How Dance Builds Resilience in War and Conflict

“Dance offers hope and a sense of belonging. It creates safe spaces for self-expression and helps strengthen both psychological and social resilience”, says Palestinian cultural leader Khaled Elayyan, one of the main contributors to Norway’s National Dance Conference 2026.

When Norway’s dance community gathers in Oslo on January 21, 2026, Khaled Elayyan will travel from Palestine to share experiences from a life and professional practice in which dance is not only an artistic and cultural expression, but a vital part of societal preparedness.

Elayyan is the Executive Director of the independent humanitarian organisation First Ramallah Group (Sareyyet Ramallah), Artistic Director of Sareyyet Ramallah Dance Company, and Director of the Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival.

Founded in 1927, the organisation combines culture, the arts, sports and community development in a region marked by long-term conflict and war.

In this interview, Khaled Elayyan shares insights from his work in Palestine on how dance functions as community, resilience and hope in a state of exception, and why art and culture become even more important when society is under pressure.

You lead Sareyyet Ramallah, an organisation that combines cultural work, humanitarian activities and community development. Could you describe the role that dance, and the arts play within the organisation today?

“Sareyyet Ramallah is an independent Palestinian community-based organization founded in 1927. It upholds humanistic values and principles, foremost among them equality and non-discrimination based on gender, religion, or ethnicity, as well as the protection of the rights of marginalized groups. Sareyyet Ramallah develops and implements diverse programs and activities targeting all segments of Palestinian society through its scouting, sports, artistic, cultural, and social programs.

Dance and the arts play a central role in the work of Sareyyet Ramallah, forming a core part of its vision for community development, strengthening cultural identity, and providing a safe space for young people to express themselves. Our programs include the productions of folklore dance (Dabke) and contemporary dance performances, a dance school that welcomes children aged 3 to 15 to learn ballet, Dabke, and contemporary dance, in addition to a summer dance school and the organization of specialized artistic workshops and training courses.

Sareyyet Ramallah also organizes the Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival, which was launched in 2006 and has to date presented 303 performances by 193 companies from 39 Palestinian, Arab, and international countries. The festival includes performances, workshops, a conference on dance and society, and the Palestinian Dance Forum, contributing to cultural exchange and the building of bridges between local, regional, and international communities.”

When did you first realise that dance could be something more than a purely artistic expression?

“We realized this from the establishment of the Sareyyet Ramallah dance company in 1960, which continued its work until 1967 before being forced to stop due to the Israeli occupation and was later re-established in 1985. Since then, Sareyyet Ramallah has believed that dance is not merely an aesthetic form of expression, but also a tool for character-building, strengthening national belonging, deepening social connection, and developing cooperation and discipline among children and youth, particularly in a highly challenging environment.

Given that the Palestinian people live under occupation, the arts in all their forms have played a fundamental role in cultural resistance, expressing the daily reality of Palestinians and their aspirations for freedom and dignity.”

You work in a region marked by extreme instability and conflict. What is the most important thing dance can offer people living in such a reality?

“Dance offers hope and a sense of belonging, provides a safe space for self-expression, and contributes to strengthening psychological and social resilience. It allows individuals to experience freedom and creativity despite the harsh conditions they go through living under Israeli occupation, which seeks not only to occupy our land but also to displace our people and erase our cultural identity.

The artistic works produced by Sareyyet Ramallah Dance Company have given artists the opportunity to express themselves through the body as a powerful tool of expression, enabling them to communicate their ideas, perspectives, and human values through dance.”

How has the dance practice within Sareyyet Ramallah functioned as a kind of “self-preparedness” for children, youth and adults; emotionally, socially or culturally? Could you share a moment or situation in which you clearly saw dance create safety, community or hope?

“Through dance programs at Sareyyet Ramallah, children, youth, and adults acquire psychological, social, and cultural readiness. In Dabke and contemporary dance workshops, participants learn discipline, develop cooperation and teamwork skills, and experience safety and belonging within the company, creating a supportive and motivating environment for growth.

In 2021, in partnership with Nawa for Culture and Arts Association in Deir Al-Balah city in the Gaza Strip, we began producing a dance performance titled “Taraweed Deir Al-Balah.” Over the past three decades, Gaza has been portrayed almost exclusively as a place of war and destruction, as if it lacked cultural and civilizational history, despite its deep historical roots especially the city of Deir Al-Balah.

The performance aimed to present the natural and authentic image of Gaza, and of Deir Al-Balah in particular, a coastal city rich in musical and human heritage, and in everyday life practices such as weddings, harvests, fishing, and social celebrations.

The premiere was scheduled for November 2023, but the genocidal war on Gaza that began on October 7,2023 led to its cancellation. The company resumed work in mid-2024, and the performance premiered in May 2025, receiving wide public and critical acclaim.

This experience gave dancers aged 16 to 23 many of whom had never visited Gaza the opportunity to learn about its culture. The production became a means of strengthening their belonging and a space to express hope for a better future for Gaza."

Many people think of the arts as something added after a society is functioning well. You experience the opposite, that art and dance are foundational elements of a society in turmoil. How do you explain this to others?

"In the Palestinian context, where society lives under the Israeli occupation, art and dance are not luxuries but essential tools for building community and preserving cultural identity. Dance is in the core of our resistance to occupation, which seeks to appropriate both our tangible and intangible heritage. Art empowers young people to express themselves and provides tools for coping with daily pressures and challenges, making it a fundamental component of community life."

What structural or political conditions are essential for keeping dance and artistic practice alive under such challenging circumstances?

"Sustaining dance and arts under difficult conditions requires safe and well-equipped facilities, sustainable financial support to ensure program continuity especially in light of politically conditioned funding and weak local support along with empowering artistic practitioners and developing their capacities and guaranteeing freedom of artistic and cultural expression.

Sareyyet Ramallah has faced significant challenges from conservative currents, particularly regarding contemporary dance, yet it has succeeded in firmly establishing this art form within Palestinian society. Artistic practice also needs to be strengthened as part of the cultural industry, supported by a clear institutional and administrative framework that ensures organization and sustainability."

What is lost — for artists and for society — when these structures are weakened?

"When these structures weaken, artists lose passion, hope, and opportunities for creativity and development; youth participation declines; and society's ability to maintain cultural and social cohesion is undermined. Since the genocidal war on Gaza, many artistic productions and performances have stopped, and the Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival has been suspended, forcing many artists to seek work in other fields or to migrate abroad. In such circumstances, society loses one of its most vital means of communicating with the world."

The theme of The National Dance Conference 2026 in Oslo is "Dance as a Bridge Builder." Based on your experience, how can dance connect people who are otherwise separated by conflict, language, history or politics?

"Dance is a universal human language that transcends borders and can build bridges between individuals and communities despite differences in language, history, or politics. The Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival is a living example, bringing together Palestinian, Arab, and international companies and creating a space for cultural exchange, mutual understanding, and relationships based on respect and artistic collaboration."

The festival has played a significant role in strengthening cultural dialogue between the Palestinian people and the world, and in presenting an authentic image of Palestinian society to international audiences."

What have you learned in Ramallah that you believe may also be relevant to us in Norway, a peaceful society, yet increasingly affected by polarisation?

"We have learned that engaging young people in cultural and artistic activities from an early age strengthens social cohesion and reinforces collective identity. Art is also a powerful tool for dialogue and for bridging differing perspectives, even in societies experiencing political or social polarization. We have also learned the importance of holding on to hope, as it is a vital source for perseverance, even under the most difficult circumstances."

On a practical level: what is daily life like for a dance company in the situation you are currently experiencing? Could you describe what it takes just to keep going?

"Daily life is filled with political, security, economic, logistical, and artistic challenges ranging from occupation practices such as the imprisonment of artists, daily military incursions into Palestinian cities, villages, and refugee camps, and checkpoints that restrict the movement of artists and audiences, to limited funding, a shortage of theatres and facilities, and social challenges related to contemporary dance.

Despite these obstacles, we have succeeded in building a distinctive and high-quality experience in dance education, festival organization, and the production of artistic works with tangible social impact."

What role do you think international networks, festivals and collaborations can play in strengthening dance communities in places facing significant challenges?

"International networks and festivals provide moral and financial support, enable the exchange of expertise, and enhance recognition of local artistic practices. They also empower artists to develop their skills, sustain their work, and strengthen dialogue, communication, and cultural exchange between peoples."

What gives you the personal strength and motivation to continue this work?

“Seeing children and young people create, gain self-confidence, and express themselves through the body, along with the joy of audiences, is my primary source of motivation. Community and international recognition also reinforce my commitment to continuing the development of the artistic movement.

The experience of producing Taraweed Deir Al-Balah was a profound source of strength for me. Through this work, I felt I was offering real support to my people in Gaza especially when they watched the performance, expressed their joy, and asked me to convey their authentic image to the world.”

Has dance changed the way you understand community, leadership or social development?

“Absolutely. Over 44 years of working in this field, I have come to understand that leadership is not merely about directing others, but about empowerment and creating opportunities for people to express themselves and participate. I have also realized that art and dance in particular plays a vital role in social development, strengthening human values, and building communities that are more resilient and capable of withstanding challenges.”