The Armenians of Afrin: Displacement, History, and Erasure in Northwest Syria

I. Introduction: Afrin's Armenians and the Echoes of Displacement

A. Setting the Scene

The district of Afrin, located in the northwestern corner of Syria adjacent to the Turkish border, occupies a distinct place in the country's complex socio-political landscape.[1] Historically recognized as part of Aleppo Governorate, the region, particularly its western, mountainous parts, has been characterized by a significant Kurdish population, leading to its designation as "Kurd-Dagh" or the 'Mountain of the Kurds'.[3] Before the onset of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, Afrin was considered one of the most densely Kurdish-populated areas in Syria.[3] Following the withdrawal of Syrian government forces in 2012, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) assumed control, and in 2014, Afrin was declared one of the three cantons of the de facto Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), with Afrin city as its administrative center.[1] Compared to the widespread devastation engulfing other parts of Syria, Afrin experienced a period of relative stability under AANES administration, even becoming a refuge for internally displaced persons (IDPs) from elsewhere in the country, including Aleppo.[2] This stability, however, proved fragile, situated within the broader context of the Syrian conflict and neighboring Turkey's escalating security concerns regarding the YPG's dominance along its border.[7]

B. Introducing the Armenian Connection

While Afrin was overwhelmingly Kurdish before 2018, with estimates ranging from 75% to over 95% [5], its demographic fabric also included Arab and Turkmen communities, as well as a small but historically significant Armenian presence.[6] This Armenian community largely consisted of descendants of those who had sought refuge in Syria, including the Afrin area, during the Armenian Genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire starting in 1915.[9] For these families, Syria, and specifically locales like Afrin, represented a sanctuary, a place to "live in peace among their Kurdish brothers" after fleeing massacres and oppression in their ancestral homeland.[15] This historical context immediately establishes a poignant paradox: Syria served as a haven from the 20th century's first genocide, only for its descendants in Afrin to face renewed violence and displacement a century later, events they perceived as a chilling repetition of past traumas.[14]

C. Thesis Statement

This report examines the history, experiences, and fate of the Armenian community connected to Afrin, Syria. It focuses on their settlement following the 1915 Genocide, their life within the district, their displacement during the 2018 Turkish military offensive known as "Operation Olive Branch," the subsequent demographic and cultural shifts imposed on Afrin under Turkish-backed occupation, and the current status of the displaced community. The analysis draws parallels between the historical trauma of the Genocide and the contemporary experiences of violence and displacement, based on the available source materials.

D. Scope and Methodology

The findings presented in this report are based exclusively on an analysis of the provided research materials.[5] The objective is to synthesize the information contained within these diverse sources, which originate from various news outlets, academic works, human rights organizations, and encyclopedic entries in multiple languages. While striving for an objective account, the report acknowledges the varying perspectives and potential biases inherent in sources covering such a contested region and sensitive historical events.

II. Armenians in Northern Syria: A Historical Overview

A. Ancient and Medieval Presence

The Armenian connection to the region of Syria stretches back into antiquity. While often constituting a small presence, historical records note Armenian interactions and settlement in northern Syria over centuries. During the reign of Tigranes the Great in the 1st century BCE, Armenian forces briefly controlled parts of Syria, with Antioch selected as one of the capitals of the short-lived Armenian Empire.[17] Following Armenia's adoption of Christianity as its state religion in 301 CE, Armenian merchants and pilgrims frequented early Christian centers in Syria, including Antioch, Edessa (Urfa), and Nisibis, fostering relations with local Christian communities.[17]

The Arab conquest of Armenia in the 7th century led to the forced relocation of some Armenians to other parts of the Umayyad Caliphate, including Damascus.[17] A more significant wave of settlement occurred in the 11th century after the Seljuk Turkish conquest of Byzantine-controlled Armenia. Seeking stability, many Armenians migrated southwards; while many settled in Cilicia, establishing an Armenian kingdom there, others formed communities and established distinct quarters in northern Syrian cities like Antioch, Aleppo, Aintab (Gaziantep), Marash, and Kilis.[17] The relationship between these Armenian communities and the shifting powers of the region was complex; for instance, the expulsion of Armenians from Antioch by its Turkish governor prior to the First Crusade prompted Armenians to align with the European Crusaders.[17] Subsequent centuries saw fluctuations in the Armenian population due to events like the Mongol invasions led by Hulagu Khan in 1260, which significantly reduced their numbers in Syria.[18]

B. Ottoman Era

During the early Ottoman period, military conflicts in northern Syria resulted in a relatively smaller Armenian presence compared to later centuries, although a notable community existed in Urfa.[17] Aleppo, however, gradually emerged as a major center for Armenians within Ottoman Syria. Some Armenians migrated from the large indigenous Armenian population centers in Eastern Anatolia (often referred to as Western Armenia by Armenians) seeking economic opportunities.[17] Later, particularly from the 17th century onwards, waves of Armenian families moved to Aleppo specifically to escape Ottoman oppression in regions like Sasun, Marash, and Van.[17] This influx strengthened the Aleppo community, leading to the formal establishment of the Armenian Diocese of Beroea (Aleppo) in 1432.[17] By the 14th and 15th centuries, the Armenian community in Aleppo was well-organized, developing its own schools and churches, such as the Church of the Holy Mother of God (built before 1429) and the Forty Martyrs Church (consecrated 1491), which later became the Cathedral.[17] However, by the late 17th century, as Aleppo's significance in international trade declined, Syrian Armenian communities experienced economic weakening, prompting some emigration.[21]

C. The Armenian Genocide (1915) and the Formation of the Modern Syrian Armenian Community

The single most defining event shaping the modern Armenian community in Syria was the Armenian Genocide committed by the Ottoman Empire during World War I.[14] Beginning in 1915, the Ottoman authorities orchestrated the systematic deportation and massacre of the Armenian population of the empire. An estimated 1.5 million Armenians perished through killings, starvation, and exhaustion during forced death marches, representing more than half of the Armenian population living in their historic homeland at the time.[14] Thousands of surviving orphans were forcibly converted or assimilated.[24]

Syria, particularly the harsh desert region around Deir ez-Zor in the Euphrates Valley, became one of the main killing fields and the final destination for countless Armenian deportees.[17] Mass graves dotted the landscape, and sites like Margadeh and Ras al-Ain became synonymous with the suffering.[17] The Holy Martyrs Armenian Church and Memorial Complex in Deir ez-Zor, built later to commemorate the victims and house some remains, became a crucial pilgrimage site for Armenians worldwide, often referred to as the "Auschwitz of the Armenian Genocide," until its destruction by the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014.[19]

While many survivors who reached Syria viewed it merely as a transit point, hoping to continue to Lebanon, Egypt, or the West, thousands remained.[19] They found shelter among the local Arab population and sought opportunities in Syria's cities and towns.[19] This massive influx of refugees dramatically swelled the Christian population of cities like Aleppo.[17] Armenian communities were established or significantly expanded mainly in Aleppo, the country's commercial hub, but also in Damascus, and the northern provinces of Hasakeh, Raqqa, and Latakia, as well as border villages like Kessab and Yakubiyah which acquired Armenian majorities.[17] Some families fleeing the Genocide also found refuge in the Afrin district.[9] This period laid the foundation for the modern Syrian Armenian diaspora.[31] The Genocide is thus not merely a historical backdrop but the foundational trauma upon which the contemporary

Syrian Armenian community was built. Their very presence in Syria in such numbers is a direct consequence of this violent expulsion and attempt at annihilation.[17]

D. Integration and Community Life under the French Mandate and Independent Syria

The arrival of Armenian refugees coincided with the post-World War I era when Syria came under French and British control, later formalized as the French Mandate (1923-1943).[19] The refugees arrived during difficult times of disease and famine, sometimes facing blame for economic hardship or perceived collaboration with the French authorities who provided humanitarian aid and administrative roles.[17] Relations with Arab nationalists were initially complex, though they improved over time, particularly after Armenians were granted Syrian citizenship in 1924 and later mobilized as a voting bloc supporting nationalists against the French.[19] Some friction also existed initially with the small, established pre-Genocide Armenian community ("Arman al-Qadim") who feared the influx of impoverished refugees might negatively affect their status.[17]

Despite initial hardships, the Syrian Armenian community flourished in the decades following their settlement.[19] They established a robust network of community institutions, including schools, churches, cultural centers, and athletic clubs, particularly concentrated in Aleppo, which became a vital center of Armenian learning and culture for the entire Middle East diaspora.[17] The community structure, geographical distribution, and collective memory remained deeply intertwined with the Genocide experience. Syria, the land that witnessed the culmination of their ancestors' suffering, paradoxically became a place where survivors could "start anew," building livelihoods and contributing to the diverse mosaic of Syrian society.[19] Armenians enjoyed representation in the Syrian parliament and participated in public life, reflecting a degree of tolerance within Syria's multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian makeup prior to the civil war.[19] Before the war, distinct Armenian quarters existed in cities, alongside those of other minorities like Assyrians.[17] The Armenian Apostolic Church, primarily under the Diocese of Beroea (Aleppo) belonging to the Holy See of Cilicia, served the majority, alongside smaller Armenian Catholic communities.[17] Overall Christian populations, including various Orthodox and Catholic denominations, formed a significant minority in Syria.[32]

III. The Armenian Community in Afrin Before 2018

A. Settlement Post-Genocide

The Armenian presence in the Afrin district, unlike in major centers like Aleppo or Damascus, appears to be almost entirely a product of the post-Genocide era.[14] Families escaping the massacres and deportations sought refuge in various parts of Syria, and some found their way to Afrin, likely attracted by its relative remoteness and the prospect of peace.[15] The family history of Harout Kevork, identified in sources from 2018-2019 as the "last Armenian" in Afrin, illustrates this pattern: his family fled the Genocide, initially settling in Azaz and Aleppo, before

he moved to Afrin approximately fifty years prior to the 2018 Turkish offensive.[9] His account suggests other Armenian families had also moved from Aleppo to Afrin over the years, although many had died or emigrated due to subsequent conflicts even before 2018.[9]

B. Size and Integration

All available sources indicate that the Armenian community in Afrin before the 2018 offensive was extremely small. One estimate placed "other" minorities, including Armenians and Turkmens, at just 1% of the district's pre-war population.[11] News reports from January 2018, just after the Turkish offensive began, suggested only three Armenian families remained in Afrin city at that time.[15] Harout Kevork himself stated in February 2018, "I'm now the only Armenian here" [9], a status reiterated in reports of his forced departure in 2019.[16]
This minuscule Armenian presence stood in stark contrast to the overwhelming Kurdish majority, estimated at anywhere from 75% to 97% of the population before 2018.[2] Despite their small numbers, testimonies suggest a peaceful coexistence between the Armenians and the local Kurdish population, as well as other groups within Afrin. Phrases like "lived with its people" [14] and finding refuge "among their Kurdish brothers" [15] characterize the relationship before the Turkish intervention. Kevork noted that "Together with other peoples living here we take care of our city".[9] This integration into the local fabric, however, did not erase their distinct identity, rooted in their history as Genocide survivors. Consequently, while numerically marginal within Afrin itself compared to larger Armenian centers like Aleppo, the community held a symbolic weight. Their presence represented the extension of the Genocide survival narrative into this specific Kurdish-majority enclave. The subsequent targeting and displacement of even this tiny community during the 2018 events resonated strongly, interpreted through the potent lens of historical persecution and giving their fate a significance beyond their numbers.[9]

C. Life under AANES (Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria)

From 2012, when Syrian government forces withdrew, until the Turkish invasion in early 2018, Afrin was under the control of the YPG and, from 2014, administered as a canton within the AANES framework, led politically by the Democratic Union Party (PYD).[1] This period saw the establishment of local administrative structures and institutions, including attempts at democratic governance and promoting gender equality.[1] Afrin maintained relative stability compared to other war-torn regions of Syria, attracting IDPs and fostering some economic and cultural activity.[2] Harout Kevork's statement about jointly caring for the city reflects a sense of shared civic life during this period.[9] However, this autonomy, dominated by Kurdish groups linked by Turkey to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), was viewed as a major threat by Ankara, setting the stage for the 2018 intervention.[7]

IV. Operation Olive Branch (2018): Displacement and

Trauma

A. The Turkish Offensive

On January 20, 2018, Turkey launched a major military offensive, codenamed "Operation Olive Branch," against the Afrin canton.[5] The operation involved the Turkish Armed Forces and allied Syrian opposition factions, later consolidated under the umbrella of the Syrian National Army (SNA), targeting the YPG/YPJ forces that controlled the region.[7] Turkey justified the invasion by citing threats to its border security, explicitly linking the YPG to the PKK, which it designates as a terrorist organization – a designation shared by Turkey but contested by the United States, which had partnered with the YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) against ISIS elsewhere in Syria.[7] Tensions had escalated over US plans to support an SDF border force, which Turkish President Erdoğan vowed to "strangle before it's even born".[7] The operation was preceded by artillery exchanges and the withdrawal of Russian military observers who had been stationed in Afrin as part of an earlier agreement ostensibly to deter Turkish attacks.[1] The offensive involved heavy aerial bombardment, with Turkish sources reporting 72 aircraft involved on the first day, and ground assaults.[7] The main combat phase lasted until March 2018, culminating in the capture of Afrin city on March 18.[7]

B. Impact on Afrin's Armenians

For the small Armenian community remaining in Afrin, Operation Olive Branch brought direct violence, displacement, and the resurfacing of profound historical trauma. On January 24, 2018, just days into the offensive, Turkish shelling struck the home of an Armenian family who had settled in Afrin after the Genocide.[15] The attack killed Rosher Konis and gravely injured his mother, Shamsa, and sister, Hanifa.[15] Relatives, like Hartyon Kivork, explicitly framed the event not as an accident of war but as a continuation of Turkish aggression against Armenians: "[Our] ancestors fled the oppression of the Turkish authorities nearly 100 years ago... so that they headed towards Afrin to live in peace... Turkish occupation army had resumed its massacres... to leave our Armenian family as a victim of the Turkish crimes again".[15]

This incident, coupled with the general violence and the specific fear evoked by Turkish military action, led to the displacement of the remaining Armenians from Afrin.[14] Harout Kevork, the blacksmith identified as the last Armenian, lost his metallic items store and his home on the road to Jindires due to the actions of Turkish forces and the SNA, forcing him to flee to Aleppo.[16]

Crucially, testimonies from displaced Afrin Armenians consistently articulate the experience through the lens of the 1915 Genocide. Mohammed Gharib stated bluntly, "The history has repeated itself in Afrin. The Turkish army is still on the same mindset of murder, destruction and displacement of civilians," recalling the "worst practices" endured by their grandparents.[14] Harout Kevork echoed this sentiment: "Turkey has been continuing its attacks for 100 years. It is killing women and children just like 1915. Genocide found us a century later".[9] This interpretation highlights how, for this community, the 2018 offensive was not merely a

contemporary conflict event but was perceived as a direct reactivation and continuation of the historical persecution by the successor state of the Ottoman Empire. The identity of the perpetrator (Turkey and its allies) was central to this interpretation, triggering deep-seated fears and collective trauma rooted in the Genocide narrative.[9]

C. Broader Civilian Impact

The Turkish offensive had a devastating impact on the civilian population of Afrin as a whole, the vast majority of whom were Kurds. The fighting and bombardment caused significant civilian casualties, with one monitoring group reporting 68 civilian deaths, including 21 children, by early February 2018.[10] More profoundly, the operation triggered mass displacement. United Nations figures indicate that at least 98,000 people were displaced from Afrin between January and March 2018.[40] Other estimates suggest much higher numbers, potentially exceeding 300,000, as the Kurdish population fled the advancing Turkish and SNA forces.[42] Most sought refuge in nearby areas controlled by the SDF or the Syrian government, particularly the Tel Rifaat / Shahba region and Aleppo city.[12]

V. Afrin Under Occupation: Demographic Shifts and Cultural Erasure

A. Post-2018 Control

Following the capture of Afrin city and the surrounding district in March 2018, Turkish forces and allied SNA factions established control over the area.[1] While nominally administered by Syrian local councils established by Turkey, the region effectively fell under Turkish military and political control.[37] The administrative structures put in place by the AANES were dismantled.[5] Turkey integrated Afrin into its own systems, introducing the Turkish lira, linking postal services and financial transactions to Turkey, and placing sectors like health and education under the supervision of the governorate of the adjacent Turkish province of Hatay.[47] Turkish flags were raised, and the Turkish Red Crescent provided aid, solidifying Turkish presence.[1] This established what some analysts term an atmosphere of 'managed chaos,' where Turkey could pull the strings among various SNA factions and security bodies to maintain overall control.[2]

B. Human Rights Violations and Security Environment

The period following the Turkish/SNA takeover has been marked by widespread and systematic human rights violations, documented by numerous international and local organizations.[2] Reports detail patterns of looting of homes and businesses, seizure of property (especially olive groves and harvests, crucial to Afrin's economy), arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, torture in SNA-run facilities, sexual and gender-based violence (including against detained women), extortion, and killings.[2] These violations have disproportionately targeted the remaining Kurdish population, often accused of affiliation with

the former PYD administration or YPG forces.[48] The constant infighting between different SNA factions vying for territory and resources further contributes to a precarious and fearful security environment for all civilians remaining in Afrin.[2] The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the US Department of Treasury (which sanctioned two SNA groups) have condemned these abuses.[4] This pervasive insecurity and pattern of abuse created conditions that actively discouraged the return of displaced persons, particularly Kurds and other minorities.[2]

C. Demographic Engineering

Concurrent with the displacement of the original population and the creation of a hostile environment, Turkish authorities and their SNA allies implemented policies that have drastically altered Afrin's demographic composition, leading to accusations of deliberate demographic engineering or Arabization.[2] Thousands of families, primarily Sunni Arabs and some Turkmens, were systematically resettled into Afrin from other parts of Syria.[2] Many of these settlers were fighters from SNA factions and their families, or IDPs relocated from areas like Eastern Ghouta (near Damascus), Idlib, Homs, and Deir ez-Zor, often as part of agreements brokered by Turkey and Russia.[2] They were moved into the homes and properties left vacant by the displaced Kurdish inhabitants.[2]

This policy was accompanied by rhetoric from Turkish President Erdoğan about returning Afrin to its "true owners," citing disputed figures suggesting a large pre-existing Arab population, and aiming to dilute the Kurdish presence.[6] Reports indicate the construction of new settlement complexes, sometimes funded by external actors including Palestinian charities (though officially denounced by the Palestinian Authority), often built on land confiscated from displaced Kurds.[42]

The demographic impact has been dramatic, although precise figures are difficult to verify due to restricted access for independent monitors.[13] Available estimates consistently show a massive reduction in the Kurdish population and their replacement by settlers.

Table 1: Estimated Population Demographics in Afrin District (Pre- and Post-2018)

Group	Pre-2018 Estimate (%)	Post-2018 Estimate (%)	Source(s)
Kurds	75% - 97%	~35% (Jan 2020)	[5]
Arabs	~25% (or less)	~60% (Afrin City 2018)	[6]
		~55% (Erdogan claim)	[38]
Turkmen	<1% (with Armenians)	~6-7% (Erdogan claim)	[6]
Armenians/Other Minorities	~1%	Not specified	[11]
Settlers/IDPs (non-native)	Minimal	~65% (Jan 2020)	[13]

Note: Figures are estimates from various sources and time points, indicating trends rather than exact counts. Post-2018 figures often categorize by origin (native vs. arrival) rather than

precise ethnicity.
The data clearly indicates a fundamental shift, transforming Afrin from a predominantly Kurdish region into one where externally settled populations constitute the majority, particularly in urban centers and strategic villages.[12]

D. Attacks on Cultural and Religious Heritage

Alongside the demographic transformation, Afrin under occupation has witnessed systematic attacks on its rich and diverse cultural and religious heritage, primarily targeting sites associated with non-Sunni Arab or non-Turkish identities.[1] This pattern of destruction appears aimed at erasing the historical and cultural markers of the region's previous inhabitants and imposing a new, more homogenous identity aligned with the occupiers.
Numerous Yezidi shrines and cemeteries, representing one of Syria's largest pre-war Yezidi communities centered in Afrin, have been looted, vandalized, desecrated, or destroyed.[28] Specific sites mentioned include the shrines of Sheikh Junaid, Sheikh Rikab, Sheikh Hussein, Gilkhan, and others, often with graves being exhumed in search of valuables or as acts of desecration.[51] Alawite shrines have also been targeted; the Shrine of Kara Jorna was vandalized, and the cemetery containing the Shrine of Ali Dada was reportedly bulldozed to build a Turkish military installation.[51] Islamic shrines associated with local traditions or figures, such as the Shrine of Sheikh Zaid and the Shrine of Sheikhmous, were also damaged and looted, with graves dug up.[51]
Archaeological sites of great historical significance have suffered damage. The Ain Dara temple, an important Iron Age (Neo-Hittite) site dating back to 1300 BCE with parallels to Solomon's Temple, was severely damaged by Turkish shelling during the offensive and subsequently looted.[5] The ancient site of Cyrrhus (Nabi Houri), with Roman and early Christian importance, was reportedly looted, with its shrine converted into a mosque.[48] Illegal excavation has also been reported at archaeological sites like Dederiyeh.[48]
Symbols of Kurdish identity were explicitly targeted. Immediately after capturing Afrin city, SNA fighters destroyed the prominent statue of Kawa the Blacksmith, a figure central to Kurdish mythology and the celebration of Newroz.[1] The grave of the Kurdish intellectual Nuri Dersimi was also destroyed.[51]

Table 2: Documented Damage to Cultural/Religious Heritage Sites in Afrin District (Post-2018)

Site Name/Type	Location (if specified)	Nature of Damage	Perpetrator (Implied/Stated)	Source(s)
Ain Dara Temple (Archaeological)	Ain Dara	Severe damage from shelling, looting	Turkish forces/SNA	[5]
Kawa the Blacksmith Statue (Kurdish Symbol)	Afrin City	Destroyed	SNA	[1]

Multiple Yezidi Shrines & Cemeteries	Various villages*	Looted, vandalized, desecrated, graves exhumed, destroyed	SNA/Turkish-backed groups	[28]
Shrine of Kara Jorna (Alawite)		Vandalized	SNA	[51]
Shrine of Ali Dada / Cemetery (Alawite)	Sinara	Cemetery bulldozed, shrine removed (for military base)	Turkish forces/SNA	[51]
Shrine of Sheikh Zaid (Islamic)	Afrin City	Damaged, vandalized, grave exhumed	SNA	[51]
Shrine of Sheikh Junayd (Islamic/Yezidi?)	Qarabash	Looted, vandalized, gravestone smashed, grave exhumed	SNA	[51]
Shrine of Sheikhmous (Islamic)	near Gawando (Rajo)	Damaged, looted, grave exhumed	SNA/Pro-Turkish militias	[51]
Nabi Houri / Cyrrhus (Archaeological/Shrine)	Nabi Houri	Looted, converted to mosque	SNA	[48]
Nuri Dersimi Grave (Kurdish Figure)	Henan cemetery	Destroyed	Turkish or SNA	[51]
Dederiyeh (Dudêrî) (Archaeological)		Illegal excavation	Unknown	[48]
Cemeteries (General)	Jindaris, Kafr Safra	Damaged by shelling	Turkish forces	[51]
Mosque (General)	Jalame	Damaged by shelling	Turkish forces	[51]
Church (unspecified)	Afrin	Reported closed	Turkish allies	[54]

**Specific Yezidi sites mentioned include Sheikh Junaid (Faqira/Qarabash), King/Malak Adi (Qibar), Sheikh Hussein (Qibar), Gilkhan, Sheikh Rikab (Shadiri/Shidere), Basofan village shrines, Mount Sheikh Barakat shrine (seized for military use).*

It is crucial to note that while the destruction of heritage is widespread, *based on the provided sources*, there is no specific confirmation of Armenian churches, schools, or

cemeteries being destroyed or damaged *within the Afrin district* itself.[5] This contrasts with the documented destruction of significant Armenian sites elsewhere in Syria during the conflict, such as the Genocide Memorial Church in Deir ez-Zor by ISIS [19], damage to churches in Aleppo [28], and attacks on the Armenian town of Kessab.[17] One source does mention a church in Afrin being closed by Turkish allies [54], but its denomination and status are unclear.
The combined evidence of forced displacement, systematic resettlement, widespread human rights abuses preventing return, and the targeted destruction of non-Sunni Arab/Turkish cultural and religious heritage strongly suggests a deliberate policy under the Turkish/SNA occupation. This policy appears aimed at fundamentally altering Afrin's identity, erasing its diverse history, and consolidating control by implanting a new population and cultural landscape, reflecting patterns seen in other occupations aiming for long-term control or annexation.[37]

VI. The Displaced Armenians of Afrin: Current Status (c. 2024-2025)

A. Primary Locations of Displacement

Following their forced departure from Afrin during Operation Olive Branch in early 2018, the small number of displaced Armenians primarily sought refuge in areas adjacent to Afrin or in Syria's major cities.

- **Shahba Canton / Tel Rifaat:** Several sources indicate that IDPs from Afrin, including Armenians, fled to the Shahba region, particularly the town of Tel Rifaat, which remained under SDF control (often with Syrian regime and Russian military presence) until late 2024.[14] Life in the IDP camps in Shahba (sometimes called Tal Rifaat Camps) was characterized by difficult living conditions, lack of services, and vulnerability due to the complex political situation, including sieges imposed by the Syrian regime's Fourth Division and disputes between the PYD administration and Damascus.[44] The capture of Tel Rifaat and the rest of Shahba Canton by Turkish-backed SNA forces during the Syrian opposition offensive in late 2024 likely resulted in further displacement or entrapment for the IDPs sheltering there, including any remaining Armenians.[4]
- **Aleppo:** Aleppo, with its historical significance for Syrian Armenians, served as another destination. Harout Kevork, the last known Armenian resident of Afrin, relocated to Aleppo after losing his property.[16] However, Aleppo itself has faced immense challenges. Its large pre-war Armenian community was drastically reduced by the civil war.[23] Furthermore, the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 and the subsequent takeover of Aleppo by opposition forces led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) created a new climate of uncertainty and fear among the remaining Armenian and Christian populations, estimated to be only around 10-15,000 Armenians in late 2024/early 2025.[56] Reports of violence against minorities, particularly Alawites in Latakia, heightened anxieties.[56]

B. Secondary Displacement and Emigration

The displacement from Afrin occurred within a broader context of Syrian Armenian emigration triggered by the protracted civil war. Since 2011, a significant majority of Syria's pre-war Armenian population (estimated potentially around 100,000 or more, though figures vary [17]) has left the country.[19] They sought refuge in neighboring countries like Lebanon, or emigrated further to Armenia, Canada, the United States, Germany, Sweden, Australia, and elsewhere.[22] Some Syrian Armenians were even resettled by Armenian authorities in the contested Nagorno-Karabakh region prior to the 2020 war.[55]

Syrian Armenian refugees in Lebanon faced precarious conditions, sometimes residing in Palestinian refugee camps like Rashidieh, which itself had hosted Armenian refugees from the Genocide a century earlier.[61] Following the regime change in Syria in late 2024, there was an anticipated, though initially limited, influx of Syrian Armenians into Armenia.[58] The Armenian government and aid organizations like the Armenian Red Cross Society prepared for arrivals, coordinating efforts to provide support, though challenges related to documentation and integration remained.[58]

C. Prospects for Return to Afrin

Based on the available information, the prospects for the displaced Armenians to return to their former homes and lives in Afrin appear virtually non-existent. Several factors contribute to this assessment:

1. **Continued Occupation:** Afrin remains under the control of Turkey and allied SNA factions, the very forces responsible for the initial displacement.[2] Recent developments in early 2025 saw the establishment of Syrian Public Security Forces linked to the interim government in Afrin, but the underlying power dynamics and Turkish influence persist.[63]
2. **Insecurity and Abuses:** The environment of human rights violations, arbitrary rule by militias, and general insecurity documented since 2018 continues to make return unsafe, particularly for minorities perceived as linked to the former administration or as historical adversaries.[2]
3. **Demographic Transformation:** The homes and properties of displaced persons, including Armenians like Harout Kevork whose house was reportedly converted into a mosque named Al-Faruq [16], have been confiscated and occupied by settlers brought in under the occupation authorities.[2] This large-scale resettlement presents a major physical and political obstacle to return.
4. **Fear and Trauma:** The experience of 2018, interpreted through the lens of the Genocide, created deep-seated fear and trauma, making voluntary return under the same authorities highly unlikely.[9]
5. **Departure of the Last Known Resident:** The departure of Harout Kevork, described as the "last Armenian," symbolizes the end of the community's physical presence.[16]
6. **Broader Emigration Trend:** The overwhelming trend for Syrian Armenians has been

emigration *out* of Syria, not return to contested and occupied territories.[34] Even the recent limited return of some displaced Kurds to Afrin following the fall of Assad faced significant challenges and extortion.[43]

The combination of these factors suggests that the 2018 displacement marked the effective end of the small, century-long Armenian presence in the Afrin district. Their dispersal to other unstable locations within Syria or emigration abroad, coupled with the irreversible demographic and cultural changes imposed on Afrin itself, points towards a permanent erasure of this specific community from the region.

D. Current Situation in Syria (Early 2025 Context)

The broader situation for Armenians and other minorities remaining in Syria remained highly uncertain in early 2025. The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 and the ascendancy of an HTS-dominated interim government raised significant concerns.[45] While some Armenian community members in Aleppo reported relative calm compared to media portrayals, underlying anxiety persisted due to the Islamist nature of the dominant factions and reports of revenge killings against Alawites in coastal regions, which tragically included at least two Armenian victims.[56] The socio-economic situation remained dire, further fueling emigration.[57] The reopening of Aleppo airport offered potential routes out, while the long-term political settlement for Syria, including the role of minorities and the status of Turkish-occupied areas like Afrin, remained unresolved.[57]

VII. Conclusion

A. Summary of Findings

The history of Armenians in Afrin is a poignant microcosm of the broader Syrian Armenian experience, deeply intertwined with the legacy of the 1915 Genocide. Seeking refuge from Ottoman persecution, a small number of Armenian families settled in the predominantly Kurdish district of Afrin over the past century, finding relative peace and coexistence.[9] This fragile sanctuary was shattered in January 2018 with the launch of Turkey's Operation Olive Branch. For Afrin's Armenians, the offensive was not merely conflict spillover but a terrifying echo of historical trauma, explicitly described by survivors as the Genocide finding them "a century later".[9] The violence led to deaths, injuries, and the forced displacement of the remaining Armenian families.[15]

In the aftermath, Afrin came under Turkish and SNA occupation, characterized by widespread human rights abuses, the systematic resettlement of populations from elsewhere in Syria, and the targeted destruction of Kurdish, Yezidi, Alawite, and other cultural and religious heritage sites, fundamentally altering the region's demographic and cultural identity.[1] The displaced Armenians of Afrin were scattered, primarily to the Shahba/Tel Rifaat area (itself later overrun) and Aleppo, or joined the larger exodus of Syrian Armenians emigrating abroad.[14] Given the ongoing occupation, the hostile environment, the seizure of their properties, and the profound demographic changes, the prospect of their return to Afrin is effectively nil, marking the

erasure of this small but historically resonant community from the district.

B. Reflection on Themes

The story of Afrin's Armenians underscores several critical themes. It highlights the paradox of Syria as both a historic refuge and a contemporary site of conflict and renewed displacement for Armenians. It demonstrates the enduring power of historical trauma, particularly the memory of the Armenian Genocide, in shaping perceptions of and responses to present-day violence, especially when perpetrated by actors linked to historical oppressors. The narrative reveals the acute vulnerability of small minority communities caught within larger geopolitical struggles and proxy wars. Furthermore, the events in Afrin since 2018 serve as a stark case study of how forced displacement, demographic engineering, and the destruction of cultural heritage can be employed as interconnected tools of occupation aimed at erasing a region's history and identity, potentially constituting serious violations of international law.

C. Lingering Questions/Future Outlook

While the available sources provide a grim picture, some questions remain. The precise fate and current location of every individual Armenian family displaced from Afrin cannot be fully traced from the provided materials. Additionally, while numerous sources document heritage destruction in Afrin, specific confirmation regarding any Armenian-affiliated sites (churches, cemeteries) *within* the district is absent in these particular documents, representing a potential gap for further investigation.

Looking forward, the future for Armenians in Syria as a whole appears precarious. The dramatic decline in their population since 2011, coupled with the ongoing political instability, the rise of Islamist factions in the post-Assad era, and the uncertain trajectory of the Syrian state leave the remnants of this ancient community facing profound challenges to their continued existence in the country that once offered their ancestors sanctuary. The erasure of the Armenian presence in Afrin may foreshadow further erosion of the Armenian footprint across Syria.

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