



Movement Vocabulary of Middle Eastern Dance

Introduction

The movement vocabulary of Middle Eastern dance is not codified to a common body of knowledge and standards like many western dance forms such as ballet. In its countries of origin it is usually not taught using the western concepts of structure and technique. It is learned as a social dance and those who teach it as a performance art use the “do as I do” format where the student mimics the teacher. It is my understanding that for the most part, it is only when the student performs incorrectly the teacher will to break down steps or revert to other methods. Though there are benefits to this approach of teaching and learning when the student is open to and fully engaged in the activity, most learners, at some point in their studies need a vocabulary of words to organize, process, and later access that information. This is the mechanism which I use as a rationale to not only name our steps and movements, but to use descriptive names wherever possible rather than words that rely on imagery. Although imagery can help capture the feeling and flavor of the step, it should be used in addition to the descriptive term, not in its place.

Having no common vocabulary to describe movements, students are often confronted with several names for the same steps or movements when they take instruction from different teachers, particularly in workshops from national and international artists. Sometimes it is not clear whether it is a completely new move or step or a variation of one they already know. There are however some well-known and more established terms that most dancers if not all will be familiar with. Some of the terms are borrowed from other dance forms and some are created to describe the unique movements of Middle Eastern dance forms. Wherever possible I have used the most commonly known term for the movement or step, or I have chosen concrete descriptive terms. I also rely less on abstract imagery to describe the movements.****



The Movements and Their Names

Middle Eastern dance has many more body movements than other dance forms, I have divided the movement vocabulary into those of **Base Movements and Isolations**, **Dance Movements** and **Dance Steps**. A **movement** is defined as action performed within the core of the body or limbs for which there is no shift of weight and does not travel on the floor. A **base** movement is movement of the body that by itself is not necessarily a dance movement, but it can be. More often **base** movements are combined to make a **basic** dance movement. Similarly, an **isolation** is a contraction of a muscle which by itself may or may not be a dance movement and is more often combined with a **base movement** to make a **basic dance movement**.

A **step**, on the other hand, is an action where there is a shift of weight and may or may not travel on the floor. A step is simply the footwork and weight placement that is often combined with movements to make a dance move or combination. Thinking of **steps** and **movements** as separate skills will facilitate learning as we build on basic skills to reach more complex and sophisticated skills, such as combining several movements and steps to create a multi-dimensional combination.

This concept of placing one skill or idea on top of another without compromising the integrity of its components is called “layering.” Layering can be as simple as combining a step and a movement, or can be very complex and sophisticated with several movements layered on top of each other. To master any level of layering a dancer must first master and be in complete control of the individual components of the layers. It is only with correct muscle engagement technique that allows all the individual parts to be distinct yet complimenting each other.

In addition, when performing for an audience, the movement vocabulary you choose to combine or layer must interpret the music in a way that is appropriate, and ideally performed with artistry with respect to instrumentation, genre, mood and style.

As you review the movement vocabulary, keep in mind that a **step** is a weight shift, where in contrast a **touch** has no weight shift, simply a touch with the foot, usually the ball or toe.

Steps: A shift of weight or footwork and weight placement that may or may not travel on the floor. Every dance step is comprised of variations of these basic stepping patterns. More complex steps are a combination of these ten basic steps. All of these steps can be varied with pivots, level changes, floor patterns, and body movements. When one part of the step is changed or an element of movement with the body or arms is added, the step can take on new life to suite the mood, flavor, and style of music, as well as the dancer’s preference.

- 1) **Step-touch:** Take a step forward with the right foot, then touch with left ball. Repeat, step with right, touch with the left. This step is usually performed traveling forward but can also be used to travel back and around in a circle. The count is a steady beat: ONE (Step R), TWO (touch L), THREE (step R), FOUR (touch L).
- 2) **Step-close-step:** Also known as the shuffle step, take a step to the side with the right foot, close and step with the left. Repeat, step right, close with left. This step can be used to travel laterally (side-ways) but is very flattering performed in the Egyptian style, diagonally upstage (backward on a diagonal line). I have heard this step referred to as the Egyptian diagonal step. The count is a steady beat: ONE (step), TWO (close), THREE (step), FOUR (close).
- 3) **Three-step:** This step is known by many terms in different dance forms. It has many names depending on its flavor and the placement of the feet but essentially they are all variations of the same pattern of weight shifts. You might know this step as *step-ball-change* or *chasse*. As in other dance forms this step is know by many other names in belly dance. This a very versatile step that can be layered with almost any movement and is most often associated with the three-quarter shimmy, which will be explained in detail and many varieties later in the “Shimmy” section. Take a step right, quick step left, step right. Three steps in all, hence the name, that fit into two beats. Right Left Right, Left Right Left. The count is syncopated: ONE (step R), AND (step L), TWO (step R), THREE (step L), AND (step R), FOUR (step L).

- 4) Four-step: This step is known by other names and is very similar to what is known as the 'box step' in other dance forms. In belly dance I have heard it referred to as *scissor step* or the *sharqi step*. When performed with the right flavor this step is distinctly Egyptian but the concept of the step can be used to create variations and other flavors. Start with the right foot marching in place. Then start counting your steps, ONE TWO THREE FOUR, ONE TWO THREE FOUR. Since your right foot is leading it will step on ONE and THREE every time. Keeping the same timing, place the right foot forward on ONE, and back on THREE. The left foot always steps in place. The count is a steady beat: ONE (step R fwd), TWO (step L in place), THREE (step R back), FOUR (step L in place). Be sure to practice this step on both sides, taking turns leading with the right and left foot. Transitions for changing sides smoothly will be detailed as we explore Drills and Dynamic Combinations.
- 5) Grapevine: This is a common step in international folk dances and is performed laterally and also in a circle. Cross and step the right foot over the left, step to the side with the left, cross and step the right foot behind the left, step to the side with the left, ie. cross front, step side, cross back, step side. The count is a steady beat: ONE (cross R over L), TWO (step L side), THREE (Cross R back), FOUR (step L side). Be sure to practice this step on both sides, taking turns leading with the right and left foot. Transitions for changing sides smoothly will be detailed as we explore Drills and Dynamic Combinations.
- 6) Flat-ball step: This step is often referred to as the *Arabic* step. It is very commonly used in Egyptian dance and adds an exciting dynamic because of its quick level changes. It is used to travel laterally and in a circle. As you step, keep the lead right foot slightly ahead of the left, aligning the right heel with the left toe, approximately. The idea is to keep the feet very close together. Step right foot flat, step left on the ball, step right on the ball, step left on the ball, ie. flat, ball, ball, ball or fwd flat, back ball, fwd ball, back ball. The count is a steady beat: ONE (step R flat), TWO (step L ball), THREE (step R ball), FOUR (step L ball).
- 7) Tip-toe: This step comes from ballet (or Persian dance depending on your perspective), except there is no turn-out of the feet and the knees are soft to allow the hip to move. Keep the feet very close together, the body very tall and lifted and all the muscles in the thighs thoroughly engaged with soft knees. Like the flat-ball step, keep one foot slightly ahead of the other. This also helps with balance and facilitates more graceful travel laterally, which looks very nice with this step. It may be referred to as the *glide* step because when it is performed correctly it looks as if the dancer is gliding across the floor on wheels.
- 8) Cross-point: This step is similar to step-touch except the first step is a cross. Cross and step the right foot and point or touch the left foot.
- 9) Step-pivot: Like the step touch, this step uses a pivot on the standing foot to change direction. This dynamic can be combined with the step-touch and the cross-point to make variations on the weight shift pattern. Step right foot forward, touch and propel with the left to pivot on the ball of the right foot.
- 10) Two-step: Sometimes called the 'rock step' because you can easily rock forward and back depending on which movement is layered on it. This step is almost the same as the flat-ball step. The only difference is there is no level change dynamic. The step can be performed flat or on the ball but is generally smoother and more sophisticated performed more on the balls of the feet.****

Lower Body Movements

Base Lower Body Moves and Isolations: Movement that by itself is not necessarily a dance movement, but it can be. More often two or more are combined to make a basic dance movement.

Abdominal Contraction: A lower abdominal contraction used to accent the music, usually on the down or final beat.

Abdominal Release: The opposite of a contraction, a release of the lower abdominal muscles causing the stomach to protrude. This is best used as an exercise to learn control of the muscles as it is not a very flattering pose.

Gluteus Contraction: A contraction of the gluteus muscles which is used to make individual hip movements sharp and distinct.

Hip Twist: A horizontal twist initiated from the waist with the oblique muscles. There is no movement of the knees, and when performed correctly this move can be done while standing on the knees.

Hip Slide: A horizontal shift of weight initiated from the waist with the oblique muscles. There is no movement of the knees, and when performed correctly this move can be done while standing on the knees.

Pelvic Drop: A downward movement of the pelvis using the lower abdominal muscles and the lower back muscles. When performed correctly, this move can be done while standing on the knees. It is important to keep the emphasis or “accent” of this move on the down which also marks the down beat of the music.

Pelvic Lift: The opposite of a pelvic drop. This move is very easily misinterpreted. It is however a good exercise to learn muscle control and isolation.

Pelvic Tilt: A tilt of the pelvis which makes the hips move up and down alternatively like a see-saw. It is initiated by the oblique muscles and can be aided by the gluteus muscles. The pelvic tilt is a component of many advanced and sophisticated moves and therefore should be practiced on both sides as well as with the weighted and unweighted dynamic. This tilting which results in the opposing up and down movement of the hip bones has recently become known as *tick tocks*. *Tick* refers to the hip as it is going down and *tock* is the same hip going up.***



Basic Lower Body Dance Movements

Horizontal Hip Figure 8: hip slide + hip twist + hip slide + hip twist. This move is actually an infinity sign on the floor which hips can trace for... infinity.

Vertical Hip Figure 8 up: start with a pelvic tilt down on the weighted side (tick) + hip slide + hip tilt, etc. This is also an infinity sign. Imagine tracing this pattern on the wall or mirror with the front of your hips or on the wall behind you with your buttocks. Hip goes down, out, up, in and down (back to center) and repeat the sequence with the other hip. This move can be performed either completely flat-footed or by lifting the heels which is easier but not always better. If you can do this movement completely on the flat, then you will be able to do it better when you want to lift the heels for a different look and feel. Practice this move lying on the floor to develop the flexibility, strength and control in the core muscles required for this snake-like move.

Vertical Hip Figure 8 down: Also known as *maya*. This is the opposite of the vertical 8 up but it feels and looks quite different. Start with a pelvic tilt up (tock) on the non-weighted side + hip slide + hip tilt down (tick) + hip slide, etc. Imagine the same infinity sign on the wall or mirror and this time trace it from the top. Hip goes up, out, down, in (back to center) and repeat the sequence with the other hip. This move, like its opposite, can be performed either completely flat-footed or by lifting the heels. The flat-footed version is often smoother and is considered more sophisticated. Again, if you can do this movement completely on the flat, then you will be able to do it better when you want to lift the heels.

Hip Lift: hip twist + pelvic tilt on the non-weighted side initiated by the obliques. A gluteus contracted on the same side can be added to make a sharper accent. The emphasis is on the upward motion.

Hip Drop: Same as hip lift with the emphasis on the downward movement. Start this move with hip already lifted in a twist. The drop is a controlled release of the lift and can be aided by a gluteus contraction on the opposite (weighted) side to create a variation or to make a strong accent. This is one of the core moves of traditional belly dance, particularly in the Egyptian style.

Pelvic Circle: This is a dynamic three-dimensional move also referred to as *omi* or *umi* and has two variations. Start with pelvic tilt down on the R + pelvic drop + pelvic tilt up R + pelvic lift, repeat for continuous movement. This variation emphasizes the downward motion of the circle (pelvis releases down on the down beat of the music). The other variation, pelvic tilt up + pelvic lift + pelvic tilt down R + pelvic drop, emphasizes the lift or upward motion of the circle (pelvis pulls up on the down beat of the music). In my experience the first variation (accent on the down) is more flattering on more bodies, but the second adds a distinct African flavor which is desirable for percussion pieces or fusion styles.

Hip Circle: hip slide + shift to back + hip slide to other side + shift to front, etc. This circle does not engage the pelvis. The knees remain soft, however the hip bones do not tilt as in the pelvic circle. Imagine this circle around the feet rather than under the pelvis, and trace it with your pubic bone shifting your weight to the side, back, side, front (or back to center). As the hips shift to the back, engage the abs so the pelvis does not release down. This move can take on various dynamics as well as sizes. The size of the circle is directly proportional to how far apart the feet are. So, the wider your stance, the larger the move will be. This very large and often slow hip circle is commonly referred to as *Dina hip circle*, after one of the top Egyptian female dancers of our time.

Hip Sway: A gluteus contraction accompanied by a weight shift side to side. This is a basic belly dance move used in all styles and can be layered on top of a variety of steps. This move has many names depending on the dynamics.

Hip Shimmy: Fast, alternating movement of the hips. The hip sway performed very quickly is a type of shimmy. There are a number of shimmies that will be explored in detail in the Shimmy section.

Lower body undulation: A wavelike movement of the pelvis using the lower abdominal and lower back muscles in opposition. As the lower abdominal muscles contract the lower back muscles lengthen. The 'wave' is captured while the pelvis drops and lifts (abdominal contraction and release) in response to the action of the muscles, or a 'scooping' of the pelvis.****

Upper Body Movements

Base Upper Body Moves and Isolations

Rib Cage Slide: A horizontal shift of the ribcage to one side engaging the oblique and upper abdominal muscles.

Rib Cage drop: An abrupt downward movement of the ribcage using the upper abdominal muscles beginning with a soft lift, followed by the 'drop' or controlled release of the lift on the down beat.

Rib Cage lift: A lift of the ribcage using the upper abdominal muscle on the down beat.

Shoulder Accent: An abrupt or soft movement performed with the pectoral muscle pushing the shoulder forward, or back in response to a flourish in the music.

Shoulder Roll: A soft rotation of the shoulder forward, up, back and down.****

Basic Upper Body Dance Movements

Horizontal Rib Cage Circle: A circle of the ribcage using the ribcage slide or drawing a circle on the floor with the sternum. This movement is often seen on Turkish dancers and American Tribal dancers.

Vertical Rib Cage Circle: A circle of the ribcage using the ribcage lift, drop and slide, or drawing a circle on the wall or mirror with the sternum. This movement complements Egyptian dance stylization.

Horizontal Rib Cage Figure 8: A figure of eight movement using the ribcage lift, drop, and slide with a slight twist to transition from one side to the other, or drawing the number 8 on the floor with the sternum.

Vertical Rib Cage Figure 8: A figure of eight movement using the rib cage lift, drop, slide, with a slight bend on the torso to transition from one side to the other, or drawing the number 8 on the wall or mirror.

Shoulder Shimmy: Shoulder accents in rapid succession in response to melodic or percussive flourishes in the music.

Snake arms: Variations of this movement can be performed with the shoulders rotating in alternating pattern while extending the arms outward at shoulder level. When the up and down movement of the elbows is added the movement is much larger. The wrists and fingers should remain relaxed and fluid yet controlled.

Upper body undulation: A type of vertical ribcage circle where the sternum draws the circle forward, up, back and down to neutral.

Full body undulation: The upper body undulation followed by a lower body undulation in which both movements are performed in opposition and completely. As the upper undulation is about to complete the lower undulation begins without compromising the integrity of either movement. It is important to perform this movement after the lower body undulation has been mastered in order to perform the movement safely with control of the abdominal muscles which protect the lower back from strain. ****

The Layering Game

Write each **Step** name on a small piece of paper or index card. Place the **Steps** in a container or zip lock bag. Practice by choosing a different step to work on for five to fifteen minutes depending on your skill level. Use different colored paper to print each category of movements: Steps, Moves, Pattern/path/direction. Once you master a step you can start to combine it with **Movements** you have mastered. To create combinations of steps and movements, choose more cards and work on putting them together either in a combination sequence or a layered combination.

Patterns, Path and Directions: These are for the most part self-explanatory. How you interpret them can also make a wide range of variations. For example, diagonal can be interpreted as a diagonal line on the floor, and it can also be a diagonal plane in space. A circle on the floor can mean actually touching the floor or it can mean an imaginary circle on the floor which is traced on a horizontal plane in space. Combine one item from this group with an item from the “Moves”, “Steps” or “Body Parts” group. To create combinations, choose more than one item from one or more groups, ie. one step, two moves or body parts, two patterns/paths/directions for either the move or the step.

Up	Figure 8 on the floor	Diamond on the floor
Down	Figure 8 on the wall/mirror	Diamond on the wall/mirror
Lateral (side-to-side)	Circle on the floor	Forward
Diagonal	Circle on the wall/mirror	Back

Body parts: Choose an item from **Pattern, Path and Directions** group to create a unique movement. To create combinations, choose an item from the **Steps** category to add to it.

Eyes	Leg	Torso (Waist)
Head	Knee	Pelvis
Shoulder(s)	Ankle (foot)	Hip(s)
Ribcage (Chest)	Arm(s)	Leg
Torso (Waist)	Eyes	Knee
Pelvis	Head	Ankle (foot)
Hip(s)	Shoulder(s)	
	Ribcage (Chest)	

Ethnic Variations: Iranian and Arabic Dances

We can use the same step and movement vocabulary to stylize our dance to fit the flavors of both Arabic and Persian (Iranian) dance forms. Particularly when it comes to Egyptian and Persian dances, they share some similarities and their contrasting elements can be used to compliment each other. For example, we can combine the fluid, intricate and expressive upper body movements of Persian dance to interpret the melodic lines of Egyptian music. Layer on the elaborate hip and abdominal movements of Egyptian dance, we have more vast vocabulary with which to express the many layers of popular and classical Arabic music. All of the base moves and isolations should be practiced regularly. Once you have mastered the mechanics of executing the movement, explore stylizing the movements for different styles of music, moods and dynamics.

I. Basic Isolation, Moves and Steps with focus on Persian styling

A. Upper Body

1. Head/neck: focus, slide, neck circle, bobble, head/hair toss and circle/fig. 8
2. Shoulders: accents fwd/back/up-in, rolls fwd/back
3. Arm/hand positions: posture and alignment, focal points
4. Arms & hands: fingers, wrists, forearm, elbow, **Parastoo, Afshar, Nasim**
5. Chest/ribcage (bending and leaning): snake arms, **Kajaky, Brush-Push**, poses

B. Lower Body

1. Hips: sways, twist, circles (**Gher**), figure 8's (horizontal), drop, lift
2. Feet/steps: step-touch, step-together, 3-step
3. Floor patterns: Square (fwd, lateral, back), personal circle, lateral

- C. Explore one or more combinations using floor patterns: travel fwd with a step/move, travel lateral with a different step and move, travel back with another step/move.

II. Step Variations

A. Step-touch variations

1. step-hip
2. cross-touch fwd/back
3. Styling (Persian, Arabic)

B. Step-together-Step variations

1. Travel fwd, lateral, back, in a circle, fwd/side step
2. Variations with movements & arms
3. Styling (Classical, Folkloric)

C. Grape-vine (closed)

1. 4-step
2. 3-step w/touch

D. 3-step variations w/arms

1. **Seh Gaam**
2. **Balancé**
3. **Cross-Balancé (w' & w/out pivot)**
4. **Cross-Open, hips and pivots**

- E. 2-step variations- Tip-toe/Flat-ball w/arms, hands, & movements: head, shoulders, leans.

- F. Turns w/arms: 3-step turn, shukufeh, barrel turn, paddle turn, tip-toe turns

- G. Floor patterns: lines, loops, squares and circles; group patterns.

III. Ethnic Styling and Variations

- a. Persian Social/Qajar (aka Classical): Intimate, detailed arm/hand movements, Expressive head and facial movements, may include floorwork, improvised solo format.
- b. Persian Classical (aka Neo-Classical or Contemporary): Balletic, large floor patterns, detailed alignment and arm/hand movements, body bends sideways or back, head level w/shoulders, choreographed group or solo format.
- c. Folkloric/Tribal/Regional Ethnic: aerobic, emphasis on footwork, repetitive, large floor patterns, group formations, body bends sideways and forward, may include floorwork, head/hair toss common, use of props (sticks, scarves, balancing objects)
- d. Arabic/Egyptian/Modern belly dance: Emphasis on hip/pelvic movements, elements of western dance forms and regional folk dances, wide range of styles and music.
- e. Arabic/Egyptian Regional Folkloric: aerobic up/down movements/steps, emphasis on footwork, repetitive steps/movements, group formations.
- f. Modern/pop variations: Fuses elements of style of music and dance. ****



Skills and Standards

The guidelines below are specific to the program goals of my curriculum. The program takes into consideration individuals with different needs, limitations, goals and self-expectations. The length of time in each level is an approximate based on many teachers' observations and experiences and is merely to give you an idea how long it may take to integrate the specific physical and mental skills in your dance as performing art. Therefore, one should measure his or her skill level based on the actual skills and knowledge acquired rather than the length of time spent in a class.

A beginner dancer (0 – 1 year experience) is discovering a variety of styles and cultures associated with Oriental dance. The beginner dancer seeks more experience, reinforcement and repetition in order to master the foundation material in the beginner syllabus including:

- Mechanics of proper form and technique with a focus on aesthetics as well as safety.
- Fundamental movement vocabulary of Middle Eastern dance styles
- Basic finger cymbal skills and basic veil maneuvers
- Movement combinations and transitions in beginner choreography
- Discovery of a variety of dance styles and cultures associated with Middle Eastern (Oriental) dance.

An intermediate dancer (Minimum 6 mos. – 1+ years progressive experience) has mastered the fundamental movement vocabulary of Middle Eastern dance styles and has integrated basic finger cymbal patterns with some step combinations. An intermediate dancer is aware of and is exploring a variety of dance styles and concepts within the movement vocabulary of Middle Eastern/North African dance, including:

- Solid understanding of the foundational movement vocabulary found in a variety of Middle Eastern dance styles as they are practiced today in their countries of origin as well as abroad.
- Continues to polish and refine movement vocabulary and combinations
- Expands and embellishes basic movement vocabulary with accents, basic layering, level changes, dynamic combinations, and generates ideas for independent works
- Is aware of and explores a variety of Oriental, Folkloric and Fusion dance styles
- Working knowledge of Arabic Music and rhythms, origins/purpose, corresponding movements and finger cymbal techniques.
- Willing to expand repertoire of choreography and improvisational skills

An advanced dancer (Minimum 2+ years intensive progressive experience) has discovered a vision of her own dance style which she strives to fulfill; has developed a critical eye for detail in her own performance as well as others'; recognizes, anticipates and appreciates that the study of the dance is never complete. ***An advanced dancer who aspires to dance professionally must be knowledgeable of professional standards and ethics of the dance community.***

- Polished and mastered fundamental movement vocabulary including use of veil and finger cymbals
- Expands and embellishes movement vocabulary with accents, complex layering, level changes, dynamic combinations and creates variations
- Applies and modifies class material independently to perform as a soloist with artistry, showmanship, and musicality
- Possesses a solid understanding of Middle Eastern music and rhythms, origins/purpose, corresponding movements and finger cymbal techniques
- Continually seeks technical sophistication and precision
- Explores and studies a diverse repertoire of stylistic and ethnic dance forms
- Creates sophisticated choreography and improvisational dances ****