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LETTER FROM JERUSALEM

# Netanyahu's parting gift to Trump – a new embassy plot – is an empty gesture

By **Noga Tarnopolsky**

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On the day President Donald Trump faced his second impeachment, he received a gift from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: a tract of Jerusalem land.

The catch? It's an imaginary parcel.

Even while running for reelection and standing trial for corruption, not to mention fighting a surge in COVID-19 infections, Netanyahu found a few spare moments to comfort Trump, his closest international ally, and possibly provoke the ire of incoming president Joe Biden a week before Inauguration Day. In an unusual and unexplained Jan. 13 session, Jerusalem's municipal planning commission rushed through approval for plans for a United States embassy compound in Jerusalem. Actually, it approved two embassy compounds.

But neither appears tethered to reality.

The planning commission, which was scheduled with 24 hours' notice, and which—exceptionally—was convened behind closed doors, approved the expansion of a complex currently housing the U.S. embassy, which President Trump controversially moved from Tel Aviv to in 2018.

The small campus, located in the west Jerusalem neighborhood of Arnona, is not large enough to contain the staff of almost 1000 diplomats and officials, who continue working out of a massive, fortress-like building in

Tel Aviv.



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A panorama of Jerusalem taken from a hill above the Allenby site approved for the U.S. embassy.

Separately, the Jerusalem commission approved the construction of a nearby 64,5834 square-foot structure on a site known as the Allenby Complex, which lies on one of the city's busiest arteries.

It is unclear at whose behest Netanyahu acted— or if his office worked unilaterally to press Jerusalem officials to approve the move.

Netanyahu's office declined to respond to multiple queries.

American officials appeared unaware of the move, but their Israeli counterparts celebrated the zoning authorization as a boon to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem Mayor Moshe Leon, a Netanyahu ally who last month foresaw an embassy groundbreaking “within six months,” hailed what he called “a historic and exciting moment.”

Speaking like an optimistic city planner, Leon said the new site, located on busy Hebron Road, would “be built on the axis of the light rail and increase the development of the city for its residents,” and declared his conviction other countries will follow the American example.

In reality, the State Department has already ruled out that location, has yet to issue a tender for the embassy design and has not included a new embassy in its budget. Also, the light rail Leon trumpets is at least a decade away from reality.



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A sign near the traffic circle by the current U.S. embassy in Jerusalem.

Leased by the United States on President Ronald Reagan’s last day in office, the Hebron Road tract lies on one of Jerusalem’s busiest avenues and does not conform to State Department safety standards established after al-Qaeda bombed the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998.

“With the new rules, that land is not big enough,” former ambassador Dan Shapiro told the Washington Post in 2017.

“This is all Netanyahu-choreographed theater poking yet another finger in Biden’s eye,” said Jerusalem lawyer and activist Daniel Seidemann.

When the contradiction was pointed out to Fleur Hassan-Nahoum, a Jerusalem deputy mayor for Netanyahu’s Likud party, she responded, erroneously, on Twitter, “We’ve dealt with all their security concerns it’s done hallelujah.”

Not so. A Department of State spokesperson told The Forward “no final decision has been made regarding the way forward for expansion or renovation of embassy facilities.”

“We continue to assess how diplomatic facilities can best support mission operations in Jerusalem,” the department spokesperson said. “This analysis is informed by routine discussion and review with local planning authorities.”

A source with knowledge of U.S. embassy activity in Israel said he knew “nothing” about the matter.

It is not the first time Netanyahu has promised Trump a chunk of the land of Israel but not followed through. On June 14, Trump’s birthday, the Israeli government authorized the establishment of Ramat Trump (Trump Heights,) a future town serving as a thank you note for Trump’s recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. The site remains uninhabited, with no construction plans in place. So this parting gift of the Jerusalem embassy zoning appears more likely to benefit Netanyahu’s reelection campaign than America, or Trump.