

UNITING CULTURES

Dialogue across borders with the Anna
Lindh Foundation

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Inspiring **Knowledge** Driving **Action** Uniting **Cultures**

Executive Summary



In 2007–2008, the Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF) co-funded the creation of the Arab-West Report database, later renamed Dialogue Across Borders. Initially focused on religion in Egypt and how it was misreported or misrepresented in Western countries, the project evolved between 2007 and 2025 into a resource featuring Arabic newspaper translations, investigative reporting, and in-depth interviews, enriched by contributions from student interns. Supported primarily by Dutch and German institutions, it also developed a search engine for rapid contextual insights. With current funding ending, panellists emphasised the database's unique value and proposed building a sustainable Euro-Mediterranean university–NGO network to expand its scope region-wide.

Introduction



The Euro-Mediterranean region's diversity offers valuable opportunities for intercultural exchange and sharpen our thoughts and convictions, yet one of its greatest challenges lies in the pervasive spread of misinformation, including selective reporting and distorted contexts, and disinformation, particularly in times of conflict, entailing the intentional dissemination of falsehoods. Both undermine trust in information, fragment societies, and obstruct efforts to address global challenges (Hulsman, 2025).

Dr Hamdi Zaqzouq, Egypt's late Minister of Endowments, employed the metaphor of the world as a ship that can only reach harbour if its crew cooperates. He argued that countering misinformation is essential, though this must not come at the expense of freedom of expression and opinion (Hulsman, 2020).

Much misinformation is rooted in ideologies and religious beliefs that privilege one's own convictions over those of others, serving national, ethnic, religious, or commercial interests. This process exacerbates division and polarisation, with the refugee migration crisis and the Israel–Palestine conflict serving as prominent examples. The absence of effective countermeasures has contributed significantly to hardship and loss of life.

The Dialogue Across Borders database conceptualises truth as “a set of successive approximations” (Sagan, 1995, p. 254). Its approach stresses continuous inquiry, contextualisation of verifiable facts, and transparency, even when findings are inconvenient. Truth is pursued through accuracy, honest presentation of differing perspectives, and acknowledgement of uncertainty. Equally, it requires recognising that one's ideological orientation shapes perceptions of social reality. As such, description should be prioritised over normative judgement, and generalisations or speculation should be avoided. Presenting multiple perspectives thus becomes a method of addressing misinformation while safeguarding free expression. Core principles include accuracy, transparency, accessibility, education, and trust-building.

The Israel–Palestine catastrophe illustrates how distorted narratives shape interpretation. Pro-Israeli actors have framed global dynamics as a dichotomy between a so-called Judeo-Christian sphere and the Arab–Muslim world. This framing influences Western readings of Christian hardship in Muslim-majority contexts, often reducing multifaceted socio-economic and cultural dynamics to simplistic accounts of Muslim persecution of Christians. With Jewish communities in the region largely absent, portrayals of Christians have become increasingly filtered through this ideological lens. Such perspectives frequently diverge from lived realities in countries such as Egypt, where religion is one of factors shaping daily life.

Approach & Results



Content that later formed the basis of the database started with the Dutch Werkgroep Midden-Oosten in 1974 and switched in 1994 to Egypt following the relocation of founder Cornelis Hulsman. The transformation of collected material into a structured database began in 2007 with support from ALF and was subsequently sustained largely by private donors. Since 2018, however, donor funding declined, creating an urgent need for alternative financial models. In 2020, academic publisher Brill signed an agreement with the Arab-West Foundation to make the database accessible to universities worldwide on a subscription basis. Open Access remains possible if supplementary funding is secured. In 2025, the University of Groningen reserved funding for a double PhD project aimed at studying the development of the database's unique characteristics.

The database consistently focused on peacebuilding, intercultural dialogue, and the role of religion in Middle Eastern societies which remains poorly understood in secularised Europe. As religions often motivate action, they are frequently instrumentalised by political and social actors, destabilising the region with (proxy) war with consequences for Europe (Hulsman, 2025).

The DAB database has demonstrated its value in documenting Muslim–Christian conflict situations in Egypt. This includes disputes surrounding church construction as well as ostensibly non-religious issues that nonetheless take on a religious dimension. The database exposed prevalent Western misreporting on Muslim–Christian relations and misunderstandings within Egypt about how to address biased reporting. Case studies illustrate how partisan reporting shapes perceptions, while the database provides users with contextual information on nearly any issue reported. Such an approach fosters awareness of complexities and recurring patterns, which is a prerequisite for identifying root causes and enabling conflict resolution.

A major challenge has been the absence of a standardised transliteration system for Arabic names in Western languages which complicates search, undermining efforts to combat misinformation by erasing essential context.

Financial limitations prevented the realisation of several development ambitions. Notably, an interactive map was envisaged to trace demographic shifts in the Coptic population of Egypt during the 20th century, using census data from 1907 to 1986. Such a tool could help differentiate between economic migration—where Muslims and Christians move at similar rates—and migration driven by religious vulnerability, which would show marked disparities. Analysing these data would provide a corrective to many persecution narratives that have circulated in the West (Hulsman, 2022). The lack of such insights has allowed distorted narratives to persist, highlighting the urgency of investing in data-driven approaches.

At the ALF Forum held in June 2025 in Tirana, Albania, the ALF-NL Network hosted a session on the database moderated by Romana Moussa, ALF-NL network coordinator. Panelists were Cornelis Hulsman; Dr. Jaroslav Franc, Head of the Department of Communication Studies, Palacky University (Czech Republic); Dr. Vincent Caruana, Director Centre for Environmental Education and Research, University of Malta; Sa'ida Agrebi, Founder and President of the World Association for Solidarity Alliance and Tolerance (WASAT) and Dr. Tarek Mansour, Professor of History, Ain Shaims University (Egypt). Participants agreed to establish a group that will work towards creating a Euro-Mediterranean university-NGO network.

The initiative seeks to build on the legacies of the DAB database and the EUMENIA project (2018–2021), coordinated by the University of Amsterdam, while also identifying synergies with networks such as UNIMED, EMUNI, and Téthys. The aim is to broaden outreach, avoid duplication, and involve EU delegations as advisory stakeholders.

As part of this network, NGOs are expected to provide supervised internships, offering students practical skills that complement their academic studies.

Stefano Sannino, Director General for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf at the European Commission, recommended that all ALF-networks actively pursue independent fundraising to sustain their initiatives.

The Forum also emphasised the global urgency of addressing misinformation. Partners for Transparency invited Agrebi and Hulsman, to speak at a Human Rights Council side event in Geneva on 3 July 2025. The speakers at this event argued that legal measures alone are insufficient to address the vast scale of misinformation and disinformation. Initiatives such as the DAB database were highlighted as essential in providing contextualised and reliable information (Hulsman, 2025).

Policy Implications & Recommendations

A Strategic Roadmap for a Sustainable Euro-Mediterranean University-NGO Network

The development of a sustainable network of universities and NGOs centred on the Dialogue Across Borders (DAB) database requires a phased approach, structured into short-, medium-, and long-term steps, dependent on EU funding.

Short-term objectives (until October 2026) include transforming the informal ALF-NL Network into a formally registered association (vereniging). This strategic step will enhance fundraising capacity, transparency in financial management, and continuity in leadership through elected transitions.

Following the Forum the ALF-NL network appointed Ms. Cintia Nunes, LL.M. in Law and Economics (Erasmus University Rotterdam), who has 3.5 years of project management experience at the Hamburg University of Applied Sciences.

With expertise in managing EU-funded projects and drafting grant applications for agencies such as EUROPE-AID, Horizon Europe, Interreg, COST Action, DAAD, DMU, and BMBF, Nunes will lead the application for COST Action funding by the October 2026 deadline. COST Actions require participation from at least seven member states, half from Inclusive Target Countries such as Türkiye, Czech Republic, Malta, and Slovenia, while Near Neighbour Countries (NNCs) including Egypt may serve as Working Group co-leaders and international advisors. Expansion to Tunisia, Algeria, Jordan, and Lebanon has also been identified as opportunities.

Dr. Vincent Caruana (University of Malta) and Dr. Manoela Carpenedo (CRCC, Groningen University) investigate Erasmus+ opportunities to develop micro-credit programmes for student exchanges.

The network will align with the “Living Together” agenda promoted by ALF and the European External Action Service (EEAS), which emphasises bottom-up, civil society-led approaches to interfaith dialogue. The next policy debate is scheduled for late 2025.

Inquiries will also be made regarding membership in the GRACE-ETN thematic network (2025–2027), led by Groningen University, with Ain Shams University in Egypt requiring a Memorandum of Understanding prior to joining. Moreover, the network aims to expand to universities and NGOs across the Euro-Mediterranean region, building on the Egyptian database model while incorporating Oral History, defined as “a method of collecting and preserving historical information through recorded interviews with participants in past events and ways of life” (Ritchie, 2014, p. 1). Partnerships with impartial NGO content providers, such as WASAT, Search for Common Ground, and Qantara, will be vital.

The Wavemakers United Foundation (WUF), represented by Moustafa Abdalla, will mobilise its youth network, secure Egyptian private funding for exchanges, leadership training, and workshops, and promote the database within academia and civil society. Planned activities include joint research, student mobility, curriculum integration, and the creation of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. WUF will also explore digital innovations, such as mobile-friendly platforms and multilingual features, to expand access.

The new ALF-NL association will register on the EU online platform, apply for Erasmus+ accreditation, and register with the UN in Geneva.

Medium-term objectives (2026–2030) focus on transitioning the database from subscription-based access to Open Access, once funding is secured. As the database is closely aligned with ALF’s expertise in knowledge-sharing, integrating it within ALF structures could amplify its impact. Funding will support the development of tools to identify and contextualise misinformation, offering both general insights and access to more detailed material. Transparency in methodology and the inclusion of verifiable facts from all stakeholders, including adversaries, are deemed essential for credibility.

Long-term objectives (after 2030) emphasise building a sustainable network of universities and NGOs committed to maintaining the database. Integration into educational programmes will allow students and faculty to contribute content for academic credit, fostering ambassadors of peace who can counter misinformation and promote intercultural dialogue. Universities in the Southern Mediterranean will play a central role by offering practical training in conflict resolution and intercultural communication. Participating institutions must retain editorial control over the content they upload, within an overarching editorial framework that allows each institution to focus on its own areas of expertise.

Conclusion



The ALF Forum highlighted divisions caused by the Israeli-Palestinian crisis and broader regional tensions, underscoring the urgent need to counter misinformation and disinformation. A Euro-Mediterranean university-NGO network, building on the Dialogue Across Borders (DAB) database, is poised to play a key role. With two decades of content collection in Egypt, the database has proven its reliability by offering evidence-based insights into complex social, political, and religious dynamics in Egypt and the wider Euro-Mediterranean region. Its strength lies in presenting multiple perspectives, challenging selective reporting, and ensuring nuanced understanding through continuous verification, empirical evidence, and balanced representation—fostering trust without compromising freedom of expression.

The emerging Euro-Mediterranean university-NGO network will link Southern Mediterranean and European universities and NGOs, giving students and faculty access to the database as both a teaching and research tool. European institutions such as Palacký University (Olomouc), the Universities of Groningen and Malta will coordinate initiatives under EU Twinning and Erasmus+, providing expertise in digitisation, Open Access, curriculum development, funding, and research supervision. Student contributions should be academically recognised, encouraging practical engagement with intercultural dialogue and evidence-based research.

Commitments to transparent governance, multi-level editorial oversight, and a rigorous methodology will ensure the database's credibility and local relevance. Participating institutions will maintain editorial independence while working within a shared thematic framework to guarantee consistency across the region. Planned activities include cross-border exchanges, workshops, collaborative research projects, and early exploration of support from Egyptian donors such as the Sawiris Foundation.

This initiative offers a scalable model combining academic rigour, civil society engagement, and practical training to counter misinformation. By equipping students with empirical knowledge, analytical skills, and a commitment to dialogue, it strengthens social cohesion, peacebuilding, and intercultural understanding. The network's operational launch will mark a critical step toward institutional collaboration, embedding dialogue-driven education, and maximising the DAB database's impact across the Euro-Mediterranean region.

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