

# **Mystics on the Mountain: Sufism in Afrin's Kurd Dagh Before 2010**

## **I. Introduction: Afrin's Kurd Dagh - A Pre-2010 Sufi Heartland**

### **A. Situating Afrin: Geography, Demographics, and Kurdish Identity before 2010**

Nestled north of Aleppo and abutting the Turkish border lies the Afrin region, historically known as Kurd Dagh – the "Mountain of the Kurds".<sup>1</sup> This geographically distinct area, characterized by the Afrin River carving its path through heavily forested hills and fertile valleys renowned for fruit, nuts, and especially olives, formed a unique enclave within Syria.<sup>1</sup> Its administrative ties were to the Aleppo Governorate<sup>3</sup>, yet its history was also shaped by the drawing of the Syria-Turkey border in 1923, which severed its connection to the Kilis Province in Turkey and left it almost encircled by the border.<sup>3</sup>

Before the profound upheavals of the Syrian Civil War post-2011, Afrin was distinguished by its overwhelmingly ethnic Kurdish population. It was considered one of the most densely Kurdish-populated parts of Syria, with some accounts suggesting around 360 Kurdish villages thrived there.<sup>1</sup> The homogeneity was such that the district was sometimes described as "homogeneously Kurdish".<sup>5</sup> The 2004 Syrian census placed the district's population around 200,000.<sup>5</sup> While predominantly Sunni Muslim, Afrin hosted a diversity of religious groups, including Yazidis and Alevi Muslims, some of the latter having settled in Maabatli after fleeing persecution during the Dersim Massacre in Turkey in the 1930s.<sup>5</sup> Crucially, Kurdish identity in Afrin was primarily defined by ethnicity and shared cultural heritage, rather than strictly by religion; north of the Midanki area, Arabic was scarcely spoken, and traditional Kurdish attire remained visible.<sup>1</sup>

The region boasts a deep history, evidenced by remnants like the Syro-Hittite settlement of Ain Dara and the Roman ruins of Cyrrhus, which once served as a Roman military base.<sup>1</sup> Part of Roman Syria, the Afrin Valley transitioned through Muslim conquest, brief Crusader presence, Mongol invasions, and eventually became part of the Ottoman Empire's Kilis Province.<sup>3</sup> Following the French Mandate period, it was incorporated into modern Syria.<sup>3</sup> However, within post-independence Syria, the Kurdish society of Afrin faced significant pressure through "heavy-handed Arabization policies" implemented by the Damascus government.<sup>5</sup> These policies, aimed at suppressing or diluting Kurdish identity, formed a critical part of the socio-political backdrop against which Afrin's distinct cultural and religious life, including its Sufi traditions, unfolded. Despite these underlying tensions, the region was known for its relative peace and stability compared to other parts of Syria in the years leading

up to 2010.<sup>7</sup>

Economically and socially, Afrin was intrinsically linked to Aleppo, located just 50 kilometers south.<sup>1</sup> The region's famed olive groves supplied the crucial olive oil for Aleppo's traditional soap production, an ancient trade link.<sup>2</sup> Many Kurds from Afrin pursued higher education in Aleppo, strengthening the ties between the rural Kurdish heartland and the predominantly Arab urban center.<sup>1</sup> Afrin's scenic landscapes also made it a destination for domestic tourism within Syria.<sup>6</sup> This interplay between Afrin's specific geography, its concentrated Kurdish population, and its vital economic dependence on Aleppo created a unique environment. The region's distinct cultural identity was forged not only by its ethnic makeup but also by its mountainous terrain and its necessary relationship with the major urban hub nearby. It was within this specific context that Sufi networks found fertile ground, navigating and reinforcing these existing rural-urban connections.

## **B. Sufism in Northern Syria: An Overview**

Across northern Syria, and particularly among its Kurdish populations, Sufism – the mystical dimension of Islam – held considerable sway before 2010. Its influence was often described as deeply embedded in the social fabric, sometimes surpassing adherence to more orthodox interpretations of Islamic practice.<sup>2</sup> Sufism is typically organized around specific paths or orders (*tariqas*), each guided by spiritual leaders known as *shaykhs*. Followers, or *murids*, engage in communal rituals and spiritual disciplines within lodges or centers called *zawiyas*.<sup>2</sup> Historically, the Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya orders were considered the most prominent *tariqas* among Kurdish communities.<sup>2</sup> However, the religious landscape, particularly in northern Syria including the Kurd Dagħ, presented a more complex picture. The Rifa'iyya order, for instance, maintained a significant and robust presence in Afrin and surrounding areas.<sup>2</sup> Other orders, such as the Shadhiliyya, were also active within the broader Syrian context.<sup>13</sup>

In the decades leading up to 2010, Syria witnessed a noticeable resurgence in Sufi activity, seemingly driven by a growing popular demand for forms of personal piety that emphasized spiritual experience alongside communal practice.<sup>14</sup> Sufism's appeal lay partly in its capacity to blend collective rituals, which fostered community cohesion, with pathways for individualized religious experience and self-cultivation.<sup>14</sup> It represented a major form of social expression of Islam, attracting adherents from various social strata, from rural peasants to urban professionals.<sup>16</sup> This emphasis on Sufism as a lived religion, deeply integrated into social structures (*shaykh-murid* bonds, *zawiya* life) and expressed through tangible practices (rituals, pilgrimages, mediation of social relations), distinguished it from more text-centric or state-influenced interpretations of Islam.<sup>2</sup> It was not merely a set of doctrines but a dynamic force shaping individual lives and community interactions.

## **C. Afrin as a Center of Distinctive Kurdish Sufism**

Within this broader context, the Afrin region (Kurd Dagħ) stood out. Multiple sources explicitly identify the area as having developed as a center of a "distinctive Sufi Kurdish tradition" or a

unique form of "Kurdish Islam".<sup>5</sup> This local expression of Sufism was characterized, at least by some observers, as being less conservative and more tolerant compared to neighboring regions.<sup>17</sup>

This perceived distinctiveness likely emerged from a confluence of factors specific to Afrin. The region's pronounced Kurdish ethnic identity, coupled with its relative geographic isolation yet strong economic ties to Aleppo, provided a unique cultural milieu.<sup>1</sup> The specific mix of Sufi orders present, notably the strong Rifa'iyya alongside the Naqshbandiyya and Qadiriyya connections, contributed unique ritualistic and organizational elements.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, historical events, such as the Naqshbandi-led Murid Movement of the 1930s, left their imprint on the region's collective memory and religious landscape.<sup>18</sup> The constant negotiation between the rural Kurdish environment of Afrin and the urban Arab environment of Aleppo, often facilitated by Sufi networks, further shaped local religious expression.<sup>2</sup> Understanding Sufism in pre-2010 Afrin therefore requires exploring this unique blend of Sufi practice, Kurdish cultural elements, specific local leadership, and the region's particular history and social dynamics.

## II. The Tapestry of Sufi Orders in Afrin

The Sufi landscape of Afrin before 2010 was woven from the threads of several prominent orders, each contributing unique characteristics, leadership styles, and practices to the region's distinctive religious fabric. While the Naqshbandiyya and Qadiriyya are often cited as the dominant orders across Kurdistan, Afrin presented a more nuanced picture with a particularly strong Rifa'iyya presence.

### A. The Rifa'iyya Presence: Leaders and Practices

The Rifa'iyya order, named after its 12th-century founder Ahmad al-Rifa'i<sup>19</sup>, found a significant foothold in the Kurd Dagh. Its historical strength often lay in rural areas, making the agrarian landscape of Afrin a conducive environment for its proliferation.<sup>11</sup> This contrasted with the common narrative emphasizing Naqshbandi or Qadiri dominance in Kurdish regions.<sup>2</sup> The order's influence in Syria had seen periods of prominence, notably under Abu al-Huda al-Sayyadi during the reign of Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II, attracting followers from villages and tribes.<sup>11</sup>

Central to the Rifa'iyya presence in pre-2010 Afrin was Shaykh Mahmud al-Husayni. He led a major Rifa'i *zawiya* in the town of Afrin, drawing followers not only from the immediate vicinity but also from Kurdish migrant communities in Aleppo and Damascus.<sup>2</sup> Shaykh Mahmud's legitimacy stemmed from multiple sources: he was a descendant of a local Rifa'i family and claimed a spiritual lineage (*silsila*) tracing back to both the order's founder, Ahmad al-Rifa'i, and to Ali ibn Abi Talib.<sup>2</sup>

The rituals practiced in Shaykh Mahmud's *zawiya* were particularly notable for their emphasis on embodied mystical experiences and the public display of *karamat* (miraculous deeds), considered evidence of the *shaykh's baraka* (spiritual power or blessing).<sup>2</sup> The weekly *hadra* (communal gathering), centered around the *dhikr* (remembrance of God), became the

primary arena for these demonstrations.<sup>2</sup> Ethnographic accounts specifically mention dramatic practices such as *darb al-shish* (ritual piercing of the body, often with skewers), walking over burning coals, and the ingestion of glass.<sup>2</sup> Healing rituals and the expulsion of *jinns* were also reportedly part of the Rifa'i *dhikr* under Shaykh Mahmud.<sup>12</sup> This performative dimension, the tangible demonstration of spiritual power overcoming physical limitations, appears to have been a hallmark of the Rifa'iyya tradition as practiced in Afrin. It likely played a crucial role in establishing and reinforcing Shaykh Mahmud's authority, attracting followers, and distinguishing this local expression of Sufism. The very charisma generated through these powerful embodied experiences, however, could introduce complex dynamics within the community. While the *shaykh* demonstrated his *baraka*, the potential for disciples to also perform such acts raised questions about how this distributed charisma was integrated into the established hierarchical structure of the *zawiya*.<sup>20</sup>

## **B. The Naqshbandiyya Influence: Leaders and Networks**

The Naqshbandiyya order, tracing its lineage through Abu Bakr<sup>21</sup> and named after Baha-ud-Din Naqshband<sup>21</sup>, is widely acknowledged as a major force in Kurdish Sufism and across the Sunni Muslim world.<sup>2</sup> Known for its emphasis on adherence to Sharia (Islamic Law) and often characterized by silent or contemplative forms of *dhikr*, the order has a history of socio-political engagement.<sup>21</sup> Its spread into Syria was significantly boosted by the Kurdish Shaykh Khalid al-Baghdadi in the early 19th century, whose Khalidi branch became influential throughout the Ottoman world, including Syria's Kurdish regions.<sup>12</sup>

In the Kurd Dagh, the Naqshbandiyya maintained a notable presence alongside the Rifa'iyya.<sup>2</sup> Sheikh Hassan al-Naqshbandi was recognized as the *shaykh al-masha'ikh* (chief shaykh) of the order in the region, with his *zawiya* based in Afrin serving as a destination for pilgrims, including those connected to other orders in Aleppo.<sup>2</sup> His grandfather was also revered as a local saint, indicating a generational depth to the family's spiritual authority.<sup>2</sup>

A significant historical manifestation of Naqshbandi influence in Afrin was the Murid Movement of the 1930s.<sup>18</sup> Led by "Naqshi Sheikh" Halil İbrahim Soğukoğlu, this movement blended Naqshbandi leadership with social grievances and political resistance against local landowners and the French Mandate authorities.<sup>18</sup> Its headquarters were located at the prominent Nabi Huri shrine complex.<sup>23</sup> This historical episode embedded a specific form of politically charged Naqshbandism within the region's collective experience. Furthermore, Naqshbandi networks often transcended local boundaries, connecting Kurdish communities across Syria (like Aleppo and the Jazira region) and into Turkey, suggesting that Afrin's Naqshbandis were likely integrated into these wider webs of affiliation.<sup>15</sup>

While often associated with orthodoxy and political action, the Naqshbandiyya in Afrin demonstrated adaptation to the local Kurdish context. The Murid Movement exemplifies a potent fusion of Naqshbandi authority with specific local socio-political struggles.<sup>18</sup> The later, respected presence of figures like Sheikh Hassan suggests the order's continued integration into Afrin's social fabric, perhaps shifting towards a greater emphasis on spiritual guidance and network maintenance after the turbulence of the Mandate era.<sup>2</sup>

## C. The Qadiriyya Order: Historical Role and Connections

The Qadiriyya, founded by the revered Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 1166) <sup>9</sup>, stands as the oldest Sunni Sufi order with a significant following among Kurds.<sup>9</sup> Historically prominent, its influence waned in some areas, particularly northern and western Kurdistan, with the rise of the Naqshbandiyya in the 19th century.<sup>9</sup>

In Syria, the Qadiriyya faced challenges, with urban branches experiencing decline or suppression by the state, particularly in Hamah following the 1982 uprising.<sup>12</sup> However, the order persisted. In Aleppo, the Hilaliyya branch represented a blend of Qadiri and Khalwati traditions.<sup>12</sup> A notable Qadiri *zawiya* in Aleppo was led by Sheikh Muhiy al-Din. Significantly, Sheikh Muhiy al-Din was a former *murid* (disciple) of Sheikh Hassan al-Naqshbandi, the leading Naqshbandi shaykh in Afrin.<sup>2</sup> This connection highlights the fluidity and interaction between different orders and regions.

While the provided sources offer less direct evidence of major, independent Qadiri *zawiyas* situated *within* Afrin itself compared to the Rifa'iyya and Naqshbandiyya during the pre-2010 period, the linkage through Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's Aleppo community is crucial. His followers undertook pilgrimages back to Sheikh Hassan's Naqshbandi *zawiya* in Afrin, demonstrating active ties.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, broader Kurdish Qadiri networks connected Aleppo with other regions, suggesting potential, if less documented, links involving Afrin.<sup>15</sup> The Sufi landscape was clearly not one of rigid separation between orders. Personal relationships, shared spiritual respect (as seen between Muhiy al-Din and Hassan), and the movement of people for pilgrimage created intricate connections that transcended formal *tariqa* boundaries and linked Afrin's religious life firmly to that of Aleppo.<sup>2</sup>

## D. Summary Table: Sufi Orders in Pre-2010 Afrin

Sufi Order	Key Leaders Mentioned in Afrin Context	Notable Practices/Features in Afrin Context	Key Sites Mentioned in Afrin Context
Rifa'iyya	Shaykh Mahmud al-Husayni <sup>2</sup>	Strong rural presence; <i>Darb al-shish</i> , fire-walking, glass-eating ( <i>karamat</i> ); Embodied mysticism; Healing/Exorcism	Shaykh Mahmud's Zawiya (Afrin town) <sup>2</sup>
Naqshbandiyya	Sheikh Hassan al-Naqshbandi <sup>2</sup> ; Halil İbrahim Soğukoğlu (1930s Murid leader) <sup>18</sup>	Emphasis on Sharia (general); Murid Movement (1930s socio-political/religious revolt); Pilgrimage destination	Sheikh Hassan's Zawiya (Afrin) <sup>2</sup> ; Nabi Huri (Murid HQ) <sup>18</sup>

<b>Qadiriyya</b>	(Indirect links via Aleppo) Sheikh Muhiy al-Din (Aleppo leader, former <i>murid</i> of Sheikh Hassan) <sup>2</sup>	Connections via Aleppo <i>zawiya</i> ; Pilgrimages to Afrin (Naqshbandi site) by Qadiri followers from Aleppo	(Connections to Afrin via Aleppo <i>Zawiya</i> )
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Table based on information synthesized from.<sup>2</sup>

### III. Institutions and Social Structures: The *Zawiya* and Community

The social expression of Sufism in Afrin before 2010 was deeply embedded in specific institutions and hierarchical relationships that structured community life and connected the region to the wider world. The *zawiya*, the *shaykh*, and the networks they fostered were central components of this socio-religious system.

#### A. The Role of the *Zawiya* (Sufi Lodge) in Afrin

The *zawiya* served as the cornerstone of Sufi organization and practice in the Afrin region.<sup>2</sup> These lodges, such as the prominent Rifa'i *zawiya* led by Shaykh Mahmud al-Husayni and the Naqshbandi *zawiya* headed by Sheikh Hassan al-Naqshbandi, functioned as the primary centers for communal religious life.<sup>2</sup> They were far more than just places of worship; they were dynamic hubs where the Sufi tradition was lived and transmitted.<sup>24</sup>

Within the *zawiya* walls, followers gathered for collective rituals, most importantly the weekly *hadra* featuring the *dhikr*.<sup>2</sup> These gatherings were crucial for reinforcing community bonds, sharing spiritual experiences, and receiving teachings from the *shaykh*.<sup>2</sup> The *zawiya* also served as a visible symbol of the *shaykh*'s authority and a space where his *baraka* could be demonstrated, particularly through the performance of *karamat* in the Rifa'i context.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, *zawiyas* played a vital social role, acting as cultural anchors and support centers, especially for individuals migrating from rural Afrin to urban centers like Aleppo.<sup>2</sup> In the predominantly rural setting of the Kurd Dagħ, the authority of the *shaykh* within his *zawiya* was often deeply respected and widely recognized by the local community.<sup>2</sup>

#### B. Leadership and Authority: *Shaykhs*, *Khalifas*, and *Murids*

Sufi communities in Afrin, like elsewhere, were typically organized hierarchically.<sup>2</sup> At the apex stood the *shaykh* (also *murshid*), the spiritual master who guided his disciples, the *murids*, along the mystical path (*tariqa*).<sup>2</sup> The bond between *shaykh* and *murid* was often formalized through an oath of allegiance or initiation (*bay'ah*).<sup>25</sup> To manage their followers across different locales, *shaykhs* frequently appointed deputies known as *khalifas*, who acted as intermediaries, supervised local groups, and collected dues or allegiance on the *shaykh*'s behalf.<sup>9</sup> This structure was evident in Afrin, with figures like Shaykh Mahmud and Sheikh Hassan leading their respective communities <sup>2</sup>, and historical examples like the Murid

Movement utilizing deputies (Hanif Arabû and Ali Galib).<sup>18</sup>

The authority of a Sufi *shaykh* rested on a combination of factors. Claimed spiritual lineage (*silsila*), tracing back through previous masters to the order's founder and often ultimately to the Prophet Muhammad, provided historical legitimacy.<sup>2</sup> Demonstrated spiritual power (*baraka*), often made manifest through *karamat* (miracles), offered tangible proof of divine favor, particularly significant in the Rifa'i tradition of Afrin.<sup>2</sup> Personal charisma, teaching ability, and the capacity to provide spiritual guidance were also crucial.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, *shaykhs* often functioned as important social mediators, resolving disputes within the community or representing its interests to external authorities.<sup>2</sup> This combination of spiritual prestige and social influence could translate into considerable power. Figures like the Barzani Naqshbandi *shaykhs* were noted for wielding both temporal and spiritual authority.<sup>9</sup> In Afrin, Shaykh Mahmud was known to mediate between his community and the Syrian state<sup>2</sup>, while Halil İbrahim Soğukoğlu, leader of the Murid Movement, mobilized his followers into a major socio-political force.<sup>18</sup>

### **C. Sufi Networks: Mediating Between Rural Afrin and Urban Aleppo**

One of the most significant social functions of Sufi communities in the Afrin region before 2010 was their role in mediating the relationship between the rural Kurd Dagħ and the major urban center of Aleppo.<sup>2</sup> These Sufi networks, built upon the relationships connecting *zawiyas*, *shaykhs*, and *murids*, acted as vital conduits facilitating the flow of people, goods, and ideas between the Kurdish countryside and the largely Arab city.<sup>2</sup>

As Kurds migrated from Afrin to Aleppo seeking work or education, Sufi *zawiyas* in the city, particularly those with connections back to the Kurd Dagħ (like Sheikh Muhiy al-Din's Qadiri lodge), provided essential support systems.<sup>2</sup> They offered spaces of solidarity, helping new arrivals navigate the unfamiliar urban environment. These *zawiyas* also served as important cultural reference points, allowing migrants to maintain and express their Kurdish identity, for instance, through the use of the Kurmanji dialect in religious songs and rituals within the predominantly Arabic-speaking city.<sup>2</sup> This function allowed individuals to navigate the complexities of belonging to both their rural Kurdish origins and the urban Syrian context, using the framework of Sufism as a medium for expressing this dual identity.

Simultaneously, these networks ensured that ties to the rural homeland were not severed. Continued allegiance to *shaykhs* based in Afrin (like Sheikh Hassan al-Naqshbandi) and participation in pilgrimages (*ziyarat*) to sacred sites within the Kurd Dagħ, such as the tombs of saints or the shrine of Nabi Huri, kept urban migrants connected to their roots and reinforced a shared sense of identity linked to the ancestral region.<sup>2</sup> These Sufi networks, therefore, functioned as more than just religious associations; they constituted a crucial, informal social infrastructure. In the context of pre-2010 Syria, they provided practical mechanisms for managing migration, preserving cultural identity, and facilitating the necessary economic and social interactions between the distinct yet interdependent worlds of rural Afrin and urban Aleppo, operating alongside, and sometimes perhaps in lieu of, formal state structures.

## IV. Rituals, Practices, and Sacred Spaces

The religious life of Sufi communities in Afrin before 2010 was animated by a rich repertoire of rituals, practices, and connections to sacred geography. These elements shaped individual subjectivity, reinforced communal bonds, and anchored the tradition in the local landscape.

### A. Communal Rituals: *Dhikr*, *Hadra*, and *Mawlid*s

Central to Sufi practice was the *dhikr*, the remembrance or invocation of God's name.<sup>2</sup> This was typically performed collectively within the *zawiya* during the *hadra*, a term signifying "presence" or the regular communal gathering, often held weekly.<sup>2</sup> The *hadra* served as the primary arena for shared worship, spiritual instruction, and the reaffirmation of the bonds linking the *shaykh* and his *murids*.<sup>20</sup> The aim of the *dhikr* was to cultivate an emotional and embodied connection to the divine, potentially leading to mystical states or experiences.<sup>2</sup> Depending on the specific *tariqa* and local customs, the *dhikr* could involve rhythmic chanting, specific breathing techniques, bodily movements, and sometimes the use of musical instruments, as noted in some Qadiri practices.<sup>9</sup> In the context of Afrin's Rifa'iyya community under Shaykh Mahmud, the *hadra* and *dhikr* were also the setting for the dramatic display of *karamat*.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the regular *hadra*, *mawlid*s – celebrations marking the birth anniversaries of the Prophet Muhammad or revered saints – were important communal events.<sup>2</sup> These occasions often involved large gatherings and pilgrimages (*ziyarat*) to the tombs of the commemorated figures, further strengthening collective identity and devotion.<sup>2</sup>

### B. Embodied Mysticism: *Karamat* and the *Darb al-Shish* in Afrin

Sufism emphasizes the transformation of the self (*nafs*) through disciplined practice, and this process often involves the body as a site of spiritual work.<sup>14</sup> Rituals, mystical exercises, and even bodily trials are employed to cultivate specific capacities and dispositions, shaping what some scholars term the "mystical body".<sup>25</sup>

In the Rifa'iyya tradition prevalent in Afrin, this emphasis on embodiment found dramatic expression in the performance of *karamat* (miracles or wonders).<sup>2</sup> These acts, understood as divinely granted gifts demonstrating the spiritual power (*baraka*) of the *shaykh* or exceptionally advanced disciples, were performed publicly during the *hadra*.<sup>2</sup> The most frequently cited *karamat* associated with Shaykh Mahmud's *zawiya* in Afrin included *darb al-shish* (the piercing of the body with skewers or knives without apparent harm), walking on burning coals, and eating glass.<sup>2</sup>

The *darb al-shish*, in particular, attracted ethnographic attention as a striking example of embodied charisma within this specific community.<sup>20</sup> These performances were not merely esoteric displays; they served crucial social functions. By publicly demonstrating mastery over pain and the physical body, attributed to divine protection, the *shaykh* powerfully legitimized his spiritual authority in the eyes of the community.<sup>2</sup> Such extraordinary acts could attract new followers, solidify the faith of existing members, and mark the local Rifa'i tradition with a



distinct, visceral form of piety. The public nature of these *karamat* underscored their role as social validations of spiritual status within the Afrin context.

### **C. Pilgrimage and Sacred Geography: The Shrine of Nabi Huri**

Connecting with sacred places through pilgrimage (*ziyarat*) is a widespread practice in Sufism, allowing believers to seek blessings (*baraka*) from deceased saints (*awliya*) or prophets, commemorate sacred history, and reinforce their connection to a shared spiritual lineage and territory.<sup>2</sup> In the Afrin region, the most prominent site for such devotion was the shrine complex of Nabi Huri.<sup>1</sup>

Located near the ruins of ancient Cyrrhus, the site's centerpiece is a distinctive hexagonal tower tomb dating back to the Roman period (2nd or 3rd century CE), possibly the mausoleum of a Roman military commander.<sup>2</sup> Its significance, however, lies in the multiple layers of religious and cultural meaning accrued over centuries. Local tradition strongly identifies the figure buried there as Nabi Huri (Prophet Huri), often conflated with Uriah the Hittite, the soldier whose wife Bathsheba was desired by King David in biblical accounts.<sup>1</sup> During the Mamluk era (1303), the Roman tomb was officially converted into a Muslim shrine attributed to a saint named Nebi Huri, and a mosque was constructed adjacent to it (later rebuilt in the Ottoman period).<sup>26</sup> Some Sufi traditions viewed him as a prophetic predecessor<sup>2</sup>, while local belief held him to be a Sufi saint capable of granting the wishes of sincere petitioners.<sup>26</sup> This multi-layered identity made Nabi Huri a potent focal point for religious life in Afrin before 2010. It was a major destination for Sufi pilgrimages, drawing Kurds from the surrounding villages and even attracting visitors connected to Afrin from Aleppo.<sup>1</sup> The site functioned as a space where religious devotion, local cultural narratives, and a sense of territorial belonging converged.<sup>2</sup> Its popularity extended beyond purely religious visits, serving as a scenic spot for family outings and recreation, as evidenced by visitor accounts and images.<sup>28</sup> Adding another layer to its history, the Nabi Huri mosque complex served as the headquarters for the Naqshbandi-led Murid Movement in the 1930s.<sup>18</sup> The enduring importance of Nabi Huri thus stemmed not from a single, fixed identification but from its capacity to embody multiple historical eras and resonate with diverse local traditions – Roman, biblical, Mamluk, Ottoman, Sufi, Kurdish, and even modern political history. This syncretism allowed it to function as a powerful and unifying local symbol.

## **V. Historical Echoes and Political Context**

The Sufi landscape of Afrin before 2010 did not exist in a vacuum. It was shaped by historical events, intertwined with local expressions of Kurdish identity, and constantly negotiated within the political realities of the Syrian state.

### **A. The Murid Movement (1930s): A Naqshi-led Uprising in Kurd Dagħ**

A pivotal event in Afrin's 20th-century history was the Murid Movement, which unfolded primarily during the 1930s under the French Mandate.<sup>18</sup> Led by Halil İbrahim Soğukoğlu, identified as a Naqshbandi (*Naqshi*) Shaykh with origins possibly outside the region but with

deep Sufi training, the movement took root around 1929 in the Kurd Dagħ, using the Nabi Huri mosque complex as its base.<sup>18</sup>

While possessing a clear religious dimension centered on Soğukoğlu's charismatic leadership and perceived miraculous abilities, the movement's rapid growth was significantly fueled by the socio-economic conditions of the time.<sup>18</sup> It resonated strongly with the impoverished Kurdish peasantry, mobilizing them against the powerful local landowners (*aghas*) who often collaborated with the French authorities and exploited the rural population.<sup>18</sup> The movement advocated for literacy and religious knowledge, challenging the traditional power structures and taking on an anti-feudal, populist character.<sup>18</sup> Scholars like Lescot and Bois argue that these social dynamics were more central to the movement's success than religious fanaticism alone.<sup>18</sup>

Politically, the Murid Movement was overtly anti-French.<sup>18</sup> Its alignments, however, were complex and shifted over time. It initially received support from elements within the Syrian National Bloc who saw it as a tool against French control.<sup>18</sup> More significantly, the movement developed strong ties with Turkey, particularly during the period when Turkey was maneuvering to annex the Sanjak of Alexandretta (Hatay).<sup>18</sup> Sources suggest direct Turkish support, including logistical aid and potentially intelligence involvement, with some believing Turkey aimed to use the movement to facilitate the annexation of Kurd Dagħ itself.<sup>18</sup> For a period, the Murids established their own de facto administration in parts of Afrin, implementing Islamic principles and challenging both the *aghas* and the Mandate authority.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, the movement was suppressed. Internal divisions, shifting alliances (the Syrian National Bloc eventually distanced itself), and direct French military intervention, including aerial bombardment in 1939, led to its defeat.<sup>18</sup> Soğukoğlu and many of his followers fled across the border, becoming refugees in Turkey.<sup>18</sup> Though often overlooked in broader historical narratives, the Murid Movement remains a crucial episode. It vividly illustrates the potent mix of Sufi leadership (specifically Naqshbandi), social protest against inequality, Kurdish identity politics, and the complex geopolitical interplay between local actors, the Syrian national movement, French colonial power, and Turkish regional ambitions. It stands as a significant historical precedent, revealing the deep-seated tensions and dynamics that continued to shape the Kurd Dagħ long after the movement itself subsided. The conflicting narratives surrounding Soğukoğlu's true motivations – religious reformer, social revolutionary, Turkish agent – further underscore the politically sensitive nature of the region's history and the contested interpretations that persist.<sup>18</sup>

## **B. Sufism, Kurdish Identity, and Social Cohesion**

In the decades leading up to 2010, Sufism in Afrin remained closely interwoven with Kurdish identity.<sup>1</sup> In a context where the Syrian state promoted Arab nationalism and implemented Arabization policies<sup>5</sup>, Sufi practices and institutions offered spaces where Kurdish culture and language could be maintained and expressed. The use of Kurmanji Kurdish in rituals within Aleppo *zawiyas* connected to Afrin is a clear example of this phenomenon.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond cultural expression, Sufi orders played a vital role in fostering social cohesion within

the Kurdish community of Afrin.<sup>2</sup> The hierarchical structure centered on the *shaykh-murid* relationship created strong networks of loyalty, mutual support, and shared identity.<sup>9</sup> *Zawiyas* served as focal points for community life, bringing people together for regular rituals and social interaction.<sup>2</sup> These bonds extended beyond the local village, connecting Afrin's Kurds to compatriots who had migrated to cities like Aleppo, helping to maintain a sense of collective belonging across geographical distances.<sup>2</sup>

### **C. Navigating the State: Sufi Communities and Syrian Authorities before 2010**

The relationship between Afrin's Sufi communities and the Syrian Ba'athist state before 2010 was characterized by ambiguity and careful navigation. The regime, in power since 1963, maintained an authoritarian grip and was generally suspicious of independent religious or social organizations, particularly those with strong ethnic affiliations that could challenge its centralizing, Arab nationalist ideology.<sup>12</sup> The state's documented Arabization policies in Kurdish areas were a direct manifestation of this approach.<sup>5</sup>

In response, Sufi communities in Afrin appear to have adopted various strategies. Many likely maintained a relatively low profile, focusing on devotional practices and community affairs while avoiding overt political stances. Some leaders, like Shaykh Mahmud al-Husayni, seem to have skillfully navigated the system, acting as mediators between their followers and state authorities.<sup>2</sup> By emphasizing religious virtues and traditional authority structures, they could carve out a sphere of influence locally, potentially framing their leadership in ways that resonated with Kurdish cultural identity without directly confronting the regime's power.<sup>2</sup> This contrasts with certain national Sufi figures, like Shaykh Ahmad Kuftaro of the Naqshbandi-Kuftariyya order, who developed closer, albeit complex, relationships with the Ba'athist state apparatus.<sup>12</sup>

While open opposition was risky and often suppressed (as seen in the aftermath of the Hama uprising<sup>12</sup> or the fate of some militant Shadhili leaders<sup>12</sup>), the potential for Sufism to serve as a vehicle for dissent or resistance remained. The historical precedent of the Murid Movement demonstrated the capacity for Sufi leadership to mobilize the population against ruling powers.<sup>18</sup> In later years, figures like Sheikh Muhammad Mash'uk Khaznawi<sup>2</sup> became symbols of Kurdish religious resistance against the regime. In the pre-2010 period, however, Sufi communities in Afrin likely functioned more subtly as relatively autonomous spaces. Within the *zawiya* and the networks it sustained, Kurdish identity could be preserved, social bonds maintained, and local leadership exercised, offering a crucial sphere for negotiating community life and cultural continuity under the watchful eye of the Syrian state.

## **VI. Conclusion: Enduring Traditions Before the Storm**

The Afrin region, or Kurd Dag, presented a unique and vibrant landscape of Sufi practice deeply interwoven with Kurdish identity in the period before 2010. It was a place where the historical weight of the Qadiriyya and the widespread influence of the Naqshbandiyya coexisted with a particularly strong and visible Rifa'iyya presence.<sup>2</sup> This local Rifa'i tradition,

exemplified by Shaykh Mahmud al-Husayni, was characterized by a striking emphasis on embodied mysticism and the public performance of *karamat*, such as the *darb al-shish*, which served to validate spiritual authority and galvanize the community.<sup>2</sup>

The *zawiya* functioned as the central institution, not only for ritual practice like the *dhikr* and *hadra*, but also as a vital hub for social organization and community solidarity.<sup>2</sup> Sufi networks, structured around the authority of *shaykhs* like Mahmud al-Husayni and Hassan al-Naqshbandi, played a crucial role in mediating the complex relationship between rural Afrin and the urban metropolis of Aleppo, facilitating the movement of people, goods, and cultural practices.<sup>2</sup> Sacred sites, most notably the multi-layered shrine of Nabi Huri, served as powerful focal points for pilgrimage, local identity, and collective memory, embodying the region's syncretic history from Roman times through Islamic eras and even the political turmoil of the Murid Movement.<sup>1</sup>

The historical echo of the 1930s Murid Movement, a Naqshbandi-led uprising fueled by social grievances and entangled in regional geopolitics, underscored the long-standing interplay of religion, ethnicity, social structure, and political forces in the Kurd Dagħ.<sup>18</sup> In the decades leading up to 2010, Sufism continued to provide a framework for expressing Kurdish identity and navigating the pressures of the Syrian state's Arabization policies, offering relatively autonomous spaces for cultural continuity and social cohesion.<sup>2</sup>

This rich tapestry of Sufi life – characterized by its specific blend of orders, its emphasis on embodied experience, its function as social infrastructure, its connection to sacred geography, and its deep roots in local history and Kurdish identity – constituted a significant part of Afrin's cultural heritage before the devastating conflicts that began in 2011. The period prior to 2010 represents a crucial baseline, a portrait of enduring traditions and complex social dynamics that existed before the storm of the Syrian Civil War and the subsequent Turkish-led incursions fundamentally altered the region's demographic, political, and cultural landscape.<sup>5</sup> Understanding this pre-2010 reality is essential for grasping the depth of what was lost and the historical context for the challenges faced by the people of Afrin in subsequent years.

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