

AIPAC had some recent wins but isn't invincible



By Aaron Sobczak
Reporter

OPINION

America's most influential pro-Israel lobby group, AIPAC, has been boasting about its success in recent congressional primary elections. Rep. Cori Bush's (D-Mo.) loss on August 6 was the second instance of a so-called "squad" member losing their primary against an AIPAC-backed candidate this election season, following Rep. Jamal Bowman's (D-N.Y.) defeat on June 25. AIPAC and its partners have spent over \$24 million so far this year to influence elections and have enjoyed a series of successes all summer, bragging on X that 100% of the Democratic candidates it endorsed have so far won their primaries, a narrative that may cause many aspiring politicians to see AIPAC as a force they cannot afford to cross. But that may be more a function of AIPAC simply opting not to intervene in races in which it is unlikely to win, even if it means allowing critics of the US-Israel relationship to coast to victory.

Rep. Ilhan Omar's (D-Minn.) primary this week, for example, was a race that AIPAC preferred not to call attention to. AIPAC didn't offer significant support to Omar's Democratic challenger, former Minneapolis City Council member Don Samuels, who pleaded for AIPAC's assistance. And judging from AIPAC's social media activity and public statements, the lobby group was largely signaling it has no interest in this race, which could unseat one of the most outspoken critics of US arms transfers, foreign aid, and political support for Israel in Congress today.

Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.) first reelection campaign during the 2020 primary, but Tlaib won the nomination with over 66% of the vote, despite AIPAC spending more than \$600,000 in an effort to defeat her. Tlaib defeated three other candidates in 2022 with almost 64% of the vote. One of her challengers that year, Janice Winfrey, received support from AIPAC, as well as from a new organization largely funded by out-of-state billionaire pro-Israel donors, the Urban Empowerment Action PAC. After her victories in 2020 and 2022, Tlaib ran unopposed

in Minnesota, to assist Samuels in the final weeks of that campaign, which ultimately proved ineffective. UDP is a group largely funded by pro-Israel Republicans seeking to influence Democratic primary races. Over the past week, however, mysterious anti-Omar mailers have shown up in her district, sent by Make a Difference MN. The group has spent around \$90,000 on anti-Omar mailers in the last days of the primary this week, an amount that is unlikely to affect the election outcome. AIPAC does like to brag about its successes, and will largely



Minnesota Rep. Ilhan Omar (L) and Michigan Democratic Rep. Rashida Tlaib
● ALLISON BAILEY/NURPHOTO

Indeed, at times, AIPAC has pulled the trigger and misfired. For example, Rep. Thomas Massie (R-Ky.) — a member of the House Liberty Caucus and a strong defender of non-intervention overseas — has been critical of how much American aid goes to Israel, and other nations, and spoke out against anti-Semitism laws proposed in Congress this year as potential violations of the First Amendment's free speech guarantees. AIPAC spent roughly \$400,000 in an effort to defeat him in his primary in May. Rather than succumbing to AIPAC's efforts, Massie trounced his opponent, pulling in over 75% of the vote. A few Democrats who have criticized America's relationship with Israel have also successfully dodged AIPAC's wrath. It doesn't appear that AIPAC tried to unseat Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) during her first re-election campaign in 2020, perhaps realizing it would be a lost cause and thus tarnish its stellar endorsement record. Ocasio-Cortez won almost 75% of the vote in her 2020 primary, went unchallenged in 2022, and won 82% in the 2024 primary. Another strong critic of Israel is Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.). Tlaib, who won her first race in 2018, was the first Palestinian-American to be elected to the United States Congress. Detroit City Councilwoman Bren-

da Jones challenged Rep. Tlaib's first reelection campaign during the 2020 primary, but Tlaib won the nomination with over 66% of the vote, despite AIPAC spending more than \$600,000 in an effort to defeat her. Tlaib defeated three other candidates in 2022 with almost 64% of the vote. One of her challengers that year, Janice Winfrey, received support from AIPAC, as well as from a new organization largely funded by out-of-state billionaire pro-Israel donors, the Urban Empowerment Action PAC. After her victories in 2020 and 2022, Tlaib ran unopposed

persist in endorsing candidates who criticize Israel in ways that AIPAC considers too harsh or too effective. But in choosing not to invest heavily to defeat Omar, apparently to avoid an embarrassing loss, it seems that the purportedly all-powerful pro-Israel lobby group knows its limits. The electoral victories of Reps. Massie, Omar, Tlaib, and Ocasio-Cortez should offer some hope to lawmakers who, for example, do not believe that the US should continue providing billions of dollars in aid to Israel without conditions. Perhaps AIPAC isn't so invincible after all.

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Reps. Rashida Tlaib (L) and Cori Bush (R) hold signs reading "Lasting Cease-fire Now" as President Joe Biden delivers the State of the Union address in Washington, D.C., on March 7, 2024.
● ANDREW CABALLERO-REYNOLDS/AFP

AIPAC hijacks US elections



By Medea Benjamin
Co-founder of peace group CODEPINK

OPINION

Representative Cori Bush, a progressive black woman from St. Louis, MO 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 US electoral process itself.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addresses the annual policy conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in Washington, D.C., on March 6, 2018.
● CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES

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 misnamed 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 the President of the Arab American Institute Jim 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 US 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, MO determined to defeat a black woman who was one of the most unique voices in all of Congress. Once an 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, 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 US Capitol that resulted in an extension of the moratorium on

evictions. Foreign policy was not her focus, but in the wake of the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, and Israel's subsequent bombing of civilians in Gaza, Bush felt compelled to speak out. Just nine days after the October 7 Hamas attack, she had the courage to introduce a cease-fire 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 US-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. 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 their positions. Most Americans want a cease-fire 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 Congresswoman 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." Jim 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 cease-fire 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. If we are going to stop US 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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