

The Economic History of Afrin Prior to 2010

I. Introduction

A. Geographical and Historical Significance of Afrin

The Afrin region, situated in the northwestern part of Syria within the Aleppo Governorate, is characterized by its fertile lands, the life-giving Afrin River, and a Mediterranean climate conducive to agriculture.¹ Its geographical position has rendered it a site of continuous human settlement and strategic importance for millennia. Archaeological evidence points to habitation dating back to antiquity, with influences from Syro-Hittite, Roman, and Ottoman civilizations shaping its historical trajectory.² Historically, the region has been known as "Kurd-Dagh," meaning "Mountain of the Kurds," a testament to the long-standing and significant presence of the Kurdish people in this area.³ This deep historical rootedness and geographical endowment have profoundly influenced its economic development.

B. Scope and Objectives of the Report

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the economic history of the Afrin region—encompassing the Afrin district and its surrounding agricultural areas—specifically focusing on the period *prior to 2010*. This temporal demarcation is critical, as it allows for an examination of the region's long-term economic structures and trends before the profound disruptions and transformations brought about by the Syrian Civil War, which commenced in 2011. The objective is to meticulously explore Afrin's key economic sectors, the evolution of its infrastructure, the complexities of land tenure systems, the impact of state policies, and the prevailing socio-economic conditions during this defined historical period.

C. Rationale and Importance

Understanding the economic foundations of Afrin before 2010 is indispensable for contextualizing its subsequent socio-political and economic trajectories. The pre-2010 economic landscape serves as a crucial baseline against which later changes can be measured and understood. The region's agricultural heritage, particularly its reliance on olive cultivation, its existing infrastructure, and the socio-economic conditions shaped by decades of state policies and local dynamics, all formed the bedrock upon which the dramatic events of the post-2011 era unfolded.

D. Methodology and Sources

The reconstruction of Afrin's pre-2010 economic history presented in this report draws upon a diverse array of historical and contemporary sources. These include academic research

papers, regional studies, governmental and non-governmental organization reports, and journalistic accounts that provide data and analysis pertinent to the period under investigation. In line with the research parameters, sources in multiple languages, including English, Arabic, Turkish, and Kurdish, have been consulted to ensure a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Afrin's economic past [User Query].

II. Historical Context of Afrin's Economy (Pre-1960s)

A. Late Ottoman Period (until 1918-1923)

During the late Ottoman era, the Afrin region was administratively part of the Kilis Province (or Sanjak), an area already recognized for its extensive olive cultivation.² Indeed, Ottoman administrative documents from the period referred to the Afrin area as the "Sancak of the Kurds," acknowledging both its ethnic character and its administrative inclusion within a larger olive-growing zone.² The economy was overwhelmingly agrarian, with vast olive groves defining the landscape and serving as the primary source of wealth. The town of Afrin itself was established as a market center (souk) in the 19th century, a development that signifies its emerging role as a local commercial hub for the agricultural surplus of its hinterland.² The Ottoman land tenure systems and administrative practices of this period would have established foundational patterns of property relations and agricultural organization that, to some extent, persisted into later eras. The early designation of Afrin town as a market suggests a formalization of pre-existing local exchange mechanisms, driven by the region's agricultural output, primarily olives.

B. French Mandate Period (c. 1923-1946)

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent territorial arrangements, Afrin was detached from Kilis and incorporated into French-administered Syria.² This period witnessed notable developments in the town of Afrin itself, with French authorities undertaking urban planning initiatives; the main square, for instance, was developed into the central bus station, and residential areas expanded.² A significant piece of infrastructure, the Baghdad Railway, whose Katma station (opened in 1912) served the Afrin region, continued to operate, influencing trade and transportation logistics under French oversight.⁶ The French Mandate likely introduced elements of modernization, however limited, particularly in urban infrastructure and administration. Critically, the drawing of the new Syria-Turkey border in 1923 fundamentally reshaped Afrin's traditional economic sphere. Long-standing economic ties with areas like Kilis, now in Turkey, were largely severed, compelling a reorientation of Afrin's trade towards Aleppo and other internal Syrian markets. This geopolitical shift had lasting implications for the region's economic integration and development pathways.

C. Early Post-Independence Syria (1946 - 1960s)

Afrin was formally incorporated into the modern Syrian state in 1961.² The population of Afrin town reflected this period of transition and growth, increasing from approximately 800

permanent residents in 1929 to 7,000 by 1968.² Nationally, the early post-independence Syrian economy saw a trend where landowners channeled profits from agricultural exports into nascent agro-industrial enterprises and related urban businesses.⁷ However, the benefits of this agriculturally driven economic growth were often not widely distributed among the rural populace, who frequently worked under challenging land tenure and sharecropping arrangements.⁷ While specific data for Afrin is limited, this national trend might have found echoes in the region, likely benefiting local landowning elites. The early post-independence era in Afrin probably saw a continuation of agrarian dominance, accompanied by slow urbanization centered on Afrin town. National policies that favored agricultural exports could have reinforced the economic importance of olives in Afrin. However, the extent to which these benefits translated into broader economic development for the majority Kurdish population remains an important question, particularly given the nature of subsequent Ba'athist state policies which often marginalized Kurdish areas. This period may have laid the groundwork for some of the socio-economic disparities observed later.

III. Key Economic Sectors in Afrin (Pre-2010)

A. Agriculture: The Backbone of Afrin's Economy

Agriculture formed the undisputed backbone of Afrin's economy prior to 2010, with a significant majority of its population directly dependent on this sector for their livelihoods.⁴ The region's fertile soil and favorable climate provided ideal conditions for a variety of crops, though one reigned supreme.

1. Olive Cultivation

- **Historical Prominence and Scale:** Afrin's association with olive cultivation dates back to antiquity, a tradition passed down through generations.⁵ Before 2010, the region was home to an estimated 13 to 15 million olive trees, some of which were centuries old, underscoring the depth of this agricultural heritage.¹ Around 2007, these trees constituted approximately one-fifth of Syria's total olive tree count, highlighting Afrin's significant contribution to national production.⁵ The sheer number of trees and the longevity of many groves point to a highly specialized and historically significant olive monoculture. This deep specialization, while a source of regional identity and income, also implied a degree of economic vulnerability to factors specifically affecting olive production, such as pests, diseases, drought, and fluctuations in market prices.
- **Olive Varieties and Quality:** Several local olive varieties were cultivated, with 'Sorani', 'Halouni' (also referred to as Al-Hilwani), and 'Khalkhali' (also known as Qalam Baz) being prominent.¹¹ Research comparing local varieties to introduced foreign ones indicated that the indigenous 'Sorani' variety was often superior in terms of fruit size (length 24.10 mm, diameter 16.63 mm) and key oil quality characteristics, boasting a notable oil ratio of around 25%, low acidity (0.5%), and a favorable peroxide value (2.16 meq O2/kg).¹³ Afrin's olive oil, sometimes referred to distinctively as "Kurdish oil" (Zeytê Kurdî), was recognized regionally and even internationally for its high quality, often

characterized by a sweet taste and desirable aroma.¹¹ The recognized quality of specific local varieties like Sorani suggests generations of careful cultivation and adaptation to the local terroir.

- **Cultivation Practices:** Local farmers in Afrin traditionally favored natural and time-honored cultivation techniques, often eschewing chemical fertilizers and pesticides in favor of organic methods passed down through families.⁵ The olive harvesting season, a crucial period for the local economy, typically commenced in mid-October and extended through the end of the calendar year.¹¹ This preference for traditional methods suggests a deep-seated agricultural heritage and a respect for the land, though it may also have implied a slower adoption of modern, potentially higher-yield, agricultural techniques compared to other regions.

2. Olive Oil Production

- **Processing:** The significant olive harvest necessitated a substantial local processing capacity. By approximately 2007, the Afrin region was equipped with around 285 olive presses (معاصر زيتون), the majority of which were modern mechanical presses (مكابس حديثة) designed for efficient oil extraction.⁵ This number indicates a considerable investment in upgrading processing capabilities from more rudimentary traditional methods.
- **Economic Role:** Olive oil was not merely a product but a cornerstone of the local economy, serving as a primary source of income and livelihood for a large segment of the population.¹² Historically, Afrin was a pivotal source of olive oil for the renowned Aleppo soap industry, a traditional Syrian product with a long history and international recognition.³ This linkage highlights a significant regional economic integration and a value chain that extended beyond the simple production of raw olives.
- **National Context:** Prior to the conflict that began in 2011, Syria was a leading global producer and exporter of olive oil. In 2010, national production was around 200,000 tons.¹⁵ Afrin was a major contributor to this national output. On a national scale, the olive sector was economically significant, contributing between 1.5% and 3.5% to Syria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and providing employment for nearly 337,000 households in 2003.¹⁶ Afrin's substantial olive production thus played a role in Syria's position in international olive oil markets, even if this was often mediated through larger Syrian exporters based in Aleppo or other commercial centers.

3. Other Agricultural Activities

- **Crop Diversification:** While olive cultivation was dominant, Afrin's agricultural sector exhibited a degree of diversification. Farmers also cultivated a range of other crops, including essential grains like wheat, barley, and lentils.¹ Cotton, sugar beets, citrus fruits, and various other fruits such as apricots, almonds, and pistachios, along with a variety of vegetables, were also grown, contributing to local food supply and offering alternative income streams.¹ There was a reported more recent focus on increasing wheat production in the period leading up to 2010, perhaps reflecting national food security policies or evolving market demands.⁹
- **Regional Specializations:** Specific sub-districts within the broader Afrin region, such as Rajo, Jindires, Bulbul, Ma'batli, Sharran, and Sheikh Hadid (Shiye), were also involved

in the cultivation of grains (particularly barley), cotton, and various fruit trees.¹⁷ This suggests some level of localized agricultural specialization within the district. The cultivation of grains like wheat and barley indicates efforts towards local self-sufficiency in basic food staples, while fruits and nuts like almonds and pistachios could have provided higher-value cash crops, complementing the revenues from olive production. This diversification, even if secondary to the olive economy, would have offered some measure of resilience to the local agricultural system.

4. Impact of Environmental Factors (Pre-2010)

- Drought (2006-2010):** A critical environmental factor impacting Afrin's agriculture in the latter part of the pre-2010 period was a severe and prolonged drought that affected Syria nationally from 2006 to 2010. This drought was considered one of the worst in the country's modern history, characterized by significant decreases in rainfall, unusually high temperatures, and widespread agricultural land degradation and destruction.¹⁹ Nationally, this drought exacerbated existing socio-economic problems, leading to the failure of rain-fed agriculture, mismanagement of farmland which subsequently became fallow, and a significant wave of rural-to-urban migration as agricultural livelihoods collapsed.¹⁹
- Impact on Afrin:** While specific quantitative data detailing the direct impact of the 2006-2010 drought on the Afrin district is not extensively available in the provided sources, its consequences can be inferred. As a region heavily reliant on agriculture—much of it rain-fed, particularly olive groves—and dependent on water resources such as the Afrin River and groundwater for supplementary irrigation, Afrin would have been significantly affected. The drought conditions would have inevitably led to reduced olive yields, diminished outputs of other crops, and increased stress on water availability for both agricultural and domestic use. This environmental shock occurred against a backdrop of national economic policies that may have been reducing support for the agricultural sector (e.g., changes in subsidies), compounding the hardship for Afrin's farmers. This period likely represents a significant economic stressor for the region immediately preceding 2010, impacting the 75% of the population directly reliant on agriculture and potentially accelerating migration from rural parts of Afrin to the main town or even further afield.

Table 1: Predominant Agricultural Products in Afrin District (Pre-2010)

Agricultural Product	Significance/Notes	Primary Use
Olives	Primary crop; 13-15 million trees ¹ ; key varieties: Sorani, Halouni, Khalkhali ¹¹ ; some ancient groves. ⁴	Olive oil production, table olives, key raw material for Aleppo soap. ⁹
Wheat	Increasingly important focus for cultivation. ⁹	Local consumption, regional trade, contribution to national food supply.
Barley	Widely cultivated, especially in	Animal feed, local

	areas like Rajo and Jindires. ¹⁷	consumption.
Lentils	Cultivated as part of crop rotation and for local consumption. ¹	Local consumption, regional trade.
Cotton	Grown as a cash crop in some areas. ¹	Raw material for textile industry (likely outside Afrin primarily).
Apricots	Fruit crop cultivated in the region. ¹⁷	Fresh consumption, drying, local and regional markets.
Almonds	Nut crop cultivated in the region. ¹⁷	Local consumption, regional markets.
Pistachios	Nut crop cultivated in the region. ¹⁷	Local consumption, regional markets.
Citrus Fruits	Part of the diverse fruit cultivation in Afrin. ¹	Fresh consumption, local and regional markets.
Vegetables	Various types grown for local sustenance and markets. ¹	Local consumption, supply to Afrin town market.

B. Industry and Traditional Crafts

Afrin's industrial landscape before 2010 was modest and largely an extension of its agricultural prowess, particularly centered on olive processing.

1. Agro-processing

- **Olive Oil Pressing:** As previously detailed, this was the foremost agro-industrial activity in Afrin. The presence of approximately 285 olive presses by around 2007, many of them modern, signifies a significant local industrial capacity dedicated to processing the region's primary agricultural output.⁵ This activity represented the primary mode of value addition to the raw olive harvest within the region itself, transforming perishable fruit into a more stable and marketable commodity. The scale of pressing suggests operations catered not only to local consumption but also to wider Syrian markets, including the critical Aleppo soap industry.
- **Aleppo Soap:** Afrin held a long-standing and vital role as a key supplier of olive oil to the historic Aleppo soap industry.⁹ While the bulk of Aleppo soap manufacturing traditionally occurred in Aleppo city, the industry's reliance on high-quality olive oil from Afrin was crucial for its production and reputation. Some sources suggest that even before the large-scale displacement of industries during the Syrian Civil War, some soap production value chain activities might have begun to locate in Afrin due to the ready availability and quality of its olive oil, though direct, large-scale soap manufacturing in Afrin pre-2010 (beyond supplying the oil) requires more specific substantiation.⁹ The primary role was as a supplier of the key raw material.

2. Textile Production

- **Pre-2010 Presence:** Several sources note that olive oil pressing and textiles were

among the local industries present in Afrin city before the major upheavals of the Syrian Civil War.² A significant boom in Afrin's textile sector, characterized by the establishment of around 400 textile workshops employing approximately 17,000 people and producing large quantities of items like jeans, occurred later, primarily between 2016 and 2017.⁹ This later expansion was largely a consequence of the displacement of industrial capacity from Aleppo to the relatively safer environment of Afrin during the conflict. However, the earlier, pre-2010 mention of textiles as an established local industry suggests that a foundational, albeit likely much smaller-scale, textile sector existed in Afrin prior to this influx. This earlier activity was probably characterized by small workshops, possibly handicraft-based weaving or tailoring, serving local needs rather than large-scale export markets. The capacity for Afrin to absorb and expand textile production so rapidly post-2011 implies the pre-existence of some relevant skills, labor, or rudimentary infrastructure.

3. Other Local Crafts

- The available research material predominantly focuses on Afrin's olive-centric economy. While Syria as a whole boasts a rich and diverse heritage of traditional crafts—including pottery, intricate metalwork (brass and copper), glassblowing, and decorative woodworking with mother-of-pearl inlay²⁴—specific evidence indicating that these crafts were economically significant or widely practiced in the Afrin region *before 2010* is limited in the provided sources. It is plausible that general Syrian crafts were present on a small, artisanal scale, catering to local household needs or limited tourist markets. However, olive-related agricultural and processing activities appear to have been the dominant features of Afrin's economic identity. The lack of specific mentions in the context of Afrin's pre-2010 economy suggests these other crafts were not major economic drivers for the region, unlike in larger Syrian urban centers such as Damascus or Aleppo, which were renowned hubs for such specialized artisanship.

Table 2: Documented Industrial and Craft Activities in Afrin (Pre-2010)

Industry/Craft	Description/Scale (Pre-2010)	Primary Market/Linkages
Olive Oil Pressing	Primary agro-industry; approx. 285 mills (c. 2007), mix of traditional and modern (mechanical) presses. ⁵	Local consumption, regional supply (especially to Aleppo), national markets.
Aleppo Soap (Olive Oil Supply)	Key supplier of olive oil, a primary ingredient, to Aleppo-based soap manufacturers. ⁹	Regional (Aleppo city soap industry).
Textiles	Mentioned as a local industry in Afrin city ² ; likely small-scale workshops, possibly artisanal or tailoring.	Primarily local market for clothing and fabric needs.

C. Trade and Commerce

Afrin's role as a commercial center was primarily tied to its agricultural output and its connections to regional markets, particularly Aleppo.

1. Local Markets

- The town of Afrin was founded as a market (souk) in the 19th century and continued to serve as the primary commercial and administrative center for the surrounding district throughout the pre-2010 period.² This historical foundation underscores its long-standing function as a central place for economic exchange for its agricultural hinterland. Such a market town would typically concentrate retail activities, services, and potentially small-scale workshops, serving as the main interface between rural producers and broader trade networks. Farmers would bring their agricultural produce, especially olives and olive oil, for sale, and in turn, purchase essential goods, tools, and other supplies. Additionally, the area near the Katma train station, a key transportation node, also showed evidence of market activity, suggesting that transport infrastructure played a role in fostering local commerce.⁶

2. Regional Trade Links

- Afrin maintained strong and vital trade connections with the much larger city of Aleppo. These links were particularly crucial for the olive oil sector, as a significant portion of Afrin's olive oil was transported to Aleppo for use in the soap industry, for further distribution, or for consumption within the city itself.⁹ The demand from Aleppo for Afrin's primary agricultural product would have been a major driver of Afrin's external trade.
- The Baghdad Railway, which included a line passing via Katma in the Afrin region, had historically facilitated the movement of goods and people between Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) and Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq and parts of Syria), with Aleppo serving as a key commercial hub along this route.⁶ While the railway's peak utility for Afrin might have been in earlier decades of the 20th century, its historical presence established long-term trade corridors and regional connectivity. By the pre-2010 period, road transport likely became more dominant for the movement of agricultural goods, but the railway's legacy in shaping settlement and initial trade patterns is noteworthy.

3. Cross-border Trade (Pre-2010)

- The Afrin district is geographically distinctive in that it is almost entirely surrounded by the Syria-Turkey border, except for its eastern and southeastern connections to other Syrian districts.² Prior to the establishment of modern national borders with the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, Afrin was administratively part of the Kilis province of the Ottoman Empire, implying strong and fluid historical cross-border economic and social ties with areas that are now part of Turkey.²
- Following 1923 and the creation of the Syrian state under French Mandate, and later as an independent nation, official cross-border trade would have been subject to national regulations, tariffs, and political relations between Syria and Turkey. The provided

research snippets do not offer strong evidence of significant *formal* or large-scale cross-border trade directly involving Afrin in the immediate pre-2010 period. While informal exchange and local cross-border movements might have occurred, as is common in many border regions, the primary economic orientation of Afrin appears to have shifted towards internal Syrian markets, particularly Aleppo. The imposition of the Syria-Turkey border would have fundamentally altered Afrin's traditional economic geography, diminishing direct ties with its former administrative center, Kilis, and reorienting its commercial flows. The blockades mentioned in some sources³ refer to the post-2011 conflict period and are not characteristic of the pre-2010 era's trade environment.

IV. Economic Infrastructure Development (Pre-2010)

The development of economic infrastructure in Afrin before 2010 was a gradual process, marked by early 20th-century projects and later state-led initiatives, particularly in water management.

A. Transportation Infrastructure

1. The Baghdad Railway and the Afrin-Katma Station

- A significant early infrastructural development impacting the Afrin region was the Baghdad Railway. The Katma station, located within the Afrin district, was constructed around 1912 as part of this ambitious German-backed Ottoman project aimed at connecting Berlin to Baghdad.⁶ The railway line passing through Katma connected Aleppo to Raco and further north towards Anatolia, officially opening to traffic in December 1912.⁶
- Historically, this railway played a crucial role in regional trade, facilitating the transportation of agricultural goods and other commodities, as well as passenger travel and military logistics.⁶ An undated postcard depicting the Katma train station shows an adjacent market area, suggesting its importance as a commercial node where goods were exchanged.⁶ The railway represented a major technological advancement for its time, enabling more efficient bulk transport than traditional animal-powered means and integrating Afrin into wider regional economic networks. While its relative importance may have diminished with the later development of modern road networks, its historical legacy in shaping settlement patterns and early trade routes in the region is undeniable.

2. Road Networks

- The development of Afrin town under the French Mandate included the establishment of its main square as the central bus station, indicating the early recognition of road-based transport as vital for the region's connectivity.² For an economy heavily reliant on agriculture, an efficient road network is essential for collecting produce from dispersed rural areas and transporting it to local markets like Afrin town, and onward to larger regional centers such as Aleppo.
- General data for the Aleppo Governorate from the pre-2011 period indicates the presence of an international airport (in Aleppo city) and a railway network, alongside

generally good road connectivity throughout the governorate.²⁶ While specific details on the quality and extent of Afrin district's internal rural road network are not extensively provided, it is reasonable to assume that primary roads connecting Afrin town to its sub-districts and to Aleppo were maintained to facilitate commerce and administration.

B. Water Management and Irrigation

1. The Midanek Lake / April 17th Dam Project

- A landmark state-led infrastructure project in the Afrin region during the later pre-2010 period was the construction of the April 17th Dam (also known as the Midanek Dam or Maydanki Dam). This project was initiated in 1984 and reached completion around the year 2000 with the impounding of the waters of the Afrin River, creating the artificial Midanek Lake.²⁷
- This was a vital economic project with multiple objectives. Primarily, it aimed to enhance agricultural productivity in the surrounding areas by providing a reliable source of water for irrigation.²⁷ Additionally, the project sought to promote domestic tourism, leveraging the scenic beauty of the newly formed lake and its environs. Reports from around 2010 indicate that Midanek Lake attracted thousands of visitors annually, particularly during the spring season. This influx of tourists supported the development of local businesses, including restaurants, cafes, and resorts established along the lake's shores to cater to visitors.²⁷ The April 17th Dam represented a substantial investment by the Syrian government in the region's water infrastructure, with clear intentions to bolster its agricultural base and diversify its local economy. This project would have had direct benefits for agriculture by enabling or improving irrigation for existing olive groves and other crops, potentially allowing for the cultivation of higher-value or water-intensive crops, or even double cropping in some areas.

C. Industrial Infrastructure

1. Development in the 1980s-1990s

- Sources indicate that some level of industrial infrastructure was established in the Afrin region, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s.²⁸ This development appears to have been primarily focused on leveraging the region's main agricultural resource: olives. The infrastructure included numerous commercial establishments and workshops specifically related to the olive and olive oil sectors.²⁸ One Turkish source suggests that some of this development occurred with financial support from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), though this claim should be considered within the context of the source's perspective.²⁸
- This period of growth in local industrial capacity, even if predominantly agro-focused, points to efforts to enhance local processing capabilities and add value to agricultural products within the region itself, rather than merely exporting raw materials.

D. General Utilities (Aleppo Governorate Context)

- While specific pre-2010 data for Afrin district's utilities is sparse, statistics for the

broader Aleppo Governorate provide a general context. By 2011, within Aleppo Governorate, an estimated 99.7% of homes had access to electricity.²⁶ In major cities within the governorate, 98.4% of the population had access to sewage networks, and around 90% of the governorate's population used an improved drinking water source.²⁶

- These governorate-level statistics suggest a relatively high level of basic utility provision in the wider region by the end of the pre-2010 period. It is likely that Afrin district, particularly Afrin town as its administrative and commercial center, benefited from these general trends in infrastructure development. However, disparities in access and quality of services between urban Afrin town and its more remote rural hinterlands might have existed, as is common in many developing regions. A high level of access to basic infrastructure like electricity and potable water is a fundamental prerequisite for broader economic and social development, supporting households, businesses, and public services.

Table 3: Significant Economic Infrastructure in Afrin (Pre-2010)

Infrastructure Type	Specific Project/Feature	Period of Development/Existence	Primary Economic Purpose/Impact
Railway Transportation	Afrin-Katma Station (part of the Baghdad Railway network)	Opened 1912	Historically facilitated regional trade, transport of agricultural goods and passengers, military logistics. ⁶
Road Transportation	Afrin town bus station, network of local and regional roads	Developed from French Mandate onward	Internal movement of goods and people, connection to Aleppo and other regional centers. ²
Water Management	Midanek Lake / April 17th Dam	Initiated 1984, completed c. 2000	Provision of irrigation water for agriculture, promotion of domestic tourism, support for local businesses. ²⁷
Industrial Facilities	Olive oil presses (approx. 285 by c. 2007), other commercial workshops (olive-related)	Growth primarily in 1980s-1990s	Agro-processing (olive oil extraction), local industry, value addition to agricultural products. ⁵
General Utilities	Electricity, potable water, sewage networks (in line with	Gradual development up to 2010	Supporting households, businesses, public

	Aleppo Governorate averages)		health, and overall quality of life. ²⁶
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V. Land Tenure, Ownership, and State Policies (Pre-2010)

The economic landscape of Afrin was profoundly shaped by patterns of land ownership, the historical presence of its Kurdish population, and the overarching policies of the Syrian state concerning land and minority rights.

A. Land Ownership Patterns and Kurdish Presence

Afrin was, by all accounts, a predominantly Kurdish region. Prior to the Syrian Civil War, ethnic Kurds constituted a significant majority, estimated at roughly 90% of the district's population.⁴ Consequently, land ownership was largely in Kurdish hands, intricately tied to centuries-old agricultural traditions and settlement patterns. The historical designation of the area as "Kurd-Dagh" (Mountain of the Kurds) further underscores this deep-rooted connection between the Kurdish people and the land they inhabited and cultivated.³ For the Kurdish population of Afrin, land was not merely an economic asset; it was a core component of their cultural identity, heritage, and communal existence. This profound attachment made state policies affecting land tenure and ownership particularly sensitive and often contentious. The established traditional landholding patterns, passed down through generations, formed the basis of the agricultural economy.

B. Impact of Syrian State Policies

The Syrian state, particularly under Ba'ath Party rule, implemented a range of policies that had direct and often detrimental impacts on the Kurdish population of Afrin, including their land rights and economic prospects.

1. Arabization Policies

- Throughout much of Syria's post-independence history, the Kurdish society in Afrin, like in other Kurdish-majority areas of Syria, was subjected to "heavy-handed Arabization policies" by the central government in Damascus.³ These policies were part of a broader state strategy aimed at promoting Arab nationalism and, in practice, often involved the suppression of minority identities and rights.
- Specific manifestations of Arabization in and affecting Afrin included the banning of Kurdish language teaching in schools, the repression of Kurdish cultural celebrations and expressions, the systematic changing of Kurdish village names to Arabic ones (thus erasing historical and cultural toponymy), and, in some instances, the forcible transfer of Arab families onto lands traditionally owned and cultivated by Kurds.²⁹ While some sources highlight the intensity of these land-related Arabization campaigns in the northeastern Jazira region during the 1970s³⁰, other accounts explicitly state that Afrin's residents also faced such pressures and policies impacting land ownership and cultural rights.²⁹

- A significant piece of legislation with potential repercussions for land ownership in border regions was Decree 49, issued in October 2008. This decree reportedly aimed to evict inhabitants from certain border areas, a measure that disproportionately affected the Kurdish minority who, in some border zones, were already constrained by Syrian laws that forbade them from buying, selling, or bequeathing property to their heirs.³¹ These state-sponsored policies of demographic and cultural alteration had direct and severe economic consequences for Afrin's Kurdish population. They created an environment of tenure insecurity, led to the dispossession of some landowners, and severely limited the ability of Kurds to invest in, develop, and freely transact their primary economic asset – agricultural land. This represented a significant structural impediment to equitable economic development, imposed by the state.

2. Restrictions on Property Rights

- Beyond overt Arabization, Kurdish residents in border areas like Afrin often faced administrative and legal restrictions on their property rights. These included difficulties in obtaining official property deeds (tapoo), or permits for building new structures or repairing existing ones on their land.²⁹
- Syria's national land registration system, the cadastre, was known for its complexity. While officially registered land ownership rights, evidenced by a "tapoo" document, were considered the most secure form of tenure ³², the system itself was often incomplete, not regularly updated, and administratively cumbersome. The process of creating, altering, or transferring property rights was lengthy and could be complicated by bureaucratic hurdles and corruption.³² For Kurdish citizens in Afrin, navigating this system could be particularly challenging, especially in a political climate characterized by discriminatory policies. The lack of secure property deeds and arbitrary restrictions on construction would severely hamper economic development. Farmers and homeowners would naturally be reluctant to make long-term investments in land improvements (such as planting new olive groves, upgrading irrigation, or building storage facilities) or in their homes if their legal claim to the property was tenuous or if they faced constant uncertainty regarding permits and state interference. This situation effectively creates "dead capital," where assets cannot be easily leveraged or improved, thereby stifling local initiative and depressing agricultural output and overall economic dynamism.

3. National Land Tenure Systems

- The Syrian legal framework governing land was also a factor. According to Article 14 of the Syrian constitution (or relevant laws), all natural resources were considered to be owned by the state, which was tasked with their investment and management for the benefit of the people.³² Article 15, while protecting collective and individual private ownership, also permitted expropriation by decree for the "public interest" or by law for necessities of war or public disasters, with the provision of fair compensation.³² Inheritance laws, for the majority Muslim population, followed Sharia principles as codified in Syrian law.³²
- Furthermore, agrarian reform policies, initially launched in Syria in 1958, aimed to

redistribute land from large feudal landlords and state holdings to landless peasants. The Ministry of Agriculture maintained its own registration system for agrarian land resulting from these reforms.³² The specific impact of these national agrarian reforms in the Afrin region, with its established patterns of Kurdish family landholding, is not detailed extensively in the sources but forms part of the broader legal and historical context of land tenure. While national laws regarding resource ownership and expropriation might appear neutral on paper, their application in a context of targeted ethnic or political policies could be, and often was, discriminatory. The state's ultimate authority over natural resources and its powers of expropriation could be wielded to dispossess or marginalize specific groups like the Kurds in Afrin concerning their land rights, potentially under various pretexts, thereby reinforcing Arabization goals or other state objectives.

C. Agricultural Cooperatives

- In the period before 2011, agricultural cooperatives existed in Syria and reportedly played an important role in the agricultural sector. Their functions included involvement in agricultural insurance schemes and facilitating farmers' access to essential agricultural services, loans (credit), and production inputs such as fertilizers and seeds.³³
- The presence and effective functioning of such agricultural cooperatives could have provided significant institutional support for farmers in Afrin. Cooperatives can empower small and medium-sized farmers by enabling collective bargaining for better prices for their produce, facilitating bulk purchasing of inputs at lower costs, providing access to credit that might otherwise be unavailable from formal banking institutions, and disseminating technical assistance and improved farming practices. In Afrin, these cooperatives could have played a role in supporting the dominant olive sector, as well as other agricultural activities. However, the effectiveness and autonomy of these cooperatives could also have been influenced by state policies and local power dynamics. If heavily state-controlled or influenced, they might also have served as channels for implementing national agricultural policies that were not always aligned with the best interests or specific needs of local Kurdish farmers.

VI. Socio-Economic Conditions in Afrin (Pre-2010)

The socio-economic fabric of Afrin before 2010 was characterized by its distinct demographic profile, a heavy reliance on agriculture, and its position within the broader economic and political context of Syria and the Aleppo Governorate.

A. Population and Demographics

- **Kurdish Majority:** As established, Afrin district was distinguished by its overwhelmingly ethnic Kurdish population, who constituted approximately 90% of the inhabitants prior to the Syrian Civil War.⁴ The official Syrian census of 2004 recorded a population of about 200,000 people in the area that later corresponded to the Afrin Canton.⁹ The

main urban center, Afrin city, had 36,562 inhabitants according to the same 2004 census.⁹ This strong and cohesive Kurdish identity was central to the region's social and cultural life, but also positioned it uniquely in relation to the policies of the Syrian state, which often viewed non-Arab identities with suspicion.

- **Other Groups:** Alongside the Kurdish majority, smaller communities of Arabs, Yazidis (a distinct religio-ethnic group with ancient roots in the region), Alevis (some of whom were Kurdish Alevis who had fled persecution in Turkey and settled in areas like Maabatli in the 1930s⁹), and Christians also resided in the Afrin region, contributing to a degree of social diversity.¹
- **Urban Expansion:** Afrin town itself remained relatively small until the 1960s. From that decade onwards, it experienced significant urban expansion, primarily due to migration from the surrounding villages within the Afrin district.² This urbanization indicates a gradual shift, common in many developing regions, from purely rural livelihoods towards a more mixed economy and concentration of services and administration in the main town. This growth suggests Afrin town was becoming an increasingly important economic and administrative hub for the district, attracting population from its rural hinterland, likely in search of non-agricultural employment opportunities, education, or better access to services.

B. Employment and Livelihoods

- **Dominance of Agriculture:** The defining characteristic of Afrin's employment landscape was the overwhelming dominance of the agricultural sector. Before 2011, an estimated 75% of Afrin's population worked directly in agriculture or agriculture-related activities.⁴ This figure highlights an extreme dependence on a single sector for income and sustenance, rendering the local economy highly vulnerable to agricultural shocks such as drought, crop diseases, pest infestations, and fluctuations in the market prices for agricultural commodities, especially olives and olive oil.
- **Other Employment:** Non-agricultural employment opportunities would have been primarily concentrated in Afrin town. These likely included roles in local commerce (retail and wholesale trade), small-scale industries (such as the aforementioned olive oil pressing and textiles), local administration and public services, transportation, and other service sector activities. Specific, disaggregated employment figures for these non-agricultural sectors in Afrin before 2010 are scarce in the available documentation. The limited diversification of employment opportunities, especially in the rural areas of the district, would have further contributed to the heavy reliance on agriculture.

C. Impact of National Economic Trends and Policies

Afrin's economy did not operate in isolation but was subject to broader national economic trends and policies emanating from Damascus.

- **Syrian Economic Context (Pre-2011):** The Syrian national economy experienced periods of growth, particularly in the 1990s and 2000s. Syria's per capita GDP was approximately \$US4,058 in 2010.⁷ However, the economy also faced significant

structural challenges and policy shifts. Following Bashar al-Assad's succession to the presidency in 2000, a series of economic liberalization policies were introduced. These reforms aimed to transition the economy away from the Ba'athist state's traditional "Arab socialist" model towards more market-based mechanisms. This involved measures such as the privatization of some state-owned enterprises and the gradual reduction or removal of subsidies and price ceilings on various commodities.¹⁹ While intended to modernize the economy, these reforms often had uneven impacts, frequently benefiting individuals and groups well-connected to the regime, while potentially harming vulnerable populations such as rural peasants and urban laborers who relied on subsidies or faced increased competition.¹⁹ Changes in national agricultural subsidies or price controls would have directly affected the profitability of farming in Afrin.

- **Inflation and Currency:** The Syrian Lira (SYP) maintained relative stability against the US dollar for certain periods (e.g., averaging around 50.78 SYP per USD between 1995 and 2001).³⁵ However, the economy also experienced bouts of significant inflationary pressure at other times; for instance, the national inflation rate reached 15.2% in 2008.³⁵ Such inflation would have eroded the real purchasing power of incomes for the population in Afrin, affecting their living standards.
- **Investment Law No. 10 (1991):** This law was enacted to encourage domestic and foreign investment in Syria and is credited with contributing to economic stability and growth during the 1990s.³⁵ However, the extent to which such national investment initiatives specifically benefited peripheral, agriculturally-focused, and ethnically distinct regions like Afrin is debatable. Investment often tends to concentrate in major urban centers or in sectors strategically favored by the state, potentially bypassing regions like Afrin unless they possessed specific strategic resources (beyond agriculture) or had strong local entrepreneurship capable of attracting and leveraging such investment.
- **Drought (2006-2010):** As discussed previously, the severe national drought from 2006-2010 had a devastating impact on Syria's agricultural sector, which was a mainstay of the national economy (accounting for roughly 17% to 26% of GDP pre-war).⁷ This national crisis, combined with potentially unfavorable shifts in agricultural support policies, likely created significant economic stress in Afrin.
- **Financial Sector:** Syria's financial sector was relatively underdeveloped prior to 2010. State-owned banks dominated for decades, and private sector banks only began to operate from early 2004.³⁶ Overall banking penetration among the population was low. Microfinance institutions also started to emerge relatively late, with enabling legislation passed in 2007 and the establishment of banks like Ibdāa Bank for Small and Microfinance in 2010.³⁷ Consequently, access to formal credit and other financial services for small farmers, artisans, and entrepreneurs in Afrin might have been quite limited throughout most of the pre-2010 period. This lack of access to finance could have hindered investment in agricultural modernization, the adoption of new technologies, or the establishment and growth of small businesses.

D. Access to Services and Living Standards (Aleppo Governorate Context)

While specific socio-economic indicators for Afrin district are not always disaggregated, data for the broader Aleppo Governorate provides a general picture of living conditions.

- **General Indicators:** As noted in the infrastructure section, the Aleppo Governorate, by 2011, had achieved relatively high levels of access to basic utilities. For example, 99.7% of homes in the governorate reportedly had electricity, and in major cities, 98.4% of the population had access to sewage networks. Around 90% of the governorate's population used an improved drinking water source.²⁶ In terms of education, enrollment in basic schooling was high, with 95.6% of children of basic school age enrolled in 2006.²⁶ These figures suggest that, at a macro level, basic infrastructure for services was in place.
- **Poverty:** Despite Aleppo city's status as Syria's economic and industrial capital, the Aleppo Governorate as a whole was paradoxically considered the poorest governorate in Syria in the 2003-2004 period, with poverty being particularly acute in its rural areas.²⁶ Typical monthly household income in the governorate around that time was estimated to be between 10,000 and 15,000 SYP (approximately \$US200-300 at prevailing exchange rates), which is modest.²⁶ The unemployment rate in Aleppo Governorate was recorded at 7.6% in 2011, lower than the national average of 14.9% at the time, but this figure might mask underemployment or precarious employment, especially in rural agricultural areas.²⁶
- The high rates of rural poverty within the Aleppo Governorate suggest that Afrin's population, being predominantly rural and heavily reliant on agriculture, likely faced significant economic hardship and potentially lower overall living standards compared to more urbanized or industrialized parts of Syria, despite the natural fertility of their land. The economic benefits derived from Afrin's substantial olive production might not have translated into widespread prosperity for the majority of its inhabitants, particularly when considering the impacts of discriminatory state policies, limited access to finance, and vulnerability to agricultural shocks like the 2006-2010 drought.

VII. Conclusion

A. Summary of Afrin's Pre-2010 Economic Profile

The economy of the Afrin region prior to 2010 was overwhelmingly agrarian, with olive cultivation and olive oil production forming its central pillars. This agricultural focus was not merely an economic activity but was deeply interwoven with the region's history, culture, and the identity of its predominantly Kurdish population. While olives were paramount, the agricultural sector also included the cultivation of grains, fruits, and other crops, providing a degree of diversification. Afrin town served as the district's primary local market and administrative center, with its most significant external trade linkages directed towards the

major urban and industrial hub of Aleppo. Local industries were modest and largely ancillary to agriculture, primarily consisting of olive oil pressing and a small-scale textile sector.

B. Key Long-Term Economic Trends and Structural Features

Several long-term economic trends and structural features characterized Afrin's pre-2010 economy. The most prominent was the enduring legacy of olive monoculture, which, while providing a specialized niche, also entailed economic vulnerabilities. Critical infrastructure developments, such as the early 20th-century Baghdad Railway and the late 20th-century April 17th Dam, played important roles in shaping connectivity, trade, and agricultural potential. However, a persistent and overarching structural feature was the profound influence of Syrian state policies. Discriminatory practices, notably Arabization campaigns and restrictions on Kurdish property and cultural rights, acted as significant structural impediments to equitable economic development and engendered insecurity among the local population. Furthermore, the region's economy remained susceptible to environmental factors, particularly recurrent droughts, and was also affected by shifts in national economic policies concerning subsidies, investment, and market regulation.

C. The Legacy of this Economic History

The economic conditions prevailing in Afrin before 2010—including its deep agricultural specialization, the nature of its existing infrastructure, the socio-economic grievances stemming from decades of state policies, and its demographic composition—collectively formed the crucial baseline upon which the dramatic and transformative changes of the post-2011 period would unfold. The Syrian Civil War, the subsequent displacement of populations, shifts in political control, and alterations in industrial activity all interacted with this pre-existing economic and social fabric. The profound attachment of the local population to their land and, in particular, to olive cultivation—an attachment shaped over centuries of practice and cultural identification—would undoubtedly continue to be a significant factor in the region's identity, resilience, and future aspirations.

D. Overall Assessment

In essence, Afrin's pre-2010 economy was characterized by a strong and historically rooted agricultural base that held significant potential. However, the full realization of this potential was demonstrably constrained by a combination of factors. These included its relative peripheral status within the national Syrian economy, the adverse impacts of discriminatory state policies that limited local agency and investment, and its inherent vulnerability to external shocks, both environmental (such as droughts) and political-economic (such as changes in national agricultural or trade policies). While possessing a rich agricultural heritage and benefiting from certain key infrastructural developments, Afrin's journey towards broader and more equitable economic prosperity was significantly hampered by these complex and often intertwined socio-political and economic realities.

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