Affective Territories of Resistance in Iran's Women, Life, Freedom Movement

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Abstract

This article examines how resistance persists under repression by shifting attention from visible protest to the affective and relational processes that sustain political agency. Focusing on the 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement in Iran, it challenges dominant spatial approaches that privilege physical territory as the primary site of political struggle by developing a three-dimensional conceptual framework of affective territories, understood as relational formations sustained through embodied affect, relational solidarity, and everyday resistance. It demonstrates how dispersed practices (re)produce infrastructures of resistance beyond moments of collective mobilisation. By emphasising the affective and intimate dimensions of political life, the article offers a way of analysing forms of resistance that are often overlooked and shows how these can function as enduring sites of political possibility even under conditions of sustained repression.

Keywords: social movements, affective territories, Women–Life–Freedom, resistance, Iran

September 2022. 22-year-old Jina Mahsa Amini died in police custody after being arrested in Tehran for allegedly wearing the mandatory hijab incorrectly. Her death caused large-scale protests to erupt across Iran and in the Iranian diaspora. One of the most significant uprisings since the 1979 revolution, this episode of contention became known as the Women, Life, Freedom protests, named after a slogan originally coined by the Kurdish independence movement (*Jin, Jiyan, Azadî*).[1] The Women, Life, Freedom movement challenged the Iranian government's authoritarianism and also called for fundamental changes in gender, social, and political rights.[2] Like many episodes of contention before and since, it was met with severe government repression. It is estimated that at least 500 people were killed and more than 20000 were arrested for participating in the protests. Out of those arrested, many have since been executed.[3] Nevertheless, resistance in Iran continues. Occasionally, this takes the form of large-scale street protests, but it also persists in more dispersed and less visible ways. Many approaches to studying protest and social movements tend to privilege visibility and scale, as well as the institutional outcome(s) as indicators of political agency. Within such frameworks, movements that fail to achieve regime change or that are violently suppressed are often implicitly or explicitly framed as unsuccessful.[4] However,

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[1] This connection is significant given the longstanding marginalisation of Kurdish populations in Iran, who have been subject to political repression and cultural erasure and because Jina Mahsa Amini was herself Kurdish. The frequent erasure of her Kurdish name, Jina, in the discourse surrounding the protests reflects the layered forms of violence that shape the context of her death. Her death cannot be fully understood outside of these intersecting structures, nor can the movement that followed be reduced to a singular national or gendered struggle.

[2] Tara Mehrabi, "Woman, Life, Freedom: On Protests in Iran and Why It Is a Feminist Movement," *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*, no. 2 (February 2023): 114.

[3] Jessica Peake et al., *Disappearances, Deaths, and Denials* (Berkley Human Rights Centre, 2025), 8.

[4] See, for example, David A. Snow et al., "Introduction: Mapping and Opening Up the Terrain," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David A. Snow et al. (John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2018); Raza Saeed, "Conceptualising Success and Failure for Social Movements," *Law, Social Justice & Global Development Journal*, no. 2 (2009); Robert H. Dix, "Why Revolutions Succeed & Fail," *Polity* 16, no. 3 (1984): 423–46.

these perspectives do not adequately account for how resistance endures under conditions in which public space is heavily securitised and collective action is violently constrained. While political agency is certainly produced and articulated in physical spaces, this article focuses on the intimate, emotional and embodied dimensions in which such agency is sustained through interpersonal bonds.

This article proposes a re-reading of the Women, Life, Freedom movement that challenges mainstream assumptions about protests and social movements. Rather than interpreting the movement primarily through moments of visible mobilisation or through the lens of success and failure, it conceptualises resistance as an ongoing process sustained through *affective territories*. These are relational spaces constituted through shared vulnerability, grief and emotions that enable political agency to persist even when formal protest becomes impossible. Resistance, in this view, is not confined to occupying physical space but involves the continuous production of new, affective spaces through relational practices. This article proposes that affective territories can be understood as relational formations sustained through three overlapping dimensions in which political agency is produced, circulated, and maintained beyond moments of visible mobilisation: embodied affect, relational solidarity, and everyday resistance. The slogan "Women, Life, Freedom" itself can be read as pointing toward such a reconfiguration of political struggle. It does not interpret the movement primarily through institutional change but implies the reorganisation of everyday life, embodied existence, and social relations. "Woman" positions the female body as a site of both control and resistance; "Life" can be understood to concern everyday practices and social reproduction, and "Freedom" may stand for a collective form of life that extends beyond political institutions. Read in this way, the slogan already encapsulates a spatial and affective logic.

After establishing the conceptual framework, the article examines how authoritarian regimes seek to regulate emotional and intimate life through forms of affective governance. Building on this, it then explores how everyday relational practices reproduce affective territories as infrastructures of resistance.

Finally, it applies this framework to the Women, Life, Freedom movement to show how affective territories were produced and sustained political agency under conditions of repression. This article contributes to spatial analyses of authoritarianism by demonstrating how resistance persists beyond geographic protest sites. It shows how affective territories function as infrastructures of sustainable resistance and enable movements to continue even when streets are inaccessible, and dissent is met with violence. Space can be occupied, but it can also be produced anew in response through interpersonal bonds and feelings that transcend physical terrain. This framework helps remain attentive to forms of resistance often overlooked and shows how these dispersed and intimate practices can function as enduring sites of political possibility.

From Territory to Affective Territory

Territory is traditionally understood as a bounded spatial unit linked to sovereignty and political control. However, more recent scholarship emphasises that territory is produced through social practice and discourse instead of accepting it as a fixed geographic element. [5] Territories are enacted through processes of territorialisation that organise bodies, identities, and forms of belonging.[6] This shift aligns with the broader affective turn in the humanities, which foregrounds the role of bodily and emotional experience as well as relational interaction in shaping both social and spatial life.[7] Affect here refers to the ways bodies affect and are affected by one another through sensory encounters that often precede conscious interpretations. [8] While closely related to emotion, affect does not denote named or articulated feelings, but captures the pre-conscious intensities and forces that circulate between bodies and environments. Emotions can be understood as the socially and culturally mediated expressions through which such

[5] Joe Painter, "Rethinking Territory," *Antipode* 42, no. 5 (2010): 1090.
[6] Jan Smitheram and Ian Woodcock, "Affective Territories," *Idea Journal* 9, no. 1 (2009): 9.
[7] Paul Stenner, "Bridging the Affect/Emotion Divide," in *Affect, Emotion, and Rhetorical Persuasion in Mass Communication*, ed. Lei Zhang and Carlton Clark (Routledge, 2019), 2.
[8] Smitheram and Woodcock, "Affective Territories," 10–11.

affective intensities become recognisable and communicable. This distinction allows for an analysis of how political subjectivity and spatial relations are shaped through explicit discourse and visible action, as well as through embodied and relational processes that may remain partially inarticulate.

Florentien Verhage's conceptualisation of intimacy as a political phenomenon provides another entry point into this expanded understanding of space. She argues that oppression operates intimately. Power is enacted in close interpersonal proximity where it enters the body, emotions, habits and everyday interactions. Drawing on French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, she contends that human bodies are, fundamentally, "without borders."[9] Humans are always mutually shaping each other through affective and sensory exchanges, which Verhage refers to as an intersubjective embrace. Oppression is then conceptualised as an "intimate terror,"[10] a condition in which multiple social forces converge directly on the lived body. Crucially, it is a condition that is felt, ongoing and spatially distributed across everyday life. When oppression is continuously reproduced in micro-relations, it eventually becomes emotionally internalised. However, Verhage also shows that these multiple affective pressures open possibilities for pushing back and grounding resistance in embodied practices.[11]

These approaches suggest that territories should be understood as dynamic relational spaces produced through affective interactions between bodies, narratives and material environments. While Smitheram and Woodcock conceptualise affective territories as spatial formations emerging through affective relations between bodies and environments, Verhage's notion of *intimate terror* foregrounds how power operates through the embodied and interpersonal dimensions of everyday life. This perspective opens the possibility for affective territories, spaces that emerge through collective practices and shared sensations and continuously expand and reproduce through the circulation of affect and interpersonal relations. The notion of affective territory extends existing

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[9] Florentien Verhage, "Living With(out) Borders: The Intimacy of Oppression," *Emotion, Space and Society* 11 (May 2014): 112.
[10] Verhage, "Living with(out) Borders," 116.
[11] Verhage, "Living with(out) Borders," 118–19.

understandings of territory as socially constructed by emphasising the role of embodied intensities, emotional circulation, and interpersonal relations in the production of space. Instead of focusing primarily on discourse or institutional organisation, it highlights how territories are continuously enacted through affective encounters that bind individuals into shared—though often diffuse—spatial formations.

Affective Territories and Political Struggle

The concept of affective territory is particularly useful for understanding political mobilisation and resistance. Political struggle unfolds not only within formal institutions and physical protest sites, but also through affective relations between bodies and their environments. Revolutions and social movements involve affective processes that expand or contract the capacity of individuals to act collectively. Political movements generate new spatial relations through affective engagement with place, terrain and social networks.[12] Understanding resistance, therefore, is aided by attention to the processes through which affective territories are produced and maintained. Mobilisation can generate affective territories through the mediation of emotional narratives that authenticate different experiences of suffering or injustice. These affective practices enable dispersed individuals to recognise themselves as part of a shared political community. Thus, affective territories are sites where personal experiences are translated into collective grievances and where belonging and identity are negotiated.[13]

Ann Ferguson's conceptualisation of the *affective economy* further highlights the role of emotional circulation in shaping political belonging. She argues that emotions are material and embodied forces unevenly distributed across systems such as capitalism or patriarchy. For example, she considers love not just a

[12] Gastón Gordillo, "Hostile Terrain: On the Spatial and Affective Conditions for Revolution," *Territory, Politics, Governance* 13, no. 6 (2025): 814–15.

[13] Sara Tafakori, "Digital Feminism beyond Nativism and Empire: Affective Territories of Recognition and Competing Claims to Suffering in Iranian Women's Campaigns," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 47, no. 1 (2021): 73–74.

private feeling but equally a bodily force which moves between subjects and shapes agency and social attachment. Further, she theorises solidarity love as a collective practice that redirects emotional energy towards mutual recognition and care.[14] This type of political belonging enables subjects to reclaim agency through embodied connection. Thus, interpersonal relations are positioned as central infrastructures of resistance movements.

While these approaches demonstrate how affect, space, and political subjectivity are deeply intertwined, they do not yet provide a clear analytical framework for examining how such dynamics sustain resistance over time, particularly under conditions that constrain visible mobilisation. As a result, it remains difficult to trace how dispersed practices, interpersonal relations, and embodied experiences coalesce into durable forms of political agency.

Dimensions of Affective Territories

To operationalise the concept of affective territories, this article develops a three-dimensional analytical framework that aims to capture how such territories are produced and sustained in practice. It proposes that affective territories emerge through three interconnected but distinct dimensions: embodied affect, relational solidarity, and everyday resistance. These dimensions are treated as overlapping processes through which affect circulates, social relations are formed, and political agency is maintained over time.

First, affective territories emerge through embodied affect: emotions expressed through bodily practices and sensory experiences. Affect theory emphasises that emotions circulate through gestures, movements and encounters between bodies that often precede conscious interpretation.[15] In resistance movements, this can refer to symbolic gestures and forms of embodied defiance. Asef Bayat, for example, highlights joy and fun as politically significant affective practices. Activities often dismissed as trivial, such as dancing or

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[14] Ann Ferguson, “Love as a Political Force: Romantic Love, Love-Politics and Solidarity,” in *The Radicalism of Romantic Love: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Renata Grossi and David West (Routledge, 2017), 25–26.

[15] Smitheram and Woodcock, “Affective Territories,” 10–11.

celebration, become forms of resistance in authoritarian contexts where regimes seek to regulate emotional life.[16]

Second, affective territories are sustained through relational solidarity. This dimension refers to the interpersonal networks through which emotions circulate, and collective trust is built, including practices of care and community. Asef Bayat expands this dimension through his concepts of *undersocieties* and *non-movements*. These are informal networks of kinship, friendship, and shared survival strategies that cultivate trust and solidarity within repressive environments.

Non-movements and undersocieties are relational infrastructures constructed against affective authoritarian governance. Here, social bonds and political subjectivities are reproduced over time, and larger mobilisation becomes possible. Friendship groups and small circles of trust offer emotional security while simultaneously serving as spaces of political dissent. Bayat emphasises that most participants in revolutionary movements develop political consciousness not primarily through protest but through daily struggle.[17]

Third, affective territories are reproduced through small acts embedded in daily life, which subtly challenge repression and state power. These acts can be grouped together under the label of everyday resistance. Theories of everyday resistance can help demonstrate how affective territories are reproduced in spaces beyond those where visible mobilisation takes place. Anna Johansson and Stellan Vinthagen build on James C. Scott, who initially framed everyday resistance as subtle, often hidden acts that occur outside formal channels of protest. They argue that resistance is not merely reactive but dynamically intertwined with power relations. Thus, it encompasses a broad spectrum of practices that can be semi-conscious and non-dramatic as they are embedded in daily interactions and lifestyle choices. Everyday resistance is not

[16] Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East, Second Edition* (Stanford University Press, 2020), 137-58.
[17] Asef Bayat, *Revolutionary Life: The Everyday of the Arab Spring* (Harvard University Press, 2021), 19–30.

about overt confrontation but about subtly undermining power through routine actions that reflect personal agency.[18]

These dimensions form the conceptual infrastructure that allows affective territories to function as spaces that sustain political mobilisation. Through embodied affect, relational solidarity and everyday resistance, movements can maintain a collective identity and political agency over time, even under conditions of severe repression.

Affective Governance

If resistance can be sustained through affective territories, it is because authoritarian regimes also attempt to control these same spaces. While authoritarian power certainly operates through coercion, surveillance and (institutional) violence, it simultaneously extends into the affective and intimate dimensions of everyday life. This section conceptualises these dynamics as affective governance and refers to the ways authoritarian regimes attempt to manage the emotional atmospheres in which political life unfolds by regulating and controlling emotions and interpersonal relationships to constrain dissent.

Within the dimension of embodied affect, Younes Saramifar shows how emotions are historically produced and embodied through state-sponsored memory practices.[19] This is an affective and embodied account of authoritarian power. He argues that political consciousness is shaped through a regime of remembering that colonises the everyday. Saramifar highlights how emotions emerge as historically saturated experiences assembled through language and institutional propaganda, in a process he calls an *assemblage* where feelings circulate between bodies, narratives, objects and infrastructure. Crucially, Saramifar notes how embodied subjects negotiate this type of affective governance by splitting their agency from their subjectivity. They continue to act but resist

[18] Anna Johansson and Stellan Vinthagen, "Dimensions of Everyday Resistance: An Analytical Framework," *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 3 (2016): 419–21.
[19] Younes Saramifar, "Emotions of Felt Memories: Looking for Interplay of Emotions and Histories in Iranian Political Consciousness Since Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988)," *Anthropology of Consciousness* 30, no. 2 (2019): 134–35.

emotionally.[20] Resistance in an affective territory occurs not only in overt dissent but persists in the ongoing effort to live with, reshape and even refuse the emotional infrastructures imposed by authoritarian rule.

Shirin Saeidi and Paola Rivetti discuss the dimension of interpersonal solidarity when they show how securitisation, specifically in post-2009 Iran, reshapes intimacy through the gendering and seclusion of space. They illustrate how these infrastructures of seclusion reorganise affective relations, because subjects are compelled to navigate suspicion, solidarity, care, and mourning within very tightly constrained interpersonal spaces. In resistance movements, relationships formed under repression are shaped by grief and alienation as well as the need to sustain life, and less so by explicit political commitments.[21] Authoritarian regimes suppress relationality and erode trust, yet this produces conditions in which new affective territories can emerge, as resistance persists through fragile interpersonal ties. Mahsa Fariman and Ahmadreza Hakiminejad argue that the Islamic Republic systematically produces public space as gendered and masculine by rendering female bodies invisible or conditionally included. Women who refuse to bend to the tactics used to produce these repressive spaces, such as compulsory veiling, become marked as out of place, as "space invaders."[22]

Saeid Golkar illuminates how in everyday life, authoritarian regimes like the Islamic Republic of Iran engage in systematic social manipulation of minds, bodies, and emotions. Most notably, this manipulation is enacted through what Golkar terms the *politics of sadness*.[23] He goes on to show how authoritarian power deliberately manufactures despair and hopelessness in order to cultivate

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[20] Saramifar, "Emotions of Felt Memories," 148–50.

[21] Shirin Saeidi and Paola Rivetti, "Out of Space: Securitization, Intimacy, and New Research Challenges in Post-2009 Iran," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 3 (2017): 515–19.

[22] Mahsa Alami Fariman and Ahmadreza Hakiminejad, "Women, Life, Freedom: Revolting Space Invaders in Iran," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 28, no. 5 (2025): 1320.

[23] Saeid Golkar, "Manipulated Society: Paralyzing the Masses in Post-Revolutionary Iran," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 29, no. 2 (2016): 135.

emotional paralysis. This, in turn, neutralises dissent and diminishes collective desire for change. Expansive regimes of propaganda, bodily regulation, and ritualised mourning embed the state's authority directly within the subjects' affective lives. Public joy is actively suppressed while sadness is normalised. Golkar demonstrates that authoritarianism actively engineers emotional atmospheres that produce compliant subjects and constrain the possibility for relationships.[24] Indeed, Arastoo Dabiri argues that at the core of Women, Life, Freedom lies a struggle over dignity and life itself. The slogan represents a demand to reclaim everyday existence from authoritarian control. The movement's emphasis on reclaiming life signals that resistance has become more than opposition to state violence, and it has become a reconfiguration of social relations grounded in dignity.[25]

Digital media offer a counterspace where the spatial control of authoritarian repression can be circumvented. Asma Mehan conceptualises the movement as a form of digital feminist placemaking in which women use social media, digital art and online protest strategies to challenge gender-segregated spatial regimes. In the context of mass surveillance and internet blackouts, digital platforms nevertheless enabled the circulation of testimonies, images, videos and art that highlighted women's presence across both physical and virtual public spheres. These practices created spaces in which marginalised voices could articulate alternative futures. Digital feminist placemaking thus functioned as a transnational affective territory and linked local protest to diasporic solidarity and global feminist networks.[26]

Women, Life, Freedom as an Affective Territory

To examine how affective territories are produced and sustained, this article draws on a set of narrative and testimonial sources. *In the Streets of Tehran* by Nila is a personal portrait of the protests by a witness who remains anonymous, *For the Sun After Long Nights* by

[24] Golkar, "Manipulated Society," 149–51.
[25] Arastoo Dabiri, 'Woman, Life, Freedom': A Movement in Progress in Iran," *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence* 8, no. 1 (2023): 3.
[26] Asma Mehan, "Digital Feminist Placemaking: The Case of the 'Woman, Life, Freedom' Movement," *Urban Planning* 9 (January 2024): 2; 15–16.

Fatemeh Jamalpour and Nilo Tabrizy explores the protests through the interwoven stories of two Iranian journalists and the edited volume *Woman Life Freedom: Voices and Art from the Women's Protests in Iran* edited by Malu Halasa is an anthology of essays, testimonies, interviews, and visual art produced in response to the uprising. These texts compile firsthand accounts, reflections, and observations from participants and witnesses of the Women, Life, Freedom movement. Here, they are treated as situated narratives that enable a re-reading of the movement based on the conceptual framework this article proposes.

The Women, Life, Freedom movement illustrates how resistance can be sustained through affective territories even under conditions of intense repression. Nima Orazani and Ali Teymoori emphasise that the movement is built on an exceptionally strong cultural and symbolic repertoire. This includes hair-cutting rituals, rooftop chants and widespread acts of civil disobedience. For example, cutting off a lock of hair became a shared gesture of grief and moral outrage, intelligible across a wide range of actors.[27] These embodied practices produced affective infrastructures that lasted even when the possibility for street protests was precluded. They are made up of a distributed network of symbolic acts that sustained collective identification even in the absence of centralised leadership.

Embodied Affect

" *We are a wave of anxious bodies, of fierce heads with our hair free in the wind."*[28]

– *Nila, protester*

Accounts of the Women, Life, Freedom movement repeatedly highlight how bodies became sites of protest. Participants describe how resistance unfolded not only through slogans and organised demonstrations, but also through gestures and bodily interactions

[27] Nima Orazani and Ali Teymoori, "The Manifold Faces of Political Resistance: The Woman, Life, Freedom Movement," in *Resistance to Repression and Violence: Global Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Fouad Bou Zeineddine and Johanna Vollhardt (Oxford University Press, 2024), 137–156.

[28] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran* (Ithaka Press, 2023), 15.

that communicate grief, anger, and courage. One of the most significant embodied gestures to emerge during the protest was the public cutting of hair. Only days after Jina Mahsa Amini died, a journalist witnessed a young woman cutting off her ponytail with a pair of scissors while shouting "You are forever dishonorable" at the present riot police and security personnel.[29] This embodied act of defiance quickly became emblematic as a ritual of grief and anger. The public cutting of hair has often been interpreted as a symbolic act of defiance directed at compulsory veiling laws. However, this practice can be re-read as more than symbolic protest. It constitutes an embodied production of space in which the body itself becomes a site of political expression and collective recognition. Through repetition across dispersed contexts, this gesture generates an affective territory that enables participants to recognise one another as part of a shared struggle, even in the absence of coordinated mobilisation. In her account of demonstrations in Tehran, participant Nila emphasises the physical intensity of collective protest. She describes how emotions like fear, determination and anger circulate through the crowd of bodies and bind individuals together.[30]

Beyond street protests, Nila notes that shared bodily affects still unite dissidents: "In taxis, shops or doctors' waiting rooms, I occasionally notice someone crying noiselessly next to me. There is a painful comfort in knowing that other people understand why you are crying: it is a kind of unity in itself."[31] She also emphasises the power of the protesters' shared anger, an anger she says is "both terrible and romantic."[32] Shared emotions and their shared bodily experience are what bind participants together and what turn them from individuals into a united collective. They create affective infrastructures that enable participants to recognise each other as part of the same struggle, even when direct protest becomes temporarily impossible.

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[29] Fatemeh Jamalpour and Nilo Tabrizy, *For The Sun After Long Nights: The Story of Iran's Women-Led Uprising*, First hardcover edition (Pantheon Books, 2025), 10–11.
[30] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran*, 15.
[31] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran*, 68.
[32] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran*, 25.

The embodied practices of singing and dancing also came to play important roles in the movement. The song "Baaraye" by Iranian singer Shervin Hajipour quickly became its unofficial anthem. In a video, a group of schoolgirls can be seen joining hands and singing the song together.[33] During confrontations with security forces, protesters often sang together in an expression of collective courage and defiance that stood in stark contrast with the fear and isolation the state tries to evoke.[34] Similarly, dance emerged as a powerful embodied form of resistance. During protests, participants "danced around makeshift fires."[35] Both singing and dancing had long been subject to government restrictions; women, for example, are prohibited from singing in public. Thus, "simple ancient arts such as dancing, singing, even a brief kiss in the street, which dare to envision a different way of life, have perhaps already defeated the mighty Islamic state."[36] Joint bodily movement itself becomes a form of political imagination and allows participants to temporarily escape the politics of sadness and inhabit the freedom they seek. Singing and dancing together amplify emotional experiences through repetition and foster affective bonds that emerge from the shared bodily participation. Embodied practices help produce spaces of resistance that challenge authoritarian attempts to regulate emotion and behaviour. Protesters transform their bodies into sites of political expression, and by doing so, affective territories emerge that sustain solidarity and collective identity even under conditions of repression.

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[33] Alexander Cyrus Poulikakos, "Queering of a Revolution: On Reappropriation," in *Woman Life Freedom: Voices and Art from the Women's Protests in Iran*, 1st ed, ed. Malu Halasa (Saqi Books, 2023), 9.

[34] Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun after Long Nights*, 40.

[35] Malu Halasa, "Introduction," in *Woman Life Freedom: Voices and Art from the Women's Protests in Iran*, 1st ed, ed. Malu Halasa (Saqi Books, 2023), iv.

[36] Halasa, "Introduction," xii.

Relational Solidarity

"*Hand in hand, we become the sea.*"[37]

– *Fatemeh, protester*

While embodied practices cause affective territories to emerge, relational solidarity enables these emotions to circulate across individuals and persist beyond immediate encounters. Gestures of mutual support, care and kinship build relational infrastructures that sustain collective struggle. In this sense, affective territories are not only constituted through shared feelings but also through practices of care that bind individuals into communities.

During the Women, Life, Freedom movement, solidarity emerged through everyday interactions among protesters, as small gestures among strangers created a sense of shared purpose during demonstrations. Participants exchanged handwritten notes and encouraging messages in public spaces and formed quiet bonds with individuals they often did not know. Young women would secretly pass notes containing poems and protest slogans to others in the streets: "These days, young women without hijab put these notes in our hands secretly in the streets as we walk past them (. . .) It is such a joy among all the difficulties and dangers that we choose to face every day."[38] These exchanges represent small moments of solidarity and reinforced the sense participants were part of a shared struggle, even when the notes were passed with "shaky hands."[39]

Another significant practice of care that emerged during the movement was tending to injured protesters. During particularly brutal crackdowns, injured participants were often transported to hospitals by ordinary civilians and fellow protesters who rushed them to emergency rooms in their private cars. However, because hospitals were monitored by security forces seeking to identify and arrest injured protesters, many people avoided formal medical care and relied on "sympathetic doctors and nurses who make underground house calls."[40] Even though they were warned not to

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[37] Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun after Long Nights*, 33.
[38] Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun after Long Nights*, 31.
[39] Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun after Long Nights*, 33.
[40] Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun after Long Nights*, 72.

and risked punishment, medical professionals continued to provide treatment to the injured and medical care itself formed the underpinning to networks of care and solidarity.[41] This network functioned even transnationally when "Iranian medics all over the world have begun to do remote consultations to those injured by tear gas, truncheons and bullets."[42] Another participant remembers his brother Azad, a Kurdish dentist who repeatedly joined demonstrations and provided aid to injured participants. He "transported the injured people to a safe place and treated them."[43] 32-year-old Azad, whose name means *free* in Persian and Kurdish, was killed on 17 November 2022 during a protest in Mahabad. In the absence of institutional protection, protesters relied on one another to provide medical assistance and safety from state violence. These practices of mutual care and aid that make up this dimension of affective territories can help transform a movement into a community capable of sustaining itself under conditions of repression.

Relational solidarity also develops and is expressed through the simple act of being present together in public space. In fact, protest gatherings often began informally as individuals moved through the city: "You can simply walk in the streets, and people will join you, and before you know it, you are part of a small group."[44] During gatherings, participants protected each other. One describes how security forces tried to detain her, and in response, bystanders immediately intervened: "men, ordinary men, leapt out of their cars and motorcycles. . . 'Let her go,' they shouted, pushing the officer off me."[45] These practices of care also extend to the families of protesters who were injured, arrested or killed on the streets. When the family of a young woman who was killed during demonstrations struggled to pay the large sum demanded by authorities in order to retrieve her body for burial, the neighbourhood mobilised to assist

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[41] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran*, 11.

[42] Kamin Mohammadi, "Jin Jîyan Azadî: The Kurdish Heart of Iran's Female-Led Uprising," in *Woman Life Freedom: Voices and Art from the Women's Protests in Iran*, ed. Malu Halasa (Saqi Books, 2023), 28.

[43] Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun after Long Nights*, 239.

[44] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran*, 11.

[45] Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun after Long Nights*, 28.

the family: "All the neighbours join in helping to collect the money."[46]

These practices demonstrate how resistance is sustained through networks of care and kinship. By protecting one another, treating the injured, exchanging gestures of encouragement, and recognising shared grief, protesters construct relational infrastructures that allow collective action to persist. Acts such as exchanging notes, protecting strangers, or providing medical care are often understood as spontaneous expressions of solidarity during protest. However, these practices are constitutive elements of affective territories. They do not simply support mobilisation but actively produce relational spaces through which trust, care, and collective identity are sustained over time. In this sense, solidarity is not a byproduct of protest, but an actively practised infrastructure that enables resistance to persist under conditions of repression.

Everyday Resistance

"*Hijabs are like the petrol in our Molotov cocktails: fuel for the revolution.*"[47]

– *Nila, protester*

Unlike large demonstrations or overt political mobilisation, everyday practices of resistance are often dispersed, informal, and difficult for authorities to fully suppress. Yet their effect can still be politically significant. Within the framework of affective territories, everyday resistance operates by gradually reshaping public space. Through repeated acts of subtle defiance, individuals normalise dissent and create environments in which resistance becomes part of ordinary social life.

One of the most visible forms of everyday resistance in the Women, Life, Freedom movement involves changes in clothing, in particular the refusal to fully comply with compulsory hijab regulations. Many women began quietly altering their behaviour in public spaces even outside formal demonstrations: "For a while

[46] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran*, 66.
[47] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran*, 41.

now, I, like many other women, have stopped pulling up my scarf to cover my hair when I pass by the guards."[48] This subtle gesture represents a significant form of everyday resistance that undermines the state's attempts to regulate their bodies by gradually normalising noncompliance in routine interactions. Rather than viewing these practices as isolated or merely symbolic, they can be read as cumulative processes that gradually transform the spatial and social norms of public life. Through repetition across everyday interactions, such acts produce spaces of resistance that normalise noncompliance and reshape the boundaries of what is politically possible.

Another important expression of everyday resistance emerges through the persistence of ordinary pleasures and social practices that authoritarian governance attempts to regulate or suppress. Even seemingly mundane activities take on political meaning under the Islamic Republic: "We try to live our everyday lives every moment — every time we laugh, dance, or drink. In the Islamic Republic, everyday life is a struggle for the most basic human rights." [49] In this context, actions that might otherwise appear apolitical become forms of quiet defiance and demonstrate how resistance can take the form of sustaining ordinary forms of life that the regime attempts to discipline. For example, resistance was often confined to "an underground life of partying or cursing the ayatollahs behind closed doors."[50] Everyday resistance also unfolds through informal conversations, for example, when individuals begin questioning the ideological foundations of the regime through discussions circulating on social media and messaging platforms.

People used digital spaces to reflect on contradictions within the system and to articulate grievances that had previously remained unspoken: "On social media platforms (. . .) we write about hypocrisies that we have only recently woken up to."[51] Everyday forms of communication can gradually transform political consciousness and produce alternative interpretations of social and political life. Everyday resistance operates through the ordinary

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[48] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran*, 15.
[49] Jamalpour and Tabrizy, *For the Sun after Long Nights*, 171.
[50] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran*, 10.
[51] Nila, *In The Streets Of Tehran*, 68.

practices of daily life. Practices such as maintaining spaces of joy, engaging in everyday political discussion, expressing dissent in private gatherings or dressing in a way that defies state-sponsored dress codes allow individuals to challenge authoritarian authority without necessarily confronting it directly. These actions may not appear dramatic in isolation. Yet, when repeated across many interactions and social contexts, they gradually transform the emotional and relational landscape in which resistance takes place. Everyday resistance, therefore, plays a crucial role in sustaining movements under conditions of repression.

By embedding dissent within routine practices and intimate spaces, individuals create subtle but persistent forms of opposition that persist even when visible mobilisation becomes dangerous. In this way, everyday acts of defiance help reproduce the affective territory of the Women, Life, Freedom movement.

Conclusion: Rethinking Resistance and the Possibility of Hope

This article began with an attempt to think differently about the Women, Life, Freedom movement, specifically, and social movements generally. That is: less in terms of its visible moments of protest, and more in terms of the relations, practices, and emotions through which it was sustained. I began working on this article only a few weeks after the massacre on 8 and 9 January 2026 that cost tens of thousands of Iranian protesters their lives after new large-scale protests had erupted at the end of 2025. I had been working on it for only a few weeks when all-out war broke out in Iran. It was difficult when writing, not to feel constantly outpaced by the present. Repression intensified, protest re-emerged in altered forms and eventually war unfolded. I had to resist the sense that my object of analysis was constantly slipping out of view, that it was at once ongoing and already past.

Maybe this experience highlighted even more sharply the need for rethinking how resistance is recognised and studied. The events that unfolded during the writing process neither confirm a continuous trajectory of resistance nor mark its definitive rupture. Instead, they make visible how quickly the conditions under which resistance is lived can shift, and how difficult it is to trace what carries over from one moment to the next. Movements do not simply

appear and disappear, nor do they unfold in a linear or continuous manner. They shift, fragment, and reconfigure and at times become difficult to locate without being entirely absent. The framework of affective territories offered in this article is meant to make space for uncertainty. It is not meant to stabilize the object of analysis, but to hold open the possibility that resistance might endure in dispersed, uneven, and at times barely perceptible ways. If this article has sought to think resistance differently, it does so without claiming to fully grasp it, but it is an attempt to remain attentive to those forms of resistance that are easily overlooked. The spaces and relations that come into view through this framework may also be among the few sites in which change remains visible, and hope can still be located, even in times of despair.

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