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AIPAC Hijacks US Elections

Medea Benjamin responds to the pro-Israel lobby's second "win" of the U.S. campaign season.



Rep. Cori Bush protesting at the U.S. Capitol on Aug. 3, 2021, to extend the eviction moratorium. (Miki Jourdan, Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Rep. Cori Bush, a progressive black woman from St. Louis who is a member of the "Squad" and has been a powerful voice in Congress for poor people, women's rights, healthcare,

housing — and Palestine, just lost her primary because pro-Israel lobby groups flooded the race with outside funding. Her loss is a tremendous blow to progressives and to the U.S. electoral process itself.

This is the pro-Israel lobby's second "win" of the season. The first was the June defeat of progressive, black congressman from Westchester County, N.Y., Jamaal Bowman, who was a forceful critic of Israel's attacks on Gaza.

AIPAC and its mis-named super PAC, the United Democracy Project, barged into Westchester County to anoint an opponent — white, pro-Israel Westchester County Executive George Latimer — and then shower him with cash.

The ads against Bowman were not about Israel. Instead, AIPAC smeared the congressman's character and criticized him as a "hot head" who was not a reliable member of the Democratic team.

In the words of President of the Arab American Institute James Zogby, the race became "the angry, frightening young black man versus the calm, thoughtful older white guy."

By throwing \$17 million into the race, pro-Israel groups turned Bowman's primary into the most expensive one in U.S. history. When Bowman was defeated, AIPAC declared the outcome showed that the pro-Israel position is "both good policy and good politics."

On the contrary. It showed that pro-Israel groups can buy elections and it sent a frightening message to all elected officials that if they criticize Israel, even during a genocide, they may well pay with their careers.

Buoyed by its success, AIPAC then took on Cori Bush, marching into St. Louis determined to defeat a black woman with a unique voice in Congress.

Once a unhoused single mother of two, and a survivor of gun violence, domestic violence and sexual assault, Bush became a nurse and a pastor, and in the wake of the killing of the unarmed black man Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014, she became an activist on the frontlines of the movement to save black lives.

After protesting in the streets for 400 days, she jumped into the political arena. In 2020 she made a successful run for Congress, becoming the first black representative from Missouri.

In Bush's two terms in Congress, she demonstrated leadership on many fronts, including reproductive justice and abortion rights. At a House of Representatives committee hearing in 2021, Bush was one of three congresswomen to share her abortion story publicly.

And after the Dobbs decision that overturned Roe v. Wade, she introduced a host of bills, including the Reproductive Health Care Accessibility Act, the Protecting Access to

Medication Abortion Act, the Reproductive Health Travel Fund Act, and the Protect Sexual and Reproductive Health Act.

She also championed housing rights. When the Covid moratorium on evictions was about to expire, she grabbed her sleeping bag and lawn chair, and organized a “sleep in” on the steps of the U.S. Capitol that resulted in an extension of the moratorium on evictions.

Introduced Ceasefire Resolution

Foreign policy was not her focus, but in the wake of the Hamas attack on Oct. 7, 2023, and Israel’s subsequent bombing of civilians in Gaza, Bush felt compelled to speak out.

Just nine days after the Oct. 7 Hamas attack, she had the courage to introduce a ceasefire resolution in the House.

She was one of only nine House members who opposed a resolution supporting Israel.

She boycotted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s speech before Congress, calling him a “war criminal.”

As a result of defending Palestinians, she found herself in AIPAC’s crosshairs. “Cori Bush has been one of the most hostile critics of Israel since she came to Congress in 2021 and has actively worked to undermine mainstream Democratic support for the U.S.-Israel relationship, “ AIPAC claimed.

AIPAC’s super PAC spent nearly \$9 million, much of it coming from Republican mega-donors, to buy ads smearing Bush and shoring up contender Wesley Bell, a St. Louis County prosecutor.

The attacks were vicious, including ads that darkened Bush’s skin and manipulated her racial features. They also distorted her domestic voting record, condemning her for not supporting Biden’s infrastructure bill instead of explaining that her vote was part of a strategy to gain leverage for key social programs in the Build Back Better Act.

Attack Ads Silent on Israel

Curiously, in the cases of both Bowman and Bush, the attack ads did not even mention Israel. But if Israel is AIPAC’s singular focus, why did the ads avoid the issue? That’s because most Americans, especially in those liberal Democrat districts, agree with the positions of Bowman and Bush.

Most Americans want a ceasefire and disapprove of Israel’s military actions in Gaza. As Jewish Voice for Peace Executive Director Stephanie Fox said during a call to rally support for Bush, “She has been a life raft for our values and principles in Congress and she has been under attack because far right extremist groups like AIPAC are scared.”

Zogby of the Arab American Institute agrees. “Pro-Israel groups are running scared,” he said.

“They are losing the public debate over policy — especially among Democrats. Most Democrats are deeply opposed to Israeli policies in Gaza and the Occupied Palestinian lands. Majorities want a ceasefire and an end to settlements. And they want to stop further arms shipments to Israel.”

So AIPAC hides the Israel issue and then claims the “win” is a victory for Israel.

[Rep. Rashida Tlaib, the lone Palestinian-American in Congress, won re-election in Michigan this month, *Al Jazeera reports*, despite the attacks by an opponent backed by a new pro-Israel group, the Urban Empowerment Action (UEA), who targeted her opposition to Biden’s infrastructure bill.]

If we are going to stop U.S. support for Israel’s genocide, prevent the Middle East from erupting in flames and reclaim our elections here at home, we have to stop AIPAC.

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