

# 2024 Annual Report

EWANA Center for Cultural Understanding |

12 January 2024 - 12 January 2025



**E W A N A**

C e n t e r

## Contents

<b>Year Two: Growth, Impact, and Progress</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Our projects</b>	<b>4</b>
Activities	4
Maqha Conversations: Brewing Dialogue Across Borders	4
Multimedia	5
Grain of Salt: Small Conversations, Big Connections	5
The EWANA Blog: A Space for Stories and Perspectives	6
Public Activities	7
<b>Where has the EWANA Center been active?</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Financial transparency</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>EWANA in 2025 - Looking ahead</b>	<b>11</b>
Activities	11
Multimedia	11
Funding & Communication	11
<b>Thank you</b>	<b>12</b>

## Year Two: Growth, Impact, and Progress

As the EWANA Center entered its second year, our team grew and strengthened, bringing together professionals from across different regions. This diverse and dynamic team has been instrumental in driving our mission forward, expanding our reach, and ensuring the success of our projects.

The EWANA Center continued to be led by **Desiree Custers**, Co-founder and Director based in Brussels, while **Walid Al-Aghbari**, who became Deputy Director in January of 2024, provided his visionary leadership from Cairo.

The Board continues to be strengthened by **Hussam Falah** and **Ali Bakht al-Tamimi**, both based in Baghdad, and **Laura Bannan-Fischer**, who serves as Chair of the Board and Website Manager from Berlin. Laura has played a key role in establishing the EWANA Center's digital presence.

Our project teams have also expanded, with **Mirjam Schmidt**, based in Bonn, managing and developing the *Maqha Conversations* initiative. And with **Dorith Kool**, who, based in The Hague, has founded and led the *Grain of Salt Podcast*, shaping engaging Arabic-language discussions.

Additionally, **Fayrouz Shatout**, based in Cairo, has contributed significantly to our social media outreach during her 4-month internship.

The work of all members of the EWANA Center in 2023 was carried out on a voluntary basis. Together, this team of volunteers worked to expand the EWANA Center's activities, ensuring that our goal of fostering cultural understanding across the EWANA region is advanced!

### **2-Year Birthday!**

While the EWANA Team members kept meeting throughout the year, including a visit to Cairo and Baghdad in March of 2024, the special 2-year anniversary was celebrated in Cairo on January 12, 2025, by Executive Director and Deputy Director Desiree and Walid.

## Our projects

We at the EWANA Center are all about providing a platform for open and curiosity-based conversations—both between people and between ideas. To bring our vision of stronger cultural understanding to life, we stand on two key pillars. **First**, we create spaces where individuals from Europe, West Asia, and North Africa can connect, share perspectives, and engage in meaningful dialogue. **Second**, we amplify voices and ideas by sharing knowledge, insights, and stories that spark cultural exchange and development. Whether through lively discussions or compelling multimedia content, we're here to foster conversations that matter. **Third**, our team members also engage in public activities that promote the EWANA Center's mission and vision.

## Activities

### Maqha Conversations: Brewing Dialogue Across Borders

Maqha Conversations continue to be the beating heart of our activities—a virtual café where ideas flow, perspectives meet, and cultural exchange thrives. Twice a month, we bring together voices from Europe, West Asia, and North Africa to explore different facets of culture, from the spiritual to the intellectual, the material to the emotional. Each session begins with insights from expert speakers across the EWANA region, followed by open discussions where everyone has a chance to contribute. With simultaneous translation in English and Arabic, we ensure that these conversations are as inclusive as they are engaging.

In our second year, we entered the second season of *Maqha Conversations*, with each season featuring five online sessions. So far, we've hosted four thought-provoking discussions:

- Why language is important: the politicisation of gender issues in the EWANA region
- Sports and culture: creating identity in the EWANA region
- Reimagining environment(s) in the EWANA region: intersections and perspectives of environmentalism and culture

As we continue these conversations, we look forward to welcoming even more voices, perspectives, and ideas into the mix.

In total, the three events convened nine external speakers providing perspectives from Europe, West Asia, South Asia, and North Africa. The event reports as well as speaker and background information on the sessions are available online on the website of the MAQHA Conversations.

## Multimedia

### Grain of Salt: Small Conversations, Big Connections

It's easy to overlook the power of a simple conversation, but much like a grain of salt brings out the best in a dish, everyday chats can add depth and richness to our understanding of the world. The *Grain of Salt* podcast is all about these subtle yet powerful exchanges — where personal stories, cultural insights, and unexpected perspectives come together to reshape how we see each other.

Hosted by Dorith Kool, the podcast explores the diverse cultures and mindsets of the EWANA region, uncovering the ways they intertwine and influence one another. With her background in Middle Eastern Studies, military strategy, and translation, Dorith understands firsthand how language and dialogue can bridge divides. Through *Grain of Salt*, she invites guests to share their experiences, ideas, and expertise—proving that cross-cultural understanding isn't built on grand speeches but on the small moments when we truly listen.

The journey began on April 22, 2024, with the launch of season one, featuring a fascinating lineup of topics and voices:

- Opening episode | The EWANA Center: tracing the beginnings and peeking into the future with Desirée Custers
- Episode 01 | Yemen: tribes, tribalism and formal state institutions with Walid Al-Aghbari
- Episode 02 | Tunisian and Belgian culture and the fluidity of identity with Ines Sousou
- Episode 03 | Artificial Intelligence: exploring its impact on culture with Mohammed Babiker
- Episode 04 | Humanitarian translation: exploring its importance and challenges with Thalia Rahma
- Episode 05 | Language: its importance, power and complexity with Othman Moosa Alsaadi

- Episode 06 | The challenges of studying culture and the role of researchers with Harold Viersen
- Episode 07 | The Oud and power of music as a universal language with Saad Mahmoud Jawwad
- Episode 08 | Empowering Migrants: Kudwa's Vision for Inclusive Societies with Razan Ismael
- Episode 09 | Food, Culture, and Connection: Bridging Boundaries with Shayma Elkazem
- Episode 10 | Artistic Identity in a Global City: Exploring life of an artist in Paris with Bisan Sharif

Through these episodes, *Grain of Salt* reminds us that meaningful connections don't always come from big debates or formal meetings. Sometimes, all it takes is an open mind, a good conversation, and a little dash of curiosity.

### The EWANA Blog: A Space for Stories and Perspectives

The EWANA Blog is our space for sharing ideas, sparking conversations, and exploring cultural exchange from different angles. Whether through personal testimonies, research articles, short documentaries, or photo essays, the blog offers a platform for contributors to reflect on the many ways culture shapes our world. In 2024, we published one blog post, and we continue to welcome new voices to contribute their insights and experiences.

Our blog post in 2024:

- [Science Fiction: Imagining a Future Through Literature: A conversation on writing speculative fiction with Mustafa Laghtiri and Max Urai](#)

We're always looking for fresh perspectives and compelling stories. If you have an idea that fits the spirit of the EWANA Blog, we invite you to share your voice with us!

### Public Activities

Individual EWANA Center team members regularly advocate for cultural mutual understanding through lectures, interviews, and panel discussions which allow for direct engagement with the local public. The following two activities were held in 2024:

### **Panel Discussion | "Speculative fiction: Imagining a future through literature", May 2024**

On May 12, 2024, the EWANA Center, in collaboration with the Netherlands Institute in Morocco (NIMAR), hosted a discussion at Rabat's 2024 SIEL Book Fair, bringing together Moroccan writer Mustafa Laghtiri and Dutch writer Max Urai. The conversation explored science fiction's role in different literary traditions, the influence of folktales and heritage in shaping futuristic narratives, and the unique challenges of writing and translating the genre across cultures.

Moderated by Desirée Custers and Yassine Adnan, the event was held in both Arabic and English, creating a truly cross-cultural dialogue on the power of speculative storytelling.

(add picture)

### **Presentation | El-Hiwar Summer School on Euro-Arab Relations, September 2024**

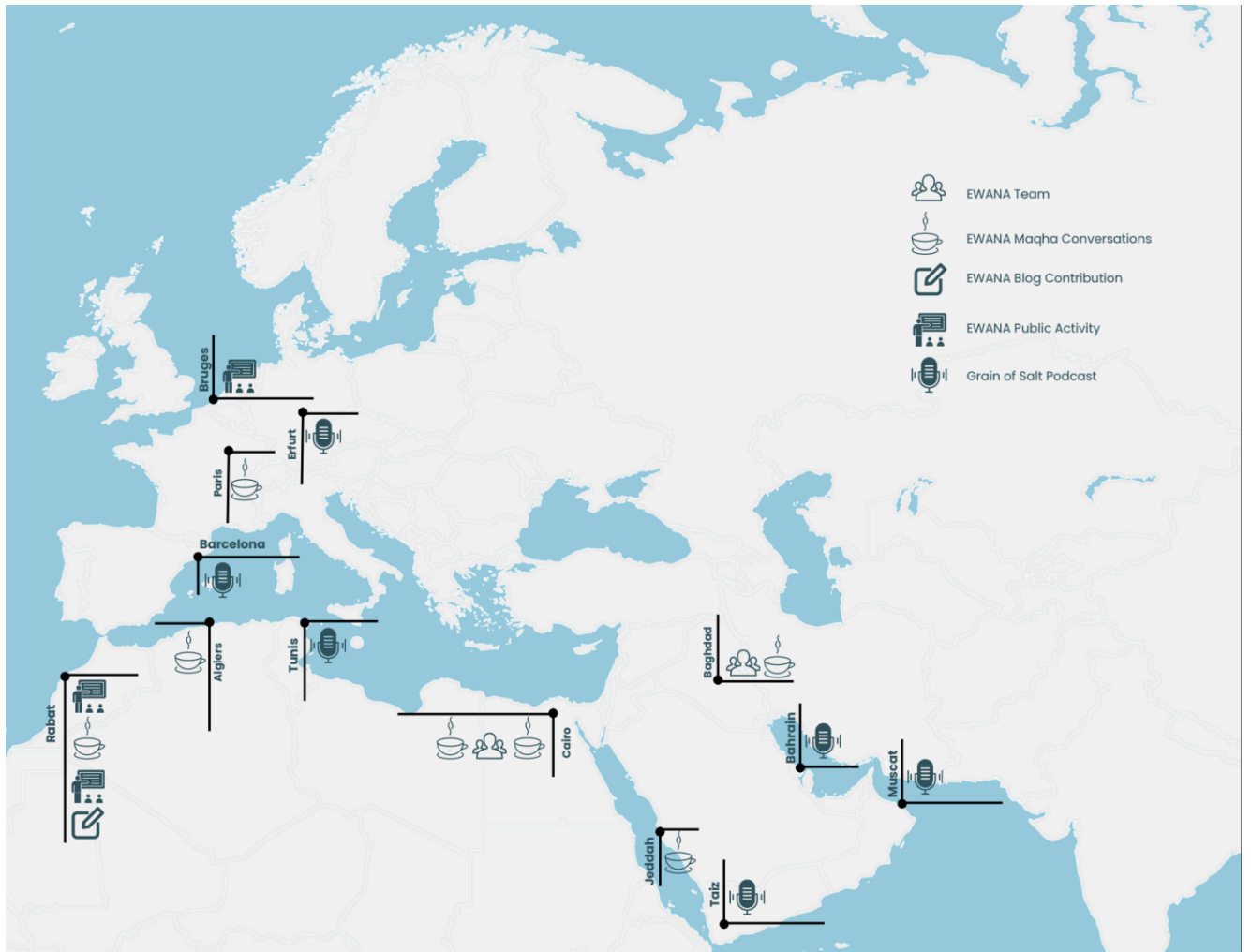
On September 3, 2024, our deputy executive director Walid al-Aghbari and director Desiree Custers presented the EWANA Center for Cultural Understanding at the fourth El-Hiwar Summer School on Euro-Arab Relations at the College of Europe in Bruges, Belgium.

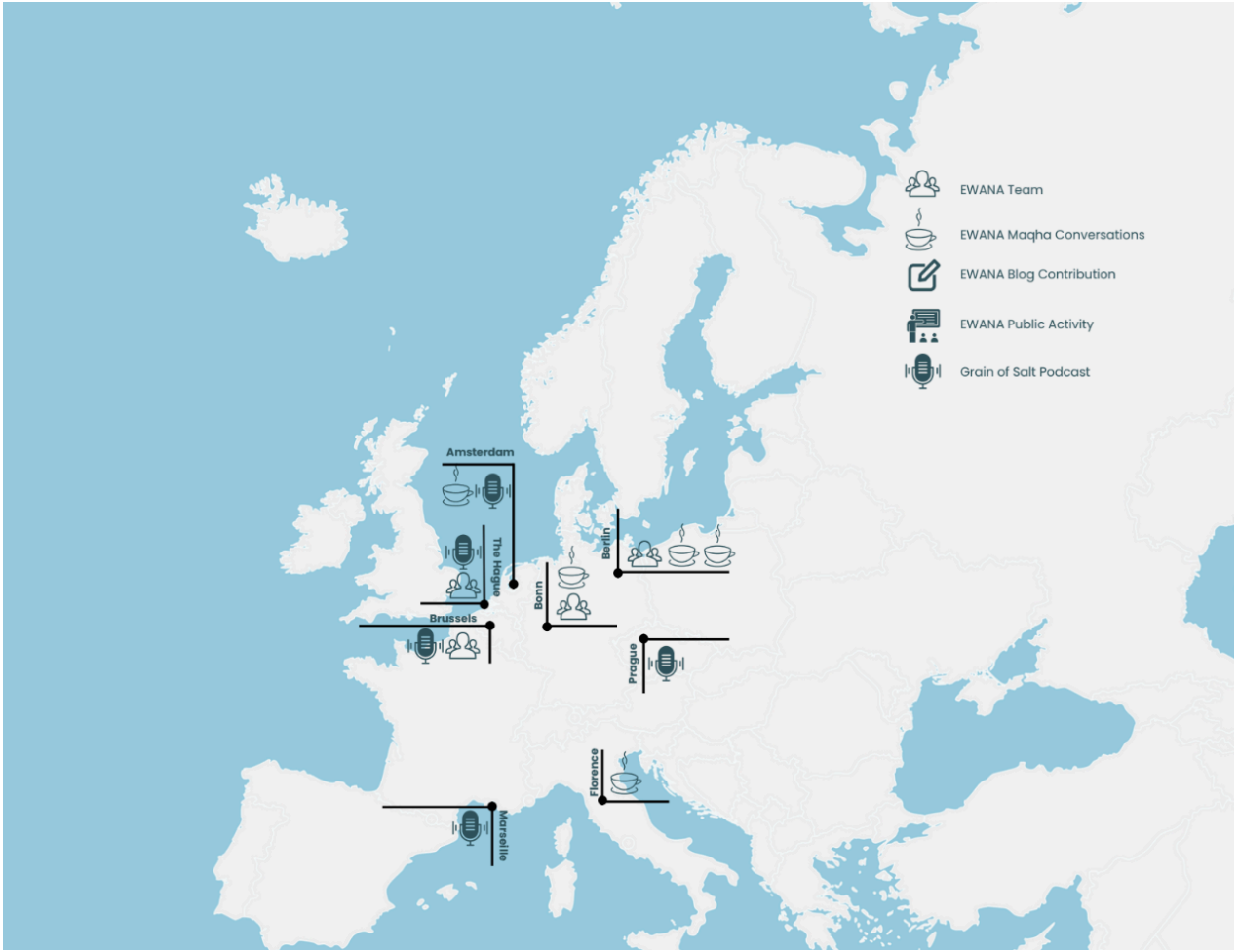
The El-Hiwar summer school was organized by the College of Europe in the framework of the EU-funded project El-Hiwar III, which aims to strengthen dialogue, cooperation and collaboration with key regional actors involved in Euro-Arab relations through a number of activities including institutional training courses, briefings, thematic workshops and dialogue sessions.

Walid and Desiree shared how the EWANA Center works on changing and improving relations between Europe and the Arab-majority world.

(add picture)

# Where has the EWANA Center been active in 2024?





## Financial transparency

In the year 2024, the expenses of the EWANA Center covered only essential requirements. These include the costs for the continuation of “Maqha Conversations” discussion series (e.g. engagement of translators) and the costs of the digital presence

Members of the team up to this point work in a voluntary capacity. In total, expenses for the year 2024 amount to 1047 EUR. The EWANA Center received one **donation** that amounted to 600 EUR.

The EWANA Center also received a subsidy of 5000 euros from the **Stichting Oosters Institute** for the implementation of the *Contemporary Arabic Literature Project* (see next section).

For the year 2025, the EWANA Center continues to seek grants to continue implementing and to expand its projects. We aim to provide financial transparency in the coming years.

## EWANA in 2025 – Looking ahead

As we step into 2025, we're excited to expand our activities, strengthen our multimedia projects, and secure the resources needed to sustain and grow EWANA's impact. Here's what's on the horizon:

### Activities

- We're taking EWANA **offline and in-person** with three key events, including the launch of the **Contemporary Arabic Literature (CAL) project** in Brussels and related events throughout the year.
- Our team will be making at least **three public appearances**, sharing EWANA's mission at various events.
- *Maqha Conversations* continues with **a second session, a second report publication.**

### Multimedia

- The EWANA Blog will keep the conversation going with **three new blog posts.**
- The **Contemporary Arabic Literature Encyclopedia (CAL) project** launches in **July 2025**—a digital platform designed to explore contemporary Arab(ic) literature, its themes, and its connections to broader socio-political contexts. This project aims to make Arabic literature more accessible, encourage new translations, and offer valuable insights for researchers and readers alike. It is subsidized by the Stichting Oosters Institute.

### Funding & Communication

- We aim to secure funding for both **Maqha Conversations** and **EWANA's operational needs** to keep our work sustainable.
- Our visibility will grow with **enhanced social media engagement**, supported by ongoing internships to strengthen our digital presence.

2025 promises to be a year of growth, new initiatives, and deeper connections. We can't wait to bring these plans to life!

## Thank you

The whole team of the EWANA Center for Cultural Understanding would like to express our gratitude to those who supported the establishment of the EWANA Center through their advice, guidance, and motivational energy! You have formed a solid network that secured a fruitful start of the EWANA Center and we hope for your continued engagement.

A special thank you to the Stichting Oosters Institute, who is recorded as the EWANA Center's first official supporter with their subsidy for the launch of the digital Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Arabic Literature!

Lastly, we would like to thank all of you who participated in our activities and multimedia initiatives. It was truly great to see so many people engaged with the EWANA Center and we look forward to increasing our network in the coming year.