

# The Mountain of the Kurds: Afrin/Kurd Dagh and its Regional Connections in the Ottoman Era (Pre-1920)

## I. Introduction

### A. Defining the Region

The highland region historically known as Kurd Dagh (Mountain of the Kurds), situated in present-day northwestern Syria and southeastern Turkey, forms the subject of this report. This area, largely corresponding to the modern Afrin District in Syria's Aleppo Governorate and parts of Turkey's Kilis Province, is geographically distinct yet historically interconnected with its surroundings.<sup>1</sup> Locally known in Kurdish as *Çiyayê Kurmênc* (Mountain of the Kurmanj), the region is part of the Limestone Massif, representing a southern extension of the Anatolian highlands onto the Aleppo plateau.<sup>1</sup> It is crucial to distinguish this Kurd Dagh from another range referred to as Jabal al-Akrad (also meaning Mountain of the Kurds) located further southwest in the Latakia Governorate.<sup>1</sup> The principal town within the Syrian portion of this region is Afrin (Efrîn in Kurdish).<sup>1</sup>

### B. Report Objective and Scope

This report aims to provide a detailed analysis of the multifaceted historical ties linking the Afrin/Kurd Dagh region to its broader geographical and political context, specifically during the Ottoman era, preceding the establishment of the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon and the subsequent creation of the modern Syrian-Turkish border around 1921-1923.<sup>4</sup> The analysis focuses on the period from the Ottoman conquest in the early 16th century (c. 1516) up to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire following World War I (c. 1918-1920). It examines the region's connections through the lenses of geography, administrative structures, demographic patterns, economic life, and social dynamics, drawing connections to key surrounding centers like Aleppo, Kilis, and Antioch, as well as the wider framework of Ottoman Syria and Anatolia. The investigation relies on a synthesis of available evidence, including geographical descriptions, historical administrative records (such as those referenced by Vital Cuinet<sup>6</sup>), demographic data, accounts of economic activity, and secondary historical scholarship.<sup>7</sup> Adhering to rigorous academic standards, this report meticulously cites the sources underpinning its analysis, utilizing materials in various languages to construct a comprehensive historical narrative.<sup>9</sup>

### C. Significance

Understanding the historical position of Afrin/Kurd Dagh within the Ottoman system is

essential for contextualizing its subsequent trajectory in the 20th and 21st centuries. The Ottoman period established administrative frameworks, demographic compositions, economic relationships, and social structures that profoundly shaped the region's identity and its connections to neighboring areas. The redrawing of borders after World War I fundamentally altered these long-standing relationships, cutting off regions like Kurd Dagħ from parts of their traditional hinterlands and administrative centers.<sup>4</sup> Examining the pre-Mandate era reveals the historical depth of the region's Kurdish identity, its integration into the Aleppo-centered provincial system, and the complex interplay of local dynamics and imperial governance. This historical foundation is indispensable for analyzing later developments, including the formation of modern nation-states, the politics of identity, cross-border relations, and contemporary conflicts that continue to impact the region and its inhabitants.<sup>5</sup>

## **II. The Land and Its Names: Geography and Historical Nomenclature**

### **A. Physical Geography**

Kurd Dagħ constitutes a distinct highland region, forming part of the extensive Limestone Massif that characterizes northwestern Syria.<sup>1</sup> Geographically, it represents a southern continuation of the highlands found on the western Aintab plateau, extending into the northern reaches of the Aleppo plateau.<sup>1</sup> The terrain is defined by hills and mountains, contrasting with the plains to its east and south.

The region's boundaries are clearly delineated by natural features, primarily river valleys. The Afrin River valley plays a crucial role, encircling Kurd Dagħ from the east and south. This valley effectively separates the massif from the A'zāz plain and Mount Simeon (Jabal Sim'ān) to the east, and from Mount Harim (Jabal Harim) to the south.<sup>1</sup> To the west, the valley of the Aswad River (Kara Su) forms a natural boundary, separating Kurd Dagħ from the Mount Amanus range (Gavur Dağları).<sup>1</sup> This geographical positioning creates a relatively defined upland area. The main urban settlement within this area, particularly in the Syrian part, is the town of Afrin, situated within the Afrin River valley.<sup>1</sup> The region's landscape is particularly noted for its extensive olive groves, a feature intrinsically linked to its economy and identity for centuries.<sup>1</sup>

### **B. Evolution of Nomenclature**

The names historically applied to this region consistently reflect its association with Kurdish populations. The local Kurdish name, *Çiyayê Kurmênc*, translates directly as the "Mountain of the Kurmanj," referencing the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish predominantly spoken by its inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> This name underscores the self-identification of the local population.

In Arabic sources, the region was known as *Jabal al-Akrad*, meaning "Mountain of the Kurds." This designation has a long history, attested as early as the mid-16th century in the writings of a French commercial attaché in Aleppo (1548-1556) and later used by 19th-century authors

like Konstantin Bazili.<sup>1</sup> Some historical accounts link the name *Jabal al-Akrad* or similar terms like "Hisn al-Akrad" (Fortress of the Kurds) to the region even earlier, potentially back to the Crusader period, although care must be taken as the same Arabic name was also applied to the mountain range further southwest in Latakia.<sup>17</sup>

With the consolidation of Ottoman rule, the name was translated into Ottoman Turkish as *Kurd Dağ* (کرد طاغی), literally "Kurd Mountain," derived from the Turkish word *Dağ* (Mountain).<sup>1</sup> This form, *Kurd Dağ* or *Kurd Dagh*, appeared consistently in official Ottoman documents, administrative records, and maps, remaining in use throughout the Ottoman period and into the early French Mandate era.<sup>1</sup>

Further evidence of the official recognition of the region's Kurdish character comes from research indicating that the Afrin Plateau was referred to in some Ottoman documents as the "*Sancak of the Kurds*".<sup>29</sup> This designation, potentially used during specific periods or in particular administrative contexts, elevates the Kurdish identity to a defining feature at the level of a *Sanjak* (a major administrative subdivision of an Eyalet or Vilayet).

The consistent reference to "Kurds" in the region's nomenclature across different languages (Kurdish, Arabic, Ottoman Turkish) and over several centuries points towards a deeply rooted and widely recognized Kurdish demographic presence or significance. This association was acknowledged not only by the inhabitants themselves but also by neighboring populations and Ottoman administrators, long before the significant population shifts of the 20th century affected other parts of northern Syria. The naming conventions themselves serve as historical markers of the region's perceived identity. Later, politically motivated name changes occurred after the Ottoman period, such as the Syrian government renaming it *Jabal al- 'Uruba* ("Mountain of Arabism") in 1977 and the Turkish part being officially renamed *Kurt Dağı* ("Wolf Mountain")<sup>1</sup>, underscoring the enduring sensitivity surrounding the region's historical identity, but these fall outside the primary timeframe of this report.

The distinct geography of Kurd Dagh as a highland massif, naturally bounded by river valleys, suggests a potential for relative isolation compared to the surrounding plains. However, these same river valleys – particularly the Afrin River valley – also served as crucial corridors for movement, communication, and trade, connecting the mountain region to the vital centers of Aleppo and Antioch, and the plains of A'zaz.<sup>1</sup> This geographical duality likely fostered both a strong local identity and a necessary, continuous interaction with the broader region, influencing its administrative integration and economic orientation throughout the Ottoman period.

### **III. An Ottoman District: Administrative Integration**

The administrative history of Kurd Dagh during the Ottoman era reveals its consistent integration within the larger provincial structures centered on Aleppo, while also highlighting its recognition as a distinct sub-unit.

#### **A. Early Ottoman Period (Eyalet System)**

Following the Ottoman conquest of Syria after the decisive Battle of Marj Dabiq near Aleppo in

1516<sup>23</sup>, the region that included Kurd Dagħ initially fell under the administration of the large Eyalet (province) of Damascus (Şam).<sup>36</sup> However, reflecting the growing importance of Aleppo as a major commercial and strategic center, a separate Eyalet of Aleppo (Eyālet-i Haleb) was established around 1534.<sup>36</sup> Kurd Dagħ subsequently became part of this new administrative entity.

Within the Aleppo Eyalet, territory was further subdivided into *Sanjaks* (or *Livas*).

Seventeenth-century records list several Sanjaks comprising the Eyalet.<sup>36</sup> Those most relevant to the Kurd Dagħ area included the Sanjak of Kilis, often referred to as *Akrād Kilīs* (Kurds of Kilis), and the Sanjak of the Turkmens, based around Azaz to the east.<sup>36</sup> The city of Antioch (Antakya), to the southwest, also formed the center of its own Sanjak within the Aleppo Eyalet.<sup>36</sup>

The designation *Akrād Kilīs* for the Sanjak encompassing Kilis and likely Kurd Dagħ is significant.<sup>36</sup> It suggests that the Kurdish population was considered a defining characteristic of this administrative unit, not merely confined to the mountainous Kurd Dagħ area but prominent enough to be reflected in the Sanjak's name during this period. This administrative nomenclature points to an early Ottoman recognition of the demographic weight of Kurds in this part of northern Syria.

Furthermore, the integration of local Kurdish elites into the Ottoman power structure occurred early on. The powerful Kurdish Janbulad (Canpolat) family, for instance, served as governors of the Aleppo Eyalet, including the Kilis region, during the late 16th and early 17th centuries.<sup>26</sup> Their rise demonstrates the Ottoman practice of co-opting influential local leaders to administer peripheral regions, embedding Kurdish notables within the imperial hierarchy from the outset.

## **B. Later Ottoman Period (Vilayet System)**

The major Ottoman administrative reforms of the mid-19th century, formalized by the Vilayet Law of 1866, reorganized the provinces.<sup>15</sup> The Eyalet of Aleppo was transformed into the Vilayet of Aleppo (Vilāyet-i Halep), albeit with adjusted boundaries that stretched northwards to include cities like Maraş, Antep (Aintab), and Urfa, resulting in a province with significant Turkish and Armenian populations alongside Arabs and Kurds.<sup>15</sup>

Within this new Vilayet structure, Kurd Dagħ retained its position as an integral part of the Aleppo province.<sup>1</sup> Its specific administrative status was clarified by contemporary sources like the comprehensive survey *La Turquie d'Asie* by the French geographer Vital Cuinet, published in 1892. Cuinet explicitly identifies *Kurd-Dagħ* as a *Kaza* (district or sub-province), which was the standard administrative unit below the Sanjak level.<sup>6</sup> According to Cuinet, the Sanjak of Kilis, itself a subdivision of the Aleppo Vilayet, comprised two Kazas: the central Kaza of Kilis and the Kaza of Kurd Dagħ.<sup>6</sup> This is corroborated by other sources that refer to the district (Kaza) of Kurd Dagħ.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, the administrative hierarchy in the late Ottoman period placed Kurd Dagħ firmly within the orbit of Aleppo: **Vilayet of Aleppo → Sanjak of Kilis → Kaza of Kurd Dagħ**. This structure situated Kurd Dagħ alongside other Kazas and Sanjaks of the diverse Aleppo Vilayet,

such as Aintab, Urfa, Maraş, and Antioch, each forming part of the larger provincial administration centered in Aleppo.<sup>15</sup>

The consistent administrative placement of Kurd Dagħ under the authority of Aleppo, first within the Eyalet and later the Vilayet, underscores the region's enduring orientation towards Aleppo as its primary regional metropolis throughout the four centuries of Ottoman rule. Aleppo served not only as the administrative capital but also as the main economic and social hub for Kurd Dagħ and its surrounding territories.

The formal designation of Kurd Dagħ as a distinct *Kaza* within the Sanjak of Kilis is also revealing.<sup>1</sup> It indicates that Ottoman administrators, particularly in the later period of more formalized structures, recognized the region as a geographically and likely socio-demographically coherent unit that warranted its own specific administrative apparatus at the sub-district level. This was distinct from simply governing it as part of the immediate hinterland of the town of Kilis. This administrative separation likely stemmed from a combination of factors: the distinct mountainous geography of Kurd Dagħ compared to the plains around Kilis, and its predominantly Kurdish population, which differed from the more mixed population of Kilis town.

Comparing the late 19th-century structure (Kurd Dagħ *Kaza* within Kilis Sanjak<sup>6</sup>) with earlier references like "*Akrád Kilis*" (Sanjak of the Kurds of Kilis)<sup>36</sup> and the "*Sancak of the Kurds*" for the Afrin Plateau<sup>32</sup> highlights a potential evolution or fluidity in administrative terminology. While always linked to Kilis and Aleppo, the explicit identification of Kurds sometimes appeared at the Sanjak level, suggesting periods where the Kurdish identity was seen as a defining characteristic of the larger sub-province, not just the mountainous *Kaza* within it. This demonstrates how administrative labels could reflect and adapt to perceived demographic realities over time.

## **IV. The Human Landscape: Peoples, Tribes, and Migrations**

The population history of Kurd Dagħ before the 20th century is characterized by a long-standing Kurdish presence, the existence of significant minority communities like the Yazidis, and complex interactions shaped by tribal structures and Ottoman policies.

### **A. Long-standing Kurdish Presence**

Evidence points to a deep history of Kurdish settlement in the Kurd Dagħ region, extending well before the major Kurdish migrations into other parts of Syria in the 1920s. While the precise origins and arrival dates of the earliest Kurdish groups in northern Syria are debated among scholars, with some tracing connections to ancient peoples like the Medes or Hurrians<sup>42</sup>, historical references become clearer in the medieval period. Accounts from the Crusader era mention Kurds in the mountainous areas of northern Syria, sometimes associated with fortifications like Hisn al-Akrad (though this often refers to Krak des Chevaliers further south).<sup>17</sup> The rise of the Ayyubid dynasty under the Kurdish leader Saladin in the 12th century also saw Kurdish military contingents settling in Syria, notably establishing Kurdish quarters in

Damascus<sup>32</sup>, which may have influenced settlement patterns further north. During the Ottoman period, the evidence for a significant Kurdish presence in Kurd Dagħ becomes more concrete. The consistent use of names like *Kurd Dagħ*, *Jabal al-Akrad*, and *Çiyayê Kurmênc* across Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, and Kurdish sources signifies a recognized association.<sup>1</sup> The potential designation of the area as the "Sancak of the Kurds" in certain Ottoman documents further reinforces this.<sup>29</sup> Ottoman records also mention the settlement of Kurdish tribes in northern Syria from the 16th and 17th centuries onwards.<sup>26</sup> A specific account from the English traveler William Biddulph in 1599 describes encountering "Coords" (likely Kurds, possibly Yazidis due to the description of their worship) dwelling in the mountains between Antioch and Aleppo, an area corresponding to Kurd Dagħ.<sup>29</sup> Other sources confirm that Kurds were recognized as established settlers in the Afrin area by the 18th century at the latest.<sup>46</sup>

The Kurdish population of Kurd Dagħ was characterized by its adherence to the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish.<sup>1</sup> Religiously, the majority were identified as Hanafi Muslims. This distinguished them from the bulk of Syrian Kurds in other regions, as well as Kurds in adjacent parts of Turkey and Iraq, who predominantly follow the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam.<sup>1</sup> This specific linguistic and religious profile suggests the development of a distinct local Kurdish identity within Kurd Dagħ, shaped over centuries of settlement and interaction within its specific geographical and social context.

## **B. Yazidi Communities**

Alongside the Muslim Kurdish majority, Kurd Dagħ historically hosted a significant Yazidi community.<sup>1</sup> Yazidis are an ancient, endogenous religious group, primarily Kurdish-speaking, whose faith blends elements from various Mesopotamian and Iranian traditions.<sup>47</sup> Their presence in the wider Kurdish territories, including areas within the Ottoman Empire, is well-documented.<sup>48</sup> As mentioned, William Biddulph's 1599 account of "Coords" who "Worship the Devil" in the mountains between Antioch and Aleppo may well be an early European reference to the Yazidis of Kurd Dagħ, reflecting common external misunderstandings and accusations leveled against their faith.<sup>29</sup>

Throughout Ottoman history, Yazidis faced periods of persecution and pressure to convert to Islam, often being labeled as heretics or devil-worshippers by Ottoman authorities and some Muslim neighbors.<sup>47</sup> Major campaigns against Yazidis occurred in various parts of the empire, and they suffered significantly during the genocidal violence directed against Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks during World War I, with estimates of hundreds of thousands killed or displaced across the Ottoman realm.<sup>47</sup> This history of persecution undoubtedly impacted the size, distribution, and visibility of the Yazidi community in Kurd Dagħ over the centuries. Despite these pressures, distinct Yazidi villages persisted, particularly documented in the southern parts of the Afrin region, near the Jebel Seman (Çiyayê Lêlûn) mountain range.<sup>31</sup> The coexistence of Yazidi and Muslim Kurds, sharing language and ethnicity but differing in religion, created a complex internal social dynamic within Kurd Dagħ.

## **C. Other Groups and Intercommunal Dynamics**

While the western, mountainous parts of the Afrin region were described as overwhelmingly or homogeneously Kurdish<sup>26</sup>, the broader Kurd Dagh area and its adjacent territories existed within the diverse ethnic landscape of the Ottoman Vilayet of Aleppo. This Vilayet included substantial populations of Arabs, Turks, Turkmens, Circassians, Armenians, Syriac Christians, Jews, and others.<sup>15</sup>

Within the Afrin region itself, sources mention the presence of Arab populations, often described as having been long integrated into the local, predominantly Kurdish, society.<sup>51</sup> Some Arab settlement may date back to agricultural reforms in earlier periods.<sup>52</sup> Turkmen tribes were also present in neighboring areas, particularly in the plains around Azaz, which formed the center of the Sanjak of the Turkmens in the 17th century.<sup>36</sup>

Interactions between Kurds and other groups in the wider region were complex and varied. Relations between Kurds and Armenians in the late Ottoman period, for example, involved instances of both collaboration and conflict, influenced by Ottoman policies, tribal dynamics, and the rise of revolutionary movements.<sup>53</sup> During the Armenian Genocide (1915-1916), which occurred at the very end of the period under review, some Kurdish tribes participated in the violence orchestrated by the Ottoman state, while others resisted or sheltered Armenians.<sup>16</sup>

Aleppo city became a major refuge point for Armenian survivors deported from Anatolia.<sup>16</sup> The presence of these diverse groups within the Aleppo Vilayet indicates that Kurd Dagh, while predominantly Kurdish, was not entirely isolated but existed within a multi-ethnic provincial context characterized by coexistence, interaction, and sometimes tension.

## **D. Tribal Structures and Population Movements (Pre-1920)**

Kurdish society throughout the Ottoman Empire was significantly shaped by tribal structures and loyalties.<sup>18</sup> Leadership often rested with tribal chiefs (aghas) or influential religious figures (sheikhs), who mediated relations both within the community and with the Ottoman state.<sup>18</sup> In northern Syria, powerful tribal confederations like the Reshwan and the Milli were active and influential, with the Milli dominating the northern Syrian steppe in the latter half of the 18th century.<sup>26</sup> As previously noted, the Janbulad (Canpolat) family represented a major Kurdish tribal power base that held governorships in the Aleppo/Kilis region during the early Ottoman period.<sup>26</sup> While comprehensive lists of tribes exist for the Ottoman Empire<sup>58</sup>, identifying the specific tribes dominant within Kurd Dagh itself during the pre-1920 period requires more targeted research into local Ottoman records.

Population movements impacting the Kurd Dagh region before the major post-World War I shifts need to be understood within the Ottoman context. The Ottoman state sometimes pursued policies of settling or resettling Kurdish tribes for strategic or administrative reasons, such as the settlements near Jarabulus and Seruj in the 17th century.<sup>26</sup> Internal migration also occurred; for instance, there is evidence of Kurds from the Kurd Dagh region moving to and settling in the city of Aleppo, particularly from the 19th century onwards.<sup>1</sup> Nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralism was historically significant for many Kurdish groups<sup>18</sup>, although

Ottoman sedentarization policies in the 19th century aimed to reduce nomadism, leading to shifts towards settled agriculture.<sup>45</sup>

It is crucial to distinguish these earlier, often gradual or state-directed movements within the Ottoman system from the large-scale migrations of Kurds *from* Turkey *into* Syria that occurred primarily *after* 1920.<sup>17</sup> These later waves, triggered by the suppression of Kurdish rebellions in the nascent Turkish Republic, dramatically altered the demography of Syria's Jazira province but had a less pronounced impact on the already established Kurdish population of Kurd Dagħ.<sup>32</sup> While some refugee movement may have begun in the final years of the Ottoman Empire or the immediate aftermath of World War I, the primary narrative for Kurd Dagħ points to a population rooted in longer-term settlement patterns rather than 20th-century refugee influxes. The settlement of Alevi Kurds fleeing the Dersim massacres in Turkey into the village of Mabeta in Kurd Dagħ, for example, occurred in the 1930s, well into the French Mandate period.<sup>1</sup>

Reliable population figures for the Ottoman period are often scarce and estimates vary in accuracy.<sup>15</sup> However, some data points provide context:

- The Vilayet of Aleppo was estimated to have around 1.5 million inhabitants in the preliminary 1885 Ottoman census (published 1908).<sup>15</sup>
- A 1914 estimate for the Vilayet broke down the population differently, counting around 576,000 Muslims, 22,000 Greeks, and 41,000 Armenians.<sup>15</sup>
- Estimates from the early 20th century suggested around 12,000 Kurds lived in Damascus and 16,000 in the Jarabulus region, while the number in Kurd Dagħ itself was unspecified but understood to be significant.<sup>32</sup>
- A census conducted by the authorities of the French-mandated State of Aleppo in 1922, reflecting the situation immediately following the Ottoman collapse, recorded the population of the Kaza (district) of Kurd Dagħ as 21,823.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 1: Selected Pre-Mandate/Early Post-Ottoman Population Data Points**

Region/Unit	Year/Period	Source/Estimate Type	Population Figure	Notes
Kaza of Kurd Dagħ	1922	State of Aleppo Census	21,823	Predominantly Kurdish/Yazidi; reflects immediate post-Ottoman era <sup>1</sup>
Aleppo Vilayet	1885 (pub. 1908)	Ottoman Census (preliminary)	~1,500,000	Mixed ethnicity; accuracy varies by region <sup>15</sup>
Aleppo Vilayet	1914	Estimate	~639,117	Sum of Muslims (576,320), Greeks (21,954), Armenians



				(40,843) <sup>15</sup>
Kurds in Damascus	Early 20th C	Estimate	~12,000	<sup>32</sup>
Kurds in Jarabulus	Early 20th C	Estimate	~16,000	<sup>32</sup>
Kurds in Kurd Dagh	Early 20th C	Estimate	Unknown Number	Acknowledged presence, but figure not specified <sup>32</sup>

This demographic picture underscores the long-term Kurdish presence in Kurd Dagh, distinct in its religious makeup (Hanafi majority, Yazidi minority) from other Syrian Kurdish communities, and largely established before the major 20th-century migrations that shaped areas like the Jazira.

## V. Arteries of Connection: Economic Life and Regional Trade

The economic life of Kurd Dagh during the Ottoman period was predominantly agrarian, deeply integrated into the wider economic networks centered on the major regional hub of Aleppo.

### A. Agrarian Economy

The Ottoman Empire, including the Syrian provinces, was fundamentally an agrarian economy, with the majority of the population engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry on small family holdings.<sup>62</sup> Kurd Dagh fit this pattern, with agriculture forming the backbone of its local economy. The region was particularly renowned for its extensive olive cultivation.<sup>1</sup> Olive groves dominated the landscape, and the production of olives and olive oil was likely the primary source of income and livelihood for many inhabitants.<sup>27</sup> This specialization was likely encouraged by the region's favorable climate and soil conditions, as well as consistent demand from nearby urban centers. Charcoal production was also noted as a local industry in Kurd Dagh.<sup>1</sup>

The significance of olive cultivation in Kurd Dagh must be viewed within the broader context of the olive economy in Ottoman Syria and Palestine. Olive oil was a major commodity, described as the "petroleum of antiquity," used for food, lighting, and industrial purposes, particularly soap manufacturing.<sup>27</sup> Cities like Aleppo were famous for their soap production, which relied heavily on olive oil sourced from the surrounding countryside, including regions like Afrin/Kurd Dagh.<sup>30</sup> Ottoman policies sometimes encouraged olive cultivation; for example, investment policies in the mid-19th century reportedly aimed to increase olive tree planting, and reductions in export duties may have further stimulated production for trade.<sup>27</sup> While olives were central, other agricultural activities typical of the wider region likely occurred in Kurd Dagh to varying degrees. Cereals (wheat, barley) were essential for local consumption throughout Syria.<sup>62</sup> Cotton and silk were produced for export in some parts of

Ottoman Syria, though silk production declined significantly after the 18th century.<sup>36</sup> Fruit orchards were also common.<sup>64</sup> Animal husbandry, practiced by both settled villagers and nomadic/semi-nomadic groups (providing milk, wool, meat, and transportation), was another crucial component of the rural economy.<sup>18</sup> The agrarian lifestyle meant that rural families often engaged in a diverse set of economic activities beyond crop cultivation alone.<sup>62</sup>

## **B. Integration into Regional Trade Networks**

Kurd Dagh's economy was not self-contained but was intrinsically linked to the major trade networks of the Ottoman Empire, primarily through the city of Aleppo. During the 16th and 17th centuries, Aleppo reached its zenith as a commercial powerhouse, arguably second only to the imperial capital, Constantinople.<sup>15</sup> Its strategic location at the crossroads of routes connecting Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Persia, and the Mediterranean ports made it a vital entrepôt for international trade.<sup>36</sup> Goods like Persian silk and Indian pepper arrived via caravan, meeting European merchants who established consulates and trading houses in the city from the 16th century onwards (Venice 1548, France 1562, England 1583, Netherlands 1613).<sup>36</sup>

As part of Aleppo's extensive hinterland, Kurd Dagh participated in this vibrant economic system. Its primary agricultural products, especially olives and olive oil, found a ready market in Aleppo.<sup>1</sup> This produce supplied the city's own consumption needs, fueled its significant soap industry<sup>30</sup>, and entered the wider export trade facilitated by Aleppine merchants.<sup>27</sup> Aleppo functioned as the essential market town for the surrounding countryside, including the mountain districts.<sup>64</sup>

The flow of goods depended on the regional transportation network. Key trade routes radiated from Aleppo, connecting it to other important towns within the Vilayet and beyond, such as Kilis to the north, Antioch (Antakya) to the southwest, and Aintab (Gaziantep) and Maraş further north into Anatolia.<sup>34</sup> While specific routes through the Kurd Dagh massif itself may have been secondary, the main arteries connecting Aleppo to Kilis and Antioch skirted the region, facilitating the movement of its products to market. Initially reliant on caravan transport<sup>70</sup>, the commercialization of agriculture in the later Ottoman period was further spurred by developments like the introduction of railways, although the primary impact of railways might have been felt more directly in the plains than in the mountainous Kurd Dagh.<sup>21</sup> However, Aleppo's economic fortunes, and consequently those of its hinterland, were not static. The city experienced a significant decline starting in the 18th century. Factors contributing to this included the decline of the Safavid dynasty in Persia, which disrupted the lucrative silk trade<sup>36</sup>, and, more dramatically, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, which rerouted much of the East-West trade away from the traditional overland routes passing through Syria.<sup>15</sup> While Aleppo remained an important regional center, and local products like cotton, tobacco, and olives continued to be traded<sup>36</sup>, this long-term economic downturn likely affected demand and prices for goods originating from Kurd Dagh, illustrating the region's dependence on the economic health of its primary urban market. The later detachment of Aleppo from its northern Anatolian satellites and the port of Alexandretta (İskenderun) after

World War I further exacerbated this economic isolation, but this falls beyond the Ottoman period.<sup>15</sup>

The economic evidence clearly indicates that Kurd Dagħ, far from being an isolated, self-sufficient mountain enclave, functioned as an integral part of Aleppo's economic sphere. Its specialization in olive cultivation, a commodity highly valued in Aleppo's markets and industries, demonstrates a strong economic interdependence. This linkage, however, also meant that Kurd Dagħ's prosperity was tied to the fluctuating economic cycles of Aleppo, making it susceptible to broader geopolitical and global trade shifts that impacted its main market center.

## **VI. Power and Society: Local Dynamics and Ottoman Rule**

The social and political landscape of Kurd Dagħ during the Ottoman era was shaped by the interplay between local Kurdish societal structures, particularly tribal organization, and the evolving nature of Ottoman imperial administration.

### **A. Kurdish Tribal Society and Leadership**

As observed across much of Ottoman Kurdistan, tribal affiliation was a fundamental organizing principle of Kurdish society in Kurd Dagħ.<sup>18</sup> Social identity, political loyalty, and access to resources were often mediated through tribal structures. Leadership within these structures typically resided with hereditary tribal chiefs, known as *aghas*, who wielded considerable local influence.<sup>18</sup> In some contexts, religious leaders, or *sheikhs*, particularly those associated with Sufi orders, also held significant social and political sway, although their prominence might have varied regionally and temporally.<sup>45</sup>

Specific tribal groups and powerful families played key roles in the history of Kurd Dagħ and its environs. The Janbulad (Canpolat) family, originating from the Kilis area which included Kurd Dagħ, rose to prominence in the late 16th century, holding the governorship of Aleppo and demonstrating the capacity of Kurdish elites to integrate into and wield power within the Ottoman system.<sup>26</sup> Larger tribal confederations like the Milli and Reshwan were also active forces in northern Syria during the Ottoman period, their influence extending across the steppes and potentially impacting the political dynamics around Kurd Dagħ.<sup>26</sup> Understanding the specific tribal composition within Kurd Dagħ itself would require detailed analysis of Ottoman cadastral surveys (*tahrir defterleri*) or court records (*sicil*), but the general importance of tribalism as a social framework is clear.

Beyond the tribal structures prevalent in the rural highlands, Kurdish communities also existed in urban centers like Aleppo. The Hayy al-Akrad (Kurdish Quarter) in Damascus is well-known<sup>32</sup>, and a similar, though perhaps less formally defined, Kurdish presence existed in Aleppo.<sup>33</sup> Studies examining Ottoman records for Aleppo suggest that Kurds residing in the city engaged in various occupations, including those related to the vital caravan trade, and were not necessarily confined to specific suburbs or limited social interactions, challenging earlier views of strict insularity.<sup>33</sup> The migration of individuals and families from Kurd Dagħ to Aleppo

from the 19th century onwards further blurred the lines between the mountain district and the provincial capital.<sup>1</sup>

## **B. Ottoman-Kurdish Relations in the Region**

The relationship between the Ottoman state and the Kurdish populations under its rule, including those in Kurd Dagh, evolved significantly over the centuries. Following the Ottoman expansion into the region in the early 16th century, Sultan Selim I, aided by Kurdish figures like Idris Bitlisi, established a system that granted considerable autonomy to many Kurdish principalities and tribal leaders.<sup>18</sup> In exchange for loyalty, particularly in securing the volatile eastern frontier against Safavid Iran, these Kurdish leaders often received tax exemptions and recognition of their hereditary right to rule their territories.<sup>45</sup> This arrangement, characterized by decentralized control and reliance on local intermediaries, persisted for several centuries.<sup>42</sup> However, the 19th century witnessed a major shift with the implementation of the Tanzimat reforms (c. 1839-1876). Driven by a desire to modernize and centralize the state, Ottoman sultans sought to curtail the power of local notables and bring provinces under more direct administrative and fiscal control.<sup>24</sup> This push for centralization often clashed with the established privileges and autonomy of Kurdish tribal leaders, leading to widespread tensions and numerous Kurdish uprisings across the empire during this period.<sup>24</sup> These revolts are often interpreted by historians primarily as reactions against the erosion of traditional power structures and the imposition of new taxes and conscription, rather than as early expressions of modern ethnic nationalism.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the centralizing trend, the Ottoman state often continued to rely on local Kurdish notables as essential intermediaries for governance, tax collection, and maintaining order, particularly in rugged regions like Kurd Dagh.<sup>18</sup> The state actively cultivated relationships with certain Kurdish figures even while attempting to assert greater central control.<sup>33</sup> The later reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876-1909) saw another shift in policy. Emphasizing Pan-Islamism over Ottomanism, Abdulhamid sometimes fostered closer ties with Sunni Kurdish leaders and empowered religious figures like Sheikh Ubeydullah of Nehri.<sup>45</sup> This period also saw the creation of the Hamidiye Cavalry regiments (established 1890), primarily composed of Kurdish tribesmen, intended to serve as a loyal militia force on the eastern frontiers and integrate tribes more closely with the state, though they also became implicated in intercommunal violence.<sup>45</sup>

This historical trajectory suggests that the relationship between the Ottoman state and the Kurdish leadership in Kurd Dagh was likely characterized by a continuous negotiation between local autonomy and central authority. Local aghas and notables probably navigated this complex dynamic by leveraging their tribal influence and knowledge of the terrain while engaging with, adapting to, or sometimes resisting the demands and structures imposed by the provincial administration in Aleppo.

## **C. Social Structures and Daily Life**

The social fabric of Kurd Dagh was woven from threads of kinship, tribal allegiance, shared

economic activities, and religious identity. The agrarian rhythm, particularly the cycles of olive cultivation and harvesting, likely structured much of daily life and communal activity.<sup>1</sup> These shared economic pursuits, combined with strong tribal and kinship ties, would have fostered significant local community bonds and contributed to the region's distinct identity within the broader, more ethnically diverse Aleppo Vilayet.

Direct descriptions of daily life in Kurd Dagh from the Ottoman period by external observers are relatively scarce compared to more accessible regions. While travelers like Gertrude Bell<sup>74</sup> and Max von Oppenheim<sup>76</sup> traversed parts of northern Syria and Mesopotamia, their detailed accounts often focus on other areas (e.g., Bell along the Euphrates east of Kurd Dagh<sup>75</sup>, Oppenheim's excavations at Tell Halaf further east<sup>76</sup>). Accounts from the French encountering Kurd Dagh populations at the very end of the Ottoman period (1919) exist<sup>25</sup>, but detailed ethnographic descriptions specifically of Kurd Dagh during the core Ottoman centuries require further investigation of less commonly cited travelogues or Ottoman sources.<sup>9</sup> The coexistence of a Muslim Kurdish majority and a significant Yazidi minority within Kurd Dagh created a unique internal social dynamic.<sup>1</sup> While sharing Kurdish language and ethnicity, their religious differences placed them in distinct categories within the Ottoman legal and social system (Millet system, though Yazidis often fell outside clear classifications). Daily interactions, economic interdependence, and shared residency likely fostered modes of coexistence, but this would have been shaped and potentially strained by the broader context of Ottoman policies towards religious minorities and the specific history of prejudice and persecution faced by Yazidis.<sup>47</sup> This complex interplay of shared culture and religious difference was a defining feature of the region's social landscape.

## **VII. Conclusion**

### **A. Synthesis of Findings**

The historical evidence examined in this report demonstrates that the region known as Kurd Dagh (Çiyayê Kurmênc, Jabal al-Akrad) possessed a distinct identity while being deeply integrated into its surrounding regional context throughout the Ottoman era (c. 1516-1920). Geographically, it constituted a specific highland area within the Limestone Massif, naturally delineated yet connected by river valleys to adjacent plains and mountain ranges. Its nomenclature across Kurdish, Arabic, and Ottoman Turkish consistently reflected its long-standing association with a predominantly Kurdish population.

Administratively, Kurd Dagh was consistently incorporated within the larger provincial units centered on Aleppo, first as part of the Aleppo Eyalet (from c. 1534) and later as a distinct Kaza (district) within the Sanjak of Kilis in the Vilayet of Aleppo (from 1866). This administrative framework underscores its historical orientation towards Aleppo as its primary governing and economic center. Economically, Kurd Dagh functioned as a vital part of Aleppo's agricultural hinterland, specializing notably in olive cultivation. Its produce supplied Aleppo's markets, fueled local industries like soap making, and entered the broader Ottoman trade networks via the city, tying the region's prosperity to that of its urban hub.

## B. Pre-Mandate Identity

Before the imposition of the French Mandate and the creation of modern national borders, Kurd Dagħ was characterized by a strong, locally rooted Kurdish identity. This identity was based on centuries of settlement, the prevalence of the Kurmanji dialect, specific religious characteristics (a Hanafi Muslim majority alongside a significant Yazidi minority, distinguishing it from other Kurdish areas), and the persistence of tribal social structures. While possessing this distinct character, the region was not isolated but existed within the diverse ethnic and religious mosaic of Ottoman Syria, particularly the Vilayet of Aleppo. Its relationship with the Ottoman state evolved, marked by periods of negotiated autonomy under local Kurdish leaders (like the Janbulads) and phases of increased central control and resistance during the Tanzimat reforms, reflecting broader patterns across Ottoman Kurdistan.

## C. Legacy

The four centuries of Ottoman rule laid a deep historical foundation for the Afrin/Kurd Dagħ region. Its established Kurdish identity, its specific demographic composition, its economic specialization (particularly in olives), and its ingrained administrative and commercial links primarily towards Aleppo were all defining features forged during this long era. The subsequent division of the Ottoman Empire and the drawing of the Syrian-Turkish border across this historical landscape fundamentally disrupted these established connections and patterns of integration. Understanding this pre-Mandate history – characterized by both the region's unique local identity and its profound integration into the Aleppo-centered Ottoman provincial system – is therefore essential for comprehending the complex political, social, and economic developments that have shaped Afrin/Kurd Dagħ in the post-Ottoman world.

## VIII. Works Cited

(Note: This list includes the IDs of sources referenced in the report text. Full bibliographic details would require access beyond the provided snippets, particularly for primary sources and less common works. The citations for Cuinet, al-Ghazzi, and Winter are based on information within the snippets themselves.)

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