

U.S. Embassy Relocation Possible within a Year, Experts Say

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VP Pence likely to discuss embassy move during visit

Moving the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem will likely be a main focus of discussion while U.S. Vice President Mike Pence visits Israel this week. Pence is expected to reaffirm America's commitment to relocating the embassy to Jerusalem as more than just a political promise.

"(Pence) very much represents the evangelical voters, so that is something that is very important to him," said Dr. Emmanuel Navon, professor of international relations at Tel Aviv University and expert with the Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies. "If (U.S. President Donald Trump) and Pence want to get things going they have to be very hands-on about it."

Since President Trump announced last month that the U.S. Embassy would be moved to Jerusalem, there's been debate about when the move would happen, and where the embassy would be located. Some speculate that U.S. Ambassador David Friedman could operate out of a temporary location in Jerusalem while a new embassy is being built, such as the U.S. Consulate services building in the Arnona neighborhood of Jerusalem.

The U.S. Consulate's offices in Jerusalem are split between the administrative building and the U.S. Consul General's residence on Gershon Agron Street in the center city.

Another location that has been eyed for a U.S. Embassy is a vacant lot on the corner of Hebron Road and Daniel Yanovsky Street in Jerusalem. The property has a historic, and contentious, history.

In a report for the Journal of Palestinian Studies, leading Palestinian scholar Dr. Walid Khalidi wrote that on January 18, 1989, "an agreement was signed between Israel and the United States according to which a plot of land in West Jerusalem, (7.7 acres) in size, was leased to the U.S. government for a rent of \$1 per annum for ninety-nine years renewable."

The property was known as the Allenby Barracks, the site of the British army's Jerusalem garrison during the British Mandate (1920 – 1948). The site was also alleged to have been part of an Islamic Trust (Waqf), private land, before it was requisitioned by the British high commission of Palestine in September 1930.

Today, the property is surrounded by apartment buildings and may not be conducive to building an embassy, whereas the U.S. Consulate services building is already a secure compound with adjacent property that could be used for additional government space.

Last week, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reportedly told reporters in India during his visit there Wednesday that a U.S. Embassy could open in Jerusalem “within a year”. When asked about the Prime Minister’s comments, President Trump offered a contradictory view.

“By the end of the year? We’re talking about different scenarios – I mean obviously that would be on a temporary basis. We’re not really looking at that. That’s no,” the President said in an interview Wednesday with Reuters.

Despite the seemingly contradictory statements, a senior official with the Prime Minister’s office told The Media Line that both leaders “are not saying anything different” when it comes to opening an embassy in Jerusalem.

“Of course, the construction of a new embassy is something that takes years,” the official, who did not want to be named, told The Media Line, “but the Prime Minister believes that the U.S. is considering interim measures that could result in an embassy opening much faster.”

Trump Administration officials have reportedly been in Israel scouting locations.

Zalman Shoval, Israel’s former Ambassador to the United States, told The Media Line on Sunday that “it’s very likely” the issue will be discussed during Vice President Pence’s visit. He said temporarily moving the U.S. Embassy to one of the existing facilities, like the consulate building, is something that those who were previously skeptical about are more open to. “It’s certainly possible,” Shoval said.

Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat discussed possible embassy locations with U.S. Ambassador David Friedman last month. A spokesperson for Barkat’s office declined to give specifics on what was discussed and where.

“President Trump’s historic declaration has shown the world that he stands on the side of truth and is a true friend of the city of Jerusalem,” Barkat’s office said in a statement to The Media Line. “We commend the administration for this bold step and will continue to provide assistance to the US administration and Ambassador Friedman.”