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Syria's Many Local-s: Diaspora Formation and Humanitarian Action Among Syrians in Manchester

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ABSTRACT

Syrian-led humanitarianism since 2011 has been explored through the lenses of mass displacement, social media, personal networks, and its integration into the international humanitarian system. Broad-stroke comparative studies have found that differential opportunities' structures in countries in the Global North and in the Middle East explain Syrian-led civil society organizations' varying trajectories. This article takes a narrower case study approach, drawing on interview and ethnographic data to explore the specific socio-historical context in Manchester that gave rise to Action for Humanity (AFH), the United Kingdom's biggest Syria-focused aid organization. Putting into conversation theory from Diaspora, Middle Eastern, and Humanitarian Studies, it argues that the Middle East's transregionalisms go hand in hand with growing roots. AFH's practices are anchored in its diaspora's distinct migration history and translocal networks, and are subject to change, as more Syrians keep arriving. The article analyzes how one Syrian diaspora has rallied around humanitarian activities and, conversely, been reproduced through volunteering and donating. AFH brands the organization as 'Syrian' to international donors keen on 'localizing aid', while facilitating British-Syrians' remote support for their homeland. The article attends to digital, affective, and embodied processes of diaspora formation among Manchester's Syrians, as AFH mobilizes, and operates, across Syria's multiple 'local-s'.

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Introduction

In the vestibule of Didsbury Mosque, Manchester, a donation certificate is on display: the Chief Executive Officer of Action for Humanity (AFH) thanks the mosque for raising over £22,000 for the survivors of the 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria. AFH, a charity formerly known as Syria Relief, is the UK's biggest Syria-focused aid organization; most of its activities take place inside Syria, but it also operates in other

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humanitarian contexts around the world. Just like Didsbury Mosque, AFH was established by Syrian migrants and is a part of a wider landscape of Syrian-led institutions in Manchester. Home to around 13,000 Syrians from diverse backgrounds, Greater Manchester hosts the second-biggest Syrian community in the UK (interview with Haytham Alhamwi, Director of Rethink Rebuild Society, April 2023). By exploring the sociohistorical context in Manchester that gave rise to AFH, this article highlights that the Middle East's multi-configured transregionalisms go hand in hand with growing roots. Representatives of AFH engage with more than one version of the 'local': they brand AFH as a 'Syrian' organization to their recipients and to international donors keen on 'localizing aid', while facilitating British-Syrians' remote support for their homeland. Putting into conversation theory from Diaspora, Middle Eastern, and Humanitarian Studies, we attend to digital, affective, and embodied processes of diaspora formation among Manchester's Syrians, as AFH mobilizes, and operates, across Syria's multiple 'local-s'.

Since the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011, a flurry of reports and articles have scrutinized Syrian-led humanitarianism. Mass demonstrations reawakened a sense of Syrian identity among Syrians abroad, often against, and sometimes in favor of, the ruling Assad regime (Baeza and Pinto 2016). New communication technologies enabled diaspora activism across dispersed communities (Tenove 2019). Among Syrian-led organizations, there is great diversity, but also a common trajectory: outside the Middle East, many were started by members of the older Syrian diaspora, often highly educated professionals with previous experience of charity fundraising and academic exchange with Syria (Al-Ashmar 2022; DEMAC 2016; Diker and Ragab 2019; Flanigan 2022; Ragab and Katbeh 2018; Tuzi and Omran 2025). At the beginning of the conflict, many initiatives worked under the radar of the international humanitarian system, and aid, channeled through brokers and kinship networks, sometimes exacerbated inequalities among Syrians, and between refugees and locals (Dickinson 2014). Over time, taking advantage of greater legal security and access to the formal banking system in the Global North, some groups turned into professional aid providers. As Khoury and Pearlman (2025, 62) put it, 'Syrians became their own humanitarians'. Several reports feature AFH as a successful example of this path of professionalization (e.g. Svoboda and Pantuliano 2015).

Most recent scholarship views Syrian-led humanitarianism since 2011 through the lenses of mass displacement, social media, personal networks, and its gradual integration into the international humanitarian system. Khoury and Scott (2024) interviewed Syrian aid workers in Lebanon, Jordan, and Türkiye, and Khoury and Siegel (2024) analyzed social media posts of Syrian-led organizations based inside Syria and in neighboring countries. Further afield, Moss (2020, 2021) conducted research with Syrian (as well as other Arab) diaspora activists in the UK and the US. Taking a comparative approach, these studies found that country-specific legal, financial, and political opportunity structures explained civil society organizations' varying trajectories. As the Syrian conflict progressed, 'translocal' organizations, with a presence inside Syria and in another country, became the norm: in Khoury and Siegel's (2024) sample, 85% of organizations had acquired a base inside Syria *and* in an adjacent country, usually Türkiye, and translocal civil society actors were more active than those

grounded in one locality. Similarly, Syrian aid workers operating from Lebanon and Türkiye often started their activism as part of local revolutionary movements, before being forced to leave Syria (Ruiz de Elvira 2019). We agree with this body of research that individual migration histories matter because they explain why certain diasporas end up having the skills and resources to become humanitarian actors (Al-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001). While we build on these broad efforts to catalog and contrast diaspora actions, we opted for a narrower case study approach which, we believe, gains in depth what it loses in breadth. While comparative research mostly remains at the nation-state level, our data highlight the need for a more fine-grained understanding of subnational, and even local, dynamics, as well as of the specific nature of ‘translocal’ ties. In Manchester, AFH’s practices are anchored in a diaspora shaped by the historical conditions of its existence and its location, and subject to change, as more and different groups of Syrians keep arriving, and their relationship with the homeland evolves. We explore how one Syrian diaspora has rallied around humanitarian activities and, conversely, been reproduced through volunteering and donating. Our research contributes to a small, but growing body of research on how transnational activism emerges “inside and between” nation-states” (Serres 2024: 20), simultaneously shaped by nation-state level legal contexts and local conditions, such as the presence of place-specific industries that confer diaspora activists particular skill sets, or appropriate public places for demonstrations. We build on a constructivist understanding of diaspora that challenges essentialist assumptions about the links between people and ‘homeland’. In his seminal 2006 article, Sökefeld argued that not all migrants are automatically members of a diaspora; rather, we need to scrutinize the processes that *make* diasporas. Secure residency and legal frameworks that enable charity action, critical events – such as the Syrian conflict – that emotionally affect migrants, and individual ‘agents of diasporic imagination’ (Sökefeld 2006, 275) ready to start organizations all forge shared sense of identity among members of a particular ethnic, national, or religious group. Rather than a given entity, diaspora becomes ‘a category of practice’ (Brubaker 2005, 12), upheld through discursive and material acts. Therefore, we rely not only on formal interviews and social media content, but also fieldwork at community events in Manchester. While many studies prioritize online content, our in-person ethnography highlights that diaspora activism is also an affective and embodied phenomenon.

This processual approach to diaspora formation is particularly relevant to the ‘Global Middle East’. Since the 2000s, historians of the Middle East have rethought the region beyond its physical boundaries, arguing that it has been shaped as much by its migrants and refugees as by the people residing in its geographical territory. Debates have shifted to ‘non-territorialised ways of understanding’ (Abdelhady and Aly 2022, 2) citizenship, identity, and belonging. Looking at ‘the Middle East through the prism of diaspora communities [has allowed to articulate] a counter-history to the prevailing state narratives’ (Gorman and Kasbarian 2015, 3), paving the way for an understanding of the region in terms of networked communities and migratory trajectories (Khater 2005). It has also led to a new appraisal of the role of diasporas as central players in the making of the region. Renewed interest in the historical emigration of hundreds of thousands of people from the Middle East to the Americas in

the late nineteenth and early twentieth century has highlighted that cross-border circulations are nothing new to Syrians (Al-Achcar 2022). Personal visits, remittance-sending, letter-writing, organizing aid and development, accompanied by intellectual debates about the nature of the ‘homeland’ in diaspora-run newspapers (the precursors of today’s social media), have all been a trademark of Syrians’ migration experience since the turn of the twentieth century. Decades before Syria as a nation-state came into existence, ideas about Syrian identity were expressed by migrants in the Americas, and later made their way back to the Middle East. Syrians in the US did not simply ‘become American’, seamlessly integrating or transferring customs from the Middle East; instead, they redefined what it meant to be both American *and* Syrian (Gualtieri 2009; Khater 2005). This article scrutinizes how the latest generation of Syrians in Manchester negotiates being both British *and* Syrian through delivering aid to Syria, with professional standards and community support ‘made in Manchester’. Recent reports emphasize how democracy, the rule of law, and an established (Muslim) charity culture in the UK have enabled Syrian-led humanitarianism (Diker and Ragab 2019). However, they overlook migration histories and mobilization practices that do not neatly fit the nation-state framework. A *transregional*, as opposed to a *transnational* approach, can shed light on why an organization such as AFH emerged in a British city with a specific migration history and an exceptionally resourceful diaspora.

In the following, we show how engaging in aid has reproduced the Syrian diaspora in Manchester with strong affective, financial, and time commitments to Syria. In the second section, we de-exceptionalize diaspora-led humanitarianism after 2011, showing that Syrians in Manchester have supported their compatriots since the early twentieth century. Older informal networks of trust and fundraising experiences in Syria *and* the UK laid the foundations for humanitarian action after 2011. In the third section, we retrace AFH’s trajectory from a volunteer-run, small-scale relief provider to a globally operating aid and development actor. While AFH strategically engages with the international humanitarian system’s ‘localization of aid’ agenda to obtain funding, the complex, multi-sited geographies involving its practitioners and practices challenge simplistic ideas about the ‘local’. In the fourth section, we scrutinize AFH’s continued embeddedness in the Syrian community and Muslim charitable giving, in Manchester. In 2025, several events celebrated the fall of the Assad regime and the role of aid in supporting the Syrian resistance. Such rhetoric located the winners of the Syrian revolution not in the Middle East, but in Manchester. In the conclusion, we reflect on how the study of Syrian diasporas’ many ‘local-s’ compels us to revisit debates on positionality.

This article relies on interviews with AFH staff in the UK, Türkiye, and Jordan, and fieldwork at Syrian community events in Manchester, in 2024 and 2025. It is part of our ongoing participatory and historical research with Syrians in Manchester (cf. Zuntz and Columbu 2024). Some of the interviews were conducted for a documentary on Syrians’ history in Manchester that we are currently finalizing. We also conducted a desk review of AFH’s reports. A favorable ethics opinion was obtained from the University of Edinburgh’s School of Social and Political Science and all participants gave informed consent before taking part in interviews. For community

events, consent was obtained from event organizers. Unlike other researchers producing case studies of Syrian-led organizations (e.g. Sweis 2019), we chose to refer to AFH by its real name. Given the relatively small Syrian community in the UK and the limited number of Syrian-led humanitarian organizations of its scale, AFH is easily identifiable, and AFH staff have already widely contributed to reports and articles on Syrian-led humanitarianism.

There are two caveats to this research: on the one hand, we did not have the means to do similar in-depth research with Syrian organizations in other British cities, which limits the findings' comparability in the UK context. On the other hand, as the volatile security situation made fieldwork inside Syria impossible, we were unable to study the power dynamics between international donors, the organization's leadership in the UK, and staff in the region, or to what extent AFH is perceived as 'local' by beneficiaries on the ground. The focus of this article is elsewhere: to understand how 'Syrianness' is made in Manchester.

Throughout the research, the wider context in Syria and AFH's operations radically changed. In summer 2024, one of the authors discussed long-term development programming in northern Syria with AFH staff members in their Gaziantep office. By early December 2024, as we were sitting in AFH's headquarters in Salford in Greater Manchester, the rebel forces of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) were unexpectedly advancing toward Damascus. Pivoting from development to relief, AFH had just launched a £1 million appeal for an emergency response, and its staff were moving with the rapidly changing frontlines. Only a week later, thousands of Syrians congregated in Manchester's central St Peter's Square, celebrating the departure of Assad and waving the Syrian flag of the revolution, while AFH staff was interviewed on British television, commenting on reconstruction in Syria (itv NEWS 2024). The fall of the Assad regime, and Mancunian Syrians' reactions to it, focused our attention on AFH's embeddedness in this particular diaspora.

Syrian-Led Humanitarianism before 2011

To put Syrian-led humanitarianism after 2011 into perspective, one should not forget Syrians' much longer story of diaspora-driven activism. In the Americas in the early twentieth century, Syrians organized charity events, often with authentic food and music, to raise money for their compatriots in times of crises, such as the 1915 famine in the Middle East and the Great Revolt in Syria in the mid-1920s. In Boston (Fahrenthold 2021) and Buenos Aires (Balloffet 2017), to name but two examples, Syrian women established organizations to send medical relief and money across the Atlantic. For some, charitable giving was part of a broader political project of advocating for an independent Arab state (Bawardi 2014; Fahrenthold 2019).

Before 2011, Syrians in Manchester engaged in humanitarian activities at least twice: after World War I and in the 2000s. The history of Syrian arrivals began when the city was still the center of the global textile industry. In the mid-nineteenth century, British goods dominated Middle Eastern markets, and Manchester attracted merchants from around the world eager to sell high-quality cloth produced in Lancashire (Halliday 1992). By 1870, Schole's directory of foreign merchants in

Manchester listed 200 Middle Easterners identified as ‘Greeks’, ‘Ottoman’, ‘Turks’, and ‘Arabs’ (Scholes 1870). Most of the early Syrian traders were Christians and Jews from Aleppo who, together with other Arabic speakers, formed a linguistic community in Didsbury in southern Manchester. The first Muslim to be buried locally in 1902 was also a Syrian merchant; his grave, decorated with an Ottoman fez, can be found in the Southern Cemetery close to Didsbury Mosque (Asian Image 2017). This trade diaspora produced its own humanitarian organization: the ‘Manchester Syrian Association’ (MSA) was first established as the ‘Manchester Syrian Relief Committee’ during World War I to assist Syrian victims of the conflict. Led by Fadlo Hourani, a Lebanese cotton merchant and the father of the famous historian Albert Hourani, the MSA corresponded with Sharif Hussain of Mecca, had plans to send aid to newly liberated areas in the Levant, and wrote to Foreign Secretary Balfour before the 1919 conference in Paris to plead for an independent Arab state (Halliday 1992).

Halliday (1992) describes the decline of the Syrian diaspora in Manchester after World War I, when the number of Syrians stood at around 350, due to dwindling trade opportunities. After many merchants had left for the US, West Africa, and the Middle East, Halliday counted around 25–30 families of Arab descent (including Moroccans and Iraqis) in 1975. However, our own research suggests that new (Muslim) Syrian traders – often the sons and grandsons of those who had previously established textile businesses in Manchester – continued to arrive in the 1920s, and again in the 1950s and early 1960s. Some of these later arrivals left Syria after the Baathist regime nationalized family-owned businesses. In 2025, we interviewed five Syrian-British merchant families who had lived in Manchester for three to four generations. Before the turn of the twenty-first century, this small group of families formed a tight-knit diaspora, upheld through weekly meals and festivities. They also maintained close ties to Syria through phone calls, letters, and annual visits in the summer. From the 1980s, they were joined by Syrian professionals, often doctors and dentists. Some of them, like the medical doctor and Muslim peace advocate Haytham Alhamwi, had been imprisoned in Syria for their political activism, and later sent abroad by the Assad regime with postgraduate scholarships (Woerner-Powell 2025). By the early 2000s, Manchester was home to a well-established, affluent middle-class diaspora which numbered in the low thousands. As several descendants of the original Syrian merchants confirmed to us, this new, bigger community was looser and more diverse, as recent arrivals came from more varied geographic and class backgrounds, and many practiced Islam more openly than the established trader families. Yet a sense of community and shared identity prevailed, as is evident in the foundation of ‘Syrian Friends in Britain’ in 2008, a nonpolitical, non-denominational group focused on cultural activities and social gatherings.¹ Its three surviving newsletters include the children of the textile traders and more recently arrived medical professionals among the organization’s first board members. The publications celebrate weddings, births, and university graduations, while giving an insight into the

¹In the early 2000s, there was already a similar organization in London. The British Syrian Society, established by Bashar al-Assad’s father-in-law, a Syrian-British cardiologist, engaged in more openly political work, including flying parliamentarians to Syria and arranging business conferences (Booth 2012). Before 2011, the Syrian regime’s repression of activists abroad meant that most diaspora organizations abstained from political activities against the government (Jörum 2015; Moss 2016).

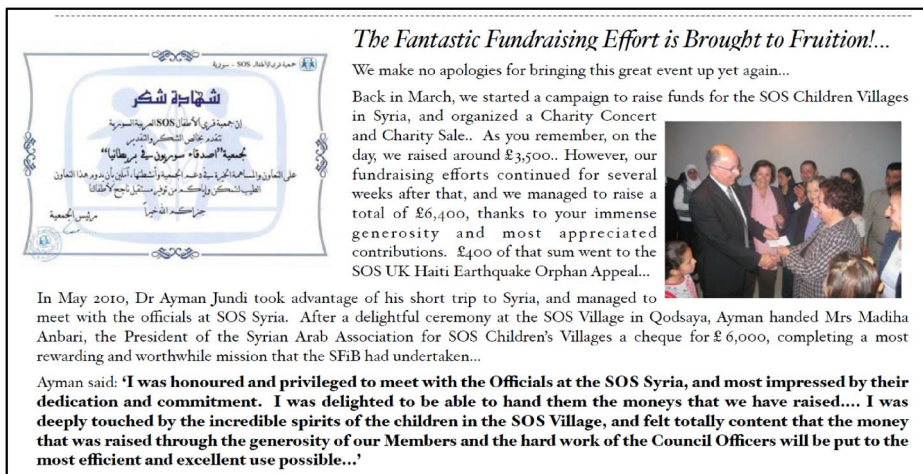


Figure 1. Syrian friends in Britain, November 2010 newsletter (Courtesy of Dr Ayman Jundi).

members' growing fundraising experience. In the late 2000s, their charity causes revolved around support for Syrian children and displaced Palestinians. One newsletter published in May 2009 celebrates that 'Our Day for Gaza Event was a resounding success by any measure ... The turnout was amazing. We had over 400 adults. [...] All in all, we managed to raise just over £11,000!' While one can assume that not all participants of the event were Syrians, this gives us an idea of the number of actively engaged members of the Syrian diaspora. In the short time of its existence, the organization's charitable activities were inclusive and targeted both local and Syrian (and Palestinian) beneficiaries. As the same newsletter explains, 'one of the main objectives of our Society is to establish and promote links between local Communities and the Syrian Community in Britain, to further advance the positive outlook of Syria and its People'. In 2009, members organized a BBQ and raised donations for Seashell Trust, a learning disability charity in Manchester. In the same year, 'Syrian Friends in Britain' raised over £6,000 for SOS Children's Villages, including through a concert with a famous Syrian violinist (Figure 1). In 2010, they supported a center providing care to children with Down Syndrome in Homs. Syrian doctors affiliated with the organization also provided medical training to practitioners in Syria through the Syrian British Medical Society. The November 2010 edition of the newsletter proclaims: 'It comes as no surprise that our Members would jump to the opportunity of doing a good deed for their beloved Syria.' Their activism coincided with the revival of charitable action inside Syria in the 2000s (Ruiz de Elvira and Zintl 2014). As part of its neoliberal transformation, the Syrian government under then newly installed president Bashar al-Assad outsourced social welfare to traditional charities and newly formed, regime-affiliated, development organizations. The rise of loyalist NGOs facilitated the emergence of a new group of urban, middle-class 'development professionals'. At least some of them, as we learned in our interviews, were the children of Syrian migrants in Manchester who had returned to Damascus equipped with perfect English skills, British university degrees, and business expertise to build 'Western'

NGOs. After 2011, they returned to the UK, and then used their experience to work with Syrian-led aid organizations there.

After 2011, ‘Syrian Friends in Britain’ did not simply morph into Syria Relief (and later AFH); but there was some personal continuity: two of the organization’s founders became trustees of Syria Relief. As Dr Ayman Jundi (2017), an original member of both organizations and also a past president of the Syrian British Medical Society, argued in an interview: ‘Syria never leaves you.’ Active community life in the 2000s revived social networks built on trust, gathered professional (especially medical) expertise, and helped some members gain fundraising experience. There was already a vibrant Syrian diaspora in Manchester, ready to step up in spring 2011 when mass demonstrations erupted in Syria and the Assad regime began to commit atrocities against its own people.

It Started with a Phone Call – Building a Syrian Organization from Manchester

We were talking to accountants and lawyers [...] and one of them said to us [...] if you don’t raise more than £50,000 a year, you don’t need to register with the Charity Commission [...] We thought, we will never raise 50,000, but the people who are setting [AFH] up were two doctors, a dentist and an educationist, and we thought, we cannot risk our careers. If something goes wrong, the GMC [the UK’s medical register] comes and crosses me out [...] Last year, we reached 32 million, next year, we’re looking at 40 million from the UK. (Dr Ayman Jundi, June 2024)

In 2024, AFH reached over 5.5 million people in 15 countries, including in protracted humanitarian crises in Gaza, Afghanistan, and Yemen (Action for Humanity 2025a). In the UK, the organization supported refugees and asylum-seekers, young people, and women. However, most of its programs remained focused on northern Syria, where the organization provided food, health, water, and education to over 2 million beneficiaries. Over 70% of AFH’s annual income of £35.5 million came from institutional partners, including from humanitarian household names such as Care International and Save the Children. In its 2021–2025 Strategy (Action for Humanity n.d.), AFH proclaims its adherence to ‘the Core Humanitarian Standard and the Humanitarian Principles (humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence), the Partnerships Principles (equality, transparency, result-oriented approach, responsibility, and complementarity) that govern the aid sector’ and its pursuit of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. By all measures – funding sources, sector-specific language, standards, portfolio, and geographic coverage – AFH is now a serious global player in the international humanitarian system.

However, like many diaspora-led organizations, AFH started as a small-scale, ad hoc project, driven by a group of engaged British-Syrians. In June 2024, Dr Ayman Jundi recalled how the idea for AFH had developed with friends in discussions around his kitchen table.

The crisis in Syria started in March 2011, and in April 2011, we heard about a town in northern Syria close to the Turkish border [where] people were going out in demonstrations [and] the Syrian army overran that city trying to capture [them]. The Turkish borders at that time were closed [and] we came to hear about around 10,000

people in a no man's land between Turkey and Syria. Northern Syria in April is very cold and wet, we got pictures of children, women, old people either sleeping in the mud or climbing on trees to get out of the mud. We really felt that we needed to do something, so on a Friday night, a friend of mine rang me and said, 'We're going to Turkey on Monday, see if you could raise some money for us because we want to help these people'. So I started calling friends and say, 'If you have any free cash, please send it to me, but you have to trust me. I'm not going to be able to give you a receipt, I'm not going to be able to prove to you where the money was spent. So if you trust me, fantastic, if you don't, no hard feelings, thank you very much'. You know, we raised £20,000 in 48 hours from the Syrian community, from our friends. [...] Trust had to go both ways because there was no way I was going to receive the money over the weekend. I had to dig into bank accounts and overdraft and credit cards to actually get the money to give it to the people who were going out there. Thankfully nobody lied to me and everybody gave what they promised. (Dr Ayman Jundi, June 2024)

The group's enthusiasm and informal money transfers were not unique. Other Syrians in Manchester told us that in the early years of the conflict, they personally transported money and aid to Syria and refugee camps in Lebanon. Some decided to sponsor individual families in the Middle East, while others founded their own small charities. As Dickinson (2015) poignantly phrased it: 'Anyone with a smart-phone could [...] become their own relief agency.' The Manchester group's first donations were used to acquire clothes, food, tents, and mattresses, which smugglers took across the Syrian-Turkish border. Afterwards, they decided to establish a proper charity. By September 2011, 'Syria Relief' was formally registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales, with four Syrian migrants as the original trustees. That the majority had a medical background was not a coincidence: before 2011, tens of thousands of Syrian doctors had been working in Europe and the US, an example of the country's significant brain drain (Kodmani 2018). Many had set up academic exchange and training opportunities for doctors in Syria; after 2011, they were among the first to organize medical assistance to victims of the conflict (e.g. Sweis 2019). In this regard, the founders of AFH had similar profiles to other Syrian activists in the Global North. In the US and in the UK, Syrian migrants' high level of education and wealth, and proximity to global centers of power like London, New York, and Washington, DC, made them ideal brokers of the revolution: they lobbied with policymakers, the media, and local communities in their host countries, while using their personal networks to broadcast information and channel money and aid to Syria (Moss 2020, 2021). Key aspects of AFH's origins as an aid provider were translocal links – in this case, between Manchester and a strip of borderland between Syria and Türkiye – and 'personal, social forms of accountability' (Abdel-Samad and Flanigan 2019, 329) based on friendship and kinship networks, trust, and reputation, rather than invoices. But AFH also benefited from its members' embeddedness in the broader Muslim civil society landscape in Manchester:

One of our contacts with the local Syrian community has close links with the Manchester-based British Muslim Heritage Center. They gave us a little cubbyhole to use as an office and they gave us a computer and a printer that they were going to throw away. (Dr Ayman Jundi, August 2025)

During the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, the international humanitarian system committed to the ‘localization of aid’ to make aid delivery more effective. International donors promised to redirect at least 25% of their funds toward local actors in a ‘Grand Bargain’. Practitioners have been vocal about the pitfalls of the ‘localization agenda’, including rigid funding cycles, lack of adequate resource transfer and accountability to affected communities, and power imbalances between ‘international’ and ‘local’ actors (Barbelet 2018; Gibbons and Otioku-Boadu 2021; Koch and Rooden 2024). In an interview study with Syrian and international aid workers in the Middle East, Khoury and Scott (2024) found that Syrian humanitarians took on additional labor and risks as frontline responders, but did not receive adequate capacity-building or a say in international coordination forums. More fundamentally, historians and social science scholars of the humanitarian system point out that ‘local’ and diaspora-led responses have long existed, albeit under the radar of the international aid industry, and that the boundaries between ‘local’ and ‘international’ actors are often blurred (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2019; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Carpi 2025). Scrutinizing the ‘local’ in AFH’s practices adds complexity to such debates by showing that diaspora organizations can strategically engage in a humanitarian discourse of ‘localization’ to attract funding, while confounding ideas about their ‘localness’ with exchanges across multi-sited geographies.

Humanitarian jargon of ‘localization’ frequently appears in AFH’s strategic documents and public statements. Its 2021–2025 Strategy, for example, discusses ‘new opportunities for locally-owned responses’ (Action for Humanity n.d., 1). Until the fall of the Assad regime, AFH’s unique selling point was its ability to operate in opposition-held territories in northern Syria, a difficult terrain with ongoing conflict and internal displacement.

When we started our project in northern Syria, we realized [that the big charities are] not really telling the truth, they are helping Syrians, but they’re helping the Syrians in Turkey or in Lebanon or in Jordan, but they are not really able to work in Syria. So we started knocking on their doors, saying quite rudely, you’re lying to the international community, you’re not working in Syria, you’re working with Syrians outside Syria. We work in Syria – we don’t have your resources, but if you give us the resources, we will implement the project in Syria. [...] You can take all the photographs and all the media that you want, and have your name on our shirts. [...] We’ll give you all the paperwork and all the audits and all the evidence that the project was done as you planned it. (Dr Ayman Jundi, summer 2024)

Between 2014 and late 2024, cross-border aid to northwest Syria was governed by UN Security Council resolutions, and subject to annual, and later six-monthly renewals. Since Russia, a member of the UN Security Council, could block the resolutions, there was cyclical insecurity about the continuation of aid delivery (Marks, Rihawi, and Katoub 2023). The presence of non-state armed actors, categorized by the UN and many countries as terrorist organizations, created uncertainty over how aid organizations could engage with them. As a consequence, most of the aid in opposition-held territories was delivered by local and diaspora-led organizations (DG-ECHO 2023; Sezgin 2016). AFH’s identity as a ‘local’ actor was shaped by its privileged access to Syria, and also by its hiring practices: whenever possible, it

employed local staff. Inside Syria, AFH has been known by fellow Syrians as a Syrian, not as an international organization (Interview with Nihad Sarmini, AFH Global Head of Business Development & Partnerships, December 2024). In December 2024, Yarub Asfari, AFH's Country Director in Türkiye, was quoted in a press release after the announcement that the majority of the UK's new £30 million aid package for Syria would be channeled through international organizations: 'Despite their proven impact, local organizations face ongoing challenges in accessing international funding. This is part of a broader trend that Syria Relief says undermines the global commitment made at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit to empower local aid groups' (reliefweb 2024). During the fall of the Assad regime, AFH's presence on the ground allowed it to rapidly adapt to the changing situation. As Nihad Sarmini explained in December 2024, their staff had been able to enter Aleppo only a day after it was taken by HTS, organizing evacuations and providing emergency assistance. In the first week of the HTS offensive, AFH assisted more than 6,000 people in the Aleppo area: 'Working in Syria for 13 to 14 years, of course we have the capacity, of course we have the knowledge, of course we have the reach. I think we have more than 500 staff and also volunteers.' In January 2025, AFH registered a new office in Damascus; in a social media post in March 2025, the organization admonished the international community: 'Our key message to everybody is: let's assist local community to implement local solutions.' With a good working relationship with the new powers in Damascus, AFH might be undergoing another transformation: from grassroots activism and global awareness-raising about the Syrian plight, to a more institutionalised engagement with the Syrian government (cf. Baser (2018) on a similar trajectory for Kurdish diaspora activists after 2003).

AFH's origin story as a diaspora-led organization, the transnational careers of some its key protagonists, as well as its expanding geographic reach and rebranding, add nuance to its characterization as 'local'. By way of illustration, Dr Mounir Hakimi, one of the co-founders, was widely featured in international media for applying lessons learned from treating war injuries in Syria to victims of the 2017 terror attacks in Manchester and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh (Syria Relief n.d.). Similarly, in a blog post written in 2020, Dr Ayman Jundi reflected on his medical career in three countries and two different conflicts: his first experience of emergency medicine in Beirut at the height of the Lebanese Civil War, his work as a Consultant in Emergency Medicine in Lancashire, organizing medical assistance for the victims of the Syrian conflict, and his role in establishing an MSc program in Disaster Medicine at the University of Central Lancashire (Jundi 2020). In both cases, British doctors of Syrian origin did not simply transfer knowledge to their countries of origin; rather, knowledge was acquired, and shared, in multiple locations.

AFH changed from a Syria-centered organization to a global humanitarian actor, partly in response to the shrinking territory it had access to in northern Syria until late 2024, as regime forces were retaking opposition-held areas, partly as a reaction to its growing expertise and reputation.

I, as a Syrian, started working in the Syria response [...] I see how much we managed to do this learning, we learned in Syria and across other countries as well. So when the

Morocco earthquake happened, the first team that went there was our team from Turkey who had lived the Turkey–Syria earthquake response. (Nihad Sarmini, December 2024)

This wider geographic orientation is visible in the organization's rebranding, from Syria Relief to Action for Humanity, in 2019. (Sweis 2019 describes a similar shift from helping Syrians to helping 'humanity' for an American association of Syrian doctors.) This said, the majority of trustees are still of Syrian background, the organization is still known under the name 'Syria Relief' in Syria and Türkiye, and often uses both logos side by side. Shedding 'Syria' from the name also had practical implications. In certain contexts, being perceived as a 'Syrian' organization did not speed up, but rather hindered humanitarian action.

We found that we were really struggling because most of our work is in dollars. It has to go through OFAC.² Whenever they see the name 'Syria', the application will take several months and sometimes it gets rejected without any clear reason. We had a project as a hospital in Raqqa funded by the EU. We had 2 million US Dollars of funds given by the EU to us, and it was sitting in our bank here, and we couldn't transfer the money to the project in Syria. Our staff in Syria were actually paying for the diesel to run the engines to heat the hospital because we couldn't send them money. [...] And then we realized it's because we had the 'S' word in our name. (Dr Ayman Jundi, June 2024)

AFH's translocal ties, alongside its expanding transregional and global connections, stand in tension with the 'localness' it markets to international donors and partners. In the final section, we turn to another 'local' that is of ongoing relevance to AFH: the Syrian diaspora in Manchester.

Manchester's Winners of the Revolution

According to Moss (2020, 2021), Syrian activism in the UK was attenuated after 2014 because of resource exhaustion, and the British government's lack of support for the Syrian revolution and focus on the 'War on Terror'. Moss also paints a picture of the Syrian civil society in the UK as increasingly fractured, which she contrasts with more stable advocacy and relief organizations in the US. In her interpretation, only those organizations that underwent professionalization and diversified their funding sources survived. At first sight, AFH is an example of such transformations. As a professional, globally operating humanitarian organization, AFH 'does the entire advocacy toolkit' (Charles Lawley, AFH Director of Communications and Advocacy, December 2024). This includes outreach with UK Members of Parliament and parliamentary groups, the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, and other (International) NGOs.

However, community engagement is still a core aspect of what AFH does; in 2023, 25% of its annual budget came from private donations (Action for Humanity 2024). As Charles Lawley explained in December 2024: 'We are not a Muslim

²The Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), a financial intelligence and enforcement agency of the United States Treasury Department that administers and enforces economic and trade sanctions in support of US national security and foreign policy objectives.



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Figure 2. Zakat calculator, Action for Humanity Website 2025.

charity. We're just a charity which facilitates Muslim giving.' Funding calls during Islamic holidays, both online and through charity dinners, continue to play an important role. During Ramadan 2025, the Action for Humanity website included a 'zakat calculator' that allowed its Muslim public to assess how much of their wealth they should donate (Figure 2). A brochure provided examples of possible charitable action. By donating £2,500, supporters could 'rehome a Syrian family'; they could also support beekeepers for £430 and plant trees on Syrian university campuses for £60 (Action for Humanity 2025b). In the final section, we share ethnographic data on a concert in late January 2025, shortly after the fall of the Assad regime, and a charity iftar dinner in March 2025. Both events highlight that successful Syrian-led organizations like AFH have not simply detached from their original base, but rather create local forums for the Syrian diaspora to renew and celebrate a shared sense of belonging.

The Concert

Syria Relief was a dream and a project that we were right in history with. It started with a phone call, and [...] it has become a number of projects that have helped the Syrian people to resist and to fight with knowledge, with medicine, with water, with building houses. (Mounir Hakimi, January 2025)

In late January 2025, over 2,000 Syrian refugees and migrants, and British people of Syrian descent, were gathered in the Bowler's Exhibition Centre, a large venue west of Manchester more used to hosting concerts and boxing matches than

humanitarian fundraisers. Many were draped in the Palestinian keffiyeh and in shawls in the colors of the Syrian revolution. With young children on their shoulders, the audience was cheering, waving the flag of the revolution, and holding up smartphones. A big screen broadcast similar scenes from Damascus – the distance between northern England and the Syrian capital was short-circuited in a gesture of intense emotional connection. The event was advertised as ‘Syria – A Legacy Unbroken’. Outside, attendees were greeted by long queues and ushers wearing hoodies with the Syria Relief logo. Inside, the atmosphere resembled a family-friendly rock concert, with singers and speakers on a huge stage, and Syrian and Asian food stalls and booths raising funds for AFH’s humanitarian response in Gaza, advertisements for an Islamic school in Manchester, and Islamic literature and toys for children. Some of the products were labeled as ‘Made by Syrian refugees’. After a speech by Mounir Hakimi, two Hama-born artists performed revolutionary songs, as well as a piece dedicated to Gaza.

The night showed AFH’s ability to rally huge numbers of Syrians in Manchester. The set-up of the event was indicative of the group’s transnational lives and concerns: while the speeches focused on fundraising for the victims of war in Syria and Gaza, the products on offer outside the main hall pertained to local issues dear to the Manchester community, such as ensuring an Islamic education for their children and a ‘taste from home’ through Syrian cooking. The main speaker reflected on the importance of grassroots funding campaigns to grow the organization:

[Tonight, we] first celebrate our victory as the Syrian people, and second, the Syrian community of Manchester, one of the first Syrian communities abroad that organized itself and shouted to the people inside Syria: We are with you. [...] I would like to thank everyone who has helped since day one, everywhere in the UK, in Manchester, Birmingham, Newcastle, London, Edinburgh [...], the people who picked up a bucket and went to the door of mosques [to ask for donations], every girl who cooked, every woman who took whatever she had in her kitchen and took it to the fundraising events to help Syria. These are the people who made us big. (Mounir Hakimi, January 2025)

The speech connected the organization’s past with its future: rebuilding Syria. As Dr Hakimi implored his audience, ‘Everything we’ve done in the past thirteen years is nothing. The work begins now because we need to rebuild our country’. He also collapsed the distance between Manchester and Damascus, praising the winners of the revolution, not in the homeland, but in the diaspora – in his interpretation, aid had enabled the Syrian people to resist violence and oppression. On stage, a video presentation illustrated the impactful initiatives led by AFH, and a QR code, next to AFH’s logo superposed on the new Syrian flag, impelled members of the audience to each donate £100 to families in need in Syria.

The Charity Iftar

‘Hold your head up high ... You are a free Syrian’, an iconic song of the Syrian revolution blasted out of loudspeakers in a wedding hall in southern Manchester during Ramadan 2025. Tearful British-Syrians of all ages clapped their hands along to the music. The view of the hall’s stage was blocked by a large screen and free-standing banner stands with the logo of the event’s organizer, Rethink Rebuild Society (RR), a local Syrian community

organization. Over the last decade, in parallel with AFH's appearance, a support infrastructure had emerged for refugees in Manchester. RR, established by a different group of Syrian migrants, many of them also doctors, first engaged in advocacy on political detention and displacement. Over time, it shifted to providing practical support to new arrivals. Unlike the event two months earlier, the charity iftar was an annual occurrence, and dedicated to a specific local cause. Since 2014, RR has mobilized the Syrian community in Manchester to donate to one of AFH's schools, a primary school in the suburbs of Aleppo. As Dr Haytham Alhamwi, the head of RR, explained in 2023:

We made sure Iqraa school would be the responsibility of the Syrian community of Manchester and a way for them to remember the old country. We kept the link alive between Manchester and Iqraa, and we made sure Syrians in Manchester contributed towards a noble cause such as the education of Syrian children.

That Syrians in Manchester should develop a sense of ownership for this specific school was ensured through annual fundraisers and branding. Dr Ayman Jundi clarified the relationship in 2024:

We [AFH] set up this project for them [RR]. They raise the money through Rethink Rebuild. They give it to our staff in Syria. We run the school on their behalf in their name, with their labels, their logos, everything. We're just the path for them.

The arrival of a young Syrian woman on stage signaled the beginning of the charity auction. Complete with logos of AFH and RR, moving videos of the school's children and teachers played on the screen, alternating with passionate pleas by the woman and other speakers to educate the young generation that would now build a 'new' Syria. The audience was invited to sponsor pupils for one year, for £200 per child. With an excel file on display that was updated as more donors came forward, the speakers began by requesting huge sums. Three older men committed to each paying £5,000 to support 25 children. Gradually, the speakers asked for lower amounts, encouraging women and younger people to pool their money and raise funds online. A female teenager spoke encouragingly about her experience of starting a GoFundMe campaign for five pupils. At the end, 325 children in Aleppo had found sponsors. Once the bidding was over, members of RR went around the room to collect additional cash. In a symbolic gesture, an older man carried his infant granddaughter who held out a donation bucket to attendees. In the audience, participants animatedly discussed their upcoming visits to Syria during the Eid holidays; for many, it was their first trip home in over a decade.

Taken together, both events point to ongoing processes of diaspora formation in Manchester. At a moment when post-conflict Syria urgently needs support, these celebrations invoked Syrians in Manchester as a coherent community, rallied around the love of the homeland and shared Islamic values, through reminding them of their tradition of charitable giving and humanitarian action. Emotionally charged gatherings like the fundraisers described above renewed not simply their affective and financial ties to the homeland, but, more specifically, with AFH, one of the organized groups of the Manchester diaspora. These charity events are more than a symbolic gesture. As Yarub Asfari, Country Director of AFH's Türkiye office, explained in August 2024, continued donations from the Syrian community in the UK are used for pilot projects that struggle to attract funding from international organizations. By

way of illustration, AFH was already planning long-term shelter solutions for internally displaced Syrians when the cluster system that coordinates international humanitarian action in northwest Syria was still in the ‘emergency phase’. Instead, AFH used community donations to build several villages for internally displaced people in northwestern Syria since 2023. One of the villages, Massa Village, was named after Yarub’s niece who had been killed in the 2023 earthquakes (Syria Relief 2023). In this way, AFH’s local Manchester connection kept inspiring the creation of new ‘local-s’, i.e. of places where people can grow roots.

Conclusion: Kaleidoscopic Perspectives on the Transregional Middle East

In this article, we argued that humanitarianism has been a key part of diaspora formation among Manchester’s Syrians for over a century. Retracing the birth and development of AFH, we disentangled the different meanings that Syrians’ ‘local’ can take on: as a location with a specific migration history that produced an affluent and highly skilled diaspora; as a source of trust for aid beneficiaries and partners; as the latest fad of the international humanitarian system; and as the focal point of diaspora efforts, such as the Iqraa school. In her moving portrait of Syrian-American doctors providing medical assistance in the Middle East, Sweis (2019) explores how they reconcile humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality with their love for their homeland and sympathy with Assad’s victims. Sweis’ argument that positionality matters – i.e. one’s ability to cross borders, mobilize personal networks, and feel an affective reaction – equally applies to our study of AFH and its role in the remaking of Manchester’s Syrian diaspora. Beyond the positionality of individual actors, there have been broader efforts to rethink the emergence and transformations of the humanitarian system not as led by the Global North, but from the vantage point of the Middle East (e.g. Watenpaugh 2015). The example of AFH shows that diasporaled humanitarianism is not simply made *in* Manchester, or in other exilic locations, but in translocal and broader networks. A truly transregional approach would therefore require more than recentring a static map on the Middle East. Rather, it would need a kaleidoscopic vision that can account for shifting viewpoints and changing locations, as the ‘global Middle East’ is reshaped by opening and closing borders, and fluctuating population and other movements, not simply between ‘home’ and ‘host’ countries, but across multiples planes.

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