

# [***New York Democrat who sharply criticizes Israel faces ouster threat***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C10-FV91-JBSS-S003-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; The war in Gaza is reverberating all the way through north Bronx and Westchester County, defining the most competitive primary an incumbent House Democrat is facing anywhere in the country.

That's where Rep. Jamaal Bowman of New York, who got to Washington four years ago by winning a primary against one of Israel's then-most adamant defenders in Congress, is now facing a major challenger of his own, driven in part because of criticism of Israel that opponents say has put "Squad"-aligned ***politics*** ahead of what his district wants.

Bowman became a central figure in taking on Israel from the first days after October 7, almost [*immediately supporting*](https://x.com/RepBowman/status/1713977858195112014) a resolution calling for a ceasefire that made no mention of Hamas or the return of Israeli hostages. By December, he was standing with hunger strikers outside the White House, upping his criticism of the actions in Gaza. He has called Israel an apartheid state, and [*in a video that surfaced of him*](https://twitter.com/dlippman/status/1772596901898072412) speaking at a demonstration in November, said it was "propaganda" and a "lie" that Hamas raped Israeli women in the October 7 attacks, though he later attempted to clean up that remark. ([*A United Nations report in March*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/04/europe/un-team-sexual-abuse-oct-7-hostages-intl/index.html) found "convincing" evidence that Hamas raped hostages.)

He's gone far enough out that even the left-leaning Israel advocacy group J Street [*withdrew its endorsement of Bowman in January*](https://forward.com/fast-forward/577654/j-street-jamaal-bowman-israel-hamas-war/), complaining that he had crossed a line in putting the blame for the conflict too much on Israel and not on Hamas.

Now even many of Bowman's fellow New York Democrats in Congress say privately they doubt he will win - but more than that, when asked by CNN, several pointedly refused to say that they want Bowman to win, or that they would support him as the race enters its final month ahead of the June 25 primary.

While Bowman says antisemitism is "abhorrent" and that his criticism is targeted at the way Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is conducting a war he believes could constitute genocide, in some parts of his district, his response to October 7 is top of mind. Even Bowman supporters acknowledge he was already in deep trouble holding on to his seat by October 6.

With national and international ***politics*** mixing into the race - and the situation only becoming more fraught as President Joe Biden [*distances himself*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/08/politics/joe-biden-interview-cnntv/index.html) from Netanyahu and a likely mass casualty invasion of Rafah looms - several leading Democratic operatives in Washington groaned at the mention of Bowman's name, upset that the situation has come to this.

Shelley Mayer, a state senator whose district largely overlaps with the congressional district, initially backed Bowman. Bowman's response to the Hamas attack convinced her to switch to endorse Westchester County Executive George Latimer.

"I believe that effective representation requires developing a bridge of trust and respect for all your constituents, even when there are disagreements," Mayer told CNN. "After October 7, it was extremely evident that our congressman had failed to develop that relationship with almost every part of our large Jewish community, and I could not accept that."

"Both personally as a Jew and as an elected official," Mayer added, "I knew we deserved better."

Bowman's response to the war crystallizes larger problems, including  [*pulling a fire alarm in a House office building*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/25/politics/bowman-charged-pulling-fire-alarm/index.html) last fall and public shouting matches with Republican colleagues, who say he has gotten caught up in "Squad"-style ***politics***.

It's a reaction, though, that has made him so identified with the opposition to Israel that, within the space of three minutes last week on Capitol Hill, Bowman was first pressed by a Fox News reporter to call people who broke into university buildings "domestic terrorists" ("Do better," he scolded), and then praised by a young protester with a keffiyeh wrapped around her shoulders as one of the few members who gives her hope.

Bowman said he knows people have called him anti-Israel because of moments like these, but, "what they don't understand is us being critical of an ally, makes our allies stronger and safer in the long term."

"If we are not critical in a healthy way, it leads to the cycle of violence that we're in right now," he added, telling CNN, "It's not criticism for criticism's sake, it's about how do we govern from the perspective of human rights and diplomacy and justice and ... a free Palestine?"

"We've been talking about a two-state solution for how long, man, where's the Palestinian state?" Bowman asked. "Let's do the work."

Bowman's mixed history on Israel support

Bowman voted for Iron Dome funding in 2021 and took a trip to Israel once in office, which led to the Democratic Socialists of America's New York chapter to consider expelling him, and the congressman in frustration let his membership lapse.

The group did not return a request for comment on whether members would support him this time.

Bowman is also supporting Biden for reelection, in contrast to Michigan Rep. Rashida Tlaib, who ducked the question and walked away last week when asked by CNN whether she would vote for him. But the congresswoman, a Palestinian American who is arguably the most publicly identified Israel opponent in Washington, has formed a joint fundraising committee with Bowman to support him.

Explaining how his response to the Israel-Hamas war fits his district, Bowman cited a poll conducted by his campaign that he claimed showed an overwhelming majority in his district support a permanent ceasefire.

Bowman has proudly been critical of Netanyahu's handling of the war, noting that his home state's senior senator, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, has also called for new Israeli elections down the line.

"The people of the district do not want taxpayer money and weapons going to Israel to continue to bomb children and support famine in Gaza," Bowman said. "They want that money to come to their community so they can afford child care and health care and workforce development and all those things."

Bowman argued that while he's more interested in talking about guns, education and climate justice, Israel is being made into a major issue in this race because the super PAC of the pro-Israel lobbying group American Israel Public Affairs Committee is planning to spend millions against him - and that much of its money comes from MAGA Republican donors who he says are trying to destroy democracy.

"It's a district issue because many Jews in the district care about the issue, and there's a large percentage of Jewish people in the district," he said. "It's a local issue to other people because people are tired of being in war and they're tired of watching US dollars go overseas to whatever country, and US weapons go overseas to kill Black and brown vulnerable people, mostly."

Some Bowman allies have warned Democrats that progressive voters would be deflated headed into November by seeing the incumbent New Yorker lose in a primary.

"President Biden needs Jamaal Bowman voters more than he needs George Latimer voters," said Usamah Andrabi, the communications director for the "Squad"-supportive Justice Democrats, which is also spending money to support the incumbent.

Bowman's challenger says Israel support is important but not the point

Bowman and Latimer are two very different men who have both spent their lives in a district that has some of the steepest contrasts of any in the country, from inner city to suburbia, from people on food stamps to people picking out tile patterns for their third and fourth homes. Bowman is 48, Black, lives in Yonkers and was a middle school principal before he made his first run for office four years ago to unseat an incumbent who had been representing the area since Jimmy Carter was president. Latimer is 70, white, lives in Rye and has spent 35 years moving up in local ***politics*** from city council to the state legislature to Westchester County executive.

Most of Bowman's endorsements are from other members of the so-called Squad and from House Democratic leaders such as Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, who is from Brooklyn, rather than from local elected officials in his district.

But among his supporters is Kevin Riley, a city councilman from the Bronx, who said he has never spoken with Latimer, but that on local issues, Bowman has been a "great partner."

In the northeast Bronx, Riley said, Israel doesn't come up much with voters. That it's showing up in other parts of the district is another demonstration of how disparate the constituents are.

"It shouldn't be," he said, "but a lot of times when you're running for office, it does seem like it happens."

Latimer insists he's not running against Bowman so much as he is running against Bowman's approach to being in the House, promising that his pitch is not "I'm going down there to lead a movement, or I'm going to be speaking truth to power on behalf of an identity or demographic."

Asked about how October 7 and the aftermath have influenced his candidacy, Latimer said it was a factor but quickly redirected the conversation to flooding concerns in Westchester, which he said he hoped to address in a House bill.

Latimer entered the race in December, but he said that local leaders had been encouraging him to run for a year and that he'd been in touch with AIPAC since the summer. He blames Bowman for making Israel a big factor in the race, both through his own actions and by invoking AIPAC as the reason why he has a primary.

Latimer would not directly answer when asked about Bowman's accusation that he is fine with Netanyahu staying in power, or about specifics on policy related to the conflict, while pointing out that he believes in the two-state solution that Netanyahu does not, and that he finds many of the prime minister's domestic policies "disagreeable."

"For every member to give their opinion as if they were the secretary of state - 'I think Biden should have done this,' 'I heard about this, and 'I don't think he should do that' - I don't think that's productive," Latimer said. "You need to have a president who pursues a policy that includes the ability to both reward and punish and use those as part of a negotiating strategy that is not seen by the world until you've come to some agreement."

Running in his first race, Bowman [*also criticized*](https://www.cityandstateny.com/policy/2020/01/rep-eliot-engel-is-facing-primary-opponents-critical-of-his-foreign-policy/176506/) his opponent for spending too much time talking about foreign policy at the expense of district issues. But in his interview last week, Bowman did not hesitate. He said he wanted to be clear that Israel has a right to exist, that "it looks that way to me" when asked whether he believes Israel has committed war crimes, and that Israel's actions have increased antisemitism.

"It hurts our fight against antisemitism, because Israel claims to be the state for all Jewish people and people who perceive it from the outside looking in say, 'What the hell is going on here? Israel's bad, which means Jewish people are bad,'" Bowman said. "That's what we need to fight against."

Speaking to CNN on her drive home after leaving a gala at her synagogue in Scarsdale, longtime state Assemblywoman Amy Paulin said in her fairly liberal community, it was notable how many people lined up to meet Latimer, who is Catholic, likening it to a "worshipping of a hero."

As for the race, "I don't know if it's a referendum on Israel, but I do know that the Jewish community - whether they're Reform, Conservative, Orthodox or Reconstructionist - are unified about the importance of Israel to the Jewish community," Paulin said, "and Jamaal has no understanding of that."

Arguing about AIPAC's influence

Latimer hasn't made any secret of the support he's getting from AIPAC. He spoke at the group's donor conference in Washington in January. He has an online portal through the group to raise money.

But AIPAC is far from the only group spending and activating in the district. The Democratic Majority for Israel (DMFI) has endorsed Latimer and is expecting to spend to boost him. A local group, Westchester Unites: Jewish Voters in Action, says it is spending six figures directly reaching out to thousands of Jewish voters and will amplify that with direct mail, digital ads, field organizers and grassroots events. The National Black Empowerment Action Fund is pledging six figures to mobilize Black voters against Bowman. AIPAC and DMFI are expected to be by far the biggest spenders.

Officials involved say much of their spending will be to attack Bowman for issues that have nothing to do with Israel, such as like his vote against the bipartisan infrastructure act - which some of the congressman's defenders argue is itself a measure of how unpopular support for Israel is.

AIPAC affiliated super PAC United Democracy Project spokesman Patrick Dorton would not specify how much money the group plans to spend in the race, though he noted its many large Democratic donors are interested in defeating the congressman.

Wednesday afternoon outside the Capitol, Bowman ran into Jeremy Ben-Ami, the executive director of J Street, the left-leaning pro-Israel group. They greeted each other with a friendly hug, despite the dropped endorsement.

A few minutes later, Ben-Ami downplayed any greater significance for the outcome.

"The Republican donors who fund the AIPAC super PAC are really excited to drive a wedge into the Democratic Party over this issue," Ben-Ami told CNN. "The majority of Democrats in the House, Democrats in the voting public, they're aligned with J Street. And that's going to be the majority position in the Democratic Party."

Maryland Rep. Steny Hoyer, the former Democratic majority leader who is an ally of AIPAC, brushed aside the group targeting some fellow Democrats.

"AIPAC, it does what it does," he said. "But I'm for our incumbents."

While not mentioning Bowman specifically or calling out any members by name, Hoyer said some of his colleagues' rhetoric has given him pause.

"I regret that there are members who really are in effect, I think, reflecting the views of Hamas, which are to kill Jews and eliminate Israel," Hoyer said.

By Edward-Isaac Dovere and Manu Raju, CNN

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