Cycles of Instability in the Kurd-Dagh: A Historical Analysis of the Afrin Region to 2010

Introduction: Defining the Region and its Enduring Conflicts

The Afrin region, a mountainous highland in northwestern Syria, has been known by several names throughout its history, each reflecting the dominant political and cultural lens through which it was viewed: Kurd-Dagh (Turkish), Çiyayê Kurmênc (Kurdish), and Jabal al-Akrad (Arabic).[1] This area, characterized by fertile valleys and strategic highlands, has been a cradle of human settlement since the Neolithic period, with evidence suggesting a continuous and significant Kurdish presence since antiquity.[3] Its history is a palimpsest of empires and cultures, from the Syro-Hittites and Romans to the successive Islamic caliphates and the Ottoman Empire, each leaving an indelible mark on its landscape and people.[5]

The history of the Afrin region prior to 2010 is characterized by recurring and compounding cycles of instability. These cycles were primarily driven by the violent imposition of external, centralizing political and ideological frameworks—Ottoman, French colonial, and Syrian Arab nationalist—onto a resilient indigenous socio-political structure. Each wave of suppression dismantled existing forms of local autonomy, leading to new forms of resistance and socio-economic disruption, with the effects of one period becoming the direct causes of instability in the next. This report will trace these causal chains, demonstrating how the destruction of a semi-autonomous emirate in the 17th century, the arbitrary division of the region by a colonial border in the 20th century, and the subsequent policies of cultural and political negation by the modern Syrian state cumulatively created the conditions for the profound political transformations that would erupt after 2010.

To provide clarity amidst the region's shifting political and nominal identities, the following table outlines its administrative and toponymic evolution.

Table 1: Administrative and Toponymic Evolution of the Afrin Region

Historical Epoch	Dominant Name(s)	Primary Administrative Division	Notes on Naming
Ayyubid/Mamluk	Emirate of Kilis	Semi-independent Emirate	Centered on Kilis, encompassing the

			Kurd-Dagh.[5]
Early-Mid Ottoman	Kurd Dağ (کرد طاغی)	Sanjak of Kilis, Vilayet of Aleppo	"Kurd Dağ" is the Ottoman Turkish translation of "Mountain of the Kurds".[2]
Late Ottoman	Kurd Dağ / Jabal al-Akrad	Kaza within Sanjak of Kilis	"Jabal al-Akrad" (جبل الأكراد) is the Arabic translation, used interchangeably.[2]
French Mandate	Qada of Kurd Dagh	District within the State of Aleppo	French administration formalized the Ottoman-era district name.[8]
Syrian Republic (Pre-Ba'ath)	Qada of Afrin	District (Qada) of Aleppo Governorate	Name officially changed in 1952 to reflect the new administrative center.[8]
Syrian Republic (Ba'ath Era)	Mintaqat Afrin / Jabal al-'Uruba	District (Mintaqa) of Aleppo Governorate	Decree 15801 in 1977 officially renamed the mountain "Jabal al-'Uruba" (Mountain of Arabism) as part of a broader Arabization policy.[2]

Part I: The End of Autonomy - Ottoman Centralization and its Aftermath (c. 1600-1918)

The first major cycle of modern instability in the Kurd-Dagh was initiated by the Ottoman Empire's strategic shift from a system of decentralized control, which accommodated local Kurdish autonomy, to a policy of direct centralization. The destruction of the region's long-standing semi-autonomous Kurdish emirate created a political vacuum, fragmented local power among competing notables (*aghas*), and eroded a unified political structure. This process fundamentally weakened the region, leaving it vulnerable to the more disruptive interventions of the 20th century.

Table 2: Chronology of Key Events and Instabilities (c. 1600-2010)

Date	Event

1591-1607	The Kurdish Janbulad dynasty rules as governors of the Vilayet of Aleppo.[4]
1607	Ali Janbulad's rebellion against the Ottoman Empire is defeated, ending the era of the semi-independent Kurdish emirate in the region.[5]
Mid-19th Century	Ottoman Tanzimat reforms and land registration laws accelerate the consolidation of power and land ownership by local *agha* families.[5]
1919-1923	French forces occupy the region, facing armed resistance from local Kurdish leaders.[5]
1921/1923	The Treaty of Ankara and subsequent demarcation of the Syria-Turkey border divides the historical Kurd-Dagh region.[5]
1922	French Mandate authorities establish the *qada* (district) of Kurd Dagh (Jabal al-Akrad).[8]
Late 1930s	The Muridin movement, an armed uprising against French rule and their local allies, is suppressed.[5]
1952	The Syrian government officially renames the district from "Jabal al-Akrad" to "Afrin".[8]
1957	The first Kurdish political party in Syria, the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria (KDP-S), is founded clandestinely.[11]
1963	The Ba'ath Party seizes power in Syria, initiating an era of systematic Arabization policies targeting non-Arab minorities.[13]
1977	Decree 15801 bans Kurdish place names; Kurd-Dagh is officially renamed "Jabal al-'Uruba" (Mountain of Arabism).[2]
c. 1980-1998	The Syrian regime under Hafez al-Assad provides a safe haven for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to operate against Turkey.[15]
1999	The arrest of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan triggers widespread protests and clashes between Kurdish demonstrators and Syrian police in Afrin.[6]
2003	The Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Syrian affiliate of the PKK, is founded.[17]

2004	The Qamishli uprising, a major nationwide Kurdish protest, erupts and is violently suppressed by the state, with unrest echoing in Afrin.[6]

The Janbulad Emirate: A Framework for Kurdish Autonomy and Stability

For centuries, the Kurd-Dagh region existed within a stable political framework defined by the semi-independent Kurdish Emirate of Kilis. Founded by the Mandi family and later led by the powerful Janbulad clan, this emirate encompassed the entirety of the modern Afrin district and its historical hinterland, including the city of Kilis.[5] This entity was not an anomaly but a key component of the early Ottoman imperial system. The Ottomans, preoccupied with their rivalry with Safavid Persia, formalized a system of broad autonomy for the Kurdish principalities along this volatile frontier. In exchange for securing the border and providing military forces when required, Kurdish princes were granted hereditary rule, fiscal privileges, and significant administrative independence.[21] The power of the Janbulads became so integrated into the imperial structure that they served as the Ottoman governors (*beylerbeys*) of the entire Vilayet of Aleppo from 1591 to 1607, demonstrating a period of functional symbiosis between the Kurdish periphery and the imperial center.[4]

Cause of Instability: The Janbulad Rebellion and Ottoman Centralization

This period of relative stability was shattered at the beginning of the 17th century. The catalyst was the Ottoman state's execution of Huseyn Janbulad Pasha, the governor of Aleppo. In response, his nephew, Ali Janbulad, launched a full-scale rebellion in 1607.[5] This was not a minor tribal revolt; it was a direct challenge to imperial sovereignty. Ali Janbulad declared complete independence, minted his own currency, and entered into a formal military alliance with the Duke of Tuscany.[5] The Ottoman response was overwhelming. Grand Vizier Kuyucu Murad Pasha was dispatched with a massive army and crushed the rebellion, effectively liquidating the Janbulad dynasty and bringing a decisive end to the era of hereditary Kurdish autonomy in the region.[5] This event was a local manifestation of a much broader imperial policy shift towards centralization, as the Porte sought to eliminate powerful, semi-independent local dynasties across the empire to consolidate direct control.[25]

Effects: The Power Vacuum and the Rise of the *Aghas*

The destruction of the Janbulad emirate was the foundational political trauma of the modern era for Kurd-Dagh. It did not lead to a more stable, centralized administration but rather to a prolonged period of fragmentation and internal conflict. The unified authority of the princely emirate was replaced by a political vacuum, which was gradually filled by a multitude of competing tribal chieftains and, more significantly, powerful feudal landowner families known as *aghas*.[5] Power was no longer derived from a recognized lineage and an imperial charter but from the direct control of land and the exploitation of the peasantry. This shift was institutionalized over the subsequent centuries, particularly by the Ottoman Land Code of 1858. Intended to modernize and regulate land ownership, the law was manipulated by local notables who registered vast tracts of communal and tribal land in their own names, legally cementing their status as a new feudal class.[5]

The fall of the Janbulads thus had a profound and lasting impact. It created a deep-seated and historically justified distrust of central authority, whether Ottoman, French, or Syrian. Furthermore, the memory of this lost autonomy became a powerful cultural and political touchstone, establishing a historical precedent for self-governance that would animate future resistance movements. The fragmentation of power from a single emirate to dozens of competing *agha* families also engendered deep internal divisions, creating a fractured political landscape that would prove susceptible to the "divide and rule" tactics of the French in the 20th century.

Part II: The Great Rupture - Colonial Borders and French Rule (1918-1946)

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the imposition of a new colonial order introduced the most significant and destabilizing rupture in the region's history. The primary cause of instability in this period was the drawing of the Syria-Turkey border, which arbitrarily vivisected the historical Kurd-Dagh. This act of political cartography triggered violent resistance, codified a fragmented and quasi-feudal social structure under French administration, and condemned the Syrian portion of the region to a state of permanent economic and political marginalization.

Cause of Instability: The Sykes-Picot Legacy and the Ankara Agreement

The post-World War I settlement, guided by the imperial logic of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, culminated in the 1921 Treaty of Ankara between France and the new Turkish government, with the border being finalized in 1923.[5] This new international boundary cut directly through the heart of the Kurd-Dagh. The northern part of the region, including its traditional

administrative and commercial capital of Kilis, was incorporated into the new Republic of Turkey. The southern, more rural and mountainous section, became a district within French-Mandated Syria.[9] This division was a social and economic catastrophe for the local population, who saw it as a violent "fragmentation of their social unity, lands, and families".[5] The region was severed from its primary markets, its administrative center, and a significant portion of its population, forcing a difficult and unnatural economic reorientation towards Aleppo.[6]

Effects: Armed Resistance and Administrative Subjugation

The imposition of French rule and the new border was met with immediate and fierce resistance. For over three years, local Kurdish leaders, including Maho Ibo Shasho and Hajj Hanan Sheikh Ismail, waged a guerrilla war against the French forces. At times, these Kurdish rebels collaborated with Turkish nationalist forces (*Kuvayımilliye*) in a pragmatic alliance against their common French adversary.[5]

After eventually suppressing these uprisings through a combination of military force and co-optation, the French established a new administrative district, the *qada* of Jabal al-Akrad, in 1922.[5] Following the pattern of their imperial predecessors, the French authorities governed by empowering and collaborating with the local landowning *aghas*, a policy that further entrenched the power of this feudal elite at the expense of the general population.[5] While the French established similar autonomous statelets for the Alawite and Druze minorities to weaken the Syrian nationalist movement, their plans for a comparable Kurdish entity in Afrin never came to fruition, likely due to a combination of internal divisions among the Kurdish notables and France's overarching strategic need to appease Turkey.[31] Despite the establishment of formal French control, resistance simmered, erupting again in the late 1930s with the religiously-inspired Muridin movement, which was only put down after a major French military campaign.[5]

The Consolidation of the *Agha* Class and Land Tenure

The French Mandate period was one of development for the town of Afrin, which grew from a small market into a proper administrative center with new roads and infrastructure.[6] However, French policy in the countryside was marked by a fundamental contradiction. French agronomists and some administrators recognized that the quasi-feudal system of large estates (*latifundia*) controlled by the *aghas* was a major impediment to agricultural modernization and social progress.[26] Yet, politically, the French were entirely dependent on these same *aghas* to maintain security and control over the rural population. Consequently, French attempts at land reform were minimal and never challenged the fundamental power structure.

This policy effectively preserved and solidified the dominance of the notable families—such as Al Sheikh Ismail, Al Seydo Mimi, Al Ghbari, and Al Kenj—whose power had been growing since the fall of the Janbulads.[5]

The creation of the Syria-Turkey border was far more than a political and economic event; it was a profound psychological rupture that catalyzed a transformation in political identity. Before the border, the inhabitants of Kurd-Dagh were part of a larger, cross-regional Kurdish society centered on Kilis, with deep cultural and kinship ties to Anatolia.[5] Their identity was primarily local and tribal, situated within a broader Ottoman-Kurdish context. The new border physically and administratively severed them from this world, isolating them as a distinct community within the borders of a new, Arab-majority state called Syria.[5] This forced isolation was the crucible in which a modern *Syrian-Kurdish* political consciousness was forged. The grievances born from this division—economic marginalization, social fragmentation, and political subjugation—became the core narrative that would fuel the modern Kurdish political parties that emerged after Syrian independence. The border transformed a collection of mountain tribes into a politically defined ethnic minority within an often-hostile nation-state.

Part III: The Age of Denial - The Syrian State and Arab Nationalism (1946-2010)

The period following Syrian independence introduced a new and deeply ideological cause of instability. The state's official doctrine of pan-Arab nationalism, particularly as implemented by the Ba'ath Party after 1963, was predicated on the denial of a distinct Kurdish identity. The effects of this policy were the systematic cultural and political suppression of the Afrin population. This, in turn, catalyzed the formation of clandestine Kurdish political parties and, most consequentially, facilitated the deep penetration of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) ideology, which transformed local grievances into a component of a transnational revolutionary struggle.

Cause of Instability: The Ba'athist Ideological Project and Arabization

The Syrian state that emerged after 1946, and which came under the absolute control of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party in 1963, was founded on an ideology of Arab nationalism that was inherently hostile to non-Arab identities.[4] The existence of a large, cohesive, non-Arab minority like the Kurds was seen as a direct threat to the ideological project of building a homogenous Arab nation.

This ideology manifested in a comprehensive set of "heavy-handed Arabization policies".[4] While the Afrin region was largely spared the most extreme form of this policy—the "Arab Belt" project, which involved the direct seizure of Kurdish lands for Arab settlement in the

Jazira region—it was subjected to the same systematic cultural suppression.[35] These policies included the strict prohibition of the Kurdish language in schools and all official contexts, the banning of Kurdish names for children and businesses, the suppression of cultural celebrations like Newroz, and the official renaming of Kurdish geographical features, most notably the 1977 decree changing Kurd-Dagh to "Jabal al-'Uruba" (Mountain of Arabism).[2]
Concurrently, the Ba'athist state used its socialist-inspired agrarian policies as a tool for political control. The agrarian reforms, beginning with Law No. 161 of 1958 and radicalized in the 1960s, were designed to break the power of the traditional landowning *aghas* and create a rural class dependent on and loyal to the central state.[39] While these reforms did alter the rural class structure, they also centralized economic power in Damascus. The farmers of Afrin, with their vital olive industry, became dependent on state-controlled cooperatives for credit, supplies, and market access, thereby extending the Ba'athist regime's political reach deep into the countryside and eroding the last vestiges of local economic autonomy.[39]

Effects: Political Disenfranchisement and Clandestine Mobilization

The state's campaign of denial and suppression was the direct catalyst for the emergence of modern Kurdish politics in Syria. In the late 1950s, the first clandestine Kurdish political parties were formed, primarily as offshoots of the Iraqi-based Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), with the goal of securing cultural rights and recognition within the Syrian state.[11]
A transformative development occurred in the 1980s when the Syrian regime of Hafez al-Assad, for its own geopolitical reasons, offered a safe haven to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to wage its insurgency against Turkey.[11] The PKK's presence on Syrian soil, including in the Afrin region, had a profound and radicalizing effect. It introduced a disciplined, revolutionary, and transnational ideology that found fertile ground among a population that was young, disenfranchised, and facing intense state repression.
The growing influence of this new political force manifested in key flashpoints of instability. The 1999 arrest of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan sparked major, violent clashes between Kurdish protesters and Syrian police in Afrin, revealing the depth of the population's allegiance to the PKK.[6] This was followed by the formal establishment of the PKK's Syrian affiliate, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), in 2003.[17] The 2004 Qamishli uprising, a massive, unprecedented wave of Kurdish protests that swept across northern Syria after a fatal brawl at a football match, was the definitive turning point. It demonstrated a new level of organized, nationwide Kurdish political assertiveness and was met with a brutal state crackdown, the effects of which were felt acutely in Afrin and solidified the population's opposition to the regime.[6]
The Ba'athist state's approach to the "Kurdish question" was defined by a deep and ultimately self-defeating paradox. The regime's primary goal was to ensure the creation of a homogenous Arab state and to prevent any form of Kurdish separatism or autonomy.[4] To this end, it ruthlessly suppressed any form of moderate, Syria-focused Kurdish political or cultural

expression, jailing activists and banning organizations.[19] Yet, at the very same time, the regime actively imported, sheltered, and supported a far more radical, militarized, and transnational Kurdish organization—the PKK—as a foreign policy tool against its neighbor, Turkey.[15] By crushing the moderate and indigenous Kurdish parties, the Ba'athist state systematically eliminated any viable, non-revolutionary political alternative. This created an ideological vacuum among the disenfranchised Kurdish youth of Afrin and other regions. The PKK, with its disciplined revolutionary structure, its powerful pan-Kurdish ideology, and its proven capacity for armed struggle, filled this vacuum completely. The state's policies did not succeed in eradicating Kurdish nationalism; they succeeded only in radicalizing it and internationalizing it, inextricably linking the local grievances of Afrin's Kurds to a much larger conflict and setting the stage for the dramatic assertion of autonomy that would follow the state's collapse after 2011.

Part IV: Synthesis - The Compounding Crises and Their Legacy on the Eve of 2011

The history of instability in the Afrin region is not a series of disconnected events but a clear causal chain of compounding crises. Each historical phase built upon the vulnerabilities created by the one that preceded it, progressively weakening the region's social cohesion and intensifying its political grievances. The Ottoman destruction of the Janbulad emirate replaced a unified political structure with a fragmented society dominated by competing *aghas*. The French colonial border then physically and economically isolated this fragmented society, severing it from its historical context and creating a deep-seated sense of injustice. Finally, the Syrian Ba'athist state's attempt to ideologically erase the identity of this isolated and aggrieved population led directly to its political radicalization and its alignment with a powerful transnational revolutionary movement.

By 2010, on the eve of the Syrian Civil War, the cumulative effect of these historical traumas had produced a region of stark contrasts.

- **Demographically**, it remained one of the most homogeneously Kurdish areas in Syria, with a population estimated at over 500,000.[35] It had successfully resisted the state's most aggressive demographic engineering projects, remaining the "least Arabized" of Syria's Kurdish regions.[35]
- **Socio-economically**, its lifeblood was agriculture, particularly its famous olive groves. However, this economy was subject to the centralized control and often neglectful policies of Damascus, leading to a sense of economic marginalization.[4]
- **Politically**, the region was a powder keg. On the surface, it was under the firm, repressive control of the Ba'athist security apparatus. Beneath this veneer, however, was a highly politicized society with widespread and deep-seated allegiance to the PYD/PKK network. Years of clandestine organizing had created a disciplined and resilient shadow structure. The violent state response to the 2004 uprising had severed

any remaining illusions about the possibility of reform within the existing system and demonstrated that the underlying political tension could erupt with significant force.[19]

Conclusion

The long history of the Afrin region before 2010 is not a story of inherent instability but of a resilient local order repeatedly shattered by the imposition of external power. The region's most unstable periods were direct consequences of the violent dismantling of its indigenous political structures and the enforcement of administrative and ideological systems hostile to its Kurdish character. From the Ottoman defeat of the Janbulad princes, to the drawing of the colonial border by France, and culminating in the decades of cultural negation under the Ba'athist state, each crisis stripped away a layer of autonomy and social cohesion. This process provoked a corresponding evolution in local resistance: from the princely revolts of the 17th century, to the tribal uprisings against the French, and finally, to the modern, ideologically-driven revolutionary politics of the late 20th century. By 2010, the compounded weight of these historical traumas had created a region that, while outwardly suppressed, possessed all the necessary elements for a radical political explosion: a cohesive ethnic identity, a profound sense of historical grievance, a powerful and disciplined clandestine political organization, and a complete and total alienation from the central state. The instability that would define Afrin after 2011 was not a new phenomenon, but the violent culmination of centuries of unresolved conflict.

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