

Archival Repositories for Researching the History of Afrin

Introduction

The Afrin region (Kurdish: Efrîn), located in present-day northwestern Syria, possesses a rich and complex history, having been a crossroads of civilizations and subject to various ruling powers over millennia. From ancient Syro-Hittite settlements and Roman military outposts ¹ to its incorporation into Islamic empires ¹, the Ottoman Empire ³, the French Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon ¹, and finally modern Syria ¹, Afrin's past is multi-layered. Its strategic location, fertile lands famed for olive groves ², and significant Kurdish population ¹ have made it a region of continuous historical interest and, at times, conflict. Understanding its history requires consulting a diverse range of archival sources spread across multiple countries and institutions. This report identifies the primary archival repositories most likely to contain significant information pertaining to the history of the Afrin region, covering different historical periods and administrative entities. The dispersal of records, linguistic diversity, and varying accessibility levels present challenges, yet also offer rich avenues for comprehensive historical inquiry.

Ottoman Era Archives (until 1918-1922)

The Ottoman Empire governed the region that includes Afrin for centuries, from the Mamluk period until its dissolution after World War I.³ During this extensive period, Afrin was typically administered as part of the Vilayet of Aleppo and, at times, specifically within the Kilis Province or Sanjak.¹ Consequently, Ottoman archives are paramount for researching Afrin's history prior to the 20th century.

The primary repository is the **Turkish State Archives (Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı)**, specifically the **Ottoman Archives (Osmanlı Arşivi)** located in Istanbul.⁸ These archives hold a vast collection of documents detailing the administrative, social, economic, and demographic aspects of the empire's territories. For Afrin, researchers should focus on records pertaining to the Vilayet of Aleppo. Key document types include:

- **Salnameler (Yearbooks):** Provincial yearbooks, such as the *Salname-i Vilâyet-i Halep*, provide statistical data, administrative information, and details on local officials and institutions for the Aleppo Vilayet.¹⁰ These can offer insights into the administrative structure that included the Afrin area. Some editions of the *Salname-i Vilâyet-i Halep* are available through online collections and libraries, such as those listed by HathiTrust. An 1899 edition is noted as being published by the Halep Vilayeti Matbaası. The content of these yearbooks would likely cover the *kazas* (districts) within the vilayet, potentially including the Kurd-Dagh (Mountain of the Kurds) region, which corresponds to modern Afrin.²

- **Land Registers (Tapu Tahrir Defterleri):** These registers recorded land ownership, property types, and tax obligations, crucial for understanding land tenure patterns and agricultural economy.
- **Tax Records:** Documents related to various forms of taxation, including the *avarız* tax (extraordinary tax) collected in Aleppo from 1640 to 1700, can reveal economic conditions and population distribution. The *avarızhane* system, a fiscal unit indicating the tax-paying ability of multiple households, was used for this purpose.
- **Census Data (Nüfus Defterleri):** Population registers, though varying in detail and scope over time, can provide demographic information, including ethnic and religious composition.
- **Administrative Correspondence:** Reports and communications between local officials in the Aleppo Vilayet and the central Ottoman government in Istanbul can shed light on local governance, security issues, social dynamics, and economic activities. Ottoman documents from the 18th century reportedly referred to Afrin as the "Sancak of the Kurds", indicating a recognized Kurdish presence and administrative unit.

The Ottoman administrative system underwent changes, with the Eyalet system being replaced by the Vilayet system in 1864, and *Nâhiye* (sub-district) teşkilatı being added in 1870. Records from the Aleppo Eyalet (1534–1864) would precede the Vilayet records. The Kilis Sanjak was part of the Aleppo Eyalet in the 17th century.

Accessing and interpreting Ottoman archives can be challenging due to the Ottoman Turkish language (using an Arabic script), complex bureaucratic systems, and the sheer volume of material. However, the Turkish State Archives offer online catalogues and research guides, though registration is often necessary. Some records, like a 1543 defter (TD 373) related to a *liva* (district), are described in archival publications. While specific Jewish community records for Aleppo were often kept by rabbis rather than as official Ottoman records, some have survived and are in institutions like the National Library of Israel. This highlights that non-state entities also maintained records that could offer glimpses into the diverse communities of the broader region.

French Mandate Period Archives (1920-1946)

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the San Remo Conference (1920) and the League of Nations assigned France the Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon in 1923.¹⁵ Afrin, detached from Kilis Province by the new Syria-Turkey border drawn in 1923, became part of French-administered Syria, initially within the State of Aleppo, and later other administrative configurations under the Mandate.¹ French archives are therefore indispensable for understanding this crucial period of transition, administration, and socio-political development.

Several key French archival institutions hold relevant records:

1. Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence:
ANOM houses records transferred from former colonies and protectorates, including those from the French Mandate in Syria and Lebanon. Researchers can expect to find:
 - Administrative reports from French officials in Syria.

- Political correspondence related to the governance of various regions, including Aleppo and Damascus, which had oversight or influence over the Afrin area.
 - Files concerning the administration of the Sanjak of Alexandretta (Hatay), which bordered Afrin and was a contentious issue, eventually being annexed by Turkey in 1939.¹ The strategic implications of this annexation, which left Afrin surrounded by Turkey on three sides, would likely be documented.
 - Records on ethnic and sectarian groups, including the Kurdish population, and French policies towards them. The French colonial strategy often involved dividing the region into states based partly on sectarian demographics to weaken nationalist movements. ANOM provides an online research portal, IREL (Instruments de recherche en ligne), which includes inventories, nominal databases, and a library catalogue. However, ANOM states they do not respond to postal or electronic mail concerning "archives des protectorats (Maroc, Tunisie, Syrie, Liban) (fiche 5)", suggesting researchers may need to use the online tools or visit in person.
2. Archives Diplomatiques (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs) in La Courneuve:
This repository holds the records of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is crucial for diplomatic and high-level political documentation. Relevant collections include:
- **Correspondance Politique et Commerciale (CPCOM):** This series contains extensive files on the Levant, Syria, Aleppo, and relations with Turkey, including border issues. For instance, records exist regarding the "Nomination de consuls turcs à Alep et Beyrouth" (1923-1925) and broader political situations in Syrian territories like Latakia.
 - **Fonds of High Commissioners and officials:** Papers of key figures like General Henri Gouraud, who was High Commissioner in Syria and Cilicia and played a significant role in establishing French control¹⁵, are held here (e.g., "Archives du général Henri Gouraud. Carrière militaire. Commandant en chef de l'armée du Levant et Haut-Commissaire...").
 - Photographic archives from the French Delegation in the Levant, offering visual documentation of political and military life. The Archives Diplomatiques has an online catalogue. Searching with keywords such as "Syrie," "Alep," "Alexandrette," "Kurdes," and specific years of the Mandate period is advisable.
3. Service Historique de la Défense (SHD) in Vincennes:
The SHD holds the archives of the French military and is vital for understanding military operations, security, intelligence, and the administration of territories by military authorities during the Mandate. The most relevant collection is:
- **Sous-série 4H (Levant, 1917-1946):** This sub-series specifically covers the French military presence and activities in the Levant.²⁰ It includes documents from the *Troupes Françaises du Levant*, intelligence reports from the *2ème Bureau*, records on the command of territories (e.g., Nord-Syrie, Est-Syrie, secteur Centre-Syrie), the *Troupes Spéciales du Levant* (locally recruited forces), and journals of military operations (JMOs). The online inventory for Sous-série 4H

(SHDGR_REP_4H.pdf) details specific files, such as "4 H 255 Commandements des troupes des territoires. Nord-Syrie, Sud-Syrie et de la région de l'Euphrate" and "4 H 448 - 449 Territoire Est-Syrie". These records are crucial for understanding the French military administration and interactions with local populations, including Kurds, in regions like Afrin. The inventory indicates that these archives originate solely from the Levant, not from Parisian bureaus, making them particularly direct sources. Some documents within this series may have access restrictions.

The French administration developed the town of Afrin, which grew from a small market in the 19th century to a more substantial settlement under the Mandate. French maps from this period, such as a 1935 map of Syria and Lebanon compiled by French Mandate troops, also provide valuable geographical and demographic insights.

British Archives (Primarily for broader regional context and intelligence)

While France held the Mandate for Syria, British archives are important for understanding the broader regional geopolitical context, Anglo-French relations in the Middle East, intelligence gathering, and the "Kurdish question" which transcended newly drawn national borders.

The National Archives (TNA) in Kew, London, is the principal repository:

- **Foreign Office (FO) Records:** These are the most critical records.
 - **FO 371 (General Correspondence, Political):** This voluminous series contains dispatches, reports, and memoranda relating to British foreign policy and observations on political developments worldwide, including Syria and the surrounding region. Files within FO 371 would cover British perspectives on the French Mandate, border issues (particularly the Syrian-Turkish border near Afrin), the status of ethnic and religious minorities like the Kurds, and regional stability. For example, records concerning Assyrian refugees after World War I (e.g., FO 371/5125, FO 371/5126) also touch upon the situation of Kurds and the complex inter-communal relations in areas like the Mosul Vilayet and the Persian borderlands, which had parallels with the situation in northern Syria.
 - **Consular Records:** Reports from British consulates in Damascus (FO 1098, FO 684) and Aleppo would contain on-the-ground information about political, economic, and social conditions.²⁵ These might include observations on the Afrin region, particularly if events there had implications for British interests or the stability of Aleppo.
- **Cabinet Papers (CAB):** Records like CAB 24/108/72 show high-level discussions on regional issues, including the repatriation of groups like the Assyrians, which involved considerations of Kurdish populations and territorial arrangements.
- **Colonial Office (CO) Records:** Files such as CO 1073/169 regarding Assyrian demands at the Lausanne Conference also reflect the broader context of minority aspirations in the post-Ottoman Middle East.

The National Archives' online catalogue, "Discovery," is the primary tool for locating relevant files. Researchers can use keywords such as "Syria," "Aleppo," "Kurds," "Turkish border,"

"French Mandate," and specific date ranges. While direct administration of Afrin was French, British intelligence and diplomatic reporting often covered areas beyond their immediate control, especially concerning strategic regions and populations like the Kurds.

Syrian Archives

Accessing archives within Syria presents significant challenges, particularly given the ongoing conflict and political situation. However, for historical periods prior to recent events, some institutions theoretically hold relevant materials.

- **National Archives Directorate and Asad National Library** in Damascus: These institutions are reported to house materials primarily from before the 1950s. These could include records from the late Ottoman period (though likely less extensive than those in Istanbul) and the French Mandate era from a Syrian perspective, as well as documents from the early post-independence period. However, access to more recent or sensitive diplomatic material is generally restricted. The current operational status and accessibility for international researchers are uncertain.
- **Syrian Archive (Mnemonic project)**: This is a contemporary initiative focused on preserving documentation of human rights violations and other crimes committed during the Syrian Civil War since 2011. While its primary mission is not historical research in the traditional sense, its efforts to collect, preserve, and verify digital material (including over 3.5 million videos) are creating an archive of recent events. For future historians studying the 21st-century history of Afrin, particularly the period from 2012 onwards when Syrian government forces withdrew and various groups took control ², this archive will be an invaluable, though harrowing, resource. It also highlights the critical need for preserving digital records in conflict zones.

The period after Syrian independence in 1946 saw policies of Arabization, particularly under the Ba'ath Party from 1963 and Hafez al-Assad from 1971, which heavily impacted Kurdish society in Afrin.⁵ Records pertaining to these policies, if accessible, would be located within Syrian state archives.

German Archives (for early 20th-century context)

German archives can provide additional perspectives, particularly for the late Ottoman and World War I periods, due to Germany's political and military alliances with the Ottoman Empire.

- **Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts (German Federal Foreign Office Political Archive)** in Berlin ³¹: This archive holds records of German foreign policy. Relevant materials could include:
 - Consular reports from German consulates in Aleppo and Damascus. For example, a report from the U.S. Consul in Aleppo in 1915 mentions correspondence with the American consular agent in Alexandretta, indicating the presence and activity of foreign consulates whose records might survive in their respective national archives. German consular reports would offer a German perspective on the region during a critical period.

- Documents related to German interests in the Ottoman Empire, including the Baghdad Railway project and military missions.
- Reports from individuals like Max von Oppenheim, a German diplomat and archaeologist who travelled extensively in Syria and Mesopotamia and reported on his findings, including ancient sites. The Political Archive uses an online catalogue called "Invenio" for research, ordering, and citation of archival material.³¹ Searching for terms like "Syrien," "Aleppo," "Osmanisches Reich," and relevant date ranges would be necessary. The archive provides guidance on how to use Invenio and cite documents, noting changes in citation style with the introduction of the system.

Kurdish Archives and Digital Humanities Projects

In recent years, there has been a significant "archival turn" in Kurdish Studies, with increasing efforts to locate, preserve, digitize, and make accessible materials related to Kurdish history, culture, and politics.³⁷ These resources are vital for incorporating Kurdish perspectives and voices into the historical narrative of regions like Afrin.

- **Kurdish Institute of Paris (Institut Kurde de Paris):** Founded in 1983, this institute maintains the largest Kurdish library in the Western world, the **Kurdish Digital Library (BNK)**.³⁹ It holds over 10,000 monographs in 25 languages, tens of thousands of documents, periodicals (including its linguistic journal *Kurmancî* and research journal *Études Kurdes*), photographs, videos, and audio archives.³⁹ The BNK's online catalogue allows searches by keyword (e.g., "Afrin," "Efrîn," "Kurd Dag"), theme ("History"), author, and date. This is a key resource for finding published and unpublished materials specifically on Kurdish topics.
- **Kurdistan Center for Arts and Culture (KCAC) Archive:** This organization offers a comprehensive digital collection of books, manuscripts, photographs, periodicals, and historical documents from various collections throughout Kurdistan. They employ a mobile digitization unit to reach and preserve at-risk collections in remote areas.
- **Kurdish Digital Archive (DAME - Digital Archive of the Middle East, University of Exeter):** This project aims to digitize and provide access to key Kurdish materials from the University of Exeter's collections and collaborates with other Kurdish archives and institutions. Its holdings include press releases, articles, and photographs related to Kurdish political movements and student organizations.⁴²
- **Vera Beaudin Saeedpour Kurdish Library & Museum Collection (Binghamton University):** Originally based in Brooklyn, this collection, founded in 1981, includes around 3,000 volumes, art, and handicrafts related to Kurdish culture and history. The collection was donated to Binghamton University after Saeedpour's death in 2010 and is accessible there.⁴⁴
- **Kurdish Heritage Institute (KHI) in Sulaymaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan:** Founded in 2003, KHI is dedicated to preserving Kurdish oral traditions, music, and folklore. It holds over 15,000 books, extensive audio-visual archives, and has representatives in Syria, Turkey, and Iran, actively collecting materials from across Kurdistan. This makes it a potential

source for materials related to Afrin's cultural history and oral traditions.

- **British Library Endangered Archives Programme (EAP):** The EAP funds the digitization of at-risk archives worldwide, making them freely available online. It has funded projects related to Kurdish history, such as "Archives of Kurdistan: recovering endangered public records of Sulaymaniyah and surrounding regions in Iraq (EAP1654)". While no projects explicitly list Afrin, searching the EAP database for Syria or broader Kurdish regions might yield relevant collections.⁴⁷
- **"An "Archival Turn" in Kurdish Studies?" Workshop (Berlin, February 2025):** This academic workshop highlights the growing body of archival sources for Kurdish history, including state archives from European countries, personal archives of diaspora figures, and documents from Kurdish organizations.³⁷ Of particular relevance is the presentation by **Seda Altuğ, "Kurds in the French and Syrian archives (1921-1946),"** which examines the displacement of Kurds from Turkey to Syrian Jazira post-1925, using French, Syrian, and oral historical sources. This type of research underscores the interconnectedness of archives and the importance of cross-referencing different source types.

These Kurdish-focused archives and projects are crucial because they often prioritize materials and perspectives that might be marginalized or absent in state-centric archives. They are particularly important for social history, cultural studies, and understanding the Kurdish experience in Afrin.

Oral Histories and Local Collections

For a region like Afrin, with a history marked by political upheaval, displacement, and conflict, oral histories and privately held local collections (family papers, photographs, community records) are invaluable, though often difficult to access systematically.

- **Oral Histories:** The lived experiences of Afrin's residents, particularly concerning the periods of French Mandate rule, Syrian state policies, the Syrian Civil War, the establishment of de facto autonomous administration (2012-2018) ², and subsequent invasions and occupations ⁵, are rich sources of historical information. Narratives like that of Hammude, a young Syrian refugee from Afrin, describe the thriving life, local governance, and subsequent destruction and humanitarian crisis post-2018, including the impact on olive farming, a central part of Afrin's identity and economy. Diana Darke's journalistic work also incorporates local accounts and observations of cultural heritage in Afrin. While systematic oral history archives specifically for Afrin may not be widely publicized, academic researchers, journalists, and community organizations may have undertaken such projects. The Kurdish Heritage Institute's focus on oral traditions is noteworthy in this regard.
- **Local Collections:** Families and local community institutions in Afrin and among its diaspora may hold important documents, photographs, and artifacts. The challenge lies in identifying, accessing, and preserving these materials, especially in a context of instability. Initiatives like the KCAC's mobile digitization unit aim to address this for the broader Kurdistan region.

The historical narrative of Afrin is significantly enriched by these less formal, yet deeply personal, sources. They provide texture and human perspective to the events documented in official state archives. The cultural heritage, including the significance of olive trees ² and local traditions, is often best understood through these local and oral accounts.

Conclusion

Researching the history of Afrin requires a multi-archival approach, reflecting the region's complex political and administrative trajectory. Key repositories include:

- **Ottoman Archives (Istanbul):** For the pre-1920 period, focusing on records of the Vilayet of Aleppo and Kilis Sanjak.
- **French Archives (ANOM, Archives Diplomatiques, SHD):** Essential for the French Mandate era (1920-1946), covering administration, military affairs, political developments, and border issues.
- **British Archives (TNA):** For broader regional context, intelligence, and the "Kurdish question" during the Mandate and beyond.
- **Syrian Archives (Damascus):** Potentially for post-independence Syrian state records, though accessibility is a major concern.
- **German Archives (Political Archive of the Federal Foreign Office):** For supplementary perspectives from the late Ottoman and WWI periods.
- **Kurdish Archives and Digital Humanities Projects (Kurdish Institute of Paris, KCAC, DAME, KHI, etc.):** Crucial for Kurdish perspectives, cultural history, and accessing dispersed or endangered materials.
- **Oral Histories and Local Collections:** Indispensable for capturing lived experiences and community narratives, especially for more recent and contested periods.

The challenges are considerable, including linguistic barriers (Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, French, Kurdish), the geographical dispersal of records, access restrictions in some repositories, and the ongoing political instability affecting the region itself. However, the increasing digitization of archival materials and the growing academic focus on Kurdish studies and the history of regions like Afrin offer expanding opportunities for researchers. A comprehensive understanding of Afrin's past necessitates navigating these diverse archival landscapes to piece together its rich and often turbulent story.

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