the permit period (Andorn Committee Report, 2004).

In 2007, another committee, the Eckstein Committee, was established to examine the policy regarding the employment of non-Israeli workers. The committee found that the employment of migrant workers in Israel reduced the employment opportunities of unskilled local workers and their wages, delayed the integration of advanced technologies, and created severe demographic and social problems. The committee recommended a significant reduction in the quota of migrant workers. In the construction industry, the committee recommended a gradual reduction of the number of permits so that from 2010 on it would allow very limited employment of migrants, defined as specialists only (Eckstein Committee Report, 2007). Figure 1 shows the change over time in distribution of workers in the construction industry.



**Figure 1.** Distribution of workers in the construction industry in Israel

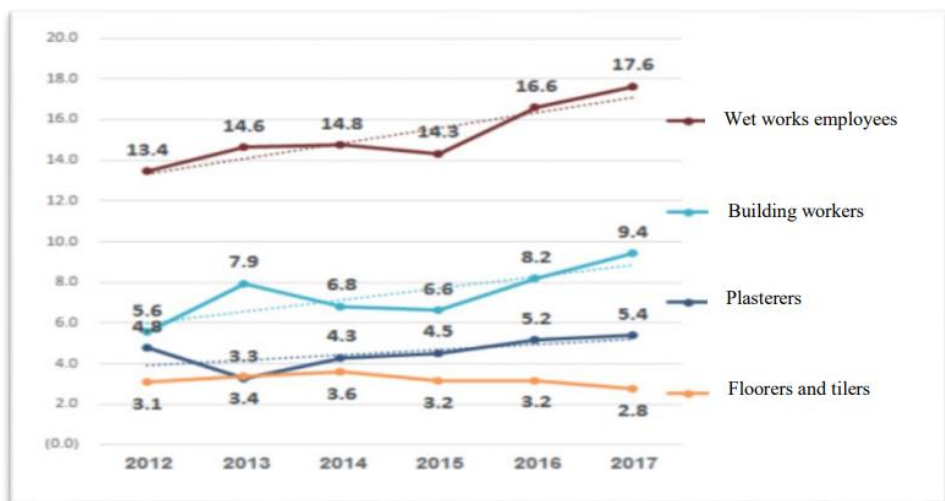


Source: Israel Builders Association, 2018, p. 4.

The number of permits for migrant workers in the industry decreased between 2009 and 2012 from 9,000 to 5,000 permits in total, and from that year onwards it has increased gradually. Thus, the figures show that the 2007 Eckstein Committee recommendations regarding limited employment of migrant workers in this industry were only partially implemented. The decrease in the number of permits for the employment of migrant workers was accompanied by an increase in the number of Israeli and Palestinian workers employed in the industry (Ministry of Construction and Housing, 2020).

In comparison, differentiation between workers in wet and complementary works in the construction industry reveals a different picture regarding the degree of integration of Israeli workers in the construction industry. Figure 2 shows the number of Israeli construction workers employed in wet works in the years 2012-2017 (the latest data available).

**Figure 2.** Israelis employed in wet works (in thousands)



Source: Israel Builders Association, 2018, p. 4.

As shown in the figure, the supply of Israeli workers in wet works has been inelastic. The efforts made between 2000 and 2010 to encourage the engagement of Israeli workers in wet works did not yield significant results (Spivack and Amir, 2010). This suggests that even if the 2015-2017 upward trend in the number of Israeli workers continues, it will not close the gap between the needs of the industry and the number of Israelis employed in wet works. The Ministry of Housing and Construction argued that increasing the number of non-Israeli workers in wet works would not harm Israeli employment. On the contrary, it predicted that this would increase the employment of Israeli workers in complementary work, such as that of engineers, architects, electricians, glaziers, elevator installers, plumbers, air conditioning workers, and others. This claim is strengthened by data from the construction industry in Israel, which show that in the years in which the number of non-Israeli workers increased, so did the number of Israeli workers (Ministry of Construction and Housing, 2020).

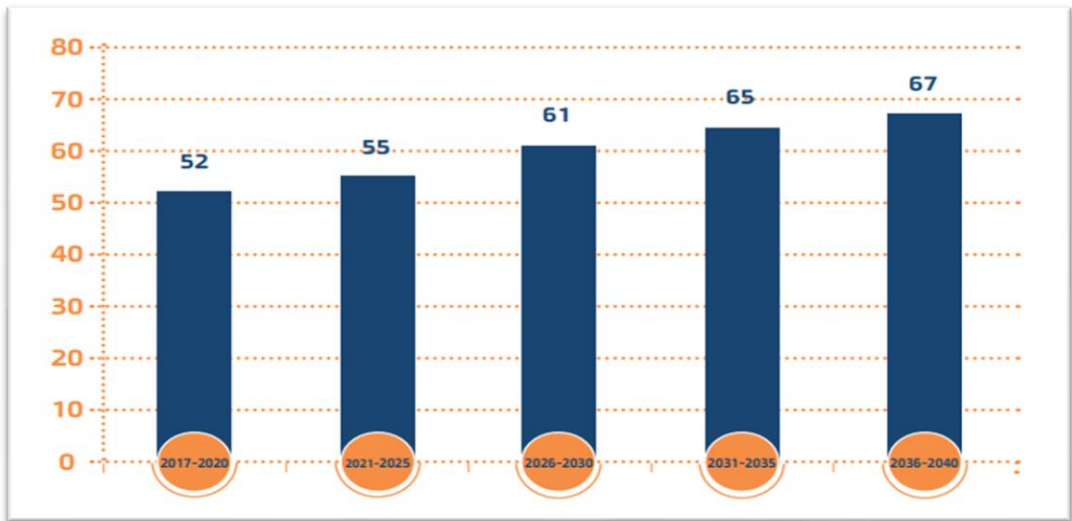
### **Growing disparity between demand and housing supply and changes in housing prices in Israel**

In the last decade, there has been very high demand for privately owned apartments, especially in the high-demand areas in central Israel. During the period between 1995 and 2021, housing prices in Israel rose in real terms by a sharp rate of over 78%; at the same time, the average gross wage of households in real terms increased by only about 49% (Tzadik, 2021).

The main factors that influence the demand for housing are mortgage interest rates, average wages and disposable income of households, expectations of a continued rise in prices, change in public tastes regarding place of residence, and demographic changes in the population. In Israel, low interest rates and relatively cheap credit for housing, increases in the average wage and in the labour force participation rate, together with a high fertility rate and a positive migration balance led to a steady rise in demand for residential apartments. The inherently inelastic housing supply did not change in correspondence with demand, which led to an annual increase of 3% in housing prices (Bank of Israel, 2020).

To counter the rise in housing prices, the Israeli government sought measures to speed up the construction of apartments by improving bureaucratic procedures. The Strategic Housing Plan, which includes definition of the planning and construction targets for 2017–2040, is based on anticipated housing needs, as shown in Figure 3 (Raz-Dror and Kost, 2017). In 2017, this strategic plan was adopted as a government decision (Government of Israel, 2017).



**Figure 3.** Housing needs in Israel 2017-2040 (in thousands of housing units)

Source: Raz-Dror and Kost, 2017, p. 11

The scope of construction in the years 2017-2019 did indeed meet the targets set. Data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (2021a) show that between April 2020 and March 2021, permits were issued for the construction of 53,640 apartments, a decrease of 3.9% compared with the same period a year earlier. Another significant hindrance is the length of time required to build an apartment. Data from the construction industry show that the duration of construction of an apartment in Israel is an average more than 27 months in 2014. Shortening the duration of construction could be achieved by increasing productivity by means of a technological-organizational revolution, or, alternatively, a significant increase in the number of non Israeli workers in the industry (Bentur et al., 2015).

In 2021, the State of Israel once again changed its policy regarding the employment of migrant workers in the construction industry. In August that year, the government decided to gradually increase the quota of Palestinian workers in the construction industry from 64,500 to 80,000 and the quota of migrant workers from 16,500 to 30,000 (Government of Israel, 2021). Changing the policy was a controversial decision that had far-reaching implications for the construction industry and socio-economic implications for the State of Israel as a whole. In the next chapter, we present a model for examining whether changing this policy was justified, and to what extent the new policy is meeting the existing need.

measuring the shortage of non-Israeli workers in the construction industry

To examine the size of the shortage of non-Israeli workers in the local construction industry, we used the following model:

$$N = ap * average\ m^2(ap) * w(per\ 1,000\ m^2)$$

where:

$N$  - the number of workers required for wet works;

$ap * average\ m^2(ap)$  - the scope of construction (in thousands of  $m^2$ ), calculated by multiplying the number of dwellings in active construction by the average area per apartment; and

$w(per\ 1,000\ m^2)$  - the number of workers required to build 1,000  $m^2$  of construction.

According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (2021a), the volume of actual construction in Israel as of March 2021 was 129.1 thousand apartments, with a total area of 23,238 thousand  $m^2$ . According to Spivack and Amir (2010), the construction of 1,000  $m^2$  requires 5 workers in wet works.

That is: the number of workers required to build 1,000 square meters of construction is:

$$w(per\ 1,000\ m^2) = 5$$

The required number of employees can then be calculated as follows:

$$N = 23,238 * 5 = 116,190$$

According to data from the Israel Builders Association (2018), in 2017, 17,600 Israeli workers were employed in wet works in the construction industry. This figure has not changed significantly over the years relative to the growing need, as shown in Figure 2. Even if the rate of increase in the number of Israeli workers employed in wet works continues, this would add only about 1,000 workers a year, reaching about 20,600 workers in 2020. In addition to these, the industry also employed about 56,000 Palestinian workers and about 18,400 migrant workers in that year (CBS, 2021c). Assuming that all Palestinian and migrant workers were employed in wet works only (Zeira, 2015), there would be a total of about 95,000 workers employed in these works by 2020. Therefore, an additional 21,000 workers are needed to meet the needs of the industry. During the COVID-19 pandemic, migrant workers could not enter Israel. In light of this hiatus, along with the absence of figures beyond 2017, at the time of writing it is still too early to estimate the current situation and the need for additional wet workers in the construction industry.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The decision to increase the number of non-Israeli workers in the construction industry (Government of Israel, 2021) was made under pressure from the Builders Association and with the support of the Ministry of Construction and Housing, and despite opposition from the Ministry of Finance. Against the background of this controversy, in the first part of this chapter we discuss the extent to which this policy discourages employment of Israeli workers in the industry and impedes the industrialization of the industry. We also discuss the two possible alternatives to Israeli workers in the industry: migrant workers from overseas or Palestinian workers.

Are non-Israeli workers taking jobs from potential Israeli employees in the construction industry? The Eckstein Committee's (2007) recommended a reduction in the number of non-Israeli workers in the industry on the assumption that in a situation of zero migrant and Palestinian workers, wages would increase, creating a larger supply of Israeli workers that would fully replace the non-Israeli workers. These assumptions were based on the market mechanism: the shortage of workers in wet works would cause a wage increase of 20% -30%, causing Israelis to move from other, lower-paying jobs to wet construction works. Spivack





and Amir (2010) argued that this was a very simplistic analysis; they predicted that a wage increase of this magnitude would not lead to a significant transition of Israelis to hard physical jobs such as construction work, particularly because the career span for this type of work is relatively short. This is supported by the data; Ida (2012) reported that since 2005, wages in the construction sector had increased beyond the required level, but there was no flow of Israeli workers to wet works in construction. Moreover, the wages of migrant workers in these jobs were higher than those of Israelis, indicating that the employment of migrant workers in wet works did not affect the wages of Israelis. In fact, the opposite was true: wet works are essential to building, and therefore migrant workers represent a complementary factor of production, not a substitute for Israeli workers. In other words, they actually contribute to increasing the employment of Israeli workers in the industry.

To promote industrialization in the construction industry, in 2015 and 2016 the Ministerial Committee on Planning, Real Estate and Housing made two decisions that were also adopted later as government decisions. The aim was to increase productivity by encouraging construction companies to use industrialized construction technologies, professional training for workers, technology development, and an easing of regulations (Government of Israel, 2015, 2016). However, this solution might be relevant in the medium to long term, but it does not provide an effective solution for the near future.

Thus, the question arises of how long it is possible to sustain the construction industry without non-Israeli workers and at the same time address the housing needs that the construction industry is meant to address? To resolve the shortage of workers presented above, an addition of about 21,000 employees for wet works are needed (based on the assumption that all existing Palestinian workers and migrant workers are employed in wet works only). This estimate is relatively low compared with those made by the Ministry of Construction and Housing (2020), which were based on an assumption of the need for a 1:1 ratio between the number of employees in wet works and the number of apartments under construction. Based on this estimate, an additional 33.9 thousand workers were required for the industry.

An alternative to Israeli workers in the construction industry could come from two sources: Palestinians and migrant workers. The most prominent advantage of employing Palestinians is social-demographic. The Palestinian workers do not live in Israel and therefore their employment does not affect the socio-demographic composition of the state. In addition, the employment and economic well-being of these workers could, among other factors, contribute to the calming relations between Israel and the Palestinians (Gdaliahu, 2019).

In contrast, the employment of Palestinians has two prominent disadvantages: the main one is their low availability compared with migrant workers, due to the distance from between their homes and the workplace and the need to cross checkpoints daily. In cases of security clashes and border closures, Palestinian workers do not come to work in Israel. Therefore, reliance on a workforce of Palestinians, can be problematic. Migrant workers are more available; they live close to workplaces in Israel and are not absent from work during periods of security tensions and border closures. Another disadvantage of employing Palestinian workers is the relatively low level of their wages, which affects the wages paid to unskilled workers. The wages of migrant workers are higher, mainly due to various taxes and levies imposed by the Israeli government on their employment.

There are, then, advantages and disadvantages to employing both migrant workers and Palestinians; this makes it impossible to unequivocally determine whether employing Palestinians is preferable to employing migrant workers or vice versa. The government decision that created an almost equal division of employment permits between Palestinian workers and migrant workers (Government of Israel, 2021) suggest that the government has no unequivocal preference regarding the origin of non-Israeli workers that should be added to the industry.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, an examination of the housing needs in Israel shows that the state needs a significant increase in the housing stock to meet the projected demand for housing in the next few years. This requires the addition of working hands in the construction industry, and especially in wet works. Israeli workers are not attracted to this kind of work; consequently, it seems that the only short-term solution to the existing shortage of workers lies in the employment of non-Israeli workers. To reduce the State of Israel's dependence on non-Israeli workers in the medium and long term, it is important that the Israeli government continue to promote reforms in the construction industry, and especially the integration of industrialization and advanced technologies that will attract local workers to the industry and reduce the dependence of the state on non-Israeli workers.

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