

Patrick Lawrence

Jamaal Bowman, AIPAC, and our disorderly world.

Readers at the European end of the Atlantic may not have heard of, or heard very much about, an American political figure named Jamaal Bowman. Let us do our bit to remedy this. Jamaal Bowman's fate this week tells us much about the collapse of American democracy—not too strong a phrase—and why the world we all live in has become so dangerous.

Bowman was elected to Congress in 2021, when he roundly defeated a Democratic Party incumbent named Eliot Engel in an upset victory. Engel had served his working- and middle- class district in New York for 16 terms. His most notable identity on Capitol Hill was as a faithfully reliable supporter of Israel.

Bowman is a very different animal. He is a Democratic Socialist, which makes him rare enough in Congress, and he has been prominent among the small group of self-proclaimed “progressives” who have come to office in the past half-dozen years or so. Bowman, like these others, arrived on Capitol Hill with little experience in national politics and was prone to errors and misjudgments, some of them very foolish. But he has been careful, since he was elected three years ago, to profess his support for Israel on various occasions when opportunities arose. However, he has not been, as Eliot Engel was, indiscriminate in his fidelity to “the Jewish state.” Bowman has been a principled critic of Israel's assault on Gaza more or less since it began on 7 October.

Bowman was due to stand for reelection this November, when all 435 members of the House and 34 of the Senate's 50 members, along with the president, will also

face voters. But since this spring he has been in a fierce battle to win the Democratic Party's nomination with a come-from-nowhere opponent named George Latimer, a county bureaucrat of very little distinction.

On Tuesday Bowman lost to Latimer by a 58-to-42 margin. As all major media have noted, this was the most expensively fought primary election, as these contests for the party's nomination are called, in American history. The political advertising both sides spent came to \$24.8 million—an extravagant sum for a primary, marking out the Bowman-Latimer contest as a political oddity even in this, a very odd season in American politics.

The principal reason the political spending was so astoundingly high as Bowman met Latimer at the polls was the interest the Israel lobby took in the contest. Of the amount just noted, [the American Israel Public Affairs Committee](#) accounted for \$14.8 million of it—all of this amount going to the Latimer campaign. AIPAC was determined to turn Bowman out of office to an extent not much short of obsessive. The reason for this is perfectly well-known: Bowman had supported Israel on many occasions, but he had not been sufficiently supportive. AIPAC, as Bowman's downfall demonstrates, requires nothing less than total, unqualified support from members of Congress—all of them. Well-grounded, principled positions will never do if they conflict with Israeli interests. Anything less than automatic, unconsidered approval of all Israel does, and a congressman or congresswoman risks his or her political future.

“We should not be well-adjusted to a sick society,” Bowman asserted when he conceded to Latimer Wednesday. It is what needed to be said precisely when Bowman said it. This goes straight to the matters raised in the Bowman case. Latimer's challenge and AIPAC's influence have been well-scrutinized for some

time. Since Tuesday so has Bowman's loss to an unknown figure the Israel lobby has—the dollars and cents are there to see—succeeded in buying off. The matters to be considered come down to two. They are distinct but closely related, the former informing the latter.

■

One, Bowman's defeat brings into the unforgiving light of day what has long been known but rarely acknowledged in Washington and among a considerable proportion of the American electorate. Whatever the convictions or principles of a legislator or aspiring legislator may be, his or her political longevity requires an allegiance to apartheid Israel that transcends all questions of conscience. Straight off the top, this pushes into the faces of American voters the reality that the democratic process in which they insist on believing is fundamentally broken.

“The amount of spending on the race should be alarming to everyone who cares about democracy,” Sophie Ellman–Golan, who directs public affairs at Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, said in an interview with *The Intercept*. “We now know how much it costs to buy an election. That price tag was nearly \$25 million.”

A few days before Tuesday's poll, Thomas Massie, among the only members of Congress so far willing publicly to criticize AIPAC's influence, lifted the lid on how the lobby operates, I think for the first time, in a remarkable interview with *Tucker Carlson*, the prominent broadcast commentator. “Everybody but me has an AIPAC person,” the Kentucky Republican said. “It's like your babysitter, your AIPAC babysitter, who's always talking to you for AIPAC.” Massie went on to

explain that colleagues habitually say they must “check with my AIPAC guy” before articulating positions on any question of concern to the Israel lobby.

There is a view abroad now to the effect that AIPAC’s expenditures in its campaign to turn Bowman out of office reflects the lobby’s concern that the Israelis’ brutality-in-real-time genocide against the Palestinians of Gaza has critically damaged the “unconditional support” rule it enforces on Capitol Hill. “They would not have spent this much money if they were not scared,” Sophie Ellman–Golan said in her interview with *The Intercept*. “You don’t spend \$25 million if you’re feeling confident in your candidate.”

It is certainly true that the genocide we now witness in Gaza has weakened many Americans’ faith in the worthiness of the Israeli state. But AIPAC’s power is such—its prevalence, its reach, its resources—that the thought it is in any kind of significant decline seems to me the wishful thinking of America’s not-especially-intelligent “progressives.”

AIPAC intends the fate of Jamaal Bowman to be taken as a lesson to others: Do not cross us even minorly. This is how I read it. And in this context the lobby’s expenditures are well in line with its longstanding strategies and tactics.

A ready-to-hand case in point arrived [Thursday, when the House passed, by a 269–144 vote, an amendment](#) that, if made law, forbids the State Department to citing statistics provided by the Gaza Health Ministry, which daily issues well-circulated fatality counts. The co-sponsors of the bill, which will now go to the Senate, are Jared Moskowitz, Josh Gottheimer, Mike Lawler, Joe Wilson, and Carol Miller. With the exception of Carol Miller, who accepts lobbyists’ funds but does not

disclose from which lobbies these come, all of these legislators receive AIPAC funds that run to high six figures in U.S. dollars. As to Miller, she states:

Our country is a Judeo-Christian country, and our laws are founded on the Ten Commandments. I'm very solidly pro-Israel; it would be ludicrous not to be.

■

The second truth to be drawn from Bowman's defeat is of larger significance and seems to me inescapable. This is the frightening extent to which the Israel lobby—and let us not forget that President Biden has historically been the No. 1 recipient of AIPAC funds, in the amount of roughly \$4 million in the course of his career—effectively controls American foreign policy to the considerable extent it controls Capitol Hill. Given America's unfortunately exceptional power, this means the most influential political lobby in the U.S. has a grossly inappropriate hand in determining the geopolitical order. This reality could scarcely be less democratic or more perilous. The disorder in the Middle East is all the evidence one needs of this danger.

There are many “unsayables,” as I call them, attaching to this state of affairs. High among them is the matter of dual loyalties on Capitol Hill and, for that matter, across Washington. Some days ago the Biden regime dispatched a special envoy to Israel and other Middle East nations named Amos Hochstein. Amos Hochstein is a dual citizen of the U.S. and Israel. No one to my knowledge has raised an eyebrow. On Capitol Hill the question is not dual citizenship but divided loyalties.

I do not see how this matter does not merit very serious examination considering its consequences, although it is unlikely to get any. As things stand—and let us credit the Israel lobby one again—it is denounced as unforgivably anti-Semitic even to raise the question of divided loyalties. So be it: We Americans must learn to make our Great Unsayables sayable and to understand, in this case, how “anti-Semitism,” in quotation marks, works: To the extent a recognition or assertion such as this is irrefutable is exactly the extent to which the Israel lobby and its numerous appendages will term it anti-Semitic. The label is intended solely to foreclose all scrutiny and debate, and most of the time, regrettably, it succeeds in doing so.

Jamaal Bowman has been tipped out of office. His various foibles and miscalculations notwithstanding, this fate has something to say to all of us. To Americans, it should now be a lot clearer that we do not have a properly representative legislature able to act according to the wishes of the electorate. To the world beyond America’s shores, it is well to identify one very significant source of the disorder with which we all must live.

As the piece linked near the top of this commentary argues well, remedying this disorder requires, among much else, “breaking AIPAC.” It is well past time for this.

28 June 2024