

# Early Accounts of the Kurd Dagh (Afrin) Region Before the Syrian Republic

## I. Introduction: The Kurd Dagh in Historical Perspective

### Situating the Region

Nestled at the crossroads of major historical powers and civilizations lies the mountainous region historically known as Kurd Dagh, the "Mountain of the Kurds".<sup>1</sup> Located northwest of the ancient city of Aleppo and straddling the border later established between Turkey and Syria, this area, encompassing the modern Afrin valley, constitutes a distinct geographical and historical entity.<sup>2</sup> Its landscape is defined by the Kurd Dagh mountain range, which runs parallel to the Amanus mountains, featuring rolling hills and fertile valleys carved by watercourses like the Afrin River.<sup>1</sup> For centuries, this region has been recognized, both by its inhabitants and external observers, as predominantly Kurdish territory, a characteristic deeply embedded in its identity long before the political reconfigurations of the 20th century.<sup>1</sup> The consistent historical application of the name "Kurd Dagh" or its equivalents (such as the Ottoman *Kürt Dağı* or the Arabic *Jabal al-Akrad* when referring to the Kaza northwest of Aleppo) across various sources—including local tradition<sup>1</sup>, Ottoman administrative documents<sup>5</sup>, French Mandate records<sup>2</sup>, and later scholarship<sup>2</sup>—underscores this deeply rooted ethno-geographic identity. This historical naming convention, signifying the Kurds as the defining demographic feature in the perception of diverse actors over time, provides a crucial baseline against which the impacts of 20th-century state policies, border creations, and demographic shifts can be understood.<sup>1</sup>

Positioned between the Anatolian and Iranian plateaus, the Syrian and Iraqi deserts, and the Caucasus Mountains, the broader Kurdish territories, including Kurd Dagh, have served as a significant historical contact zone, isolated primarily by their challenging mountainous terrain.<sup>3</sup> This peripheral yet strategic location fostered a complex dynamic between imperial ambitions and local realities. The region's history appears not merely as a passive recipient of external forces but as an arena where the actions and choices of its inhabitants—their negotiations with imperial authorities, their maintenance of tribal structures, and sometimes their resistance—played a crucial role in shaping local conditions and responding to larger geopolitical currents.<sup>2</sup>

### Importance of Early Accounts

Understanding the Kurd Dagh region before the profound political, social, and demographic transformations ushered in by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of

the Syrian Republic necessitates a careful examination of earlier accounts. Narratives left by travelers, explorers, Ottoman officials, and scholars who visited or administered the area provide invaluable, if often fragmented, windows into its past.<sup>3</sup> These sources, ranging from administrative records and statistical surveys to personal travelogues and ethnographic studies, offer glimpses into the region's geography, the lives of its inhabitants, its economic basis, and its place within the Ottoman system. However, reconstructing this history presents challenges. Sources are disparate, sometimes contradictory, and often filtered through the specific biases, interests, and cultural perspectives of their authors, whether European observers influenced by Orientalist paradigms or Ottoman officials concerned with administration and control.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, access to key primary texts, such as the detailed travelogues of Eduard Sachau or Vital Cuinet's comprehensive surveys for this specific region, or Mark Sykes's tribal ethnography, can be limited, requiring reliance on secondary descriptions and careful source critique.<sup>13</sup>

## **Scope and Approach**

This report focuses on the Kurd Dagħ/Afrin region during the era preceding the formation of the Syrian Republic, primarily concentrating on the Ottoman period (roughly 1516-1918), while incorporating relevant earlier historical context. It aims to synthesize information gleaned from the available research materials, including secondary analyses and references to primary accounts, to construct a portrait of the region's geography, administration, inhabitants, and economy during this time. The analysis prioritizes identifying key individuals who observed or interacted with the region and critically evaluating their descriptions. Meticulous attention is paid to citation, acknowledging the provenance and potential limitations of each piece of information. Where direct access to primary sources is unavailable, findings are presented based on reliable secondary accounts, with appropriate caveats regarding interpretation.

## **II. The Kurd Dagħ within the Ottoman Administrative Landscape**

### **Geographical Features**

The Kurd Dagħ presents a distinct geography defined by its eponymous mountain range, a series of hills and peaks running parallel to the Amanus Mountains, reaching altitudes between 700 and 1260 meters.<sup>2</sup> This rugged terrain is interspersed with fertile valleys, historically renowned for agriculture, particularly olive cultivation.<sup>1</sup> The Afrin River is a central feature, flowing through the region and shaping its landscape.<sup>4</sup> Cartographic representations, such as the detailed maps produced by Heinrich Kiepert based on journeys like those of C. Haussknecht in the 1860s, provide valuable visualizations of the region's topography, settlement patterns, and routes connecting it to surrounding areas like Aleppo and Kilis.<sup>2</sup> Its strategic location, situated on historic trade routes connecting Anatolia with Syria and Mesopotamia, contributed indirectly to the commercial significance of nearby Aleppo, which served as a major hub for goods moving between the East and the Mediterranean, especially

during the 16th and 17th centuries.<sup>18</sup>

## Administrative Evolution

Throughout much of the Ottoman era, the Kurd Dagħ region was integrated into the larger administrative framework of the Empire, primarily falling under the jurisdiction of Aleppo. Initially part of the Eyalet of Aleppo (established formally by 1534)<sup>18</sup>, and later within the reformed Vilayet of Aleppo (after 1864), the villages and communities of the Kurd Dagħ were specifically grouped under the administrative umbrella of Kilis.<sup>4</sup> During Ottoman times, the town of Kilis, located north of the main Kurd Dagħ massif, served as the primary administrative, political, and economic center for the mountain districts.<sup>2</sup> The Kurd Dagħ area corresponded largely to administrative sub-units (*nahiyes*) attached to the *Kaza* (district) or *Sanjak* (sub-province) of Kilis.<sup>2</sup>

Detailed 16th-century Ottoman records (*tahrir defterleri*) reveal that the area, then often referred to as the *Com Nahiye*, was part of the "Liva-i Azez ve Ekrâd" (District of Azez and the Kurds) established around 1536, with *Cindires* (*Jindires*) identified as its central village.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, from approximately 1527 until the early 17th century, the entire Kilis Sancak, including the Kurd Dagħ, was administered under the *yurtluk-ocaklık* system. This granted hereditary administrative and revenue rights to a powerful local family, the *Canpolatoğulları* (*Janbulad*), suggesting a significant degree of localized Kurdish control within the broader Ottoman structure during this period.<sup>4</sup> This long-standing administrative subordination to Kilis intrinsically linked the Kurd Dagħ's economy and orientation towards the inland centers of Kilis and Aleppo.<sup>18</sup> Surplus agricultural goods, such as olives and olive oil, as well as pastoral products, would logically flow towards these administrative and market hubs. This deep historical connection highlights the profound disruption caused by the imposition of the Syrian-Turkish border in the 20th century, which artificially severed the Kurd Dagħ south of the border from its traditional center in Kilis, forcing a difficult economic reorientation.<sup>2</sup> While the formal separation of the Syrian part of Kurd Dagħ from Kilis and the creation of a new, distinct *Kaza* named Kurd Dagħ occurred later, likely solidifying during the French Mandate period after World War I<sup>2</sup>, the historical administrative unity under Kilis is crucial for understanding the pre-Republic context. The region was also known by its Arabic translation, *Jabal al-Akrâd*, and is referred to in Kurdish as *Ciyayê Kurmênc*.<sup>2</sup> It is important, however, to distinguish this Kurd Dagħ/Afrin region northwest of Aleppo from another area also known as *Jabal al-Akrad* ("Mountain of the Kurds") located further south within the Syrian Coastal Mountain Range in modern Latakia Governorate.<sup>20</sup> While the shared nomenclature points to a wider historical pattern of Kurdish settlement in Syria's northern and coastal mountain ranges that was recognized geographically or administratively, the specific historical trajectories, settlement patterns, and social dynamics of these two distinct regions likely differed. Observations made by travelers like Martin Hartmann concerning 16th-century Kurdish settlement and subsequent Arabization in the Latakia *Jabal al-Akrad*<sup>20</sup> cannot be automatically applied to the Kurd Dagħ near Afrin, though they speak to broader regional processes of identity and assimilation.

### III. Glimpses Before the 19th Century

#### Classical and Medieval Mentions

References to the inhabitants of the Kurd Dagh region in classical and early medieval sources are sparse and often ambiguous. Ancient Greek and Roman writers like Xenophon, Strabo, and Pliny mentioned groups residing in the broader mountainous areas between Anatolia and Mesopotamia who might have possessed elements of early Kurdish culture, using terms from which the modern identifier "Kurd" may derive.<sup>3</sup> However, these accounts lack specific detail about the Kurd Dagh area itself. Later travelers, such as the 13th-century Venetian Marco Polo, passed through the wider region and mentioned Kurds, but often in stereotypical terms, such as characterizing them as bandits, offering little reliable historical or ethnographic information.<sup>3</sup> Some modern scholars have proposed earlier settlement: René Dussaud suggested Kurdish presence in the Kurd Dagh and the nearby Antioch plain since antiquity, while Stefan Sperl argued for possible settlement during the Seleucid era (post-4th century BCE), given the region's strategic position on the path to Antioch and the known use of Kurdish mercenaries and archers in ancient times.<sup>4</sup> These suggestions remain speculative due to the lack of definitive contemporary evidence specifically pinpointing Kurdish groups in the Kurd Dagh during these early periods.

#### Early Ottoman Period

Following the Ottoman conquest of Syria in 1516, the Kurd Dagh became part of the Ottoman Empire. The broader region of Kurdistan had already seen division following the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514 between the Ottomans and the Persian Safavids.<sup>10</sup> In the aftermath, the Ottomans established arrangements with many Kurdish chieftains, granting them a wide measure of autonomy in exchange for loyalty and border defense.<sup>9</sup> While this likely benefited the Kurdish notables (aghass and sheikhs), its impact on the lives of ordinary Kurdish peasants and nomads may have been less significant initially, although increased security probably resulted from the cessation of major military campaigns.<sup>9</sup> This period saw the emergence of a narrative, later reflected in Kurdish epics like *Mem û Zîn*, portraying Kurds as caught between warring empires.<sup>9</sup>

More concrete information emerges from 16th-century Ottoman administrative surveys (*tahrir defterleri*). Records for the Kilis Sancak clearly document the Kurd Dagh area, primarily under the name Com Nahiye.<sup>5</sup> This nahiye was explicitly included in the "Liva-i Azez ve Ekrâd" (District of Azez and the Kurds), confirming the official recognition of the region's Kurdish character from the early Ottoman period onwards.<sup>5</sup> These records identify Cindires (Jindires) as the nahiye's center and detail a population that included significant nomadic Kurdish elements, specifically mentioning the "Ekrad-ı İzzeddinli" (Kurds of İzzeddinli).<sup>5</sup> The economic structure described emphasizes animal husbandry, reflected in taxes like *resm-i ağnam* (sheep/goat tax) and *resm-i otlak ve yatak* (pasturage tax), alongside some settled agriculture, often taxed via sharecropping (*kısm*).<sup>5</sup> This early focus on pastoralism suggests a

continuity of traditional livelihoods adapted to the mountainous terrain, which likely persisted alongside the expansion of agriculture, particularly olive cultivation, in later centuries.<sup>1</sup> The administrative structure under the *yurtluk-ocaklık* system, granting hereditary rights to the local Kurdish Canpolatoğulları family for nearly a century, further solidified the region's distinct identity within the Aleppo Eyalet.<sup>4</sup> The brief period when the Janbulad (Canpolat) dynasty held the governorship of Aleppo itself (1591–1607) may also have had implications for the Kurd Dagh.<sup>4</sup>

## 18th Century Insights

The 18th century remains a less documented period for the region compared to the 16th or the late 19th centuries. However, research utilizing Ottoman archives, such as the work by Stefan Winter focusing on the Kurds of Syria during this time, offers potential avenues for understanding the administrative and tribal dynamics within the Kurd Dagh/Kilis area.<sup>2</sup> While specific findings directly pertaining to Kurd Dagh from these 18th-century archives are not detailed in the provided snippets<sup>49</sup>, such archival work is crucial for bridging the gap between the early Ottoman records and the later European accounts.<sup>2</sup>

## IV. European Observers and Accounts (Late 19th - Early 20th Century)

### Introduction to the Era

The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed a marked increase in European interest and presence in the Ottoman Empire, including its Syrian provinces. This era was driven by a confluence of factors: intensifying geopolitical rivalries between European powers (Britain, France, Germany, Russia), the search for new economic opportunities and markets, a burgeoning interest in biblical and classical archaeology, and the development of ethnography as a discipline.<sup>18</sup> Figures like Max von Oppenheim, heir to a banking fortune turned archaeologist<sup>23</sup>, and Gertrude Bell, traveler, archaeologist, and later political agent<sup>25</sup>, exemplify the diverse motivations drawing Europeans to the region. Their accounts, along with those of diplomats, scholars, and officials, provide crucial, albeit often filtered and biased, perspectives on the Kurd Dagh and its surrounding areas during the final decades of Ottoman rule. Critically evaluating these sources requires understanding the observers' backgrounds, agendas, and the prevailing intellectual currents, such as Orientalism, which often shaped their perceptions and representations of local societies.<sup>12</sup> Comparing these external viewpoints with available Ottoman administrative sources offers a path toward a more balanced understanding, juxtaposing European observations with the internal concerns of the Ottoman state regarding control, security, and modernization.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 1: Key Pre-Republic Observers of the Kurd Dagh/Afrin Region (Late 19th - Early 20th C.)**

Observer	Approx. Dates / Publication	Key Work(s) Relevant to Region	Primary Focus / Contribution	Notes / Limitations
Martin Hartmann	c. 1891 (Pub.)	"Das Liwa el-Ladkije und die Nahije Urdu" (ZDPV, 1891) <sup>20</sup>	German traveler/scholar. Provided ethnographic notes on Syrian coastal regions, including Jabal al-Akrad (Latakia).	Focused on Latakia, not Kurd Dagħ/Afrin directly, but useful for comparative context on "Jabal al-Akrad" term and Arabization. <sup>20</sup>
Eduard Sachau	1879-1880 (Travels) / 1883 (Pub.)	<i>Reise in Syrien und Mesopotamien</i> <sup>27</sup>	German Orientalist. Travelogue focused on topography, geography, potentially inscriptions. Traveled in Northern Syria/Mesopotamia.	Primary text inaccessible. <sup>13</sup> Analysis based on secondary descriptions. <sup>12</sup> Subject to Orientalist perspectives. <sup>12</sup>
Vital Cuinet	c. 1890s (Pub.)	<i>Syrie, Liban et Palestine</i> (1896) <sup>17</sup> ; <i>La Turquie d'Asie</i> (1891-94) <sup>17</sup>	French geographer/statistician. Compiled administrative, statistical, and descriptive data on Ottoman provinces, including Aleppo Vilayet and Kilis Kaza. Included maps. <sup>30</sup>	Primary text inaccessible. <sup>15</sup> Data for Syria considered unreliable/invented by some scholars. <sup>11</sup> Statistics must be treated with extreme caution.
Max von Oppenheim	1899 onwards (Travels/Excavations)	Archaeological reports on Tell Halaf; travel accounts.	German diplomat/amateur archaeologist. Extensive work in Northern Syria/Mesopotamia. Traveled from	Focus was primarily archaeological (Tell Halaf). <sup>32</sup> Route details near Kurd Dagħ unclear. <sup>24</sup> Provides

			Aleppo. <sup>24</sup> Ethnographic interest in Bedouins. <sup>24</sup>	context on European presence and activities.
Gertrude Bell	c. 1905-1907 (Travels) / 1907 (Pub.)	<i>Syria: The Desert and the Sown</i> <sup>26</sup> ; Letters, Diaries, Photos <sup>25</sup>	British traveler, archaeologist, writer, later political officer. Traveled extensively in Greater Syria, including Aleppo, Antioch, Alexandretta. <sup>26</sup>	Archive requires specific search. <sup>25</sup> Potential for descriptions of landscape, people, olives, villages near Kurd Dagh. <sup>1</sup> Perspective influenced by background and later political role. <sup>33</sup>
Mark Sykes	c. 1908 (Pub.)	<i>The Kurdish Tribes of the Ottoman Empire</i> <sup>14</sup>	British diplomat/traveler. Conducted anthropological/et hnographic study of Kurdish tribes across the Ottoman Empire. <sup>22</sup>	Primary text inaccessible. <sup>14</sup> Potential data on Kurd Dagh/Kilis tribes. <sup>14</sup> Work heavily influenced by political agenda and later role in Sykes-Picot agreement; objectivity questionable. <sup>22</sup> Notes on Alevi Kurds. <sup>39</sup>
Ottoman Administration (e.g., Cevdet Paşa)	mid-1860s (Fırka-i İslahiye)	Reports/Records related to Fırka-i İslahiye; Ottoman Archives <sup>5</sup>	Ottoman officials/records. Focused on state control, sedentarization of tribes, security, administration.	Provides internal state perspective, contrasting with European views. Focus on order and control. <sup>7</sup> Access often requires archival research.

## Individual Accounts and Perspectives

- **Martin Hartmann (c. 1891):** Hartmann's work, particularly his article in the *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* (ZDPV), is valuable for understanding the contemporary usage of terms like "Jabal al-Akrad" and the complexities of identity in Kurdish-inhabited regions of Syria.<sup>20</sup> However, his specific ethnographic observations regarding 16th-century settlement origins and the loss of the Kurdish language among Sunni Muslims claiming Kurdish descent pertain explicitly to the Jabal al-Akrad region within the Liwa (district) of Latakia, distinct from the Kurd Dagħ northwest of Aleppo.<sup>20</sup> His work underscores that while the name "Mountain of the Kurds" was applied to different areas, their specific histories and linguistic situations could vary.
- **Eduard Sachau (1879-1880):** The German Orientalist Eduard Sachau undertook significant journeys through Syria and Mesopotamia in 1879-1880, documented in his *Reise in Syrien und Mesopotamien* (1883).<sup>27</sup> Based on secondary descriptions, his travelogue focused primarily on topography, geography, and potentially epigraphy.<sup>27</sup> While he traveled in the broader region, specific detailed descriptions of the Kurd Dagħ/Afrin area within this work cannot be confirmed without access to the text.<sup>13</sup> His work, however, is situated within the context of 19th-century German Orientalism, representing a process of knowledge production about the "Orient" from a European academic perspective.<sup>12</sup>
- **Vital Cuinet (c. 1890s):** Vital Cuinet's ambitious project, *La Turquie d'Asie* and *Syrie, Liban et Palestine*, aimed to provide comprehensive administrative, statistical, descriptive, and geographical accounts of the Ottoman provinces.<sup>17</sup> His volumes included maps and detailed tables covering administrative divisions (like the Vilayet of Aleppo and the Kaza of Kilis), population figures (broken down by religion/ethnicity), economic products, and settlements.<sup>15</sup> However, scholars analyzing Ottoman population history have raised serious concerns about the reliability of Cuinet's figures specifically for Syria and Palestine, suggesting some data may have been poorly sourced or even invented, despite being presented with an air of authority.<sup>11</sup> While his work might contain structural information about the Kilis Kaza (which included Kurd Dagħ) or mention key economic activities like olive production<sup>15</sup>, any specific population statistics derived from Cuinet for this region must be treated with extreme skepticism unless corroborated by other sources. Direct access to the relevant sections was not possible.<sup>15</sup>
- **Max von Oppenheim (1899 onwards):** Although primarily famed for his archaeological excavations at Tell Halaf in northern Mesopotamia, Max von Oppenheim's activities provide context for European engagement with Northern Syria around the turn of the 20th century.<sup>23</sup> His initial journey in 1899, which led to the discovery of Tell Halaf, took him from Aleppo towards Damascus and then into Mesopotamia.<sup>24</sup> While the exact route's proximity to Kurd Dagħ is unclear<sup>24</sup>, his later large-scale excavations involved significant logistical operations, including transporting substantial equipment and



supplies by camel caravans from Aleppo, indicating interaction with the broader landscape and likely local populations.<sup>31</sup> His keen interest in Bedouin tribes also reflects the ethnographic currents of the time.<sup>24</sup>

- **Gertrude Bell (c. 1905-1907):** Gertrude Bell, a prominent British traveler, archaeologist, and writer who later played a significant political role in the Middle East, journeyed through Greater Syria in 1905, documenting her experiences in *Syria: The Desert and the Sown* (1907).<sup>26</sup> Her travels took her through Aleppo, Antioch, and Alexandretta (İskenderun), placing her in the vicinity of the Kurd Dağh.<sup>26</sup> Her extensive archive, including letters, diaries, and photographs, housed at Newcastle University, offers a rich potential source for observations on the region.<sup>25</sup> While a comprehensive search of the archive is beyond the scope of this report, secondary sources confirm her presence near the region, and her known attention to detail regarding landscapes, people, and antiquities suggests her writings might contain valuable descriptions of Kurdish villages, local life, the Afrin River valley, or the prominent olive groves.<sup>1</sup> Her observations, like those of her contemporaries, reflect the perspective of an educated European woman of her time, interacting with the local populations and landscapes.<sup>36</sup>
- **Mark Sykes (c. 1908):** Sir Mark Sykes, later infamous for his role in the Sykes-Picot Agreement that partitioned the Ottoman Middle East, conducted an earlier, formal anthropological study of the Kurdish tribes within the Empire, published as *The Kurdish Tribes of the Ottoman Empire* (1908).<sup>14</sup> Although the primary text is inaccessible<sup>14</sup>, secondary accounts suggest it contained information on tribal names, locations, population estimates, lifestyles (nomadic/sedentary), and potentially their relations with the Ottoman administration and other groups, possibly including tribes in the Kilis/Kurd Dağh area.<sup>14</sup> However, any information derived from Sykes must be viewed with extreme critical awareness. His later political actions, aimed at dividing the very regions he studied, cast significant doubt on the objectivity of his ethnographic work.<sup>22</sup> His classifications and observations were likely influenced by imperial strategic thinking. His reported comments on the religion of Alevi Kurds, describing them as "Shias or Pantheists" or "advanced Pantheists"<sup>39</sup>, might be relevant if Alevi communities existed in the Kurd Dağh, but reflect his external interpretation.
- **Ottoman Perspectives (e.g., Fırka-i İslahiye):** Complementing European observations are insights derived from Ottoman administrative actions and records. The Fırka-i İslahiye ("Reform Division"), a military and administrative expedition dispatched in the mid-1860s, aimed to assert state authority and "reform" nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes in several regions considered restive or outside effective government control. According to the prominent Ottoman statesman and historian Cevdet Paşa, the target areas included Kozan, Gavur Dağı, and significantly, Kürt Dağı (Kurd Dağh).<sup>7</sup> This initiative reflects Ottoman concerns about tribal autonomy, security, the sedentarization of nomads (viewed as backwards by some officials<sup>41</sup>), and potentially countering perceived foreign influence among the tribes.<sup>7</sup> Ottoman archival documents from various periods also contain references to Kürt Dağı, relating to administration, military

matters, or local events, providing an internal perspective on the region's relationship with the central state.<sup>5</sup> These Ottoman sources highlight the ongoing interaction between the imperial center and the Kurdish periphery, characterized by attempts at control, negotiation, and the persistence of local tribal structures.<sup>7</sup> This dynamic process suggests that the late Ottoman period was one of significant transition and adaptation for Kurd Dagħ society, not simply stagnation, as local communities navigated the pressures of a modernizing state and increasing global interconnectedness.<sup>7</sup>

## V. A Synthesized Portrait of Pre-Republic Kurd Dagħ/Afrin

Synthesizing the fragmented evidence from Ottoman records, European travelogues, ethnographic studies, and secondary historical analyses allows for the construction of a tentative portrait of the Kurd Dagħ/Afrin region in the centuries leading up to the establishment of the Syrian Republic. This picture reveals a geographically distinct, predominantly Kurdish area deeply integrated into the administrative and economic sphere of Kilis and Aleppo, yet retaining significant local characteristics shaped by its mountainous terrain and tribal social structures.

**Table 2: Comparative Data on Kurd Dagħ/Kilis Kaza Inhabitants and Economy (Ottoman Era - Selected Sources)**

Feature	16th Century (Ottoman Defter - Com Nahiye)	Late 19th / Early 20th Century (Various Sources)	Notes / Caveats
<b>Administration</b>	Nahiye within Liva-i Azez ve Ekrâd (Kilis Sancak); Center: Cindires; Yurtluk-Ocaklık system (Canpolatoğulları)	Kaza of Kilis (Vilayet of Aleppo); Kilis as admin/economic center <sup>2</sup> ; Fırka-i İslahiye intervention (mid-1860s) <sup>7</sup>	Formal separation into Kurd Dagħ Kaza likely post-Ottoman. <sup>2</sup>
<b>Inhabitants - Ethnicity</b>	Explicitly Kurdish ("Ekrad-ı İzzeddinli" nomads mentioned)	Overwhelmingly Kurdish ("Kurd Dagħ") <sup>1</sup> ; French Mandate est. 90% Kurdish <sup>1</sup> ; Possible Yazidi presence <sup>1</sup> ; Arabized Kurds noted in broader Syria <sup>4</sup>	Consistency across centuries confirms Kurdish character. Specific data on minorities sparse.
<b>Inhabitants - Social Structure</b>	Nomadic tribes significant; Settled villages also present	Tribal structures remain important (Reshwan, Milli mentioned broadly <sup>4</sup> ;	Persistence of tribalism alongside settled life.

		Sykes potentially detailed specific tribes <sup>14</sup> ); Agha/Sheikh influence <sup>9</sup> ; Village/kinship ties <sup>2</sup>	
<b>Inhabitants - Population</b>	Detailed tribal/village numbers available in defters (not fully extracted here)	Cuinet's figures for Kilis Kaza exist but are unreliable <sup>11</sup> ; Late 1930s estimate for Kurd Dagħ Kaza: ~50,000 <sup>2</sup>	Lack of reliable, consistent population data for the Ottoman period is a major challenge.
<b>Economy - Primary Activities</b>	Animal husbandry (nomadic focus - sheep/goat tax); Agriculture (sharecropping tax)	Agriculture central, esp. Olives ("famous for olive groves") <sup>1</sup> ; Pastoralism continues <sup>5</sup> ; Rudimentary farming methods likely <sup>43</sup>	Apparent shift towards or increased visibility of olive cultivation over time.
<b>Economy - Trade/Markets</b>	Implicit link to Kilis/Aleppo via administration	Explicitly linked to Kilis (admin/economic center) <sup>2</sup> ; Integration into Aleppo regional economy <sup>18</sup>	Inland orientation towards Kilis/Aleppo markets was fundamental.

## Landscape and Geography

The consistent picture emerging from various accounts is of a distinct geographical zone defined by the Kurd Dagħ mountain range northwest of Aleppo.<sup>2</sup> This landscape features significant elevation changes, hills suitable for grazing and cultivation, and fertile valleys watered by streams and the Afrin River.<sup>1</sup> Its location placed it historically within the hinterland of Kilis and Aleppo, shaping its administrative and economic connections.<sup>2</sup>

## Inhabitants: Ethnic Composition, Tribal Society, and Social Life

The most salient characteristic reported across centuries is the region's predominantly Kurdish population, reflected unequivocally in its very name, Kurd Dagħ.<sup>1</sup> Ottoman records from the 16th century confirm this through administrative designations like "Liva-i Azez ve Ekrâd" and references to Kurdish nomadic groups.<sup>5</sup> Later observers and French Mandate administrators estimated the Kurdish population share at around 90%, likely reflecting the long-standing demographic reality.<sup>1</sup>

Tribal organization appears to have been a cornerstone of social life throughout the Ottoman period. Early records mention specific groups like the Izzeddinli <sup>5</sup>, while later accounts refer to larger confederations like the Reshwan and Milli operating in northern Syria, potentially

encompassing groups within Kurd Dagħ.<sup>4</sup> Mark Sykes's 1908 study likely contained more specific details on tribes within the Kilis/Kurd Dagħ area, though this information requires careful handling.<sup>14</sup> Society likely involved a mix of nomadic pastoralists utilizing the mountain pastures and settled agriculturalists in the villages, living under the influence of local notables (aghās and sheikhs).<sup>5</sup> Beyond tribal affiliations, identity was also shaped by village origin and kinship ties.<sup>2</sup> This complex social fabric suggests that individuals navigated multiple layers of identity: belonging to a specific tribe or lineage, identifying with their village or locality, recognizing a broader Kurdish ethno-linguistic identity, and functioning as subjects within the Ottoman imperial system. Reducing this multi-layered reality to a single, monolithic identity, as often occurs in modern nationalist frameworks, risks oversimplifying the lived experiences of the pre-Republic inhabitants.<sup>9</sup>

While overwhelmingly Kurdish, the region may have hosted small populations of other groups. Some sources mention Yazidi villages or cemeteries in the Afrin area<sup>1</sup>, although details are scarce and require careful verification to distinguish them from larger Yazidi centers elsewhere. The phenomenon of Arabized Kurds, noted in broader Syrian contexts<sup>4</sup> and specifically documented by Hartmann for the Latakia region<sup>20</sup>, also points to the potential for linguistic fluidity and assimilation over time, though the extent of this within Kurd Dagħ itself during the Ottoman era is unclear. Reliable population figures remain elusive; while Ottoman defters offer detailed 16th-century snapshots<sup>5</sup> and a late 1930s estimate for the Kaza exists (~50,000)<sup>2</sup>, consistent and trustworthy data across the entire period is lacking, hampered partly by the unreliability of sources like Cuinet.<sup>11</sup> Social conditions likely included periods of relative security interspersed with local conflicts, banditry (like the documented case of Etûnê near Rajo before 1908<sup>2</sup>), and the repercussions of larger tribal disputes or Ottoman military campaigns.<sup>3</sup>

## **Economic Activities and Livelihoods**

The economy of Kurd Dagħ was intrinsically linked to its geography. Agriculture formed a major pillar, with olive cultivation emerging in later accounts as a particularly prominent and defining feature, lending the region fame for its extensive groves.<sup>1</sup> This suggests a degree of agricultural specialization focused on a valuable cash crop. However, farming techniques likely remained traditional and rudimentary, similar to those described for the wider Aleppo Vilayet in the late 19th century, potentially limiting overall productivity.<sup>43</sup> Alongside agriculture, animal husbandry and pastoralism remained vital, especially given the mountainous terrain and the historical presence of nomadic and semi-nomadic Kurdish tribes documented since the 16th century.<sup>5</sup> The regional economy was oriented towards the markets of Kilis and Aleppo, which served as outlets for agricultural surplus (olives, oil, grains) and pastoral products (wool, animals), and as sources for goods not produced locally.<sup>2</sup> This economic specialization, particularly in olives, while potentially profitable, likely created a dependence on these external markets, rendering the region vulnerable to price fluctuations or disruptions to trade routes—a vulnerability starkly realized when the 20th-century border severed the link to Kilis.<sup>1</sup>

## Local Conditions under Ottoman Rule

Life in Kurd Dagħ under Ottoman rule appears to have been characterized by a dynamic interplay between local autonomy and imperial administration. For significant periods, particularly under the *yurtluk-ocaklık* system, Kurdish notables wielded considerable local power.<sup>5</sup> However, the region remained integrated within the formal Ottoman administrative structure centered on the Kaza of Kilis.<sup>2</sup> The Ottoman state periodically sought to assert greater control, particularly over nomadic groups, through initiatives like the *Fırka-i İslahiye* in the 1860s, aiming to impose order, encourage sedentarization, and ensure loyalty.<sup>7</sup> The region's inhabitants navigated this relationship, sometimes collaborating with Ottoman authorities, sometimes resisting or operating outside formal structures, reflecting the agency of local actors in negotiating their position within the empire.<sup>2</sup> Security could be precarious, with mentions of banditry and the potential for tribal conflicts impacting daily life.<sup>2</sup> The broader theme of Kurds being situated between larger competing powers, evident from the Ottoman-Safavid rivalry onwards, likely continued to shape the region's political environment.<sup>9</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

### Summary of Findings

The available historical accounts, drawn from Ottoman administrative records, European travelers' narratives, and scholarly analyses, paint a consistent picture of the Kurd Dagħ/Afrin region before the establishment of the Syrian Republic. It emerges as a geographically distinct mountainous area northwest of Aleppo, characterized by hills, valleys, and the Afrin River. For centuries under Ottoman rule, it was administratively and economically tied to the nearby center of Kilis, forming part of the Kaza of Kilis within the Vilayet of Aleppo. The region's defining feature, reflected in its very name, was its overwhelmingly Kurdish population, organized largely along tribal lines with both settled agricultural and nomadic pastoral elements. The economy revolved around agriculture, with olive cultivation becoming particularly significant, supplemented by extensive animal husbandry. Local life unfolded within a framework of relative autonomy under Kurdish notables, balanced by the overarching structure of Ottoman administration and periodic attempts by the state to assert greater control.

### Significance of Early Sources

Reconstructing this pre-modern history relies heavily on the diverse, yet often challenging, sources left by those who observed or administered the region. Ottoman records provide invaluable structural information on administration, population groups, and economic activities, particularly for the 16th century and through insights into later state initiatives like the *Fırka-i İslahiye*. European accounts from the late 19th and early 20th centuries offer rich descriptive detail on the landscape, local customs, and the conditions prevailing during the final decades of Ottoman rule. However, these sources must be approached critically, mindful

of the observers' biases, the reliability issues associated with certain statistical compilations like Cuinet's, and the political agendas that sometimes informed ethnographic work, as in the case of Mark Sykes. Despite these limitations, these early sources are indispensable for establishing a baseline understanding of the Kurd Dagh's long-standing Kurdish identity, its traditional socio-economic structures, and its complex relationship with the Ottoman state.

## Transition and Legacy

The portrait of Kurd Dagh in the Ottoman era—defined by its specific administrative links to Kilis, its economic orientation towards inland markets, its predominantly Kurdish tribal society, and its particular relationship with the imperial center—provides essential context for understanding the region's tumultuous 20th and 21st-century history. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the subsequent imposition of the French Mandate, the drawing of the Syrian-Turkish border directly through the region's traditional sphere, and the rise of modern nation-states with assimilationist or centralizing policies fundamentally altered this historical landscape.<sup>1</sup> The pre-Republic history, documented in these early accounts, highlights the deep roots of the region's identity and the profound dislocations caused by the political remapping of the Middle East after World War I.

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(Note: Sources marked with \* were inaccessible for direct consultation; analysis relies on secondary descriptions and references found within the provided snippets.)

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