



The system wants you to feel despair

## Description

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Image from Palestine protests in London. A large crowd of people holding many Palestinian flags and placards

It's a critical time for the left to stand firm with moral clarity, understanding how mechanisms of power impact the psyche and what we can do about it. But the psychological toll on [Palestine solidarity activists](#) is nonetheless immense right now. Not since the worst days of Israel's bloody, ferocious bombing against civilians in Gaza two years ago — watching [children](#) shredded on my phone screen daily — have I felt the crippling wound of injustice so viscerally.

The Filton 4's [staggering sentencing](#) under a "terrorism connection" for criminal damage — like being sentenced for murder for stealing bread, as one friend put it — and Palestine Action's [proscription ban overruling](#) were political defeats felt heavily and collectively. In a desperate attempt to protect [Israel's largest weapon manufacturer](#) and wider Israeli interests, the message was chilling: *direct action can cost you your freedom.*

Instantly, I felt how the layers of injustice mounting over here paralleled those imposed on Palestinians for decades over there. It [cemented the reality](#) that those in positions of power in the justice system will inevitably protect the interests of the already powerful.

## How power impacts the psyche

If you're wondering how best to cope in this current climate, reading Lara Sheehi's latest work, [From The Clinic To The Streets](#) will feel timely.

The despair, confusion, exhaustion or fear you might be feeling are not accidental. The clinical psychologist points to these states as "psychic intrusions", which are intentional parts of systems of power used to pacify, exhaust and derail resistance.

Sheehi, who is Research Fellow at the University of South Africa's Institute for Social and Health Sciences, says on the [Sumud podcast](#)

Anything that makes its way into your mind and reconfigures how you feel and think about yourself in the world is a psychic intrusion. Psychic intrusions normalise the world as it is.

This psychological warfare can be crude and obvious, like [job losses](#) [smear campaigns](#) and [unfounded threats by UK Lawyers for Israel](#). Sometimes, more subtle tactics are used, like inverted media narratives, [censorship](#) [lexical warfare](#) and the engineering of acceptable political discourse.

Sheehi says:

Many of the techniques and devices used in psychological warfare are designed to worry to make life more uncomfortable and to undermine morale.

These tactics, referred to as psychological operations (psyops) by the state and military, have been used to alienate and debilitate, such as [Black civil rights](#). They are tried, trusted, and publicly documented.

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Walid Daqqa puts it:

the body of the incarcerated no longer becomes the primary target or torture, but instead, it is his mind and soul.

Using the contested space of the psyche to break the force of a person or movement is deliberate and intentional.

## You're not going crazy

For power systems like settler colonialism to exist, reality must be obscured. [Hospitals are bombed](#) while the Israeli military [claims](#) it protects civilians; students in encampments, [attacked by Zionists](#) are inverted as [the aggressors](#)

When doctors [face losing their medical licenses](#) for fabricated antisemitism charges, or when [criticism of Israel is conflated with antisemitism](#) the public are left confused about what to believe. Confusion is curated to stabilise power; this happens "seamlessly" and is aided by media, state and right-wing activist groups, as well as the "violent complacency of liberalism".

Fear and anxiety have the power to diffuse energy and action too. I think about the conversations shutdown by friends since October 2023, creating what Sheehi calls "low-grade anticipatory fears" as mainstream discourse demonises any advocacy for Palestine.

Despair, another psychic intrusion, erodes stamina. Our fellow protesters have been imprisoned with [more trials ongoing](#) while those committing war crimes [continue to be funded](#) and [shielded from accountability](#). I know I felt shaken and defeated watching peaceful Jewish protests against the illegal

sale of Palestinian land being [attacked by violent Zionist thugs](#) and protected by the police.

Exhaustion is also a *“saboteur”*, sustaining domination, keeping people *“alienated”*, disconnected and disassociated, says Sheehi. Recognising exhaustion without feeling shame is a step toward staying connected to reality.

As the Palestinian activist and martyr [Bassel al-Araj](#) cautions:

do not contribute to instilling a sense of defeat.

The more we’re engaged in politically dissident action, the more intense the psychic intrusions will be. We must ensure that we do not write Palestinians out of their futures. But state power has noticed the more militant activists are, the most unmalleable. Sheehi guides us to remain vigilant, refuse these intrusions access to our interior worlds, and to reskill ourselves.

## How to fortify yourself

**Be psychologically militant:** *“Psychic numbing”* was what Sheehi saw in revolutionary black psychiatrist [Frantz Fanon](#) forming an *“unflinching”* commitment to liberation as a *“non-negotiable starting point”*. She calls for a daily, active political consciousness to resist the forces turning you against your own moral clarity.

**Transform anger into repetitive refusal:** *“not a loop of stuckness”*, but a mental strength that *“antagonises power’s ability to settle within us”*. Maintain lucidity against the *“confusion and never-ending terror”* of Zionist aggression, expansionism and imperial violence.

**Commit to community care:** Political organising is messy and fraught with tensions. Defeat and grief will affect people differently, but it’s a shared experience, says Hannah Proctor, author of [Burnout: The Emotional Experience of Political Grief](#). She sees *“militant mourning”* as a way to process loss collectively alongside continued action.

Being well is necessary for collective action. The Palestinian cause, confronted by larger infrastructures of power, involves risk, so creating a web of care is essential. The Black Panthers understood this, pioneering and embedding community care [into their agenda](#) for social and racial justice.

**Strengthen your inner world:** If you’re made to feel like the crazy or obsessive one, a conspiracy theorist, asking too much, delusional or plain utopian, recognise these as narratives that detract and extinguish our fire.

Even when you don’t see change, Proctor invites us to turn to activist [Mike Davies](#), who said:

Fight with hope, fight without hope, but fight absolutely.

We can acknowledge how utterly horrendous things are, and how insurmountable the challenges feel, yet continue to fight.

Political struggle changes people. The injustices of Gaza have changed me, especially as a British-Iraqi Arab. Whether you're living through the hell of Israeli occupation firsthand in Gaza or the West Bank or here fighting on their behalf, we know that showing up is not just a political act but very much a psychological one too. The best we can do is be aware of that and protect our psyche with utmost resistance.

*Featured image via the Canary*

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