

## Stomping for Palestine: “We are more than victims”

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Palestine stands at the center of global attention, the *dabke*, a traditional folk dance from the Levant, is conquering social media, city streets, and Brussels stages. As a collective gesture and act of resistance, the dance returns to the KVS with *Badke(remix)*, a reworking of a performance originally staged in 2013. This time, the artistic direction lies entirely in the hands of Palestinian choreographers. *“If you can't say it, dance it.”*

On TikTok and Instagram, *dabke* challenges have been circulating for several years. But since late 2023, in the wake of the devastating war in Gaza, this traditionally group-performed dance has made a new viral resurgence. Alongside footage of Palestinian children dancing among the rubble of bombed-out buildings, videos from all corners of the globe show people performing their boldest moves, their most defiant foot stomps. Each clip is a gesture of solidarity, as made clear by the hashtags that accompany them.

In Brussels, events like Estafette for Palestine, supported by Les Halles and Kaaaitheater, have hosted *dabke* workshops open to all. Every Sunday, the group Dabke Love draws eager crowds to community center De Rinck in Anderlecht, where people come to embrace the movements, energy, and history of this dance. Dabke Love has nearly 27,000 followers on TikTok and contributes to the rising popularity of a dance that is not inherently political—but becomes political when the world trembles.

This is not new. Dabke has long gone hand in hand with political unrest in the Middle East. In 2011, protests against Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria were rhythmically powered by *dabke* performances. When Syrian refugees arrived en masse in Brussels in 2015, they brought this collective dance with them, shaking city meeting points well into the night.

### **A Different Context**

But what does *dabke* actually look like? Picture a group of dancers standing in a line or half-circle, holding hands or linking arms, rhythmically striking the ground in unison. Feet stomp, legs jump, bodies quiver to a compelling, almost hypnotic rhythm. It is a dance in which the power of the collective is central, where energy flows through the group like a wave. While it is often performed at weddings and celebrations, *dabke* also belongs on stage.

In 2013, dramaturg Hildegard De Vuyst, together with choreographers Koen Augustijnen and Rosalba Torres Guerrero, presented *Badke* at the KVS, a performance born out of workshops in the West Bank and co-produced by les ballets C de la B (now renamed laGeste), the KVS, and the A. M. Qattan Foundation, a Palestinian organization.

On stage, ten Palestinian dancers deconstructed the classic *dabke* steps and merged them with the energy of hip-hop, breakdance, and contemporary dance. The performance was widely acclaimed and toured internationally for years—even in Israel, in Nazareth.

Twelve years later, *Badke(remix)* emerges in a radically different context. While the structure of the original performance remains, it is now entirely driven by Palestinian choreographers. Leading the project are Ata Khatab, a choreographer from Ramallah, and Amir Sabra, based in Ireland and originally from Nablus. The production is co-produced by laGeste and the Palestinian company Stereo48, co-led by Sabra.

### **Travel Ban**

"These are not the same bodies, not the same times," summarizes Ata Khatab, who was also involved in the original version of *Badke*. As artistic director of El-Funoun—a major cultural institution in the West Bank, a cornerstone of contemporary *dabke*, and a symbol of resistance—he now brings a new political reality to the stage: tougher, tenser, and marked by a renewed urgency.

Khatab is barred by Israeli authorities from leaving the West Bank and therefore cannot attend rehearsals in Ghent. It's not the first time—in 2021, he spent fourteen months in prison. "It's not the dance that bothers them," he explains. "It's what the dance enables: mobilizing youth, passing on culture, creating a sense of collective belonging."

That is the essence of *Badke(remix)*: turning the stage into a living archive. Rebecca Kaoud, one of the dancers, puts it like this: "Dabke is my first breath. A memory of my childhood." She adds: "The occupation tries to erase this heritage. But with every foot stomp, we call upon the earth itself to remember us."

For her, it is the *dabke's* subversive power that fuels her desire to keep dancing. "By dancing, we exist differently—not just as victims." Kaoud, who is from Ramallah and trained at the National Dance Academy in Rome, is not only a dancer but also a choreographer, advocating for a form of dance that transcends gender and social roles.

"As a Palestinian woman, dancing and claiming a place on stage is an act of resistance—a bold gesture in a society where cultural expression is often marginalized, and where our bodies are politically charged simply for existing, moving, and creating."

## A Shared Human Heritage

Dabke originated in the rural Levant and takes its name from the Arabic word “dabka”, meaning “foot stomp.” According to Rebecca Kaoud, tradition holds that farmers once flattened soil with their feet—a simple act that grew into a ritual group dance.

In December 2023, Palestinian folk dance dabke was added to UNESCO’s list of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Dabke is much more than a dance: it’s a cultural universe in which music, traditional instruments—*darbuka*, *mijwiz*, drums—song, and texts in local dialects come together.

“When we dance, we’re always telling a story,” says Kaoud. “We carry so many stories, stories that are rarely allowed to be told. Stories that reveal the truth of our existence, our desires, our resistance. Like that of two lovers separated not by choice, but by the cold bars of a prison, in Israeli-occupied territory, where even love is seen as a threat.”

Today, *dabke* transcends its folkloric origins. “If we were a free people, this would be a dance of the past, steeped in nostalgia,” says Ata Khatab. “But in the Palestinian reality, it’s an essential symbol of resistance and a way to pass our culture on to our children—so they don’t lose their identity and retain a vital connection to their heritage.”

For Khatab, it is crucial that *dabke* does not become a museum piece, but remains a living, evolving art form that adapts to today’s challenges. “Palestinians are not isolated individuals, but carriers of a dynamic culture—despite the attempts of Zionist propaganda to deny this.”

## Too Uncomfortable

“The most painful thing,” says Rebecca Kaoud, “is that the world doesn’t see the cage we’re trying to break out of through dance.” She adds, “Sometimes I feel that our sorrow and struggle are too painful for people, that they make them uncomfortable.” That’s why the dance is so essential: “Our words are censored, but our bodies can still speak: *If you can’t say it, dance it.*”

*Badke (remix)* will be performed in mid-June at the KVS—a return to the stage in an explosive international climate. “The war in Gaza both helps and hinders us,” Ata Khatab acknowledges. “Some institutions welcome us with open arms. Others prefer to keep their distance. Not everyone is ready to host Palestinian artists right now.”

For now, only Brussels and a few Flemish cities are on the program; more European dates are expected to follow. But for Khatab, it’s already a powerful message that Palestinian dancers from both the homeland and the diaspora are able to perform together. “That is the magic of *dabke*: reminding the world that our people remain indivisible.”