

# "Ask Zelensky:" UAE rebuffs Bibi request to pay Palestinian workers barred from Israel

Barak Ravid January 8, 2024



Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Photo: Sebastian Scheiner/Getty Images

The Emirati president rebuffed a request by [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu](#) to pay "unemployment" stipends to Palestinian workers from the occupied West Bank whom [Israel](#) barred from entering its territory after the Oct. 7 Hamas attack, an Israeli official and a source familiar with the issue told Axios.

- "Ask Zelensky for money," [Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed \(MBZ\)](#) sarcastically told Netanyahu, the sources said.

**Why it matters:** MBZ's refusal underscores the position of many Arab countries that have said they won't foot the bill to maintain the status quo in the West Bank and Gaza after the war.

- "The notion that Arab countries will come in to rebuild and pay the bill for what's currently happening is wishful thinking," an Emirati official told Axios.

**Catch up quick:** Shortly after the [Hamas attack](#), the Israeli government imposed a closure on the occupied West Bank for what it said were security reasons. That meant that the [more than 100,000 Palestinians](#) who lived in the West Bank but worked in Israel before the war could not enter Israeli territory.

- The worsening Palestinian economy and growing unemployment due to the war have heightened concerns among the Israeli security establishment and the Biden administration that such conditions could lead to a violent escalation in the West Bank.
- The Israeli economic cabinet, led by ultranationalist Finance Minister Bezael Smotrich, rejected a proposal by the Israeli Defense Ministry to allow some Palestinian workers into Israel.
- Despite pressure from the Israeli Defense Forces and the Shin Bet security agency, Netanyahu chose not to put the issue to a vote in the security cabinet after Smotrich and other radical right-wing ministers threatened to resign.

**Behind the scenes:** In an attempt to find a solution to the issue without having to confront members of his coalition, Netanyahu tried to get other countries to pay the Palestinian workers.

- Netanyahu turned to MBZ a few weeks ago and broadly asked for help in regards to the Palestinians, the Israeli official and source with knowledge of the issue said.

**MBZ said he was ready to help,** but when Netanyahu specifically asked if the UAE would be willing to pay the Palestinian workers, the Emirati president was stunned, the source with knowledge said.

- According to the source, MBZ couldn't believe the Israeli prime minister thought he would be willing to pay for a problem that was created due to Israel's decision not to allow the workers in.
- MBZ told Netanyahu he couldn't do it, and then sarcastically suggested the Israeli prime minister turn to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky instead, the Israeli official and source with knowledge said. MBZ said Zelensky gets a lot of money from many countries so maybe he would be able to help him, according to the sources.
- The Israeli Prime Minister's Office and the Emirati Embassy in Washington declined to comment.

**The big picture:** Netanyahu has publicly and privately said he won't allow the Palestinian Authority, which currently governs the occupied West Bank, to have any role in Gaza after the war and he has rejected the idea of a Palestinian state.

- Instead, Netanyahu and his aides have suggested a situation in which "local forces" who are not hostile to Israel administer Gaza's civilian affairs, while the IDF maintains security control.

**They also want the UAE,** Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries to be in charge of rebuilding Gaza after the war, according to Israeli and U.S. officials.

- But the UAE publicly said it won't pay for the rebuilding of Gaza unless it is part of an agreement that includes renewing the U.S.-led peace process with a path toward a two-state solution.
- "The message is going to be very clear: We need to see a viable two-state solution plan, a road map that is serious before we talk about the next day and rebuilding the infrastructure of Gaza," Emirati ambassador to the UN Lana Nusseibeh [told](#) the Wall Street Journal last December.

- Rebuilding Gaza will be a massive undertaking. Israel's bombardment has caused mass destruction, and it's estimated that at least a half million Palestinians in the enclave won't have a home to return to when the war ends, according to the [UN aid office](#).