

Distinguishing Features of Afrini Kurds in the Pre-2010 Era: A Comparative Historical Analysis

I. Introduction

The Kurdish people represent one of the largest stateless nations globally, with significant populations distributed across the modern nation-states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.¹ This division, largely solidified in the aftermath of World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire¹, has resulted in distinct historical trajectories, socio-political experiences, and cultural nuances among Kurdish communities in different states and regions. This report aims to delineate the specific historical, socio-cultural, political, and economic factors that distinguished the Kurdish population of the Afrin region (also known as Kurd Dagħ) in northwestern Syria from other major Kurdish populations—namely those in Syria's Jazira and Kobani regions, as well as Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran—during the period strictly before 2010.

The scope of this analysis is deliberately confined to the historical context preceding the tumultuous events of the Syrian Civil War and its aftermath. Consequently, developments occurring after 2010, including the establishment of autonomous administrations, large-scale conflicts, and subsequent occupations, fall outside the purview of this study. Furthermore, this report will not engage in comparisons of Kurdish linguistic dialects, such as Kurmanji and Sorani, focusing instead on the socio-political, economic, and historical dimensions of differentiation. The analysis relies exclusively on the provided academic and historical source materials, adhering to rigorous citation standards. Geographically, the focus is the Afrin district (Kurd Dagħ), situated northwest of Aleppo.⁴

The distinctiveness of Afrini Kurds prior to 2010 appears to stem from a unique confluence of factors. These include its specific geographical positioning adjacent to Turkey yet separate from other Syrian Kurdish enclaves, a demographic history potentially characterized by deeper local roots compared to the heavily migration-influenced Jazira region, unique socio-economic structures tied to its fertile landscape and proximity to Aleppo, particular religious dynamics including the presence of significant Yezidi and Alevi minorities, and a specific, albeit often repressive, relationship with the Syrian state apparatus that differed in application, if not always in intent, from policies enacted in other Kurdish regions within Syria and neighboring countries. Understanding this pre-2010 baseline is essential for contextualizing the region's subsequent history.

II. The Shaping of Afrin (Kurd Dagħ): Historical Context Before 1946

A. Ancient Roots and Early Kurdish Presence

The Afrin region possesses a history stretching back millennia, long predating the settlement of Kurdish populations. Archaeological evidence points to Syro-Hittite settlements, such as Ain Dara, located south of the modern town of Afrin, and Luwian inscriptions dating to the 9th

or 8th century BCE have been discovered.⁷ The area fell under the sway of successive empires, including the Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, Achaemenid, and Seleucid empires.⁷ During the Roman era, the nearby settlement of Cyrrhus served as a military base, and the region, known then by names like Oinoparas or Ufrenus (from which Afrin likely derives), was part of Roman Syria.⁷

While the precise timeline of Kurdish settlement in the Kurd Dagħ (Mountain of the Kurds) area is subject to scholarly discussion, evidence suggests a presence potentially dating back to antiquity or the Seleucid period, possibly linked to mercenary activities.⁸ Certainly, by the time of the Crusades in the 11th century, the region was recognized for its Kurdish inhabitants, as indicated by place names like *Hisn al-Akrad* (Castle of the Kurds, later Krak des Chevaliers) located further south but indicative of Kurdish presence in the broader Syrian landscape.³ More concretely, historical records, including accounts from European travelers like William Biddulph in 1599, confirm Kurdish settlements in the mountains northwest of Aleppo by the 16th-17th centuries, with Biddulph specifically mentioning "Coords" who likely included Yezidis.⁷

This potentially long-standing and relatively continuous Kurdish presence within the specific territory of Kurd Dagħ offers a contrast to the demographic history of Syria's Jazira region. While Jazira also had historical Kurdish populations, its Kurdish majority solidified much later, primarily due to significant waves of migration from Turkey during the 20th century.⁹ This difference in historical demographic trajectory—deep local roots in Afrin versus substantial 20th-century influx in Jazira—likely contributed to shaping distinct local identities and social structures in the period before 2010.

B. Integration into the Ottoman Empire: Autonomy and Identity

Following the Ottoman victories at the Battle of Chaldiran (1514) against the Safavids and the Battle of Marj Dabiq (1516) against the Mamluks, the region encompassing modern-day northern Syria, including Kurd Dagħ, fell under Ottoman rule for the subsequent four centuries.¹¹ The Ottoman approach to governing its vast Kurdish-populated territories was often characterized by a degree of pragmatism and flexibility, particularly in the early centuries. The Empire frequently granted considerable autonomy to local Kurdish leaders—variously termed aghas, sheikhs, or emirs—in exchange for loyalty, tax revenues (though exemptions were sometimes granted), and crucially, the securing of volatile border regions.³ This arrangement was often mutually beneficial, providing stability for the empire and preserving local power structures for Kurdish elites.³

Within this framework, the Afrin region held a recognized status. Ottoman documents referred to the Afrin Plateau as the "Sancak of the Kurds" (Kurd Dagħ Sancağı), indicating a formal administrative identity within the imperial structure.⁷ Powerful Kurdish families, like the Janbulads (Canpolat), served as governors of the Aleppo region for the Ottomans between 1591 and 1607, highlighting Kurdish influence in the wider area encompassing Afrin.⁹ This system of negotiated autonomy began to change significantly in the mid-19th century as the Ottoman state embarked on the Tanzimat reforms, a series of modernizing and centralizing measures aimed at strengthening state control over the provinces and countering

the rise of nationalism.³ These reforms sought to dismantle the power of local dynasties and intermediaries, including Kurdish emirs like Mir Bedir Khan of Bohtan (whose influence was primarily east of Afrin).³ Later, in the late 19th century, the establishment of the Hamidiye Cavalry regiments, composed largely of Kurdish tribesmen loyal to Sultan Abdul Hamid II, further altered power dynamics. While intended to bolster state control and provide a loyal force, the Hamidiye often empowered certain tribes at the expense of others and minority groups like the Armenians, although its specific impact within the Afrin Sancak requires further detailed research beyond the scope of the provided sources.³

While Afrin was part of this broader Ottoman-Kurdish dynamic, its specific experience may have differed from the larger, more powerful semi-independent emirates located further east in Botan, Soran, or Baban.¹³ Its designation as a "Sancak" suggests administrative recognition⁷ but perhaps implied a different scale of political power compared to the major emirates. Its proximity to the major Ottoman provincial capital of Aleppo might also have led to a different pattern of integration and control compared to more remote mountainous regions. This distinct historical baseline under Ottoman rule likely influenced the region's political and social organization leading into the 20th century.

C. The French Mandate (1920-1946): Borders, Administration, and Minority Policies

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I led to a radical reconfiguration of the Middle East. The secret Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 between Britain and France had already delineated spheres of influence¹⁴, and the subsequent San Remo Conference in 1920 formalized the Mandate system under the League of Nations, granting France control over Syria and Lebanon.⁴

A pivotal development for Afrin was the demarcation of the Syria-Turkey border in 1923. This new boundary separated the Kurd Dagħ region from the Kilis province, to which it had been linked under the Ottomans, and incorporated it definitively into French-administered Syria, initially as part of the State of Aleppo and later within the Syrian Republic.⁷ This border, combined with Turkey's annexation of the Sanjak of Alexandretta (Hatay province) in 1939, resulted in the Afrin district becoming almost entirely surrounded by Turkish territory, except for its eastern and southeastern boundaries.⁷ This geographical positioning would have significant long-term implications for its connections to other Kurdish regions and its relationship with both Syria and Turkey.

French administrative policies during the Mandate period had a mixed impact. The French developed the town of Afrin as a market center, contributing to its growth.⁷ Initially, French strategy often involved favoring ethnic and religious minorities, including Kurds, Alawites, and Christians, partly as a means to counterbalance the growing tide of Arab nationalism emanating from cities like Damascus and Aleppo.¹ This included recruiting minorities into the local security forces, the *Troupes Spéciales du Levant*, a policy which, while providing opportunities for some, also exacerbated tensions with the Arab majority.¹ However, this favoritism was often tactical and did not translate into consistent support for Kurdish autonomy across Syria.

A key distinction emerged between French policies in Afrin and those in the northeastern Jazira region. While the French authorities actively encouraged and facilitated the migration

of tens of thousands of Kurds fleeing Kemalist Turkey into Jazira during the 1920s, granting them land and citizenship, and significantly altering the region's demographics⁹, there is no evidence in the provided sources of a similar state-sponsored mass migration program directed towards Afrin. This difference meant that Afrin largely retained its pre-existing demographic composition, dominated by its established Kurdish population, unlike Jazira which became a hub for recent refugees. This demographic stability is reflected in Afrin being described as the "least Arabized" of Syria's Kurdish regions prior to 2011.¹⁵

Despite the lack of mass migration, Afrin was not isolated from Kurdish political developments. The Kurdish nationalist organization Xoybûn, founded in 1927 primarily to oppose Kemalist Turkey, drew members from Syrian Kurdish communities, including Kurd Dagħ, and received some degree of French tolerance or support.¹ Demands for autonomy were voiced, such as by a Kurd Dagħ deputy in 1924⁹, and more significantly in Jazira during the 1930s where Kurds and Christians jointly sought regional autonomy.¹ Ultimately, however, French policies integrated Afrin into the structures of the emerging Syrian state, which, upon independence in 1946, would be firmly dominated by Arab nationalist ideologies.¹ The Mandate period thus solidified Afrin's place within Syria's borders while simultaneously isolating it geographically and setting the stage for future challenges regarding its Kurdish identity within the new state.

III. Socio-Cultural Fabric of Afrini Kurds (Pre-2010)

A. Community, Kinship, and Social Organization

Traditional Kurdish society across Kurdistan has historically been structured around tribal affiliations (*ashiret* or *aşiret*), encompassing sub-tribes (*hoz, tira*), clans (*khel, tayfa*), and lineages, often under the leadership of influential figures known as aghas (landowners/chiefs) or sheikhs (religious leaders).³ These tribal structures served as fundamental units of socio-political and often territorial organization, based on real or perceived kinship ties.¹⁷ While processes of urbanization, migration, and state centralization led to varying degrees of detribalization throughout the 20th century, tribal identification and the authority of traditional leaders often remained relevant, even in urban settings.³

In Syria, specific Kurdish tribes played significant historical roles, particularly in the Jazira region. The Milli tribal confederation, for instance, was recognized by the Ottomans in the mid-18th century and wielded considerable power in the Raqqā area.⁹ The Havergan tribe, led by figures like Hadjo Agha, was prominent among the groups migrating into Jazira during the French Mandate.⁹ The provided sources, however, do not detail the specific tribal composition or the names of dominant tribes within the Afrin region (Kurd Dagħ) itself prior to 2010. Nevertheless, given the general pattern of Kurdish social organization, it is highly probable that similar tribal and kinship structures formed the bedrock of Afrini society, albeit potentially with local variations.¹⁷

The nature and influence of these structures in Afrin may have evolved differently compared to regions like Jazira or parts of Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan. Afrin's economy, heavily based on settled agriculture, particularly olive cultivation⁸, might have fostered different social dynamics compared to areas where pastoral nomadism remained more significant or where large, powerful tribal confederations dominated vast territories, as was historically the case

with groups like the Milli in Jazira.⁹ Furthermore, Afrin's strong and long-standing connection to the major urban center of Aleppo¹⁹ could have accelerated processes of social change or modified the political influence of traditional tribal leaders compared to more geographically isolated Kurdish areas. Kinship ties, however, likely remained a crucial element of social identity and networking.³

B. Religious Landscape: Sunni Islam, Sufi Networks, and the Aleppo Connection

Religiously, the overwhelming majority of Kurds across the Middle East, including those in Syria and the Afrin region, adhere to Sunni Islam, predominantly following the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence.² A distinctive feature of Kurdish Islam in many areas, including northern Syria, has been the strong influence of Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam.¹⁹ Historically, Sufism became organized into various orders (*tariqa*), each tracing its spiritual lineage back to a founding figure and often led by respected sheikhs. Among the Kurds, the Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya orders have been particularly prominent, with the Rifa'iyya also maintaining a significant presence, especially in the Kurd Dagħ region and Aleppo.²

These Sufi orders established networks of lodges or ritual centers known as *zawiyas*, which served not only as places for spiritual practice but also as important hubs for social interaction, community building, and maintaining cultural identity.¹⁹ A particularly notable aspect of Sufism in the context of Afrin before 2010 was the role these networks played in mediating the relationship between the rural Kurdish communities of Kurd Dagħ and the large, predominantly Arab urban center of Aleppo.¹⁹

Research highlights the specific examples of Sheikh Mahmud al-Husayni's Rifa'i *zawiya* in Afrin and Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's Qadiri *zawiya* in Aleppo.¹⁹ Sheikh Mahmud's *zawiya* in Afrin served as a focal point for the local Rifa'i community, attracting followers from the town and surrounding villages, as well as Kurdish migrants in Aleppo and Damascus. This lodge actively cultivated a sense of Kurdish identity, sometimes framing Sufism as a form of "Kurdish Islam" and emphasizing notions of Kurdish spiritual authenticity. Sheikh Mahmud himself held considerable social influence, acting as a mediator in local disputes.¹⁹

Simultaneously, Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *zawiya* in Aleppo, connected to networks originating in Kurd Dagħ, provided a crucial space for rural Kurdish migrants moving to the city. It offered solidarity, facilitated social integration, and helped newcomers navigate the urban environment, including finding employment through the *zawiya*'s networks. While rituals might incorporate Kurdish (Kurmanji), lessons often used Arabic, reflecting the adaptation required in the urban Arab context.¹⁹

Crucially, these Sufi networks fostered tangible economic links. Sheikh Mahmud's *zawiya* in Afrin helped organize the commercialization of olive oil produced by its members, connecting rural producers with merchants from Afrin based in Aleppo. Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's *zawiya* in Aleppo facilitated economic insertion for migrants and maintained connections through pilgrimages back to rural shrines, sometimes leading to urban-rural business partnerships.¹⁹ This institutionalized socio-religious and economic corridor between Afrin and Aleppo, facilitated by specific Sufi networks, appears to be a unique characteristic distinguishing Afrin's integration patterns from those of Kurds in the more geographically distant Jazira or Kobani regions. It provided a distinct channel for cultural exchange, economic activity, and

social support, linking the rural Kurdish heartland of Afrin directly to Syria's main northern metropolis.

C. Distinctive Religious Minorities: Yezidis and Alevis in Afrin

Beyond the Sunni Muslim majority and influential Sufi networks, the Afrin region was distinguished by the historical presence and integration of significant Yezidi and Alevi communities, contributing to a greater degree of religious heterogeneity compared to many other Kurdish areas in Syria, Turkey, or Iraq.²³

The Yezidis are a distinct, Kurdish-speaking ethnoreligious group indigenous to Kurdistan, whose faith incorporates elements from ancient Iranic traditions, possibly pre-Zoroastrian, alongside influences from other regional religions.²⁰ Their presence in the Afrin region dates back at least to the 13th century, and possibly earlier.²⁶ While population estimates vary, sources suggest a pre-2010 Yezidi population in Afrin ranging potentially from under 15,000 (for all of Syria)²⁴ up to 20,000-30,000 specifically in the Afrin region.²⁵ They were concentrated in several clusters of villages, particularly in the southern and eastern parts of Afrin and the adjacent Jebel Sim'an area (e.g., Basufan, Baadi, Barad, Kimar).²⁵ Yezidi religious life revolves around reverence for God (Xwedê) and seven divine beings, chief among them Malak Tâ'ûs (the Peacock Angel), often misunderstood and misrepresented by outsiders.²⁰ Their holiest shrine is at Lalish in northern Iraq²⁴, but numerous local shrines and cemeteries existed in Afrin, serving as important sites for pilgrimage and community rituals.²⁶ Historically, Yezidis faced persecution and accusations of heresy (including "devil worship"⁷), but also experienced periods of peaceful coexistence and even prominence within Kurdish society.²⁷ The Alevi community in Afrin is notable as likely the only significant Kurdish-speaking (Kurmanji) Alevi population in Syria.²⁶ Their arrival in the region occurred over several centuries, often as refugees fleeing persecution in Anatolia (modern Turkey).²⁵ A significant influx occurred following the suppression of the Dersim uprising by the Turkish state in 1937-38.²⁵ Afrin's Alevis were primarily concentrated in the Ma'abatli (Mabata) subdistrict.²⁵ Alevism, while diverse, generally differs significantly from orthodox Sunni or Shia Islam. Adherents often do not follow the five pillars of Islam, reject Sharia law, emphasize gender equality (with men and women praying together in *Cem* houses), do not require head coverings for women, and hold deep reverence for Ali.²⁵ While some identify as Muslims, many view Alevism as a distinct faith with ancient roots.²⁴ Despite being a minority, Afrin's Alevis played a notable role in local life. Figures like Muhammad Ali Khojah, an Alevi from Afrin, co-founded the first Syrian Kurdish Democratic Party in 1957, and Dr. Nuri Dersimi, a key figure in the Kurdish movement fleeing Turkey, found refuge and was eventually buried near Afrin.²⁵ The presence and historical integration of these sizable Yezidi and Alevi communities endowed Afrin with a unique socio-religious landscape. While other parts of Kurdistan host religious minorities (Yezidis are prominent near Mosul and Sinjar in Iraq²⁴, Yarsanism/Ahl-e Haqq is found in Iran and Iraq²⁴, and various Alevi groups exist in Turkey²⁴), the specific combination and relative prominence of Yezidis and Kurmanji-speaking Alevis in Afrin appears distinctive. This religious diversity likely contributed to a local culture often described as tolerant and accepting of difference prior to 2010.²³

D. Cultural Identity and Traditions

Afrini Kurds shared in the broader Kurdish cultural heritage. The celebration of Newroz (Nowruz) on the spring equinox, a festival with ancient Iranian roots symbolizing rebirth, renewal, and often linked to the myth of Kawa the Blacksmith defeating the tyrant Zuhak, was a central cultural event, carrying potent symbolism of freedom and resistance for Kurds across the region.²⁸

Language is a cornerstone of Kurdish identity. In Afrin, as in most of Syria and Turkey, the dominant dialect spoken was Kurmanji.² Despite attempts by various states, particularly Turkey, to suppress the Kurdish language²⁹, its use remained widespread. Afrin's relative demographic stability and lesser experience of the intense Arabization policies directed at Jazira likely meant that Kurmanji maintained a particularly strong and ubiquitous presence in daily life, education (unofficially), and cultural expression before 2010.¹⁵

Other elements of Kurdish culture, such as rich traditions of folklore, oral history conveyed through epic singers (*dengbêj*)³⁵, distinctive styles of weaving (carpets, kilims), and handicrafts, were undoubtedly part of Afrin's cultural life², although the provided sources lack specific details on unique *Afrini* variations of these practices.

The combination of a deeply rooted Kurdish population, relative demographic homogeneity (estimated at 97% Kurdish pre-2011¹⁵), the strong presence of the Kurmanji language, and less exposure to state-driven demographic engineering compared to Jazira¹⁵, likely fostered a cohesive and deeply embedded local Kurdish cultural identity in Afrin. This identity, while facing the general pressures of the Syrian state, may have been less overtly politicized or fragmented by the challenges of integrating recent, large-scale migration waves that characterized the experience in Jazira before 2010.

IV. Political Experiences and Affiliations (Pre-2010)

A. Navigating Independent Syria (1946-1963): Early Challenges

The transition from French Mandate to Syrian independence in 1946 marked the beginning of a challenging era for the country's Kurdish population. The newly independent state was dominated by an ascendant Arab nationalist ideology that viewed non-Arab identities with suspicion.¹ Kurds were often perceived as having been favored by the French or as harboring separatist tendencies, stemming partly from their historical opposition to the 1916 Arab Revolt and their association with French decentralization policies.¹ This created difficulties in integrating Kurds into the national fabric.¹

The brief union between Syria and Egypt to form the United Arab Republic (UAR) from 1958 to 1961 further intensified this exclusionary Arab nationalism under Gamal Abdel Nasser.¹ During this period, Kurdish identity was actively suppressed, Kurdish cultural expressions were restricted, and political activists faced arrest, accused of undermining Arab unity.¹

It was in this hostile environment that the first significant Syrian Kurdish political party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria (KDPS), was established in 1957.¹ Founded by Kurdish intellectuals and notables, some of whom had fled persecution in Turkey, and including figures like the Afrini Alevi Muhammad Ali Khojah²⁵, the party aimed to articulate Kurdish demands and defend Kurdish rights. However, its very name, referencing "Kurdistan," provoked state

repression.¹

A watershed moment illustrating the state's discriminatory stance was the special census conducted in the northeastern Hasakah governorate (Jazira) in 1962.¹ Under the pretext of identifying illegal immigrants, the census deliberately targeted the Kurdish population. Tens of thousands (estimates commonly cite around 120,000) were unable to meet stringent residency requirements (proving presence before 1945) and were subsequently stripped of their Syrian citizenship, rendered stateless.¹ These individuals were classified as *ajanib* (foreigners) and faced severe restrictions on rights, including voting, property ownership, access to public services, and obtaining travel documents.¹⁸ While the 1962 census directly targeted Jazira, its implementation sent a chilling message to all Kurds in Syria about their precarious status and established a legal framework for discrimination that persisted for decades. Afrin, though not the geographical focus of the census, existed within this overarching political climate of state hostility and insecurity towards its Kurdish citizens.

B. Under Ba'athist Rule (1963-2010): Arabization Policies and Kurdish Responses (incl. "Dissimulation")

The rise of the Ba'ath Party to power in Syria in 1963 ushered in an era of intensified and systematized discrimination against the Kurdish population, rooted deeply in the party's pan-Arab nationalist ideology.¹ While Hafez al-Assad, who seized power in 1970, adopted pragmatic policies in some areas, the fundamental approach towards Kurdish identity remained one of suppression and denial.

A key policy aimed at altering the demographic landscape and consolidating state control over resource-rich areas was the "Arab Belt" project, implemented primarily in the Jazira region during the 1970s.¹ This involved the confiscation of vast tracts of agricultural land from Kurdish owners along the borders with Turkey and Iraq and the resettlement of Arab families, often brought from other parts of Syria, into newly constructed villages.¹ The explicit goal was to create a demographic barrier separating Syrian Kurds from their counterparts in neighboring countries and to dilute Kurdish presence in strategically important areas.¹ While Jazira bore the brunt of this policy, Afrin was not entirely immune to state efforts aimed at demographic manipulation. Sources mention land expropriation from Kurdish landowners during the UAR period and later Ba'athist policies of deliberate economic neglect and restrictions on property transfers designed to encourage Kurds to migrate away from the region, particularly towards Aleppo.¹ However, the fact that Afrin remained overwhelmingly Kurdish and was described as the "least Arabized" region prior to 2011 indicates that these policies were either less systematically applied or less effective there compared to Jazira.¹⁵ Beyond demographic policies, the Ba'athist regime enforced widespread cultural suppression. The public use of the Kurdish language was restricted, Kurdish schools and publications were banned, Kurdish names were forbidden, and the very existence of Kurds as a distinct ethnic group within Syria was officially denied.¹⁵

In response to this pervasive repression, Syrian Kurds largely adopted a strategy described by scholar Jordi Tejel as "dissimulation".¹⁶ This involved avoiding direct, large-scale confrontation with the powerful state apparatus while simultaneously nurturing and preserving Kurdish language, culture, and identity within the private sphere – in homes, communities, and social

networks. This strategy allowed for the maintenance of collective awareness and subtle resistance without provoking overwhelming state violence.¹⁶

Despite this general pattern of avoiding confrontation, sporadic protests and clashes did occur. Demonstrations during Newroz celebrations in Afrin in March 1986 resulted in casualties.⁹ A more significant event was the uprising that began in Qamishli (Jazira) in March 2004, sparked by violence at a football match between Kurdish and Arab supporters.¹ The protests rapidly spread to other Kurdish towns and even to Kurdish neighborhoods in Aleppo and Damascus, representing the most serious challenge to Ba'athist authority in Kurdish areas in decades. The regime responded with lethal force, suppressing the uprising violently.¹ This event signaled rising tensions and perhaps a growing impatience with the limits of "dissimulation," occurring despite Bashar al-Assad's initial gestures towards reform after succeeding his father in 2000, which had yielded little substantive change for Kurds.¹ Afrin, while less affected by the direct demographic engineering of the Arab Belt, lived under the same repressive cultural and political system. Its relative demographic stability might have reinforced internal community structures, making "dissimulation" a viable, if limiting, long-term strategy, perhaps fostering a local political culture distinct from the more directly targeted and consequently perhaps more overtly politicized Jazira region.

C. Syrian Kurdish Political Movements: Afrin's Position (Pre-2010)

The Syrian Kurdish political landscape prior to 2010 was characterized by a multiplicity of parties, often operating underground due to Ba'athist suppression, and marked by frequent fragmentation and internal divisions.³⁷ Following the establishment of the initial KDPS in 1957, numerous splits and realignments occurred over the decades, giving rise to parties such as the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party (led for decades by Abdulhamid Hajji Darwish), the Yekîti party (Kurdish Unity Party), and the Azadi Party (Kurdistan Freedom Party), among others.³⁷ These parties, despite their illegality, attempted to represent Kurdish aspirations and maintain political networks.³⁷

Syrian Kurdish politics was significantly influenced by external Kurdish movements and regional geopolitics. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Iraq, led historically by Mustafa Barzani and later his son Masoud Barzani, exerted considerable influence, particularly in the early years, with the Syrian KDPS initially founded as an affiliate.³⁷ This KDP influence persisted through various successor parties that often looked to Erbil for guidance and support.³⁷

A competing and increasingly powerful external influence emerged from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) of Turkey, led by Abdullah Öcalan.³⁴ From the late 1970s/early 1980s until Turkish pressure forced his expulsion in 1998, Syria under Hafez al-Assad provided crucial sanctuary, training bases, and logistical support to the PKK in its armed struggle against the Turkish state.³⁷ This policy served Damascus's strategic interests vis-à-vis Ankara but created a paradoxical situation where the Syrian regime suppressed its own Kurdish population's political activities while simultaneously hosting and supporting a large Kurdish militant organization from Turkey.³⁷ The PKK's long presence profoundly impacted Syrian Kurdish society, building deep ideological and organizational roots. This culminated in the formal

establishment of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria in 2003, a party ideologically aligned with Öcalan and the PKK, although its rise to dominance occurred after 2011.⁶ Afrin was embedded within this complex political environment. Local figures participated in early party formations²⁵, and the region was undoubtedly affected by the PKK's presence and the Syrian state's policies towards it – for example, Öcalan's capture in 1999, facilitated by Turkey after his expulsion from Syria, triggered clashes between Kurdish protestors and police in Afrin.⁷ However, the primary centers of Syrian Kurdish political organization and activity before 2010 often appeared to be concentrated in the Jazira region (cities like Qamishli and Hasakah) and in the diaspora communities within Damascus and Aleppo.⁵ Afrin's geographical separation from Jazira and its unique socio-economic profile might have resulted in its political dynamics being somewhat more localized or less central to the main inter-party rivalries and transnational intrigues compared to Jazira, which sat at the critical nexus of the Syrian, Turkish, and Iraqi borders. While the PKK/PYD's influence was certainly present and growing in Afrin before 2010, it had not yet translated into the overt political and military control that would emerge later.

D. Comparative Perspective: Afrin vs. Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran (State Policies & Political Rights Pre-2010)

The political experience of Afrin Kurds under the Syrian Ba'athist regime before 2010 presents distinct characteristics when compared to the situations faced by Kurds in neighboring Turkey, Iraq, and Iran during the same period.

- **Turkey:** Kurds in Turkey faced decades of systematic state policies aimed at forced assimilation and the denial of their ethnic identity.³⁰ This included outright bans on the Kurdish language in public life, education, and media, the prohibition of Kurdish names and cultural expressions, and the official categorization of Kurds as "Mountain Turks".³⁰ From 1984 onwards, the state engaged in a large-scale, violent conflict with the PKK, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths (mostly civilians), widespread human rights abuses, the destruction of thousands of Kurdish villages, and massive internal displacement.²⁹ While some limited cultural concessions and reforms began to appear in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the fundamental state approach remained security-focused and assimilationist.³⁸
- **Iraq:** The experience of Iraqi Kurds was marked by extreme volatility, encompassing periods of intense state violence and periods of significant autonomy. Under Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime, they suffered brutal repression, including forced Arabization campaigns (particularly in Kirkuk) and the genocidal Anfal campaign in 1988.³⁸ However, following the 1991 Gulf War and the establishment of a no-fly zone, Iraqi Kurdistan achieved de facto autonomy, which was later formalized after the 2003 US-led invasion.³⁸ This led to the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), with Kurdish recognized as an official language and Kurdish parties (primarily the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK) controlling regional governance, albeit with periods of internal conflict, notably the civil war between the KDP and PUK in the mid-1990s.²⁹
- **Iran:** Iranian Kurds experienced the brief hope of the Mahabad Republic in 1946, quickly

crushed by the central state.¹³ Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Kurdish demands for autonomy were met with military suppression.¹³ While perhaps not subjected to the same overt linguistic assimilation policies as in Turkey, Iranian Kurds faced political repression, economic marginalization, and periodic armed conflict with state forces and groups like the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), a PKK affiliate that emerged in the 2000s.¹³

- **Syria (Afrin Context):** In comparison, Syrian Kurds, including those in Afrin, endured systematic discrimination, denial of ethnic identity, cultural suppression, and political marginalization within a highly centralized authoritarian state.¹ The 1962 citizenship stripping in Jazira represented a unique form of state persecution.¹ However, prior to 2010, they generally avoided the scale of direct, large-scale military conflict witnessed in Turkey and Iraq, or the state-sponsored genocide suffered by Iraqi Kurds.¹⁶ The prevalent strategy of "dissimulation" ¹⁶ differed markedly from the sustained armed insurgency in Turkey or the established (though contested) autonomy in Iraqi Kurdistan. Afrin's political reality was shaped by the specific control mechanisms of the Syrian Ba'athist regime, including its strategic manipulation of the PKK presence, creating a distinct environment compared to other parts of Kurdistan.

V. Economic Life in Afrin (Pre-2010)

A. The Primacy of Agriculture: Olives and Livelihoods

The economy of the Afrin region prior to 2010 was overwhelmingly agrarian, shaped by its favorable Mediterranean climate, fertile soils, and relatively abundant rainfall compared to other parts of northern Syria.⁴⁷ The defining feature of Afrin's agricultural landscape was the extensive cultivation of olive trees.⁸ Olive groves dominated the region, and the production of olives and olive oil formed the traditional backbone of the local economy, a practice likely dating back centuries.⁸ This specialization was so central that Afrin served as a primary source of olive oil for the production of the famous Aleppo soap, a traditional hard soap made with olive and laurel oils.⁸

While olives were paramount, the region also produced other fruits ⁴⁷, and in the period leading up to 2010, there was an increasing focus on wheat production as well.⁸ Nonetheless, the identity and livelihood of Afrin were inextricably linked to its olive trees. This agricultural focus contrasts with the economic bases of other Kurdish regions. For example, the Jazira region in Syria, while also agricultural, was more focused on large-scale grain (particularly wheat) and cotton production, and importantly, holds most of Syria's oil reserves.¹ Historically, pastoral nomadism revolving around sheep and goat herding was a significant economic activity in many parts of Kurdistan, including areas of Turkey and Iraq ³, likely playing a lesser role in the settled, orchard-based economy of Afrin.

B. Economic Ties and Relative Isolation

A crucial aspect of Afrin's pre-2010 economy was its strong integration with the nearby city of Aleppo, Syria's largest city and its northern industrial and commercial powerhouse.¹¹ Afrin functioned as a vital part of Aleppo's agricultural hinterland, supplying olives, olive oil, and other produce to the urban market.¹¹ This connection was reinforced by social and religious

networks, such as the Sufi *zawiyas* that facilitated trade links between rural Afrini producers and merchants based in Aleppo.¹⁹

Paradoxically, while deeply connected to Aleppo to its southeast, Afrin was relatively isolated in other directions. The drawing of the Turkish border in 1923 and the subsequent annexation of Hatay in 1939 left the district almost entirely surrounded by Turkey to the north, west, and south.⁷ Furthermore, Afrin is geographically non-contiguous with the other main Syrian Kurdish population centers of Kobani and Jazira, located further east.⁴ This geographical reality meant that economic interactions likely flowed predominantly southwards towards Aleppo or, where politically and economically feasible, across the border into Turkey. Direct economic exchange with the distant Kurdish regions of eastern Syria, Iraq, or Iran would have been limited by geography and political boundaries.

C. Comparative Perspective with Other Kurdish Regional Economies (Pre-2010)

The economic profile of Afrin stands in contrast to other major Kurdish regions before 2010:

- **Jazira (Syria):** Focused on grain and cotton, possessing Syria's main oil fields.⁴ Its economy was directly impacted by state policies like the "Arab Belt," designed to control agricultural resources and demographics.¹ Its economic orientation was likely towards Damascus or potentially across the Iraqi border, differing from Afrin's Aleppo focus.
- **Iraqi Kurdistan:** Increasingly dominated by oil and gas resources, especially after achieving autonomy post-1991 and consolidating it post-2003.³⁸ The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) managed oil revenues, fostering a distinct economic trajectory heavily reliant on hydrocarbons and international relations, despite ongoing disputes with the central government in Baghdad. Agriculture existed but was overshadowed by the oil sector.
- **Turkish Kurdistan (Southeast Turkey):** Characterized by historical underdevelopment relative to western Turkey, and significantly impacted by decades of conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK.³⁶ The conflict led to forced displacement, destruction of villages, and disruption of traditional livelihoods like agriculture and pastoralism.³⁶ While the Turkish state implemented some development projects (like the Southeastern Anatolia Project, GAP), these were often intertwined with security objectives and did not overcome the region's economic disadvantages.
- **Iranian Kurdistan:** Also faced relative economic neglect and underdevelopment compared to central parts of Iran. Agriculture and cross-border trade, including significant levels of smuggling due to economic hardship and border porosity, were important economic activities. The region was subject to central state control with limited local economic autonomy.

In synthesis, Afrin's pre-2010 economy was uniquely defined by its specialization in olive cultivation and its deep integration into the economic sphere of Aleppo. This differed significantly from Jazira's reliance on grain, cotton, and oil; Iraqi Kurdistan's burgeoning oil-based economy under the KRG; and the conflict-affected, underdeveloped economies of Kurdish regions in Turkey and Iran. Afrin's economic fortunes were closely tied to the Syrian national economy via Aleppo, rather than being primarily oriented towards other Kurdish regions or possessing independent resource wealth like Iraqi Kurdistan.

VI. Afrin and the Wider Kurdish World (Pre-2010)

A. Migration, Demographics, and Geographic Links

Afrin (Kurd Dagh) constitutes one of the three main, yet geographically disconnected, Kurdish-majority regions within Syria, alongside Kobani (Ayn al-Arab) and Jazira (Hasakah Governorate).⁴ A fundamental point of distinction lies in their 20th-century demographic histories. As previously noted, the Jazira region witnessed substantial waves of Kurdish migration from Turkey, particularly during the 1920s following unsuccessful Kurdish uprisings against the nascent Turkish Republic.⁹ These migrations, often encouraged by the French Mandate authorities, dramatically increased Jazira's Kurdish population and shaped its social fabric.⁹

In contrast, while Afrin undoubtedly received some migrants over time, the available sources do not indicate comparable large-scale, concentrated influxes during the same period. Its population growth appears to have been more gradual or organic, allowing it to maintain a high degree of Kurdish demographic homogeneity and leading to its description as the "least Arabized" Kurdish region in Syria before 2011.¹⁵ It is important to note that many sources state that the *majority* of Syrian Kurds overall trace their origins to Turkey⁹; however, the *timing, scale, and impact* of these migrations varied significantly between regions, with Jazira being the primary destination for the major waves of the 1920s. This difference in foundational demographic experience—long-term, continuous settlement in Afrin versus Jazira's character being significantly shaped by recent mass migration—represents a crucial differentiator, likely influencing local identity, social cohesion, and political attitudes.

Geographically, Afrin's position directly contiguous with the Turkish border to its north and west facilitated close ties—kinship, cultural, and potentially economic—with the Kurdish populations immediately across that border in Turkey.⁴ However, its physical separation from Kobani and Jazira to the east, and its considerable distance from the Kurdish regions of Iraq and Iran, naturally limited direct interaction with those communities. Afrin's primary axis of cross-border connection was northward into Turkey, while its main internal Syrian connection was southward to Aleppo.

B. Political Interactions: Solidarity, Tension, and Transnational Influences (PKK, KDP)

The concept of *Kurdayetî*—a sense of shared Kurdish identity and solidarity transcending state borders—has long been an important ideal within the Kurdish national consciousness.⁵⁰ However, the history of Kurdish political movements is also replete with examples of fragmentation, internal rivalries, and instances where cross-border interactions were complicated by the involvement of regional states (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria) pursuing their own interests, sometimes manipulating Kurdish groups against each other or against a neighboring state.⁵⁰

Afrin, like all Syrian Kurdish regions, existed within this complex web of transnational Kurdish politics before 2010, heavily influenced by the two dominant poles of Kurdish political power in the late 20th and early 21st centuries: the PKK and the Iraqi KDP.

The PKK's influence in Syria was profound, largely due to the strategic decision by Hafez al-Assad's regime to provide sanctuary and support for the organization from the late 1970s/early 1980s until 1998.³⁷ This allowed the PKK to use Syrian territory (and

Syrian-controlled areas of Lebanon) as a base for its operations against Turkey. While this policy served Syria's geopolitical aims against its northern neighbor, it created a deeply contradictory situation for Syrian Kurds, whose own political aspirations were simultaneously suppressed by the same regime.³⁷ The PKK built extensive networks and ideological influence within the Syrian Kurdish population during this period. The establishment of the PYD in 2003 formalized this connection.³⁸ Afrin was certainly impacted by this dynamic, experiencing the ambient influence of PKK ideology and organization, and reacting to events like Öcalan's capture.⁷ However, it may have been less central as an operational base compared to border areas closer to PKK training camps in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley or later, the Qandil Mountains in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The influence of the Iraqi KDP, while perhaps less overt than the PKK's in the later decades, remained significant. The original Syrian KDPS was founded with strong ties to Mustafa Barzani's KDP³⁷, and many subsequent Syrian Kurdish parties maintained political and ideological links with the KDP in Erbil. These parties often represented a more traditional nationalist or conservative orientation compared to the PKK's revolutionary socialist roots.³⁷ The KDP and PKK (and its affiliates) have had a complex relationship, sometimes cooperating but often competing for influence, and these dynamics played out within the Syrian Kurdish political field as well.

Compared to other regions, Afrin's position within these transnational dynamics was distinct. It was not the primary battleground of the PKK-Turkey conflict (unlike Turkish Kurdistan)⁴⁴, nor was it part of the KDP-PUK governed autonomous region with its own internal power struggles (unlike Iraqi Kurdistan).³⁸ Its political environment was uniquely shaped by the Syrian state's specific strategy of instrumentalizing the PKK while suppressing local Kurdish politics, creating a unique context for the interplay between PKK/PYD influence and the more traditional KDP-aligned parties.

VII. Synthesis: Key Dimensions of Afrin's Distinctiveness Before 2010

A. Summary of Differentiating Factors

The analysis of historical, socio-cultural, political, and economic factors reveals several key dimensions that characterized the distinctiveness of the Afrin region's Kurdish population compared to other major Kurdish communities in Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran prior to 2010:

- **Historical Demographics:** Afrin exhibited a demographic profile rooted in a long-standing, relatively continuous Kurdish presence, contrasting sharply with the Jazira region, whose Kurdish majority was significantly shaped by large-scale migrations from Turkey in the 20th century. This resulted in Afrin maintaining greater demographic homogeneity and experiencing less direct state-sponsored Arabization compared to Jazira before 2010.
- **Socio-Cultural Fabric:** Afrin possessed a unique religious landscape marked by the significant historical presence and integration of Yezidi and Alevi minorities alongside the Sunni Muslim majority, fostering a climate of relative religious diversity and tolerance. Furthermore, strong Sufi networks provided a distinct social and economic linkage connecting rural Afrin directly with the urban center of Aleppo.
- **Political Experience:** While subject to the general cultural and political suppression of

the Syrian Ba'athist regime, Afrin was less impacted by the most aggressive demographic engineering policies like the "Arab Belt" that targeted Jazira. The political landscape was influenced by both PKK/PYD and KDP-aligned factions, but navigated within the specific context of the Syrian state's manipulation of the PKK issue and a general adherence to a strategy of "dissimulation." Afrin largely avoided the intense internal armed conflict characteristic of Turkish or Iraqi Kurdistan during this period.

- **Economic Specialization:** Afrin's economy was heavily characterized by its specialization in olive cultivation and its strong integration with the nearby Syrian commercial hub of Aleppo. This contrasts with Jazira's grain/oil economy, Iraqi Kurdistan's oil-dominated economy, and the conflict-affected and underdeveloped economies of Kurdish regions in Turkey and Iran.
- **Geographic and Relational Orientation:** Afrin's geographical position, nearly encircled by Turkey and non-contiguous with other Syrian Kurdish regions, fostered specific cross-border ties primarily northward into Turkey and strong economic and social ties southward to Aleppo, distinguishing its orientation from the eastward connections of Jazira.

B. Comparative Table: Kurdish Regions Before 2010

The following table provides a comparative overview of key differentiating factors across major Kurdish regions in the period before 2010:

Feature (Pre-2010)	Afrin (Syria)	Jazira (Syria)	Kobani (Syria)	Turkish Kurdistan	Iraqi Kurdistan	Iranian Kurdistan
Primary 20th C. Migration	Low impact from Turkey	High influx from Turkey (1920s)	Moderate/Low influx from Turkey	High Internal Displacement (Conflict)	Internal Displacement (Conflict/Anfal)	Moderate Internal/Cross-border
Dominant Economic Base	Olives / Strong Aleppo Link	Grain / Cotton / Oil / State Neglect	Agriculture / Border Trade (?)	Conflict / Underdevelopment	Oil (post-91/03) / KRG Autonomy	Agriculture / Cross-border Trade
Key State Policies Faced	Cultural Suppression / Limited Arabization	Arab Belt / Citizenship Denial (1962)	Cultural Suppression	Assimilation / Language Bans / War	Genocide (Anfal) / Autonomy (KRG)	Post-Revolution Suppression
Prominent Religious Minorities	Yezidi / Alevi (Significant)	Christian / Some Yezidi	Primarily Sunni (?)	Alevi (Significant in areas)	Yezidi (Sinjar) / Christian / Kaka'i	Yarsan (Ahl-e Haqq) / Sunni/Shia
Primary External Pol. Influence	PKK (via Syria) / KDP Links	PKK (via Syria) / KDP Links	PKK (via Syria) / KDP Links	PKK (Direct Conflict)	KDP / PUK Dominance	KDPI / Komala / PKK (PJAK)

Level of Armed Conflict (Internal)	Low / Sporadic (e.g., 2004)	Low / Sporadic (e.g., 2004)	Low / Sporadic	High / Sustained (PKK vs State)	High (Anfal, Civil War) / Autonomy	Moderate / Sporadic
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Note: This table synthesizes information from the sources; details for Kobani are less represented in the provided material compared to other regions.

VIII. Conclusion

Prior to the transformative events that began in 2011, the Kurdish population of the Afrin region (Kurd Dagħ) in northwestern Syria possessed a distinct profile within the broader Kurdish world. Shaped by its unique geography bordering Turkey yet separated from other Syrian Kurdish enclaves, its history was characterized by a relatively stable demographic base with deep local roots, less affected by the large-scale 20th-century migrations that reshaped Jazira. This demographic continuity likely contributed to a cohesive local identity.

Afrin's socio-cultural fabric was distinguished by the significant presence and integration of Yezidi and Alevi communities, creating a religiously heterogeneous environment noted for its tolerance. Furthermore, specific Sufi networks forged strong social and economic bonds between rural Afrin and the major urban center of Aleppo, a unique linkage not replicated to the same extent in other Syrian Kurdish regions. Economically, Afrin specialized in olive cultivation, tightly integrating its agricultural output with the Aleppo market, setting it apart from the grain, oil, or conflict-impacted economies elsewhere in Kurdistan.

Politically, Afrin's Kurds experienced the repressive measures of the Syrian Ba'athist state, including cultural suppression and denial of identity, common to all Syrian Kurds. However, they were less directly impacted by the state's most severe demographic engineering policies, such as the Arab Belt in Jazira. While influenced by transnational Kurdish movements like the PKK and KDP, Afrin's political dynamics were filtered through the specific lens of the Syrian regime's policies and its geographical position. The region largely adhered to a strategy of "dissimulation" and avoided the levels of sustained armed conflict seen in neighboring Turkey or Iraq during this period.

In essence, Afrin before 2010 represented a unique variation within the Kurdish experience – defined by its specific demographic history, religious diversity, economic specialization linked to Aleppo, and a particular mode of navigating Syrian state repression. Recognizing these distinct pre-2010 characteristics is fundamental to understanding the region's subsequent trajectory and its place within the complex tapestry of Kurdish history and politics.

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