

Benjamin Brown

Democratic Party District Leader – District 31
(City of White Plains)
brownben@umich.edu 914-393-5037

May 24, 2024

Re: Recommended emergency disavowal of candidate George Latimer, and rescission of endorsement, to protect the Party's reputation and political future.

Dear Fellow Democrats:

The purpose of this letter, in advance of our May 30, 2024 Democratic City Committee meeting, is to express my grave concern about the Committee's continued endorsement of, and support for, County Executive George Latimer as a candidate for U.S. Congress in New York's Sixteenth Congressional District.

As a matter of conscience, at our next meeting I will use every available procedural mechanism to propose that this Committee rescind its previous endorsement of George Latimer as a candidate for U.S. Congress.

Far from expressing routine disagreement over a contested Democratic primary, I write to you to warn you that your continuation along this path risks long-term and significant damage to the local Party's reputation with my generation (the Millennial Generation) and Generation Z, and similar damage to the personal reputations of those of you who continue to stand behind Mr. Latimer's campaign in the face of his increasingly extreme actions and statements. From my personal perspective, your continued support for a candidate whose positions and statements I view as expressing contempt for basic human rights has damaged my morale, dampened my enthusiasm for constructive engagement with the Party Committee, and will make future Party Committee meetings inhospitable and uncomfortable environments for me and many others who might otherwise wish to participate.

As I will explain below, the crux of my perception that this candidate poses an unacceptable reputational risk to the local Party is based in the comparison of these four statements:

George Latimer’s Statement / May 13, 2024 Candidate Debate Hosted by News12

“[A]ny future for peace begins with the release of the hostages or the remains of the hostages and *from that point forward* humanitarian aid . . . makes sense.”

(Emphasis added.)
(Begins at about 7:00 in the [recording of the debate.](#))

U.S. President Joseph R. Biden Jr., March 7, 2024 State of the Union Address

“Humanitarian assistance cannot be a secondary consideration or a bargaining chip.”

Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court

Prohibits “Intentionally using starvation of civilians as a method of warfare by depriving them of objects indispensable to their survival, including wilfully impeding relief supplies.”

Cindy L. McCain, Executive Director, World Food Programme, Meet the Press, May 3, 2024

“What I can explain to you is that there is famine, full-blown famine, in the north [of the Gaza strip] and it’s moving its way south.”

([Link to recording.](#))

In other words, I perceive Mr. Latimer as explicitly endorsing a policy of imposing mass starvation upon the population of the Gaza strip, more than two million people, mostly civilians, men, women, and children, being a population already experiencing widespread famine, ostensibly as a pressure tactic to produce the release of a mere 133¹ Israeli hostages. Surely decent people such as ourselves cannot countenance such a crime.

This Congressional race has developed such that the ongoing conflict in Israel / Palestine is now a defining issue. The host of the May 13, 2024 News12 debate remarked at the debate, “So far, this has been a race where the fallout from the Israel-Hamas war has taken center stage.” On the evening when the debate aired, the New York Times ran the headline, “Democrats’ Split Over Israel Takes Center Stage in Tense Primary Debate.”² Earlier that day, New York Magazine had published the headline, “The Most Endangered Democrat in America: Jamaal Bowman Might Lose His Job over Israel.”³

Much earlier in time, on the local 914Wired talk show, a host remarked about the Congressional race, “It’s been turned into a referendum on Israel. But I don’t see how that’s avoidable. That’s . . . I think that’s incontrovertible.”⁴ For unknown reasons, this remark was later edited out of the recorded show after appearing in the initially released version.

Allegations of war crimes on the part of the U.S.-backed Israel Defense Forces have been present from the earliest days of this latest phase of the conflict, which began on October 7, 2023. On January 26, 2024, the International Court of Justice ordered provisional remedies in a case brought by South Africa against

¹ This figure represents the number of Israeli hostages believed to be held in the Gaza strip at the time of the May 13, 2024 Democratic Congressional primary debate, acknowledging that the specific status of each hostage was unknown and some may have died during their imprisonment.

² [New York Times, May 13, 2024, “Democrats’ Split Over Israel Takes Center Stage in Tense Primary Debate.”](#)

³ [New York Magazine Intelligencer, May 13, 2024, “The Most Endangered Democrat in America: Jamaal Bowman Might Lose His Job over Israel.”](#)

⁴ This comment appeared in the February 12, 2024 episode of 914Wired, when initially released.

Israel alleging violations of the 1948 *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*. Per the Washington Post’s reporting, “[T]he court . . . in a preliminary finding said the plausibility of genocide makes the need to prevent harm to civilians urgent.”⁵ The Court found that “the catastrophic humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip is at serious risk of deteriorating further before the Court renders its final judgment.” The Court found, “[T]here is a real and imminent risk that irreparable prejudice will be caused to the rights found by the Court to be plausible, before it gives its final decision.” The rights deemed to be plausible by the Court were primarily “the right of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip to be protected from acts of genocide and related prohibited acts identified in Article III of the Genocide Convention.”⁶

On March 28, 2024, the International Court of Justice issued another order affecting the State of Israel, with binding legal effect, directing:

“In conformity with its obligations under the Genocide Convention, and in view of the *worsening conditions of life faced by Palestinians in Gaza*, in particular the spread of famine and starvation, Israel shall . . . take all necessary and effective measures to ensure, without delay, in full co-operation with the United Nations, the unhindered provision at scale by all concerned of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance, including food, water, electricity, fuel, shelter, clothing, hygiene and sanitation requirements, as well as medical supplies and medical care to Palestinians throughout Gaza, including by increasing the capacity and number of land crossing points and maintaining them open for as long as necessary.”⁷ (Emphasis added.)

On May 20, 2024, the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court applied for arrest warrants against the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel’s Defense Minister, Yoav Gallant, as well as senior Hamas

⁵ [Washington Post, Jan. 27, 2024, “U.N. court orders Israel to prevent civilian deaths in Gaza, but no cease-fire.”](#)

⁶ [International Court of Justice, South Africa v. Israel \(Case 192\), Order of January 26, 2024.](#)

⁷ [International Court of Justice, South Africa v. Israel \(Case 192\), Order of March 28, 2024.](#)

political and military leadership. Among the crimes alleged against Netanyahu and Gallant were “responsibility for using the starvation of civilians as a method of warfare” and “extermination and/or murder . . . as a crime against humanity.”⁸

Even if all these allegations and suggestions of war crimes – including judicial findings of plausibility – are unmerited, there is still the risk that the Israel Defense Forces will commit war crimes going forward. Strikingly, that is precisely the course of action that George Latimer has recommended by endorsing the withholding of humanitarian assistance. Amidst the circumstance of actual famine in the Gaza strip as reported by Cindy McCain, the position taken by Mr. Latimer, a candidate for U.S. Congress, is like pouring gasoline on a smoldering fire. Hundreds of thousands of people could starve or die of thirst if the policy Mr. Latimer supports, the withholding of humanitarian assistance, continues in effect – *as it easily might*. Mr. Latimer’s extreme and inhumane position can only place us as individuals, and the local Democratic Party as an institution, in disrepute. In the long run, we cannot afford to be associated with Mr. Latimer’s contempt for basic human rights. Among other problems, this course of action will limit our ability to relate to the younger, upcoming generations of voters.

A Pew Research Center article of April 2, 2024 is titled, “Younger Americans stand out in their views of the Israel-Hamas war.” The article reports results of survey data gathered in mid-February, 2024, showing that a plurality of U.S. adults ages 18-29 considered “the way Israel is carrying out its response to Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack” to be “unacceptable.” With no change in the nature of Israel’s response since February, and the issue of famine increasingly in the news, there is a risk that younger voters’ views are even more lopsided today than at the time the survey was performed. Among Democrats and Democratic leaners ages 18-29, 47% sympathize with the Palestinians more than they do with the Israelis,

⁸ [Financial Times, May 20, 2024, “ICC prosecutor seeks arrest warrants for Israeli and Hamas leaders over alleged war crimes.”](#)

but only 7% sympathize with the Israelis more than they do with the Palestinians.⁹ While most younger voters do not rank the Israel / Palestine conflict near the top of their most important issues,¹⁰ the raft of campus protests all across the country, including at Westchester's own Purchase College and Sarah Lawrence College, shows that a sizeable minority of them are mobilized by the issue in an exceptional way. I recently attended the commencement of my own alma mater, a small college in a faraway state, and cries in support of the Palestinians broke out there, too. While it is unfortunate that the Pew surveys tested simple support for the Palestinian and Israeli causes instead of allowing for more holistic and comprehensively responsible positions on the conflict, one thing, I think, is clear. I don't think young people will ever forgive us for the level of civilian loss we now tolerate. I think that aspect of their position – intolerance for the amount of civilian suffering and death – will be static, and frankly, their firm ethical stance on that issue is both a vindication of their cohort and an embarrassment to ourselves.

Putting aside the specific, extreme position on humanitarian assistance that Mr. Latimer took at the debate, which I identified above, there is also the issue of his general position on the Israel / Palestine conflict. I do not think it is lost on any of us that: (1) The United States has taken a foreign policy position of strident support of Israel over the last several decades, materializing in transfers of weaponry, direct financial assistance, and implicit and actual military backing, all with little official criticism of Israel's human rights practices, (2) George Latimer has positioned himself as a firm supporter of that traditional United States-Israel relationship, (3) Mr. Latimer's opponent, Congressman Jamaal Bowman, is a somewhat outspoken critic of that traditional United States-Israel relationship.

⁹ [Pew Research Center, Apr. 2, 2024, "Younger Americans stand out in their views of the Israel-Hamas war."](#)

¹⁰ [ABC News, May 3, 2024, "Young people disapprove of Biden's Israel policy. It may not mean much for November."](#)

The wisdom of the traditional United States-Israel relationship, characterized by strident support by the United States for Israel with little official United States criticism of Israel's human rights practices, has come into question of late.

Within mainstream U.S. political discourse, almost all commentators avow the concept of the State of Israel's right to exist and to conduct military operations against Hamas¹¹ in the wake of the October 7, 2023 attacks. This description is true of Congressman Bowman: he is on record at the May 13, 2024 debate saying, "I've said since 2019 that I believe in a two-state solution and I believe in Israel's right to exist," as well as " Hamas needs to be condemned and immediately dealt with."¹² Nevertheless, I recognize that some of you may perceive Congressman Bowman as having insufficient care for Israel's importance in the world and its defensive needs. For example, many of you may perceive Congressman Bowman, if not disavowing Israel's right to exist and right to conduct military operations against Hamas, then as being cavalier about the support and allyship that Israel requires from the United States to fulfill those needs. Or, you may be uncomfortable with Congressman Bowman's closeness to the far-left of the Party, which analyzes the geopolitical situation in Israel / Palestine through the lens of colonialism.

It's not my intention to change your viewpoints in these respects: I simply ask that you also recognize the possibility of extremism on the *other* side of the issue. For, faced with conduct on the part of the Israel Defense Forces which plausibly meets the definition of the most severe war crimes, Mr. Latimer has either fallen silent, or explicitly endorsed such conduct.

¹¹ Mainstream discourse usually leaves out the fact that the October 7, 2023 attacks had participants other than Hamas, including Palestinian Islamic Jihad as well as disorganized Palestinian people who made their way through breaches in the Gaza strip boundary fence. In the mainstream discourse, "Hamas" has become a reductive term for Palestinian military and terrorist activities that heavily involve Hamas yet are multifaceted. However, we can leave this issue aside for purposes of the present discussion.

¹² These comments of Congressman Bowman begin at [7:27 in the recording of the debate](#).

Vice President Kamala Harris described the Biden/Harris administration's position in moderate and humane terms:

“Our position has always been that Israel has a right to defend itself, without any question. And *how* it does so matters.”¹³ (Emphasis added.)

Mr. Latimer, however, has endorsed no similar position: he has never expressed any openness to influencing Israel toward a more responsible way of war, nor to questioning the government of Israel, at all. In the wake of the horrors visited upon Israeli society on October 7th, young people now watch as the Palestinian, Gaza strip civilian population is terrified, mistreated, and subject to wanton death, injury, and starvation, in full view of the world, with a level of media exposure here in the United States that exceeds that of the military and civilian losses in the Vietnam War (which were sufficient to cause the Vietnam War to become unpopular in this country).

The following is a list of incidents, including a very local incident, which have tended to give ordinary voters pause about the traditional United States policy toward Israel. Each of these events occurred subsequent to your Committee's endorsement of Mr. Latimer and, in my view, represent the failure of Mr. Latimer's style of politics on the Israel / Palestine conflict.

- 1. Killing of Hind Rajab on January 29, 2024.** The killing of Hind Rajab, a six-year-old girl living in the Gaza strip, in addition to a great tragedy, is a major failure of Mr. Latimer's style of unconditional / uncritical U.S. support for Israeli military operations. The story of Hind Rajab is extraordinarily disturbing in its details – the child's family was killed around her, and then an ambulance team dispatched to retrieve her, which shared its route with the Israel Defense Forces, were also killed,

¹³ [The Hill, Dec. 19, 2023, “VP Harris says how Israel defends itself matters: ‘Far too many innocent Palestinians have been killed.’”](#)

along with Hind herself. There is a recording of the three-hour phone call between the desperate, terrified child and the ambulance workers sent to retrieve her.¹⁴ Photographs of Hind published in the press show a relatable and happy six-year-old girl at events such as her kindergarten graduation.

On May 6, 2024, the popular hip hop artist Macklemore released a song, “Hind’s Hall,” protesting the killing of Hind Rajab. At about forty seconds into the approximately three-minute music video produced by Macklemore, an image of George Latimer flashes across the screen, over the lyrics “Politicians / Who serve by any means / AIPAC, CUFI and all the companies.”¹⁵ As of this writing, Macklemore’s music video had amassed 2.6 million views on YouTube, and likely many more on other platforms. Macklemore recently performed the song live in a large concert venue in Wellington, New Zealand.¹⁶

2. Killing of World Central Kitchen Workers on April 1, 2024. The killing of six international aid workers, including a U.S. citizen, and one Palestinian aid worker associated with the World Central Kitchen charity headed by celebrity chef José Andrés bears chilling similarity to the killing of Hind Rajab. As in the case of the ambulance sent to receive Hind Rajab, the humanitarian convoy operated by the aid workers shared its route with the Israel Defense Forces. “A Financial Times analysis using satellite and social media imagery indicated that the three WCK vehicles were hit separately over a 2km stretch of Sharia Al-Rashid street on the Gaza coast. . . . WCK logos were visible in the debris of all three vehicles.”¹⁷

¹⁴ [New York Times, Feb. 10, 2024, “Missing 6-Year-Old and Rescue Team Found Dead in Gaza, Aid Group Says.”](#)

¹⁵ [Link to recording.](#)

¹⁶ [Rolling Stone Australia, May 9, 2024, “Macklemore Performs ‘Hind’s Hall’ for First Time in New Zealand.”](#)

¹⁷ [Financial Times, April 2, 2024, “Benjamin Netanyahu admits Israeli forces killed aid workers.”](#)

Photographs published by the Financial Times and other outlets show that the humanitarian workers' vehicles were white in color and conspicuously marked with World Central Kitchen's logo.¹⁸ José Andrés has claimed that the Israel Defense Forces targeted the aid workers' convoy "systematically, car by car"¹⁹ and continues to reject the Israel government's explanations of the incident.

The reporting on the incident commanded the attention of a broad public. In my view, this incident also reflects the failure of George Latimer's brand of unreservedly pro-Israel politics.

3. Police Action against Protest, and Arrest of Students and Faculty, at Purchase College on May 2nd and May 3rd, 2024.

SUNY Purchase ("Purchase College") is a public liberal arts college of about 3,260 students located in Purchase, New York, within Westchester County and the Sixteenth Congressional District. Per reporting by The Journal News, at about 5:00pm on Thursday, May 2, 2024, students at Purchase College began setting up a protest encampment related to the Israel/Palestine conflict.²⁰ Before the night was over, "police from several agencies" carried out a large-scale response, "with a police helicopter overhead." "State University Police, Westchester County Police and New York State Police" are identified in the article as participants. One student witness reported peers being "violently arrested" and that he "[S]aw a kid get body slammed. He was taken down by about four police officers, and he didn't resist." Over seventy students and faculty were arrested. The County police specifically acknowledged helping to "implement the

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ [Financial Times, April 4, 2024, "US defence secretary rebukes Israel over killing of aid workers in Gaza."](#)

²⁰ Mainstream journalists typically refer to such campus encampments as "pro-Palestine" encampments. I find this label dubious and am unsure of the proper label, so I leave aside the issue of whether such encampments should be labeled "pro-Palestine," "human rights," "civil rights," "war crimes," or something else.

decisions made by the College dealing with the protest encampment.”²¹

George Latimer was County Executive at this time, a position he continues to hold today.

The College’s faculty not only dissented from the administration and police agencies’ action – they were outraged. A letter signed by “The Faculty at Large of Purchase College, SUNY” states that the faculty “are outraged and condemn in the strongest possible terms the violent and disproportionate actions taken by campus authorities against our students and faculty colleagues,” describing the number of arrests, “over 70,” as “staggering” in light of the “peaceful” and “non-disruptive” nature of the protest.²²

The May 2nd and 3rd, 2024 police action at Purchase College continues to be a source of open-ended political liability for County Executive Latimer. Although there is not at this time any evidence that Mr. Latimer was directly involved in the police response, oversight of the County Police is within his role as County Executive and the optics are, at a minimum, unfortunate for his campaign. A continuing student protest encampment within the District would have been a thorn in the side of Mr. Latimer’s increasingly high-profile Congressional campaign centered around the Israel / Palestine conflict, and the encampment was shut down in a remarkably swift and violent manner even compared with other institutions that have also chosen to shut down student encampments. This juxtaposition may make voters wonder if Mr. Latimer’s Congressional candidacy was a factor in how the student protest was handled. In the Sixteenth Congressional District’s largely suburban milieu, where raising children in high-performing, small community school districts and

²¹ [The Journal News, May 3, 2024, “Over 70 SUNY Purchase students, faculty arrested at pro-Palestinian encampment.”](#)

²² [Daily Nous, May 6, 2024, “Administration Sets Police on Peaceful Student Protestors.”](#)

sending them off to college is routine, many voters are likely to be uncomfortable with the force and violence employed by the police on a college campus, as well as the size of the response and the needlessly provocative and expensive use of a helicopter. Meanwhile, like many areas of the country, the District is also working through legacies of police brutality and racism, epitomized in White Plains by the police killing of local resident Kenneth Chamberlain in 2011. Mr. Chamberlain was a 68-year-old retiree and United States Marine Corps veteran who was killed in his home by police responding to his LifeAid medical alert necklace. One of the responding police officers called Mr. Chamberlain the n-word during the altercation that led to his death. In 2023, the City of White Plains agreed to pay a \$ 5 million settlement for Mr. Chamberlain’s family members’ claim of wrongful death.²³ Police violence and the work of finding alternative, de-escalatory modes of police and social services response remain issues of high interest among local Democrats. The May 2nd and 3rd, 2024 incident at Purchase College under Mr. Latimer’s watch is a setback for our Party’s work toward realizing a more community-oriented vision of policing.

Mainstream estimates of the death toll in the Gaza strip are about 35,000. On March 5, 2024 Ralph Nader, a consumer advocate and former U.S. Presidential candidate, published an article entitled, “Stop the Worsening UNDERCOUNT of Palestinian Casualties in Gaza.”²⁴ Nader’s analysis is that the government of Israel and Hamas have separate but directionally matching incentives to undercount the death toll in the Gaza strip, and that the reported death toll is incongruous with the level of independently reported violence and

²³ [The Journal News, Aug. 7, 2023, “White Plains settles with Kenneth Chamberlain family for \\$5M.”](#)

²⁴ [Ralph Nader, Mar. 5, 2024, “Stop the Worsening UNDERCOUNT of Palestinian Casualties in Gaza.”](#)

deprivation in the Gaza strip. He concludes that the oft-repeated estimates arising from Gaza Ministry of Health data are likely undercounts of the true death toll, and puts his own estimate at 200,000 deaths. I do not know how to resolve Nader's dispute of the mainstream estimate of the death toll. Good information is hard to come by. Nader acknowledges that "Unguided Western and Israeli reporters and journalists are not allowed to enter Gaza by the Israeli government." Nader has, however, convinced me to be skeptical of the oft-repeated mainstream estimates, and to recognize a risk that the true death toll may be much higher. This risk has, as a corollary, political and reputational risk. If the death toll in the Gaza strip is, or becomes, in the range of Nader's figure, County Executive Latimer's incautious and unreservedly supportive position on Israel Defense Forces war-conduct could become a massive political liability not only for him, but for his prominent supporters.

In conclusion: The positions George Latimer has taken risk associating the White Plains Democratic Party, and the public officials and District Leaders who have endorsed him, with support for war crimes, alternating with insensitive indifference to war crimes – completely unacceptable political positions that will not stand the test of time. In the broader context, association with George Latimer risks putting us on the wrong side of history, on a key geopolitical issue that has captured the imaginations of domestic and world publics and especially young people.

I urge you to carefully consider what has occurred since your initial decision to endorse County Executive Latimer. Please ask yourself in the spirit of honest self-reflection: Whatever you think of the big-picture of the Israel / Palestine conflict, and whatever outcome you're hoping for, are you morally comfortable with County Executive Latimer's positions on humanitarian assistance and the range of acceptable methods and tactics in a U.S.-backed military campaign? Why has County Executive Latimer conspicuously avoided what most Americans and the vast majority of Democrats see as a commonsense

and constructive step, namely, calling for a significant increase of humanitarian assistance into the Gaza strip?²⁵ I urge you to weigh whatever benefit may come from continued support of Mr. Latimer against the potential long-term damage to the Party as an institution and to your own personal reputations.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ben Brown". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Ben Brown

²⁵ [Pew Research Center, Mar. 21, 2024, "Views of the U.S. role in the Israel-Hamas war."](#) ("In the February survey, approximately two-thirds of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents favored providing humanitarian aid to Gaza, while fewer than one-in-ten opposed it.").