

Migratory Currents and Demographic Shifts in the Afrin Region: Ottoman Era to 2010

Introduction

Afrin: A Historical Overview of a Region Shaped by Migration

The Afrin region, historically known as Kurd Dagħ (Mountain of the Kurds), is a geographically distinct area in northwestern Syria. Characterized by its mountainous terrain and fertile valleys, particularly the Afrin River valley, it has long been recognized for its olive cultivation, a practice with deep historical roots.¹ Its strategic position, nestled between the Anatolian highlands and the Syrian plains, and its agricultural resources have rendered it a significant crossroads for various populations and a territory of interest for successive ruling powers throughout history. This confluence of geography and historical trajectory has resulted in complex and layered migration patterns that have profoundly shaped its demographic composition. This report aims to detail and analyze the diverse events, policies, and socio-economic forces that led to migrations to the Afrin region, spanning the period from the Ottoman incorporation of the area until 2010, just prior to the transformative impact of the Syrian Civil War.

Defining the Scope: Ottoman Era to 2010

The chronological parameters of this study commence with the Ottoman Empire's absorption of the region, circa the 16th century, which marked a significant period of administrative and demographic consolidation. The analysis extends to 2010, a deliberate endpoint chosen to capture the region's demographic profile before the profound disruptions and large-scale displacements precipitated by the Syrian Civil War from 2011 onwards. The migrations examined are diverse, encompassing various ethnic and religious groups, including Kurds, Arabs, Circassians, Armenians, Yazidis, and Alevis. The drivers of these movements were multifaceted, ranging from imperial administrative policies, political upheavals and persecution in neighboring territories, economic opportunities and hardships, state-led development initiatives, to environmental pressures. Understanding these migratory currents is essential for a nuanced comprehension of Afrin's historical identity and its socio-political landscape.

I. The Ottoman Period: Laying the Demographic Foundations (c. 1516 - 1918)

The centuries of Ottoman rule were pivotal in establishing the demographic and administrative

contours of the Afrin region. During this era, the area became firmly recognized as predominantly Kurdish, while also experiencing the arrival and settlement of other groups due to imperial policies and regional dynamics. Ottoman administrative structures, land policies, responses to tribal powers, and the broader geopolitical context of the empire all played a role in shaping the early human geography of Kurd Dagħ.

A. Early Kurdish Presence and Ottoman Administrative Frameworks

The demographic character of the Afrin region, particularly its strong Kurdish identity, predates the Ottoman era, but Ottoman administrative practices served to formalize and, in some ways, reinforce this reality.

- **The Kurd Dagħ: An Ancient Area of Kurdish Settlement**
The mountainous massif known as Kurd Dagħ, which forms the core of the Afrin district, has been an area of Kurdish settlement for millennia.¹ Historical accounts and scholarly research suggest a continuous Kurdish presence dating back to antiquity. Authors like René Dussaud and Stefan Sperl posit that Kurdish settlements in the Kurd Mountains may extend as far back as the Seleucid era (312-63 BCE), attributable to the region's strategic importance on the path to Antioch.¹ The very name "Kurd Dagħ," meaning "Mountain of the Kurds" in Turkish and colloquially used, underscores the long-standing ethnic characteristic of this territory.⁴ This deep-rooted presence indicates that a significant portion of the Kurdish population in Afrin can be considered indigenous to the area, rather than later arrivals.
- **Ottoman Conquest and the "Liva-ı Ekrad" (Province of the Kurds)**
Following the Ottoman conquest of Syria in 1516, the region encompassing Kurd Dagħ was incorporated into the imperial administrative system. A crucial development was its designation in the 16th century as the "liva-ı Ekrad," or the province of the Kurds.⁶ This official administrative recognition by the Ottoman authorities is significant as it acknowledged and formalized the predominantly Kurdish demographic character of the area. Furthermore, the governorship of Kilis, an administrative unit that included Kurd Dagħ, was notably attributed to the influential Kurdish Canpolat (Janbulad) family.⁶ This appointment suggests an Ottoman strategy of co-opting and integrating existing local Kurdish power structures into the imperial framework to facilitate governance and maintain stability. Reinforcing this, Ottoman documents also referred to the Afrin Plateau specifically as the "Sancak of the Kurds".⁷ The Ottoman administrative framework for Kurd Dagħ, therefore, appears not as a simple imposition of external rule, but rather as a pragmatic adaptation to pre-existing socio-political realities. The empire leveraged existing Kurdish leadership structures for imperial governance, a strategy likely aimed at ensuring stability and loyalty in a strategically important frontier zone. This approach of recognizing and working with established local power brokers was a common feature of early Ottoman expansion and consolidation.
- **Role of Local Kurdish Notables and Tribal Confederations**
Throughout much of the Ottoman period, the imperial government consistently recognized and actively cultivated local Kurdish notables and tribal leaders as intermediaries in districts like Kurd Dagħ.⁴ This policy, while facilitating tax collection

and the maintenance of order on behalf of the Porte, also had the effect of entrenching the power and influence of these local figures and their families. Prominent Kurdish tribal confederations, such as the Reshwan (initially based in Adiyaman province but later settling across Anatolia and parts of northern Syria) and the Milli confederation (which became particularly powerful in the northern Syrian steppe during the second half of the 18th century), exerted considerable influence in the broader Aleppo Vilayet, thereby shaping regional Kurdish dynamics.¹ The Janbulad dynasty, of Kurdish origin, even held the governorship of Aleppo for a period (1591–1607), illustrating Kurdish influence at higher echelons of provincial administration.¹

The early Ottoman reliance on, and consequent empowerment of, Kurdish tribal leaders and notables in regions like Kurd Dagħ established a pattern of semi-autonomy and localized power. This system, while efficient for initial Ottoman control and resource extraction, also solidified the power bases of these local actors. Such deeply rooted local autonomy would later create inherent tensions when the empire embarked on centralization efforts in the 19th century. Any attempts to diminish the established authority of these notables could, and often did, lead to instability, resistance, or migration as local populations and their leaders reacted to perceived encroachments on their long-held privileges and way of life. This dynamic of balancing central authority with local power was a persistent challenge for the Ottoman administration in its Kurdish-inhabited territories.

B. Imperial Policies, Conflicts, and Population Movements

Beyond administrative frameworks, specific Ottoman imperial policies, regional conflicts, and broader geopolitical events significantly influenced population movements and settlement patterns in and around the Afrin region.

- **Ottoman Land Policies and Settlement in the Aleppo Vilayet**

The Ottoman Land Code of 1858 represented a major attempt to modernize and regulate land tenure across the empire, including in the Aleppo Vilayet, of which Kurd Dagħ was a part.⁶ The primary objectives of this code were to increase state tax revenues and to exercise greater state control over land resources by requiring landowners to register their property.⁹ However, the implementation of this law had complex and often unintended consequences for local populations. Many small farmers were reluctant to register their lands, fearing that registration would lead to increased taxation, conscription into the Ottoman army, or simply due to a general opposition to official regulations.⁹ The registration process itself was susceptible to manipulation. There were instances where merchants, urban notables, or local Ottoman administrators registered large tracts of land, including communally owned village lands, in their own names.⁹ This effectively transformed local peasants, who had cultivated these lands for generations, into tenants of absentee landlords. Such dispossession or increased economic vulnerability could have been a factor driving local migrations or shifts in settlement, although direct evidence specifically for the Afrin district requires more targeted research. The Aleppo Vilayet was an ethnically and religiously diverse province¹, and the impact of these land policies likely varied among its different communities.

- Centralization Efforts (Tanzimat, Hamidian Era) and Kurdish Responses

The 19th century witnessed significant Ottoman efforts to centralize power and modernize the state, particularly during the Tanzimat (1839-1876) and later Hamidian (1876-1909) periods.⁴ These reforms aimed to create a more efficient military, a streamlined bureaucracy, and more effective revenue collection systems. However, these centralization drives often clashed with the traditionally autonomous status and vested interests of powerful Kurdish tribal leaders in regions like Kurd Dagħ.¹¹ The imposition of direct rule, new taxes, and conscription were frequently met with resistance and, in some cases, outright rebellion by Kurdish chieftains seeking to protect their long-established positions and authority.¹¹ The state's responses to such rebellions could involve military expeditions, punitive measures, and sometimes forced displacements, or they might encourage the migration of affected groups seeking to evade heightened state control. Despite these overarching centralization policies, the Ottoman government often found it pragmatic to continue cultivating relationships with certain local Kurdish notables, using them as state intermediaries to maintain a degree of order and facilitate administration in the district.⁴ This cyclical pattern of Ottoman centralization efforts, followed by local resistance (often spearheaded by Kurdish tribal leaders), and subsequent state responses (whether military action or a re-negotiation of terms with local elites) created an environment of intermittent instability. This long-term dynamic likely contributed to smaller, less documented, but continuous population shifts within and around Kurd Dagħ. It also reinforced the importance of local loyalties and identities, as communities sought security and stability, sometimes by aligning with powerful local figures or by migrating to areas perceived as less subject to direct imperial interference.

- Settlement of Muhajirin: Circassians, Balkan Muslims, Crimean Tatars, and others in Northern Syria

A significant demographic development in Ottoman Syria during the 19th and early 20th centuries was the settlement of Muhajirin – Muslim refugees fleeing territories lost by the Ottoman Empire, particularly as a result of Russian expansion in the Caucasus and the Ottoman defeats in the Balkan Wars.¹⁴ Circassians constituted a major group among these refugees. Following the Russo-Circassian War and their expulsion from the Caucasus in the 1860s, large numbers were resettled by the Ottoman authorities in various parts of the empire, including Syria.¹⁵ The first Circassian settlements in Syria were established in 1872 in Quneitra and Homs, and by 1910, their population in Syria was estimated at around 60,000.¹⁴ They were also settled in Manbij, within the Aleppo Vilayet, and other areas.¹ Other Muhajirin groups included Muslims from the Balkans and Crimean Tatars (who began arriving in significant numbers after 1856).¹⁶ The Ottoman government had several motivations for these settlement policies: to populate and cultivate fallow or sparsely inhabited lands, to bolster security along important routes or in frontier areas (sometimes against Bedouin tribal influence), to provide a loyal manpower base, and occasionally to alter the demographic balance in regions with significant non-Muslim populations.¹⁵ While the available sources do not explicitly detail large-scale settlement of these Muhajirin groups directly within the

mountainous Afrin district itself, their establishment in nearby areas like Manbij and the broader Aleppo Vilayet 1 would have introduced new ethnic elements to the regional demographic landscape. Ottoman policies of settling Muhajirin in northern Syria, while aimed at imperial consolidation and addressing humanitarian crises, inadvertently created new layers of ethnic diversity. This, in turn, laid the groundwork for potential future inter-communal relations – both cooperative and conflictual – in areas adjacent to or within the wider Kurd Dagħ region, influencing land use, resource competition, and local alliances.

- **Bedouin Settlement and Nomadic-Sedentary Interactions**
Ottoman policies towards the Bedouin tribes inhabiting the Syrian steppe and its peripheries were complex and evolved over time. For much of the Ottoman period, control was maintained through a combination of subsidies to tribal leaders, the strategic encouragement of inter-tribal factions, and occasional punitive military expeditions.²² In periods when central Ottoman authority weakened, Bedouin tribal confederations often expanded their influence, leading to incursions into settled agricultural lands, which could disrupt agricultural production and potentially displace peasant communities.²² In the late 19th century, as part of broader centralization and modernization efforts, the Ottomans made more concerted attempts to sedentarize Bedouin tribes and integrate them more fully into the state's administrative and taxation systems.²¹ The settlement of Muhajirin groups like the Circassians was sometimes strategically intended to act as a buffer against Bedouin power and to secure agricultural areas.¹⁵ These interactions between nomadic Bedouin, established agricultural communities (like those in Kurd Dagħ), and newly settled refugee groups would have contributed to a dynamic frontier environment, influencing local settlement patterns and inter-communal relations.
- **Impact of Russo-Turkish Wars on Displacements towards Syrian Territories**
The series of Russo-Turkish wars fought during the 19th century were a primary catalyst for the large-scale displacement of Muslim populations from the Caucasus and the Balkans, many of whom sought refuge within the remaining territories of the Ottoman Empire, including its Syrian provinces.⁶ As Russia expanded southward and westward, groups such as Circassians (particularly after 1864), Crimean Tatars (from 1856 onwards), and Laz (after the 1877-1878 war) were among those who migrated to Ottoman lands.¹⁶ The Ottoman state generally welcomed these refugees, viewing them as a means to populate uncultivated lands, provide a source of agricultural labor, and potentially strengthen the Muslim element in certain regions.¹⁶ While the provided sources do not specifically identify the Afrin district as a primary destination for these particular refugee waves, the general influx of Muhajirin into "Syrian territories" and the broader Aleppo Vilayet would have contributed to the increasing demographic complexity of northern Syria during this period.
- **Yazidi Communities: Presence and Persecution**
The Afrin region (Kurd Dagħ) and the nearby city of Aleppo historically formed part of a Yazidi administrative and religious region known as "Tawisa Helebê" (the Peacock of Aleppo), one of the seven sacred sancaqs (banners) in Yazidi tradition.²⁵ Yazidis, an

ancient, ethnically Kurdish religious group, are indigenous to the wider Kurdistan region, and their presence in the Kurd Dagh mountains is long-standing and well-documented.²⁵ Historical records from the French Mandate period, referencing R. Lescot, indicate the existence of some twenty-six Yazidi tribes in the Kurd Dagh region alone.³⁰

Throughout their history, Yazidis have faced periods of severe persecution at the hands of various rulers and neighboring groups, often due to misinterpretations of their unique faith.²⁵ During the Ottoman era, there were instances of such persecution. For example, campaigns led by Ottoman commanders like Omar Wahbi Pasha in the late 19th century (around 1890-1892) targeted Yazidi communities in the Shaikhan and Sinjar regions, leading to massacres and destruction.³¹ While these specific campaigns were centered further east, such waves of persecution could have triggered internal displacements and migrations, with some Yazidis potentially seeking refuge in relatively more remote or defensible areas like parts of the Kurd Dagh, where a Yazidi presence was already established. The persistence of Yazidi communities in Afrin into the modern era, despite historical pressures, attests to their deep roots in the region.

II. The French Mandate Era: New Borders, Shifting Populations (1918 - 1946)

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire following World War I and the subsequent establishment of the French Mandate over Syria ushered in a period of profound transformation for the Afrin region. The drawing of new international borders, most notably with the newly established Republic of Turkey, fundamentally altered historic connections and created new dynamics of movement. This era was characterized by significant refugee influxes from Turkey, driven by political persecution and violence, and by French colonial policies that, while sometimes providing refuge, also aimed to reshape the demographic and political landscape of northern Syria to serve French interests.

A. Transition from Ottoman to French Rule

The end of Ottoman sovereignty and the imposition of French control laid the groundwork for new administrative and socio-economic realities in Afrin.

- **Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Establishment of French Mandate Syria**
The post-World War I geopolitical reordering of the Middle East was largely dictated by the victorious Allied powers. The 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, a secret understanding between Britain and France, had already delineated future zones of influence, allocating Syria to French control.² This arrangement was formalized through the San Remo Conference in 1920 and subsequently approved by the League of Nations in July 1922, which granted France the Mandate for Syria and Lebanon.³² As a consequence of these international decisions, the Afrin region, as part of northern Syria, came under French administration.² This transition marked a definitive break from centuries of Ottoman rule and subjected the region to new forms of governance, economic policies, and political influences.

- **Afrin Town: Emergence as an Administrative Center**
Under the French Mandate, the town of Afrin itself was developed as a local administrative center, beginning in the 1920s.⁴ Prior to this, the region of Kurd Dagħ did not have a single dominant urban hub. The establishment of Afrin town as an administrative seat by the French authorities would have naturally spurred some level of migration towards it. This would have included individuals seeking employment in the new administration, merchants and traders drawn by the town's enhanced role, and people providing various services to the growing center and its surrounding agricultural hinterland. The Kurd Dagħ region, with Afrin town as its newly designated administrative and economic focal point, became more closely integrated into the wider economic sphere of Aleppo, the major urban center of northern Syria.⁵

B. Major Refugee Influxes and French Settlement Policies

The French Mandate period was a critical juncture for demographic change in northern Syria, largely due to substantial waves of refugees fleeing persecution and instability in neighboring Turkey. French policies towards these refugees were complex, often combining humanitarian considerations with strategic colonial objectives.

- **Kurdish Migrations from Turkey (Post-Sheikh Said Revolt and Kemalist Era)**
One of the most significant migratory movements into French Mandate Syria involved Kurds fleeing the newly established Republic of Turkey. The failure of several Kurdish rebellions against the Kemalist government, most notably the Sheikh Said Revolt in 1925, and the subsequent harsh counter-insurgency measures and assimilationist policies pursued by the Turkish state, led to a large-scale exodus of Kurds.⁷ Estimates suggest that approximately 25,000 Kurds fled to Syria during this period, primarily in the 1920s.⁷ While the Jazira region in northeastern Syria was a primary destination for many of these Kurdish refugees, the Afrin region also received arrivals, further augmenting its existing Kurdish population.
The French Mandate authorities generally adopted a policy of encouraging this Kurdish immigration. They granted Syrian citizenship to many of the newly arrived Kurdish refugees.⁷ This approach was partly motivated by a colonial "divide and rule" strategy, which sought to balance different ethnic and religious groups and foster minority loyalties. Additionally, the French saw these refugees as a source of labor for developing agricultural lands, particularly in the sparsely populated Jazira region.⁷ The French policy was also influenced by Turkish pressure; following the Sheikh Said revolt, the French High Commission in Beirut became more responsive to Turkish demands regarding the acceptance of Kurdish (and Christian) refugees, aiming to manage the flow and its implications for Franco-Turkish relations.³³
- **Armenian Genocide Survivors: Resettlement in Northern Syria**
Survivors of the Armenian Genocide, perpetrated by the Ottoman authorities starting in 1915, constituted another major refugee group that found sanctuary in French Mandate Syria.³³ A significant wave of Armenian refugees entered Syria following the French withdrawal from Cilicia (a region in southern Anatolia with a large Armenian population) in 1921 and its subsequent incorporation into Turkey.³³ Fearing renewed massacres

under Turkish rule, tens of thousands of Armenians fled Cilicia, with Syria and Lebanon becoming their primary destinations. The city of Aleppo, in particular, became a major center for Armenian refugees, hosting large camps and newly established Armenian quarters.³⁶

While the bulk of Armenian settlement occurred in cities like Aleppo and in agricultural colonies established by the French in the Jazira region and other areas ³³, a smaller Armenian presence was also noted in the Afrin district. One source, describing the Afrin canton's demography prior to 2012 (though this is a later snapshot, it may reflect earlier settlement patterns), mentions a 1% "other" population category that included Armenians.²⁶ The settlement of Armenian refugees was often facilitated by international aid organizations alongside the French authorities.³⁸

- **Assyrian Refugees: Displacement and Settlement**

Assyrians, another Christian minority group facing persecution in the crumbling Ottoman Empire and its successor states, also sought refuge in French Mandate Syria.¹¹ Displaced from their ancestral lands in southeastern Turkey (Tur Abdin) and northern Iraq (particularly after the Simele Massacre in Iraq in 1933), many Assyrians migrated to Syria. Their primary area of settlement under the French Mandate was the Jazira region, particularly along the banks of the Khabur River, where they established a cluster of new villages.³⁹ The French authorities facilitated the settlement of these Assyrian refugees, often providing land and assistance, and like other Christian minorities, viewed them as a potentially "friendly" and loyal population group.¹¹ There is no specific mention in the provided documentation of significant Assyrian refugee settlements directly within the Afrin district; their main concentrations were located further to the east in Syria.

- **French Policies: Citizenship, Land Allocation, and Encouragement of Minority Settlements**

The French Mandate's approach to the various refugee groups arriving in Syria was multifaceted. As noted, French authorities granted citizenship to many Kurdish and Armenian refugees, a move that facilitated their integration but also served French political interests.⁷ Land was allocated for refugee settlement, with a particular focus on developing the agricultural potential of the Jazira region.³² The French aimed to establish agricultural colonies and new urban centers, such as Qamishli (founded in 1926), to accommodate the influx of Christian (Armenian, Assyrian) and Kurdish refugees from Turkey.³³ This policy was driven by economic considerations – the desire to bring fallow land under cultivation – and political ones, including the aim of creating a Christian population base in Jazira perceived as "traditionally loyal" to French interests and as a counterweight to Arab nationalism.³³ Furthermore, the French policy of encouraging minority autonomy to a certain degree and recruiting individuals from minority groups (including Kurds, Alawites, and Druze) into its local armed forces (Troupes Spéciales du Levant) likely made Syria a more appealing destination for communities facing persecution or seeking greater security and rights than they could expect elsewhere in the region.⁷ The town of Afrin, specifically, is noted to have flourished under French administration, benefiting from relative stability and

administrative focus.²

These French Mandate policies, while offering refuge and opportunities for settlement to various displaced groups, were also deeply intertwined with colonial "divide and rule" strategies and economic exploitation. By encouraging the settlement of specific minority groups in particular regions, often along strategic frontiers or in areas targeted for agricultural development, and by granting them certain privileges or administrative roles, the French authorities significantly altered the demographic map of northern Syria. This reshaping of ethnic distributions and local power dynamics, while serving immediate French colonial objectives, also laid the groundwork for future inter-communal tensions and political complexities in the post-independence era.

- **Migration of Kurdish Alevis to Afrin**

A specific and notable instance of migration directly into the Afrin district during the French Mandate period involved Kurdish Alevis. In the 1930s, particularly following the Dersim rebellion (1937-1938) in eastern Turkey and the brutal suppression campaign waged by the Turkish military, Kurdish Alevi communities fled the persecution.²⁷ A number of these Alevi refugees from the Dersim region found sanctuary in Syria and settled in the Maabatli area within the Afrin District.²⁷ Alevi communities in Anatolia had a long history of facing persecution and marginalization under the Sunni Ottoman establishment ⁴¹, and the policies of the early Turkish Republic continued to create an environment of insecurity for them. Their arrival added another layer to the diverse Kurdish population of Afrin.

The drawing of the Turkish-Syrian border during the early years of the French Mandate had a profound and lasting impact on the region's demography. This newly demarcated international boundary not only divided established Kurdish communities, separating families, tribes, and traditional grazing lands, but it also acted as a critical determinant for refugee flows.

Persecutions, rebellions, and assimilationist policies in Kemalist Turkey – such as those related to the Sheikh Said Revolt and the Dersim events – directly spurred migrations southward and westward across this new border into French-controlled Syrian territories like Afrin and the Jazira. The relative willingness of the French authorities to accept these refugees, for a combination of humanitarian and strategic reasons, made Syria a viable and often necessary destination. Thus, the border functioned as both a barrier to some forms of traditional movement and a powerful conduit for new, politically driven migrations, fundamentally shaping the ethnic and religious composition of regions like Afrin on the Syrian side.

C. Socio-Economic Transformations in Afrin

The French Mandate period also brought socio-economic changes to the Afrin region, influencing its agricultural base, social structures, and demographic profile.

- **Land Tenure Changes and Agricultural Development (Focus on Olive Cultivation)**

The French mandatory administration undertook measures to reform land tenure in some districts of Syria and generally encouraged agricultural development.³² Afrin, with its ancient tradition of olive cultivation, was already a significant agricultural area.¹ The primary economic activity in the Kurd Dagħ was olive harvesting and the production of olive oil, with these products being extensively traded in the markets of Aleppo.⁵ French

policies aimed at promoting agriculture likely further solidified and perhaps expanded the olive-based economy of Afrin. This could have, in turn, attracted seasonal agricultural labor or helped to stabilize and sustain the existing rural population. The development of Afrin town as an administrative center also facilitated the commercialization of its agricultural produce.

- **Kurdish Tribal Structures in Kurd Dagħ (Referencing Lescot's work)**

The nature of Kurdish tribal structures in the Kurd Dagħ (Afrin region) during the French Mandate is a subject of some discussion. According to research attributed to R. Lescot during this period⁵, tribal identities in Kurd Dagħ were considered relatively weak and had not played a dominant role in local social or political organization since the advent of the French Mandate. This situation was contrasted with the Jazira region further east, where tribal affiliations reportedly remained a more significant factor in social and political life.⁵

However, another source, also referencing Lescot's 1938 work "Enquête sur les Yézidis de Syrie et du Djebel Sindjar," mentions the existence of five major Kurdish tribes in the Kurd Dagħ region – the Amikan, Bian, Sheikhan, Shikakan, and Jam – in addition to other smaller tribes and numerous Yazidi tribes.³⁰ This suggests that while the political salience of tribal leadership might have diminished compared to other regions or earlier periods, tribal structures and identities did persist in Kurd Dagħ.

The reported weakening of the overarching political influence of tribal structures in Afrin during the French Mandate, if accurately portrayed by Lescot (as interpreted by Pinto), might be attributed to a combination of factors. These could include the increasing sedentarization of the population, the economic prominence of settled agriculture (particularly olive cultivation requiring long-term land management), the growth of Afrin town as an administrative and market center, and the influx of diverse refugee groups (such as Kurds from various parts of Turkey and Alevis from Dersim) who may not have readily integrated into pre-existing local tribal systems. These factors could have fostered a social structure increasingly based on village, regional, or new socio-economic identities, alongside, or sometimes superseding, purely tribal affiliations. Nevertheless, the enumeration of specific tribes by Lescot in other contexts indicates their continued presence as social units, even if their role in broader political organization had evolved.

- **Demographic Profile of Afrin under the Mandate**

Throughout the French Mandate, the Afrin region maintained its character as an overwhelmingly Kurdish area.¹ The influx of Kurdish refugees from Turkey, fleeing political persecution and failed rebellions, and the arrival of Alevi Kurds from the Dersim region, further consolidated this Kurdish majority. These new arrivals also introduced additional internal diversity within the broader Kurdish population of Afrin, bringing with them different regional origins and experiences. A 1935 French Mandate map illustrating the ethnic and religious communities of Syria reflects the demographic complexities of the broader region.⁴² While precise census data specifically for the Afrin district during this period is not readily available in the provided sources, the overall demographic picture is one of a predominantly Kurdish area that served as a recipient of further

Kurdish and related minority migrations, largely from across the newly defined Turkish border. An unknown number of Kurds were recorded in the Kurd-Dagh region at the beginning of the 20th century.⁷

III. Post-Independence Syria: State-Building, Development, and Internal Migration (1946 - 2010)

Following Syria's independence in 1946, the Afrin region, like other parts of the country, was subjected to the policies of successive national governments. State-building efforts, land reforms, economic development strategies, Arabization campaigns, and responses to environmental challenges all played a role in shaping migration patterns and the socio-economic landscape of Afrin up to 2010.

A. National Policies and their Regional Impact

The policies enacted by the independent Syrian state had significant, though sometimes indirect, consequences for the population dynamics of the Afrin region.

- Syrian Land Reforms (1958, 1963): Effects on Afrin's Agricultural Economy and Land Ownership

Syria implemented comprehensive land reforms, initially in 1958 during its union with Egypt in the United Arab Republic (UAR), and more extensively after the Ba'ath Party came to power in 1963.³ These reforms aimed to dismantle the power of large landowners and the traditional feudal class by setting ceilings on individual land ownership, expropriating estates exceeding these limits, and redistributing the land to landless peasants or establishing state-run farms.⁴³ A primary political objective was to weaken the old landed oligarchy and cultivate a loyal base of support among the peasantry.⁴³

The Afrin region's economy was, and remains, heavily dependent on olive cultivation, an agricultural practice deeply embedded in its history and culture.¹ The impact of these national land reforms on Afrin's distinctive olive-based agricultural system requires careful consideration. While the reforms primarily targeted very large feudal estates, which may have been less prevalent in the hilly, densely populated terrain of Kurd Dagħ compared to the vast plains of other Syrian regions, the redistribution policies could still have affected land tenure patterns. One source notes that approximately 22% of individually cultivated land across Syria was nationalized, but landholdings within the legally defined upper limit were generally not expropriated, and much agricultural land continued to be privately owned.³ The northwestern hilly regions of Syria, including Afrin, were characterized by dense populations and, consequently, smaller average landholding sizes per owner compared to the national average.³ This existing pattern of smaller holdings might have meant that the land reforms had a somewhat different, perhaps less disruptive, impact in Afrin than in areas dominated by extensive latifundia. However, any changes to ownership or tenancy could have influenced local livelihoods and stability.

- Arabization Policies and their Socio-Cultural Impact in Kurdish Regions

Successive Syrian governments, particularly under Ba'athist rule from 1963 onwards, implemented systematic Arabization policies aimed at promoting a singular Arab national identity and assimilating non-Arab minorities, including the substantial Kurdish population.¹ These policies manifested in various forms: the changing of Kurdish geographical names (toponyms) to Arabic ones, the restriction of the Kurdish language in public life and education, the suppression of Kurdish cultural expressions, and discriminatory practices in official documentation and census-taking.³⁴ A particularly egregious example was the exceptional census conducted in the Jazira province in 1962, which resulted in approximately 120,000 Kurds being stripped of their Syrian citizenship and rendered stateless.³⁴ While the Kurds of Afrin largely retained their citizenship, the general atmosphere of Arabization and the state's suspicion towards Kurdish identity would have undoubtedly been felt in the region.

A key component of these policies was the "Arab Belt" project (Hizam Arabi), officially launched in 1973. This project specifically targeted a 180-mile strip of land along the Turkish border in the Jazira region, aiming to alter its demographic composition by forcibly deporting an estimated 140,000 Kurds, confiscating their lands, and resettling Arab families (often those displaced by the construction of the Tabqa Dam on the Euphrates) in their place.¹¹ While the Afrin district was not a direct geographical target of the most severe land confiscations and population transfers implemented under the Arab Belt in Jazira, the overarching state ideology of Arab nationalism and the pressure on Kurdish cultural and political expression created an environment of discrimination and marginalization for Kurds throughout Syria.⁷

The lack of direct, large-scale Arab settlement in Afrin under the Arab Belt initiative (in contrast to the Jazira) might have reinforced Afrin's perception among Kurds as a relatively more secure and cohesive Kurdish cultural enclave. However, the broader state policies of Arabization and the general disenfranchisement of Kurds in Syria likely contributed to a sense of insecurity and limited opportunities. This could have influenced out-migration by some individuals from Afrin seeking better prospects elsewhere, or conversely, it might have subtly encouraged Kurds from more intensely Arabized regions to see Afrin as a place where their cultural identity could be better preserved, potentially leading to smaller, unrecorded internal Kurdish migrations towards the district.

The Syrian state's post-independence policies towards its Kurdish population, encompassing both land reforms and Arabization measures, reflect a common trajectory in the nation-building processes of many post-colonial Middle Eastern states. These states often prioritized the consolidation of central control and the forging of a unified national identity, frequently at the expense of minority rights, regional specificities, and forms of local autonomy that may have existed or been tolerated under previous imperial or mandatory administrations. For the Kurdish population in Afrin, which possessed a long history of distinct regional identity (evidenced by terms like Kurd Dagħ and the Ottoman-era "Sancak of the Kurds" ⁷) and had experienced a degree of recognition or autonomy under Ottoman and French rule, these Ba'athist policies represented a significant shift towards assimilation and marginalization. This

created ongoing tensions and grievances that undoubtedly shaped their socio-economic mobility, political identity, and potentially their decisions regarding migration.

B. Economic and Environmental Drivers of Migration

Economic development initiatives and environmental factors also played a role in shaping internal migration patterns in Syria, with potential, if often indirect, effects on the Afrin region.

- **State Investment in Agriculture and Infrastructure in Northwestern Syria**
From the mid-1980s onwards, the Syrian government initiated policies aimed at promoting agricultural development. These included efforts to expand arable land, improve irrigation infrastructure, and provide subsidies for certain inputs, such as olive seeds.³ These measures led to a significant growth in olive cultivation, particularly during the 1990s, with the northwestern governorates of Aleppo and Idlib – which include the Afrin area – being key beneficiaries of this expansion.³ As Afrin was already a major olive-producing region, these state-supported agricultural policies would have impacted its economy.¹ Increased investment and support for olive cultivation could have helped stabilize or even modestly attract agricultural labor. However, it is important to note that much of Afrin's olive cultivation was traditionally rain-fed ³, and state investment in large-scale irrigation projects, such as the Euphrates Dam, primarily benefited other agricultural regions of Syria, like the Jazira.⁴⁴ Similarly, while the oil and wheat-producing areas in northeastern Syria were significant sources of national income, these regions often suffered from underdevelopment and a lack of government investment in local infrastructure and services.⁵³ The expansion of olive cultivation in the Afrin region, supported by government policies from the 1980s, likely reinforced the existing agro-economic structure rather than fundamentally transforming it or attracting large-scale new migration to Afrin specifically for this purpose. Given the hilly terrain, dense existing population, and typically smaller landholdings in Afrin ³, the capacity for vast new olive plantations that would require a large influx of external labor was likely limited. Instead, government support probably enhanced the viability of the existing local olive economy, thereby sustaining the local population and the established patterns of circular migration, particularly with the city of Aleppo.
- **Droughts and their Contribution to Rural-Urban Migration across Syria**
Syria experienced several severe and prolonged droughts during the latter part of the 20th century and the early 21st century, with particularly impactful episodes occurring in 1998-2001 and, most notably, from 2006 to 2010.¹¹ These droughts led to widespread agricultural failure, especially in the rain-fed "breadbasket" regions of northeastern Syria, causing significant economic hardship, loss of livelihoods, and triggering massive internal migration. An estimated 1.5 million people, primarily farming families, were internally displaced by the severe 2006-2010 drought, moving from affected rural areas to the peripheries of major urban centers such as Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama.⁵⁵
The available sources primarily focus on this migration flow from the drought-stricken rural areas (mainly in the northeast) towards larger Syrian cities. It is less clear from the

documentation whether the Afrin district itself became a significant destination for these climate-induced migrants prior to 2010. Given that Afrin's own agriculture was largely rain-fed³, it too could have been vulnerable to drought conditions, potentially making it a source of out-migration in such scenarios, or at least limiting its capacity to absorb large numbers of displaced people seeking agricultural livelihoods. Syria's general vulnerability to drought, coupled with governmental responses often criticized as inadequate or mismanaged⁵³, created widespread internal displacement that primarily burdened major urban centers. While Afrin's specific role as a recipient of these pre-2010 drought migrants is not clearly delineated, the general destabilization of rural livelihoods elsewhere in Syria could have had indirect effects. For instance, increased population pressure in nearby urban centers like Aleppo, which had strong economic and social ties with Afrin, might have altered labor markets or economic opportunities for Afrin residents who traditionally sought work in the city.

- **Internal Migration Patterns: Afrin as a Potential Destination or Source**

Prior to the Syrian Civil War in 2011, internal migration in Syria was generally characterized by flows from rural to urban areas, driven by a search for economic opportunities, education, and better services.²⁹ The Kurd Dagh region, including Afrin, maintained strong and long-standing economic and migratory links with the city of Aleppo. Many men from Afrin's villages would traditionally travel to Aleppo to work as manual laborers or in other sectors, often returning to their villages on weekends or for critical agricultural seasons, such as the olive harvest.⁵ This constituted a well-established pattern of circular or seasonal migration.

Although falling outside the primary timeframe of this report (pre-2010), it is noteworthy that during the Syrian Civil War, the Afrin District served as a relatively safe haven for a period, attracting inbound refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) of various ethnicities.² This later role as a refuge suggests a pre-existing relative stability, social cohesion, or resource capacity that might have, on a smaller and less documented scale, made Afrin an attractive destination for some internal migrants even before 2010, particularly those seeking to escape localized conflicts, severe economic hardship, or intense Arabization pressures in other parts of Syria.

C. Afrin's Demography and Society before 2010

By the end of the period under review, Afrin had a distinct demographic and socio-economic profile, shaped by the cumulative impact of centuries of migration and local development.

- **Status of Kurdish, Yazidi, Arab, and other communities**

Prior to the Syrian Civil War, the Afrin District was consistently described by various sources as "homogeneously Kurdish" or "overwhelmingly ethnic Kurdish".¹ The official Syrian census of 2004 recorded the population of the Afrin Canton (an administrative unit that largely corresponded to the district) at approximately 200,000 people.²⁷ Within this predominantly Kurdish population, Yazidis constituted the most significant minority group, with deep historical roots in the Kurd Dagh region.²⁵ Estimates from before 2011 suggest that the Yazidi population in Afrin numbered between 50,000 and 60,000 individuals⁶⁰, indicating a substantial and well-established community.

The Arab presence within the core Afrin district itself was minimal compared to that of Kurds and Yazidis before 2010. While neighboring areas, such as Azaz to the east, had significant Arab communities⁴², Afrin proper was characterized by its Kurdish majority. One source provides a broader demographic breakdown for the "Afrin canton" as roughly 75% Kurdish, 25% Arab, and 1% other (including Armenians and Turkmens).²⁶ However, this description of the canton might encompass adjacent areas with a more mixed population beyond the traditional Kurd Dagħ. The description of the Afrin district as "homogeneously Kurdish" is more consistently found in other sources.¹

Kurdish Alevis also formed a part of Afrin's diverse population, particularly concentrated in the Maabatli sub-district, following their migration from the Dersim region of Turkey in the 1930s.²⁷ Small numbers of Armenians, likely descendants of earlier refugee waves, were also present.²⁶

- **Socio-Economic Conditions and Livelihoods**

The economy of the Afrin region was overwhelmingly reliant on agriculture, with olive cultivation and olive oil production serving as the primary engine of economic activity and the main source of livelihood for a large segment of the population.¹ The landscape was dominated by olive groves, and the seasonal rhythms of olive cultivation shaped much of daily life and economic patterns.

Strong economic ties connected Afrin with the major urban center of Aleppo. As previously noted, many residents of Afrin, particularly men, engaged in seasonal or circular migration to Aleppo for work, while maintaining their homes and agricultural interests in the Afrin district.⁵ Sufi religious networks also played a role in mediating social and economic interactions between rural Afrin and urban Aleppo, providing channels for communication, solidarity, and support for migrants.⁵

Despite its rich agricultural base, particularly in olives, the hilly terrain and dense population of northwestern Syria, including Afrin, meant that average landholdings were often small.³ This made many households in the region dependent on supplementary income from non-agricultural sources, often found through labor migration to Aleppo or other urban areas. By 2010, Afrin remained a region with a strong, historically rooted Kurdish identity, its society and economy intricately linked to its agricultural landscape and its relationship with the nearby metropolis of Aleppo.

Conclusion

The demographic tapestry of the Afrin region (Kurd Dagħ) as it stood in 2010 was the product of a long and complex history of migrations, settlements, and socio-political transformations spanning several centuries, from the Ottoman era through the French Mandate and into the period of Syrian independence.

- **Recapitulation of Major Migration Events and Their Drivers**

The earliest foundations of Afrin's demography were laid by the long-standing presence of Kurdish populations, a reality acknowledged and formalized by Ottoman administrative structures like the "Iiva-ı Ekrad" and the "Sancak of the Kurds." Ottoman rule also saw the settlement of Muhajirin, such as Circassians, in the broader northern

Syrian region, driven by imperial policies to populate lands and consolidate control, though their direct settlement in Afrin itself was limited. The 19th-century Ottoman centralization efforts (Tanzimat and Hamidian reforms) often clashed with local Kurdish autonomies, leading to resistance and potentially localized displacements, while land registration laws like the Ottoman Land Code of 1858 impacted tenure systems. Yazidi communities, indigenous to the wider Kurdish lands, maintained a significant presence in Afrin despite facing periods of persecution.

The French Mandate period (1918-1946) was a critical era of demographic shifts. The drawing of the Syrian-Turkish border became a major factor, channeling refugee flows. Significant numbers of Kurds fled persecution and failed rebellions in Kemalist Turkey (e.g., post-Sheikh Said Revolt) and settled in French Mandate Syria, including Afrin, often with French encouragement and grants of citizenship. Survivors of the Armenian Genocide also found refuge in northern Syria, primarily in Aleppo and the Jazira, with a smaller presence in the Afrin area. A distinct migration of Kurdish Alevis from Dersim to Afrin occurred in the 1930s due to persecution in Turkey. French policies, while offering sanctuary, were also driven by colonial interests, aiming to develop agricultural lands and foster loyalties among minority groups.

Post-Syrian independence (1946-2010), national policies continued to influence Afrin. Land reforms in 1958 and 1963 had some impact on agricultural holdings, though Afrin's olive-based economy with smaller landholdings may have experienced this differently than regions with large feudal estates. Pervasive Arabization policies under Ba'athist rule aimed to assimilate non-Arab groups and, while Afrin was not a primary target of the "Arab Belt" population transfers seen in Jazira, the pressure on Kurdish identity and culture was significant. Economic factors, including state investment in agriculture (particularly olives from the 1980s), and environmental challenges like recurrent droughts across Syria, also shaped internal migration patterns, though large-scale drought-induced migration to Afrin before 2010 is not clearly documented. Instead, established patterns of circular labor migration between Afrin and Aleppo persisted.

- The Cumulative Impact on Afrin's Demographic Tapestry by 2010

By 2010, the cumulative effect of these historical processes was that the Afrin region remained an area characterized by a deeply rooted and overwhelming Kurdish majority. Within this, a substantial and historically significant Yazidi minority thrived, alongside a notable Alevi Kurdish community, particularly in areas like Maabatli. Smaller numbers of Arabs, Armenians, and other groups were also present, reflecting the region's history as a recipient of various, albeit smaller-scale, migration waves. The policies of successive empires and states – Ottoman, French, and Syrian – coupled with regional conflicts, socio-economic pressures, and the agency of the migrating groups themselves, continuously molded Afrin's population structure. This resulted in a unique demographic and cultural landscape on the eve of the Syrian Civil War, a conflict that would tragically and profoundly reconfigure the region once more. The historical migrations detailed herein are crucial to understanding not only Afrin's past but also the complex identities and claims that continue to shape its present and future.

Table 1: Major Migratory Movements Influencing Afrin Region (Ottoman Era – 2010)

Period/Era	Migrant Group(s)	Primary Drivers	Key Policies/Events Influencing Migration	Estimated Scale/Nature of Settlement in/near Afrin	Key Sources
Ottoman Era (c. 1516 – 1918)					
Antiquity – Ottoman Period	Kurds	Long-term settlement, strategic location	Gradual settlement over centuries; Ayyubid, Mamluk, and early Ottoman periods likely saw continued presence and local power consolidation.	Foundational and majority population of Kurd Dagħ (Afrin region).	¹
16th Century onwards	Kurdish Tribes & Notables	Ottoman administrative incorporation, seeking local allies	Designation as "liva-ı Ekrad," "Sancak of the Kurds"; empowerment of local families (e.g., Canpolats).	Consolidation of Kurdish demographic and political presence in Kurd Dagħ.	⁶
Mid-Late 19th Century	Circassians, other Caucasian Muslims, Balkan Muslims (Muhajirin)	Displacement due to Russo-Turkish Wars, Balkan Wars; Ottoman resettlement policies	Ottoman policies to settle Muhajirin on uncultivated lands, for security, and to increase Muslim population in certain areas.	Significant settlement in broader Ottoman Syria (e.g., Golan, Homs, Manbij in Aleppo Vilayet). Direct settlement <i>in</i> Afrin district itself is not explicitly detailed, but	¹

				regional demographic change occurred.	
Late 19th Century	Yazidis	Persecution in other Ottoman areas (e.g., Sinjar, Shaikhan by Omar Wahbi Pasha's campaigns)	Ottoman military campaigns against Yazidi centers.	Possible internal displacement/ migration towards relatively safer areas like Kurd Dagħ, where Yazidi communities were already established ("Tawisa Helebê"). Afrin had numerous Yazidi villages.	²⁵
French Mandate Era (1918 – 1946)					
1920s – 1930s	Kurds from Turkey	Failed Kurdish rebellions in Turkey (e.g., Sheikh Said Revolt, 1925), Kemalist policies of assimilation and repression.	French Mandate policies encouraging Kurdish immigration, granting citizenship; desire to populate/develop agricultural lands (esp. Jazira), "divide and rule" strategies.	Significant influx into French Mandate Syria, primarily Jazira, but also reinforcing Kurdish population in Afrin. An estimated 25,000 Kurds fled to Syria in the 1920s.	⁷
1920s	Armenians	Aftermath of Armenian Genocide (1915), French	French Mandate received refugees;	Large-scale settlement in Aleppo city and Jazira.	²⁶

		withdrawal from Cilicia (1921) and its incorporation into Turkey, fear of renewed persecution.	settlement facilitated by French authorities and international aid.	Smaller presence noted in Afrin district/canton (approx. 1% "other" including Armenians in one later estimate, may reflect earlier settlements).	
1930s (specifically 1937-38 and aftermath)	Kurdish Alevis from Dersim, Turkey	Persecution by Turkish military during and after the Dersim Massacre.	Seeking refuge from state violence.	Settlement in Maabatli area of Afrin District.	²⁷
Post-Independence Syria (1946 – 2010)					
1950s – 2000s	Internal Syrian Migrants (various groups, including Kurds)	Economic opportunities (e.g., labor in Aleppo), Arabization policies in other Kurdish areas (potentially pushing some towards Afrin), land reforms, localized pressures.	Syrian state development policies, land reforms (1958, 1963), Arabization policies (esp. in Jazira potentially causing some movement), agricultural support (e.g., for olives from 1980s).	Established circular labor migration between Afrin and Aleppo. Afrin remained overwhelmingly Kurdish. Potential smaller, less documented internal Kurdish migration to Afrin due to pressures elsewhere. Afrin became a safe haven for IDPs <i>after</i> 2011, suggesting	²

				pre-existing relative stability.	
Late 1990s – 2000s (especially 2006-2010)	Rural Syrians (from NE Syria, other drought-affected areas)	Severe droughts leading to agricultural failure and loss of livelihood.	Government mismanagement of drought response and agricultural policies exacerbated displacement.	Massive internal displacement (1.5 million) primarily towards peripheries of major urban centers (Damascus, Aleppo city, Homs). No clear evidence of Afrin being a <i>major</i> destination for these drought migrants pre-2010; its own rain-fed agriculture could be vulnerable. Indirect impact via Aleppo.	⁵³

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