

State, Land, and Identity: Baathist Arabization and Displacement Policies in Syria's Afrin District Before 2010

I. Introduction: The Baathist State and the "Kurdish Question"

The history of the Syrian Arab Republic under the Arab Socialist Baath Party is inextricably linked to its foundational ideology of pan-Arab nationalism. The party's motto—"Unity, Freedom, Socialism" (*Wahdah, Hurriyah, Ishtirakiyah*)—encapsulated a vision centered on the unification of a single Arab nation, freedom from foreign domination, and the implementation of a state-led socialist economy.¹ This ideology, conceived by thinkers such as Michel Aflaq, Salah al-Din al-Bitar, and Zaki al-Arsuzi, defined the nation along explicit ethnic and linguistic lines, envisioning a unified state for all Arabic-speaking peoples from the Atlantic to the Gulf.³ Within this rigid ideological framework, the existence of a large, non-Arab Kurdish minority presented a fundamental and persistent challenge, often referred to as the "Kurdish Question".⁵

Following the Baathist military coup of 1963 and the subsequent consolidation of power under Hafez al-Assad after his 1970 "Corrective Movement," Syria was transformed into a highly centralized, authoritarian state.¹ The Baath Party became the primary instrument of a military dictatorship that extended its control over every facet of public life, including state agencies, the economy, and the media.⁷ This totalitarian structure provided the regime with the necessary apparatus to implement sweeping social and demographic policies aimed at reinforcing its vision of a homogeneous Arab state. From the regime's perspective, the Kurds—a distinct ethnic group with their own language, culture, and transnational connections across borders with Turkey, Iraq, and Iran—were a threat to the "Arab character" of Syria and its territorial integrity, particularly in the resource-rich and strategically sensitive northern borderlands.⁵ This perception fueled decades of systematic discrimination designed to suppress Kurdish identity and either assimilate or displace the Kurdish population.¹² The Baathist state's approach to its non-Arab populations can be understood as a form of internal colonialism. The regime viewed the Kurdish regions as a periphery to be controlled, managed, and exploited for the benefit of an ideological center defined by Arab nationalism.¹² It employed the rhetoric and tools of "modernization," particularly in agriculture, not for the

benefit of the local inhabitants, but as a colonial vehicle to bolster the central state, extract primary resources like oil and wheat, and deliberately underdevelop the region to ensure its continued dependency.¹² This policy framework manifested in different ways across the Kurdish regions. While the northeastern province of Jazira (al-Hasakah) was subjected to a direct and aggressive campaign of demographic engineering through the "Arab Belt" settlement project, the district of Afrin experienced a different, more subtle strategy. This report argues that although Afrin was spared the mass state-sponsored settlement campaigns seen in Jazira, the Baath regime employed a distinct, multi-pronged strategy of administrative suppression, economic marginalization, and legal restriction with the consistent aim of eroding the district's Kurdish identity and compelling displacement over the long term.

II. The Blueprint for Arabization: The "Arab Belt" in Syria's Jazira Region

To comprehend the Baathist regime's policies in Afrin, it is essential to first analyze the "Arab Belt" (*al-hizam al-arabi*) project in the Jazira region. This project served as the regime's quintessential and most explicit policy of demographic engineering, establishing a clear blueprint of intent and methodology. It created a crucial point of comparison that highlights the strategic adaptations the regime made in different parts of the country.

The Precursor: The 1962 Hasakah Census

The groundwork for the Arab Belt was laid more than a decade before its implementation, with a special census conducted in the Hasakah governorate on October 5, 1962.¹⁶ Enacted under Legislative Decree No. 93, the census's stated purpose was to identify "alien infiltrators" who had supposedly crossed illegally from Turkey.¹⁷ The decree mandated that Kurds had to provide documentary proof of continuous residence in Syria since 1945; failure to do so resulted in the immediate loss of citizenship.¹⁶

The census was carried out in a single day in an arbitrary and chaotic manner. Numerous accounts describe brothers from the same family being classified differently, with one remaining a citizen while the other became a foreigner. Fathers lost their citizenship while their sons retained it, and Kurds who had served in the Syrian army were stripped of their nationality.¹⁶ The immediate result was the denationalization of an estimated 120,000 Kurds, approximately 20% of the entire Syrian Kurdish population at the time.¹¹

This act created two distinct and legally vulnerable categories of stateless Kurds. The first, known as *ajanib* ("foreigners"), were issued special red identity cards that explicitly denied them Syrian nationality and most civil rights.¹⁹ The second, the *maktoumeen* ("unregistered" or "concealed"), were not recorded in any official register and were rendered effectively invisible to the state, lacking any form of identification.¹⁹ This

inherited status of statelessness was a critical tool of dispossession; it legally barred Kurds from owning property, being employed in the public sector, receiving state subsidies, or traveling internationally, creating a marginalized population whose land could be expropriated with impunity.¹⁷

The "Arab Belt" Project: Design and Implementation (1973-1976)

With a legally weakened Kurdish population in place, the Baathist regime, under the firm control of Hafez al-Assad, officially launched the Arab Belt project in 1973.²³ The plan was based on a 1965 party resolution and a detailed study by Muhammad Talab Hilal, a security officer in Hasakah who later became a government minister.²³ The project's explicit objective was to create a buffer zone, 350-375 km long and 10-15 km deep, along Syria's borders with Turkey and Iraq, stretching from Ras al-Ayn to al-Malikiyah.⁶ The stated strategic goal was to sever the demographic and cultural contiguity between Syrian Kurds and their brethren in neighboring countries.⁹

To obscure its political motives, the project was officially renamed the "Plan for the establishment of state model farms in the Jazira province".²⁴ Under this developmentalist guise, the state systematically confiscated vast areas of fertile agricultural land from Kurdish owners.⁹ This land was then used to construct more than 40 "model villages" with modern amenities.²⁴ These new settlements were populated by approximately 4,000 Arab families who had been displaced by the construction of the Tabqa Dam on the Euphrates River.⁶ These settlers, known as

Maghmurin ("flooded"), were relocated primarily from the provinces of Raqqqa and Aleppo.²³ The state provided the *Maghmurin* with free housing, significant land allotments (up to 300 dunams per family), weapons, seeds, and agricultural loans.²⁴ Simultaneously, an estimated 140,000 Kurds were forcibly displaced from the belt area, and their villages were renamed with Arabic names to erase their historical identity from the landscape.²³ Although Hafez al-Assad officially halted the large-scale settlement campaign in 1976, the demographic changes were never reversed, and the Arab settlers remained on the confiscated Kurdish land.²⁶

The Arab Belt project was more than a simple security policy; it was a sophisticated socio-economic and political strategy. Its implementation reveals three interlocking objectives. The first and most obvious was demographic replacement in a strategic border area. The second was economic re-engineering. By using "agrarian reform" as a pretext, the state seized control of the region's most valuable economic asset—its fertile land—and shifted economic power from the local Kurdish population directly to the central state and its chosen clients, cementing the region's status as a dependent supplier of raw materials.¹² The third, and perhaps most astute, objective was the creation of a loyalist constituency. The *Maghmurin* settlers, displaced by one state project and resettled by another, became a population wholly dependent on the Baathist regime for their land, homes, and livelihoods.⁶

This created a social and political buffer against Kurdish dissent, just as envisioned by Muhammad Talab Hilal, who had recommended that the new Arab settlements be armed and organized "like the Jewish colonies on the borders".²⁷ By using the genuine humanitarian need of the

Maghmurin as a pretext, the regime was able to mask an ideologically driven project of ethnic cleansing with a veneer of benevolent state planning.

III. The Afrin Exception: A Strategy of Containment and Indirect Displacement

The Baathist regime's approach to the Afrin district stands in marked contrast to the overt demographic engineering of the Arab Belt. The absence of a similar large-scale settlement project in Afrin did not signal a lack of intent to Arabize the region, but rather a strategic adaptation to the district's unique geopolitical and demographic characteristics. Instead of direct replacement, the state pursued a long-term strategy of containment and indirect displacement through administrative, economic, and legal means.

Geopolitical and Demographic Context of Afrin

Historically known as "Kurd-Dagh" (Mountain of the Kurds), the Afrin district was, prior to 2010, one of the most demographically homogeneous regions in all of Syria.⁵ Multiple sources confirm that its population was overwhelmingly Kurdish, with some estimates placing the figure as high as 97%.³⁰ This homogeneity contrasted sharply with the more ethnically and religiously mixed landscape of the Jazira province.²³ Geographically, Afrin forms a distinct pocket, non-contiguous with the larger Kurdish-inhabited territories of Kobani and Jazira to the east and almost entirely encircled by the Turkish border.³³

Several analyses note that, for "various reasons," Afrin was "spared the Arabization campaigns that affected other parts of Syrian Kurdistan" and remained the "least Arabized" of the Kurdish regions before the 2011 conflict.³¹ While the sources do not explicitly detail these reasons, the district's geographic isolation and demographic cohesion likely made a direct settlement policy akin to the Arab Belt both strategically less critical—as it was not part of the contiguous border buffer the state sought to create in the east—and politically more volatile, as introducing settlers into such a uniform and dense Kurdish area could provoke significant unrest.

Administrative and Cultural Suppression

Despite being spared direct settlement, Afrin was fully subjected to the Baathist state's

pervasive policies of cultural Arabization. These policies were a direct assault on the region's identity and historical memory. The state systematically changed the names of Kurdish villages, towns, and geographical landmarks to Arabic ones, seeking to erase the Kurdish toponymy from the map.¹⁴ Furthermore, in line with national policy, the Kurdish language was strictly banned from official use, schools, and publications. Cultural celebrations central to Kurdish identity, such as the Nowruz new year festival, were actively repressed by security forces.⁵ These measures were fundamental tools of a state that officially denied the very existence of a distinct Kurdish identity within its borders.

Economic Strangulation and Induced Migration

The most effective tool of indirect displacement in Afrin was economic policy. The Baathist state implemented a centralized economic model that treated the Kurdish regions, including Afrin, as colonial-style peripheries designed for the extraction of raw agricultural materials to serve the national economy.¹² The regime deliberately stifled local industrial development, preventing investment and ensuring that regions like Afrin remained dependent on the center.¹⁵

Afrin, a region famed for its ancient olive groves, estimated to contain some 18 million trees, was a prime example of this policy in action.⁵ Its economy was almost entirely limited to the production of olives, olive oil, and soap, with few to no state-supported opportunities for value-added industrialization or diversified employment.¹⁵ This state-enforced economic stagnation created a structural lack of opportunity. As the population grew, many Kurdish youths from Afrin were forced to migrate to major industrial and urban centers like Aleppo and Damascus in search of work, where they often found employment only in low-wage, precarious labor sectors.¹⁵ This process achieved a gradual, seemingly "voluntary" displacement and demographic dilution of the district's Kurdish population without the need for a single act of forced resettlement. This policy can be accurately described as demographic displacement by attrition. Rather than forcibly removing the population, the state engineered economic and cultural conditions so untenable that a significant portion of the population, especially the younger generation, would effectively be forced to "choose" to leave. The result was a slow, steady demographic bleed that served the state's long-term goal of weakening the Kurdish presence in a strategic area.

The Question of Arab Settlements in Afrin (Pre-2010)

The available evidence confirms the historical presence of a small Arab minority in the Afrin district, primarily consisting of a few clans like the al-Bubanna and al-Omeyrat who had migrated from the nearby Manbij district over time.³¹ This minority constituted a very small fraction of the district's overall population, estimated at around 3% before 2011.³¹ It is crucial to distinguish this long-standing, organic presence from state-sponsored settlement. The

research provides no evidence of any large-scale, state-directed program to settle Arab families in Afrin during the Baathist era before 2010. The mass settlement of Arabs in Afrin, which has dramatically altered its demography, is a well-documented phenomenon that occurred

after 2018, following the Turkish-led "Operation Olive Branch" and the displacement of the local Kurdish population.³⁰

The following table provides a comparative analysis of the Baathist regime's distinct Arabization strategies in the Jazira and Afrin regions before 2010.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Baathist Arabization Policies in Jazira and Afrin (pre-2010)

Policy Instrument	Jazira (al-Hasakah) Region	Afrin District
Mass State-Sponsored Settlements	Extensive: Creation of over 40 "model villages" for thousands of Arab families (<i>Maghmurin</i>). ⁶	Minimal to None: No evidence of state-sponsored settlement projects. Small, pre-existing Arab minority present. ³¹
Large-Scale Land Confiscation	Systematic: Widespread confiscation under the "Arab Belt" project, targeting Kurdish landowners to create a buffer zone. ⁹	Indirect/Restrictive: Primarily through legal restrictions on property rights for residents in border areas; no evidence of mass confiscation for settlement. ¹⁴
Citizenship Stripping (1962 Census)	Epicenter: The census directly targeted Hasakah, creating a large stateless Kurdish population (<i>ajanib & maktoumeen</i>). ¹⁶	Not Directly Targeted: Not the focus of the 1962 census, but residents were subject to the general discriminatory legal framework against all Syrian Kurds. ²¹
Cultural & Linguistic Suppression	Pervasive: Banning of Kurdish language, holidays, and systematic Arabization of place names. ⁵	Pervasive: Arabization of village names and suppression of cultural expression were key tools of state control. ¹⁴
Economic & Development Policy	Exploitative: Deliberate underdevelopment; control over agricultural production (e.g., wheat) for the national economy. ¹²	Marginalizing: Deliberate underdevelopment and lack of investment, creating economic hardship that induced out-migration of Kurdish youth for work. ¹⁵

IV. The Legal Architecture of Control and

Dispossession

The Baathist regime's policies of demographic and cultural engineering were not carried out in a legal vacuum. On the contrary, the state constructed and manipulated a sophisticated legal and administrative framework to provide a veneer of legitimacy for its actions. The regime mastered the use of "lawfare"—the strategic weaponization of legal instruments to achieve political and military objectives. This created a dual legal system: one that existed on paper, espousing constitutional principles of equality and property rights, and another that operated in practice, using those same laws as discriminatory tools against Kurds and other perceived threats to the state. This framework was applied across all Kurdish areas, including Afrin.

The Politicization of Agrarian Reform

The Baath Party's agrarian reform program, initiated with Law No. 161 of 1958 and expanded after the 1963 coup, was publicly presented as a progressive socialist policy aimed at dismantling the power of the "feudal" landowning class and redistributing land to poor peasants.¹² In practice, however, its primary purpose was political: to destroy the old rural elite, who were often sources of opposition, and to create a new class of small landholders and beneficiaries of state farms who would be economically dependent on and politically loyal to the Baathist regime.²⁸

In the Kurdish regions, this political objective was fused with an ethnic one. "Agrarian reform" became the principal legal pretext for the large-scale dispossession of Kurdish landowners.⁶ Land confiscated from Kurds was not redistributed to local landless Kurdish peasants. Instead, it was either held by the state for strategic projects like the Arab Belt settlements or granted directly to loyal Arab families brought in from other regions.⁹ The stateless Kurds created by the 1962 census were explicitly excluded from any benefits of the land reform laws, which further entrenched the ethnic bias of the policy's application and ensured that confiscated Kurdish land would be transferred to Arab hands.⁶

Property and Border Laws Targeting Kurds

Beyond the agrarian reform laws, the regime enacted a series of decrees that specifically targeted property rights in border areas, a policy that disproportionately affected the Kurdish population concentrated in these strategic zones.⁶ A 1996 report by Human Rights Watch documented that residents of border areas, including Afrin, faced severe restrictions on their ability to obtain official property deeds or to receive permits for building and repairing their homes.¹⁴ This administrative obstruction made it nearly impossible for Kurds to legally secure,

develop, or transfer their own property.

This policy was further codified and intensified over time. In 2008, the government issued Legislative Decree No. 49, which placed sweeping new restrictions on property ownership, use, and transfer in border regions.¹¹ This decree effectively aimed to evict inhabitants from their lands and was particularly damaging for Kurds, many of whom were already legally prohibited from buying, selling, or bequeathing property due to their stateless status or other discriminatory measures.¹¹ This legal framework created a state of perpetual insecurity of tenure. The regime did not always need to actively confiscate land in Afrin; it could achieve a similar result by legally preventing its owners from using it, improving it, or passing it down to their children, making their long-term presence in the region untenable.

The Legal Status of Afrin's Kurds

While the Afrin district was not the epicenter of the 1962 census that created mass statelessness, its Kurdish residents were nevertheless ensnared in the pervasive system of ethnic discrimination that defined the Syrian state.²¹ They faced systemic discrimination in public sector employment, were denied access to higher education in certain fields, and were excluded from meaningful political participation.¹⁷

The state's absolute refusal to recognize a distinct Kurdish identity meant that any expression of Kurdish culture or political aspiration was criminalized as separatism, a threat to Arab nationalism, and a betrayal of the state.⁵ This climate of political repression and legal marginalization worked in concert with the economic pressures. It reinforced the state's message that Kurds were not, and could never be, full and equal citizens of the Syrian Arab Republic, thereby adding another powerful "push" factor encouraging their gradual displacement from their homeland. The Syrian Constitution of 1973, for instance, ostensibly protected private property in Article 15 and guaranteed equality in Article 25.⁶ Yet the regime consistently bypassed these protections through exceptional decrees and discriminatory implementation, demonstrating that for the Kurds of Syria, legal rights were not guaranteed by law but were contingent on the political dictates of the security state.

V. Analysis and Conclusion

The Baathist regime's decades-long effort to manage its "Kurdish Question" was a core component of its state-building project, driven by an uncompromising pan-Arab nationalist ideology. The evidence examined in this report demonstrates conclusively that the regime's policies were not monolithic but were strategically differentiated to suit the specific demographic and geographic contexts of Syria's Kurdish regions. The overt, coercive demographic replacement enacted through the "Arab Belt" in the Jazira province stands in stark contrast to the indirect, structural methods of displacement employed in the Afrin district. This distinction does not reflect a difference in intent, but rather a calculated

adaptation of strategy to achieve the same ultimate goal: the erosion of the Kurdish presence and the assertion of Arab-Syrian sovereignty.

The regime's approach to Afrin before 2010 can be best characterized as a policy of containment and attrition. Recognizing the district's profound demographic homogeneity and its geographic isolation, the state appeared to calculate that a direct settlement campaign, like the one in Jazira, would be excessively costly, politically inflammatory, and strategically unnecessary. Instead, it pursued a more patient, long-term strategy designed to achieve demographic change through a slow, grinding process of making life in the district unsustainable for its native Kurdish population.

This strategy rested on three interconnected pillars of displacement:

1. **Cultural Erasure:** The systematic suppression of the Kurdish language, the repression of cultural traditions like Nowruz, and the official Arabization of place names were designed to sever the deep historical and cultural bonds that tied the people to their land, weakening their collective identity and resolve.
2. **Economic Strangulation:** Through deliberate underinvestment, the prevention of industrial development, and the maintenance of Afrin as a dependent agricultural periphery, the state engineered a chronic lack of economic opportunity. This policy created powerful "push" factors that compelled generations of Kurdish youth to migrate to Syria's Arab-majority cities for survival, resulting in a gradual demographic bleed.
3. **Legal Precarity:** The application of a discriminatory legal framework, particularly through laws restricting property rights in border areas and the general denial of full citizenship rights and protections to Kurds, created a permanent state of insecurity. This legal marginalization ensured that the Kurdish population could not establish a secure, prosperous, and lasting foothold in their own homeland.

In conclusion, the displacement of Kurds from the Afrin district and the corresponding effort to alter its demographic character by the Baath regime before 2010 was not accomplished through the dramatic, state-sponsored settlement projects seen elsewhere in northern Syria. It was, rather, a "death by a thousand cuts"—a relentless, multi-decade campaign waged through the systematic application of administrative, economic, and legal pressures. This insidious strategy aimed to methodically dismantle the viability of Kurdish life in the district, compelling a gradual but steady demographic shift that served the Baathist state's unwavering ideological commitment to forging a purely Arab nation.

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