

# **Holding Each Other Up: Intimacy, Care, and Resistance in Pro-Palestine Protests Facing Police Repression**

---

## **Introduction**

The early morning was punctuated by an urgent shout: “Police are here!” The sun was still under the horizon as I scrambled to put on my shoes in the dark and run to the center of our Palestine solidarity encampment, where my comrades and I had camped for nearly a month. Ahead stood a line of a dozen police officers in full riot gear, batons and tear gas canisters included. In response, my comrades and I linked arms, forming a human chain that resisted the advancing police force. The air thickened with the acrid sting of tear gas as officers pushed forward, crushing us against tents and tables and knocking people to the ground. Medics quickly moved among us, pulling people to safety and tending to burned skin. In this moment, intimacy was not a quiet, private act but an embodied, collective practice of care and resistance.

This paper expands intimacy to capture the complex physical and emotional connections forged in political struggle, especially under repression and direct violence. Drawing on participant observation, interviews, and analysis of video footage from pro-Palestine protests in 2023 and 2024, I explore how intimacy and care emerge as vital practices sustaining collective resistance in the face of police violence. Through a series of vignettes and an interview synthesis, this research highlights the multiple forms intimacy takes: planned and spontaneous, physical and emotional, individual and collective, revealing how intimacy acts as a powerful mode of resistance amid state efforts to isolate and fragment movements.

---

## **Methods**

This ethnography is based on a combination of participant observation, an interview, and analysis of video footage. As a participant in the pro-Palestine protests, I relied on my memory to capture the emotional and physical dimensions of intimacy and care. To supplement and verify my recollections, I reviewed videos recorded by comrades during key moments of confrontation, as well as interviewed a comrade who was involved in pro-Palestine protests. This triangulation of data sources allows for a richer and more nuanced understanding of how intimacy emerges and functions under police repression.

---

## **Ethnographic Vignettes & Analysis**

### **Planned Intimacy: Encampment Meetings as Care Spaces**

For nearly a month, our encampment functioned as more than a protest site; it was a shared home. Meetings brought together protesters to plan, strategize, and support one another emotionally through the looming threat of police violence. These gatherings were intimate spaces where trust was built through sharing fears, hopes, and practical knowledge about how to survive impending police raids.

During these sessions, we were often huddled close together inside the same tents that we slept in at night. We shared snacks, and we had comrades keeping an eye on the perimeter to make sure we were safe while we met. This planned intimacy laid the groundwork for resilience,

transforming political commitment into a lived, relational experience that prepared us for moments of crisis, both through the practical planning as well as the social and emotional bonds we formed through these intimate encounters.

---

### **Embodied Intimacy in Confrontation: The Police Raid**

Before dawn, the long-anticipated police raid shattered our fragile peace at the Palestinian solidarity encampment. Our preparation faltered as we were faced with the reality of militarized officers ready to enact violence upon our bodies and our home. In a spontaneous act of solidarity, someone began chanting, and we linked arms into a long human chain.

The police advanced with batons and tear gas. I held onto a comrade filming the scene when her phone died, handing her mine so she could keep recording. Suddenly, a blast of tear gas hit us directly in the face. The chain broke as we grasped at our eyes and tried to breathe through the pain.

I passed out briefly, only to be caught and supported by my comrades, who knew of my asthma and helped me breathe with an inhaler. Another medic gently washed my burning eyes with water.

This vignette illustrates how intimacy under repression can be emergent, arising spontaneously as a survival strategy. The act of chanting and the physical intimacy of holding onto each other act as both protest tactics in projecting strength to the police, but also function as a form of emotional grounding as they affirm the presence of a unified collective to the individuals within it.

---

## **Embodied Intimacy in Confrontation: Tear Gas/Pepper Spray and Medical Aid**

Tear gas and pepper spray attacks forcibly expose bodies to pain and sensory disruption, a direct assault aimed at disorienting and fragmenting the group, and often immediately results in physical bonds being broken as people recoil from the assault.

In response, the recurring acts of tending to injuries, gently washing eyes, guiding impaired comrades, comforting them through physical touch, and sharing water function as rituals of care that resist this assault. These moments of close physical contact transform immediate harm into opportunities for collective healing, countering the isolating and fragmenting effects of state repression. The repetition of this intimate care underscores its centrality not only as a medical necessity but also as a practice that reaffirms trust, interdependence, and solidarity among protesters. This intimacy functions as a form of resistance and a countermeasure to the fragmentation of state violence as it physically reconnects individuals, re-establishes safety, and fosters mutual reliance. It is also crucial to keeping movements alive as it reinforces social bonds essential to sustaining resistance.

These care acts reveal how protest becomes a space where bodily vulnerability is met with reciprocal support, deepening communal bonds under duress. Additionally, such care practices disrupt the state's disciplinary surveillance and fragmentation tactics by creating alternative modes of connection and resilience in moments where repression seeks to isolate and disempower.

---

## **Intersectional Dimensions of Intimacy**

Police violence during protests disproportionately targeted Black and Brown bodies and femmes. For example, one video of a protest depicts a hijabi woman having her scarf violently ripped off by police as they throw her to the ground and arrest her. In response, another protester rushes forward and fixes her hijab while being yelled at by the police for doing so. In another instance, a Black femme was beaten severely by police with their batons. When comrades noticed this targeted attack, they surrounded the Black femme protectively, and one of the comrades was arrested while intervening.

These moments reveal how protest communities respond to dynamics where police violence is targeted towards marginalized communities. Intersectional solidarity shapes who receives protection and redistributes intimacy and care to those in need of it the most.

---

## **Continuity of Intimacy: Jail Support**

Care also extends beyond the moment of immediate confrontation with the state. After a protest is broken apart and people are arrested, the protest shifts to the jail site. People show up to the jail despite chemical burns and injuries and cycle through picketing, chanting, and resting together. People bring food and water, and there are lots of hugs and asking how people are doing while waiting for the arrested comrades to be released.

In these moments, the intimacy of protest shifts from urgent, physical protection to slower, sustained care. These moments sustain resilience, countering the isolating effects of state repression and reaffirming protest intimacy as ongoing political work.

This intimacy challenges the carceral logic of surveillance and fragmentation, acting as resistance at the boundary of state control.

---

### **Comrade Interview: Embodied Intimacy and Collective Resilience in Protest**

An interview with a longtime comrade sheds light on the forms of care and intimacy that sustain the movement beyond singular moments. They described how physical support, holding each other upright, bracing against police pushes, and helping the fallen, became intuitive practices during confrontations. Police often used metal barricades to knock protesters off balance, prompting protesters to catch and brace one another to avoid losing anyone in the chaos. This bodily interdependence was a constant across protests.

During the violent police sweep of the Palestine solidarity encampment, several protesters, incapacitated by tear gas, were vulnerable on the ground. Nearby comrades responded swiftly: some took firm stances to hold their ground and prevent the police from advancing and trampling the fallen comrades, while groups lifted and carried affected individuals to safety. This care was both tactical protection and a relational act of solidarity.

The comrade also recounted receiving care firsthand. After a pepper spraying, impaired vision from glasses trapping the irritant left them stumbling. A calm stranger guided them by voice and touch, helped wash their eyes, and kept their glasses safe, allowing a quick recovery and return to the protest. This moment highlighted how care fosters safety amid chaos.

Physical closeness—holding hands, linking arms, or shielding—was crucial emotionally and strategically. Holding a hand while guiding someone through pepper spray or picking up a fallen comrade deepened trust and collective resolve.

The comrade noted racialized and gendered police violence, recalling the incident I analyzed from video footage of a hijabi woman's scarf being ripped off by police. The comrade recalled that this moment mobilized immediate defense and crystallized awareness of targeted harm. Such dynamics intensified collective responsibility to protect the most vulnerable.

The comrade explained how care took new forms after the protests ended. When arrests occurred, the protest shifted focus to organizing and mobilizing around detainees. As tensions eased, protesters gathered to check in, share food and water, and tend to injuries, sometimes sharing clothes or washing pepper spray off. These ongoing care practices repair bodies and spirits, reinforcing social bonds essential to sustaining resistance.

Finally, the comrade emphasized that care sustains motivation by relentlessly grounding protesters in the movement's purpose. During a particularly intense protest with many new participants, seasoned protesters shared knowledge, like how to wash out pepper spray, in live teaching moments, creating new networks of trust and readiness. This collective learning through shared intimacy builds both physical resilience and political will.

---

## **Conclusion: Intimacy as Survival, Strategy, and Solidarity**

Through these vignettes, it becomes clear that intimacy within protest spaces under police repression is not an incidental byproduct of shared struggle, but a vital force that enables the

movement to endure and adapt. Whether in the form of steady hands rinsing pepper-sprayed eyes, arms linked in the face of an advancing police line, or voices joining together in chants despite tear gas in the air, these acts create bonds that are both emotional and tactical.

Under the threat of violence, intimacy becomes a means of survival. It allows protesters to literally hold each other together in moments when the state seeks to scatter, injure, or isolate them. But intimacy is also strategic: by fostering trust and interdependence, it strengthens the collective's ability to respond cohesively to danger, to regroup quickly after dispersal, and to maintain morale through prolonged campaigns.

These intimate practices blur the boundary between the personal and the political. They are at once acts of care between individuals and acts of resistance against systems designed to dehumanize. The labor of tending to one another's bodies, washing eyes, carrying injured comrades, sharing food and water, becomes a form of political action in itself, one that refuses the logic of disposability imposed by police repression.

Ultimately, intimacy under repression is a form of counter-power. It undermines the isolating effects of state violence, affirms the humanity of those targeted, and sustains the collective body of the movement. In these moments, intimacy is not merely about affection or emotional closeness; it is an infrastructure of resistance, as essential to the protest as banners, chants, and barricades.