

Afrin under the French Mandate: Administration, Society, and Politics (1920-1946)

Introduction

This report provides a detailed analysis of the Afrin region, known historically as Kurd-Dagh, during the period of the French Mandate over Syria, spanning roughly from 1920 to 1946. The objective is to offer a comprehensive overview based on available historical sources, examining the region's administrative status, governance structures under French rule, local socio-economic conditions, demographic composition, significant political events including resistance movements, and its relations with central Mandate authorities and neighboring Turkey. The analysis relies exclusively on the provided research materials, ensuring meticulous citation for all presented information.¹

The conclusion of World War I witnessed the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent reshaping of the political map of the Middle East by the victorious Allied powers, primarily Britain and France. Pre-existing secret agreements, notably the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916¹, laid the groundwork for the division of former Ottoman territories into spheres of influence. This process was formalized under the auspices of the League of Nations through the Mandate system, which granted France control over Syria and Lebanon.¹ The Mandate system, theoretically a form of international trusteeship aimed at preparing territories for self-governance¹, in practice functioned as a continuation of colonial control under a new guise.³⁹ French authority was solidified after the defeat of the nascent Arab Kingdom of Syria, led by Emir Faisal, at the Battle of Maysalun in July 1920, leading to the direct French occupation of Damascus and the imposition of Mandate rule.¹

Within this newly established Mandate territory, the region of Afrin, historically known as Kurd-Dagh ("Kurd Mountain") and recognized even in Ottoman times as a predominantly Kurdish area (the "Sancak of the Kurds")¹², occupied a unique position. Located in the northwestern corner of Syria, adjacent to the newly drawn border with the Republic of Turkey⁸, Kurd-Dagh's geography, demography, and strategic location made it a significant area of focus for French administrative policies, local political dynamics, and regional power struggles. Its history under the Mandate reflects the broader complexities of state formation, colonial governance, emerging nationalisms (both Syrian Arab and Kurdish), and the profound impact of newly imposed international borders on local societies and economies in the post-Ottoman Middle East.

This report draws upon a range of sources, including seminal academic works on the Syrian Mandate by scholars such as Philip Khoury²⁵, Stephen Longrigg³¹, and Jordi Tejel⁶⁴, alongside more focused studies on Kurdish history and border dynamics, such as Katharina

Lange's research on Kurd Dagh.²¹ References to primary materials like League of Nations documents¹, French administrative records¹, diplomatic correspondence²³, and contemporary accounts are incorporated as cited within the provided source base. The analysis proceeds by examining the specific timeframe and administrative context of Afrin within the Mandate, followed by its governance structure, socio-economic conditions, demographics, key political events and conflicts, and its relationship with central authorities and Turkey, before offering a synthesized overview.

1. Timeframe and Geographical/Administrative Location of Afrin

1.1. Defining the French Mandate Period

The era of French Mandate rule over Syria and Lebanon is generally demarcated from the formal ratification by the League of Nations on September 29, 1923, to the final departure of French military forces on April 17, 1946.¹ This period, however, was preceded by crucial events that established French dominance. Following the Allied victory in World War I and the initial division of occupied territories⁸⁶, France asserted its claim based partly on the Sykes-Picot Agreement.¹ French military intervention culminated in the Battle of Maysalun on July 24, 1920, the defeat of Emir Faisal's Arab government, and the occupation of Damascus.¹ This marked the effective beginning of French control, although the Mandate document itself was finalized in London on July 24, 1922¹, and full pacification of resistance across Syria took until 1923.¹ The Mandate period witnessed significant political and administrative developments. France initially divided the territory into several states¹, faced numerous revolts¹, negotiated (but ultimately failed to ratify) treaties intended to lead to independence in 1936⁴, and contended with the complexities of World War II, including a period under Vichy control followed by a joint British and Free French occupation from 1941.² Syria declared independence during the war (1941, with elections in 1943)¹, but the *de facto* end of the Mandate only came with the final withdrawal of French troops in 1946, pressured by Syrian nationalists and international actors.² Therefore, while the formal Mandate lasted from 1923 to 1946, the period of effective French control and administration relevant to Afrin began in 1920.

1.2. Locating Afrin/Kurd-Dagh Geographically

The Afrin region, historically and locally known as Kurd-Dagh ("Kurd Mountain"), is situated in the northwestern part of Syria, forming a distinct geographical and cultural area within the Aleppo Governorate.⁸ Its landscape is characterized by the Kurd Mountains range, paralleling the Amanus mountains, with altitudes reaching up to 1260 meters, and the fertile valley of the Afrin River.⁸ During the late Ottoman era, this region was administratively part of the Kilis Province (Vilayet of Aleppo), centered on the town of Kilis, now in Turkey.⁸ Some Ottoman documents even referred to the area as the "Sancak of the Kurds," attesting to its long-standing Kurdish identity.¹⁶

The most significant geographical transformation during the early Mandate period was the establishment of the Turkish-Syrian border. Finalized through the Treaty of Ankara (October 1921) between France and the Turkish National Movement, and confirmed by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923)¹⁵, this new international boundary line passed directly south of Kilis, effectively severing the town from its traditional agricultural hinterland, which largely comprised the Kurd-Dagh region.⁸ Kurd-Dagh thus became a border region within French-mandated Syria.⁸ This situation was further accentuated in 1939 when France ceded the neighboring Sanjak of Alexandretta to Turkey, which renamed it Hatay.¹ This annexation left the Afrin district almost completely surrounded by Turkish territory to its north and west, significantly altering its geopolitical position.⁸

1.3. Afrin within the Mandate's Administrative Divisions

A key feature of French Mandate policy in Syria was administrative division, often reflecting and reinforcing ethno-sectarian identities as a means of control and weakening pan-Syrian or Arab nationalism.¹ Upon establishing control, the French divided the territory into several entities: the State of Damascus, the State of Aleppo, the Alawite Territory (later State), the Jabal Druze State, the autonomous Sanjak of Alexandretta, and the State of Greater Lebanon.¹ The Afrin/Kurd-Dagh region was initially incorporated into the State of Aleppo, established in 1920.¹ This placed Afrin under the administrative purview of Aleppo city. However, the administrative structures were fluid during the early Mandate years. From June 1922 to January 1925, the State of Aleppo was part of the Syrian Federation (Fédération syrienne), a loose union that also included the states of Damascus and the Alawites.¹ Following the dissolution of the Federation, the states of Aleppo and Damascus were merged to form a unified State of Syria in 1925 (lasting until 1930).¹ This entity evolved into the Mandatory Syrian Republic in 1930 following the enactment of a constitution.¹

Consequently, Afrin's administrative journey saw it transition from being part of a distinct State of Aleppo to being integrated into a larger Syrian entity governed first jointly and then centrally from Damascus.¹ This shift in the administrative center from the regional hub of Aleppo to the national capital of Damascus was significant. While Afrin maintained strong economic and social ties to Aleppo¹², its formal political allegiance and administrative reporting lines were reoriented towards Damascus as the Mandate state consolidated. This evolving administrative linkage likely influenced political dynamics, resource allocation patterns, and the complex interplay between local (Kurd-Dagh), regional (Aleppo-centric), and nascent national (Syrian) identities within the region.

1.4. The Establishment of the Qadha of Kurd Dagh

Within the State of Aleppo, the French authorities took the specific step of creating a distinct administrative district (Qadha) named Kurd Dagh in November 1921.²¹ This administrative unit was carved out specifically to encompass the predominantly Kurdish-inhabited mountainous region west and northwest of Aleppo, territory that later largely corresponded to the Afrin district.²¹

The creation of this Qadha was explicitly based on an "ethnic logic," acknowledging the region's remarkable homogeneity in terms of its Kurdish population and the widespread use of the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish.²¹ French observers like Roger Lescot noted its almost entirely Kurdish population.²¹ This administrative recognition of Kurdish distinctiveness aligned with broader French strategies of managing minorities²⁴ but was also, significantly, a response to demands from local Kurdish leaders, such as Koreşî Agha of the influential Sheikh Ismail Zada family, who conditioned their cooperation with the French on the establishment of such a district with locally recruited officials.²¹

The Qadha of Kurd Dagħ initially encompassed around 370 villages and was divided into four sub-districts (Nahiye): Rajo, Katma/Qitmê, Bulbul, and Djoum/Cûmê.²¹ The administrative seat (chef-lieu) was initially located at the strategic railway town of Qitmê, later moving to Meidanki, and then to Maabatli/Mabeta.²¹ Over time, the settlement of Afrin, which had been founded as a market center in the 19th century and was further developed under the French⁸, grew in importance and eventually became the primary administrative and economic hub of the region.²¹

A notable feature of the Qadha's administration was the designation of both Turkish and Arabic as official languages.²¹ This linguistic concession likely reflected the reality of the border zone, where Turkish was understood or spoken, and potentially acknowledged the ongoing influence and political interests of the neighboring Turkish state.²¹

The establishment of the Qadha of Kurd Dagħ, therefore, represents a microcosm of Mandate politics. It institutionalized the region's Kurdish identity within the French administrative system, serving French interests in managing diversity and potentially weakening broader nationalist movements. Simultaneously, it was a product of local Kurdish political agency and negotiation, shaped by the specific demands of collaborating elites and the undeniable geopolitical reality of the new Turkish border. The very structure and functioning of the Qadha, with its shifting centers and linguistic compromises, embodied these complex and often competing pressures.

1.5. Key Historical Sources

The reconstruction of Afrin's history during the French Mandate relies on various types of sources mentioned within the provided research material. Primary sources potentially include official documents from the League of Nations pertaining to the Mandate system¹, administrative decrees and bulletins issued by the French High Commission in Beirut¹, reports from French military, intelligence, and administrative officials detailing aspects like Kurdish migration patterns, village counts, and security situations¹⁶, and diplomatic records, such as those from the US State Department.²³ Memoirs and contemporary accounts, like those referenced by Lange regarding local resistance figures²¹, and Kurdish periodicals published in Syria and Lebanon during the Mandate (such as *Hawar*, mentioned as used by Tejel⁹⁰), also offer valuable perspectives, although direct access to these is limited to the references within the snippets.

Crucial secondary sources, frequently cited, provide synthesis and analysis based on these

primary materials and broader research. These include Philip Khoury's comprehensive study *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945*²⁵, Stephen Hemsley Longrigg's earlier work *Syria and Lebanon Under French Mandate*³¹, and Jordi Tejel's focused research in *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society*.⁶⁴ Katharina Lange's chapter, "Contested Terrain: Cross-border Violence, Politics and Memory in Syria's Kurd Dagħ Region," offers specific, detailed insights into the local dynamics of Afrin during this period.²¹ Other scholars whose work informs the understanding of the period, as referenced in the snippets, include Benjamin White on minority politics²⁴, Michael Provence on the Great Syrian Revolt and counterinsurgency¹⁷, James Gelvin on early nationalism²², and French geographers like Fevret and Gibert on demographics.¹⁶

2. Administrative Status and Governance Structure

2.1. Formal Status within Mandate Hierarchy

As established, the Qadha of Kurd Dagħ was an administrative district (a second-tier unit) within the larger framework of the State of Aleppo, which later merged into the State of Syria and the Syrian Republic.⁸ This placed it firmly within the hierarchical structure of the French Mandate. At the apex of this structure was the French High Commissioner, based in Beirut, who represented the authority of the French Republic and the League of Nations.¹ The High Commissioner wielded considerable, almost absolute, power in legislative and executive matters within the Mandated territories and acted as the intermediary with foreign powers.³⁹ Beneath the High Commissioner, the administration of Syria was carried out through the various state governments established by the French. However, these state structures, and by extension the local administrations within them like the Qadha of Kurd Dagħ, operated under strict French supervision.¹ Local authorities, whether Syrian officials or designated local leaders, possessed very limited independent decision-making power. Their authority was subordinate to French officials (delegates, advisors, intelligence officers) who could easily overrule local decisions and dictate policy.¹ The French administration relied heavily on its central bureaucracy, including the Secretary General and the pervasive *Services Spéciaux* (Special Services or intelligence branch), which played a critical role in gathering information, monitoring political activity, and shaping French policy on the ground.³⁹ The governance of Kurd Dagħ, therefore, was embedded within this system of centralized French control, despite its specific administrative designation.

2.2. French Policies Implemented Locally (Kurd-Dagħ)

Several key French policies shaped the political and social landscape of Kurd Dagħ during the Mandate:

- **Administrative Recognition and Structuring:** The very act of creating the Qadha of Kurd Dagħ in 1921 was a significant policy decision.²¹ It formally recognized the region's Kurdish character but did so within a framework designed to facilitate French administration and control. Concessions such as allowing locally recruited officials and

recognizing Turkish alongside Arabic as official languages were pragmatic measures aimed at securing local cooperation and managing the complexities of a border region adjacent to an assertive Turkish state.²¹

- **Divide and Rule (Divide et Impera):** This was a fundamental strategy applied throughout Syria, and Kurd Dagħ was no exception. By creating separate administrative units based partly on ethnicity or sect (Kurd Dagħ, Alawite State, Jabal Druze) and emphasizing minority identities, the French aimed to prevent the consolidation of a unified Syrian national movement that could challenge their rule.¹ France often positioned itself as the protector of minorities (including Christians, Alawites, Druze, and potentially Kurds in certain contexts) against the perceived dominance of the Sunni Arab majority.²⁴ A practical manifestation of this was the recruitment of Kurds and other minorities into the *Troupes Spéciales du Levant*, the local Mandate army, thereby creating military forces perceived as loyal to France rather than to a unified Syria.¹⁵
- **Co-option of Local Elites:** To govern effectively with limited French personnel, the Mandate authorities relied on cultivating relationships with existing local power structures. In Kurd Dagħ, this meant forming alliances with influential tribal leaders and landowners (Aghas).²⁰ Figures like Koreşît Agha were brought into the French system, granted positions and influence, and expected in return to maintain order and loyalty within their communities.²¹ This policy, while pragmatic for the French, often reinforced existing social hierarchies and created resentment among those excluded from power or exploited by these elites.²⁰
- **Demographic Management:** The French actively facilitated the settlement of Kurdish refugees fleeing persecution in Turkey during the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in the fertile Jazira region, granting them citizenship.¹⁵ This policy served multiple purposes: it populated underdeveloped agricultural lands, potentially increased economic output¹⁵, and bolstered the non-Arab population, aligning with the 'divide and rule' strategy.¹⁵ While the primary focus of documented settlement efforts was Jazira, the significant influx of refugees undoubtedly impacted border regions like Kurd Dagħ, likely increasing its Kurdish population density and potentially altering social relations between established residents and newcomers.¹⁵
- **Security and Pacification:** Establishing and maintaining order was a constant preoccupation. The French deployed military forces, including colonial troops, to occupy strategic points like railway stations (e.g., Qitmê) and patrol the region.²¹ They actively worked to suppress armed resistance, from the early 'tchete' bands influenced by Turkish Kemalists to the later Mûrûd movement.⁴ Methods included military operations, infantry patrols, arrests, public executions in major centers like Damascus (which likely served as warnings to other regions)¹⁷, and, notably, the use of aerial bombardment against villages suspected of supporting insurgents, a tactic employed during the Great Syrian Revolt (1925-27) and also reportedly used against the Mûrûd in Kurd Dagħ.¹⁷ Alongside suppression, the French invested in infrastructure repair (bridges, communication lines) to facilitate troop movement and administrative

control.²¹

- **Economic Development:** Mandate authorities professed an aim to develop the country's resources.⁷ This included building roads, improving urban amenities, and encouraging agriculture.⁷ In Afrin, the town was developed as a market center.⁸ However, broader economic policies often favored French economic interests, such as the 'open door' policy for imports ⁴⁷, and the extent of specific development initiatives benefiting Kurd Dagħ during the Mandate remains unclear from the available sources.

2.3. Role of Local Leaders (Aghas, Sheikhs)

The Kurdish leadership in Kurd Dagħ during the French Mandate was far from unified, reflecting diverse strategies and interests in response to colonial rule and internal dynamics:

- **Traditional Power Holders:** Before the Mandate, political and social influence was concentrated in the hands of tribal chieftains (Aghas), who were often significant landowners, and respected religious figures (Sufi Sheikhs).²¹ This traditional elite structure formed the baseline upon which French rule was imposed.
- **Collaboration with the French:** A significant portion of the established Agha class found it advantageous to collaborate with the new French authorities. By aligning themselves with the Mandate power, figures like Koreşit Agha could secure their own positions, gain administrative roles, and leverage French support to maintain or enhance their local influence.²¹ They acted as crucial intermediaries for the French administration, facilitating governance in a challenging region. This collaboration, however, tied their legitimacy to the colonial power and made them targets for anti-French and anti-elite sentiment.²⁰
- **Armed Resistance Leadership:** Concurrently, other local Kurdish figures took up arms against the French, particularly during the turbulent period immediately following World War I and the establishment of the border (c. 1919-1921). Leaders of 'tchete' bands, such as Meho Îbshashê and Tek Bîqli Haji, utilized their knowledge of the terrain and local networks to conduct guerrilla warfare against French forces and infrastructure.²¹ Later, Sheikh Ibrahim Khalil emerged as the central figure of the Mûrûd movement in the mid-1930s, mobilizing significant popular opposition.²⁰
- **Internal Socio-Political Conflict (The Mûrûd Movement):** The Mûrûd movement highlights deep internal fissures within Kurd Dagħ society. Led by a religious figure, it drew its strength primarily from the peasantry and explicitly challenged the economic and social dominance of the French-aligned Agha class.²⁰ This movement was simultaneously anti-French and anti-Agha, indicating that resistance to colonial rule was intertwined with internal class conflict and a desire to overturn the traditional socio-economic order.²¹ The movement's success in dismantling tribal structures suggests a profound, albeit violently suppressed, social transformation.²⁰
- **Engagement in Formal Politics:** Beyond collaboration and armed resistance, some Kurdish leaders from Kurd Dagħ attempted to advance Kurdish interests through the political channels established by the Mandate. In 1924, Nuri Kandy, identified as a

delegate or deputy from Kurd Dagħ, submitted the first known petition to the French authorities requesting administrative autonomy for all Kurdish-majority areas in Syria.¹⁵ Later, during the elections held under the 1930 constitution, Hassan Aouni, a member of the Kurdish nationalist organization Xoybûn, was elected as a deputy representing Kurd Dagħ (1931-1932).¹⁶ These actions demonstrate an emerging Kurdish political consciousness seeking recognition and rights within the new Syrian state structure.

The coexistence of these different roles – collaborator, resistor, challenger of internal structures, political petitioner – underscores the complexity of Kurdish leadership and political life in Kurd Dagħ under the French Mandate. French policies interacted with pre-existing social structures and emerging nationalist sentiments to produce a fragmented political landscape characterized by competing loyalties and strategies.

3. Socio-Economic Conditions

3.1. Land Ownership and Tenure

Land was a central element of the socio-economic structure and a source of significant tension in Kurd Dagħ during the Mandate period. The pre-existing system was characterized by the considerable influence of landowning Aghas, who formed a distinct elite stratum.²¹ This concentration of land ownership in the hands of a few powerful families likely resulted in significant economic inequality between the Agha class and the broader peasant population. This inequality appears to have been a major grievance fueling the Mûrûd movement in the mid-1930s, which specifically targeted the economic power of these landlords.²⁰

The French Mandate authorities implemented land tenure reforms in some parts of Syria⁷, but the snippets provide no specific details about whether or how these reforms affected Kurd Dagħ. It is probable that the legal landscape remained a complex amalgamation of inherited Ottoman land laws, new French regulations, and deeply ingrained local customary practices ('Urf) governing land use and inheritance.⁷² The French policy of co-opting local Aghas²¹ likely served to initially reinforce, rather than challenge, the existing unequal landholding patterns, further entrenching the power of collaborating elites.

A major disruption to the land tenure system and the regional economy was the imposition of the Turkish-Syrian border in 1921.²¹ This new political boundary physically separated landowners, particularly those based in the formerly central town of Kilis, from their agricultural estates located south of the border in what became the Syrian Qadha of Kurd Dagħ.²¹ This division of property and disruption of traditional land-use patterns undoubtedly created significant economic hardship, legal complexities regarding ownership and taxation across the border, and likely contributed to local discontent. Land ownership was thus not merely an economic factor but a critical point of social stratification, political alignment (Aghas vs. peasants, collaborators vs. resisters), and economic vulnerability exacerbated by the new geopolitical reality of the border.

3.2. Agricultural Practices (Focus on Olives)

Agriculture formed the backbone of the economy in Afrin/Kurd-Dagh. The region is historically, and continues to be, renowned for its extensive olive groves and the production of high-quality olive oil.¹² Sources suggest olive cultivation in the area is ancient, possibly dating back thousands of years.⁴⁵ Olive oil from Afrin was highly valued, used both for consumption and as a key ingredient in the famous Aleppo soap.⁴⁴ Before the Syrian civil war began in 2011, Afrin was considered the main economic supplier for the major urban center of Aleppo¹², indicating a robust agricultural base likely established or significantly developed during the Mandate period. The region's role as the fertile agricultural hinterland for Kilis was disrupted by the border.²¹

While the French Mandate administration generally stated its intention to encourage agricultural development in Syria⁷, specific policies targeting or impacting the olive sector in Afrin during the 1920s-1940s are not detailed in the provided sources. Much of the available information on the Afrin olive economy, including details of exploitation, trade manipulation, and destruction of groves, relates to the period after 2011, particularly following the Turkish intervention in 2018.⁴² Nonetheless, the well-established historical importance of olive cultivation provides the essential context for understanding the region's primary economic activity and source of livelihood during the Mandate years.

3.3. Trade Routes and General Economy

The town of Afrin was developed as a market center under French administration, suggesting an effort to formalize and perhaps control local commerce.⁸ The region's economy was strongly oriented towards Aleppo, its primary market and urban connection.¹² Key transportation infrastructure facilitated this connection and French strategic interests. The Baghdad Railway, completed through the area shortly before World War I, had stations like Katma/Qitmê and was a vital supply line for French forces, making it a target for insurgents.²¹

Roads also connected the region to Aleppo and the port of Iskenderun/Alexandretta.²¹ The establishment of the Turkish border profoundly reshaped trade. While it cut off traditional links to Kilis²¹, it simultaneously created a new frontier economy. The border, described as porous until the late 1950s²¹, facilitated cross-border movement and trade, both licit and illicit. Smuggling ("frontier activities") became a feature of the borderland economy, likely involving agricultural goods, consumer items, and potentially arms and munitions.²¹ Formal trade was subject to the Mandate's customs regulations¹ and potentially influenced by France's 'open door' policy that tended to favor French imports.⁴⁷

The overall economic climate was also affected by broader events. The Great Depression likely had impacts, although not specified for Afrin. World War II brought significant disruption, cutting off Syria's access to European export markets and leading to domestic shortages and inflation, which caused popular unrest.⁷

In essence, Afrin's economy during the Mandate was characterized by its agricultural base (olives), its strong linkage to Aleppo, and the transformative impact of the new Turkish border. This border disrupted old patterns but also generated new forms of economic activity characteristic of a contested frontier zone, operating within the broader framework of French

Mandate economic policies and subject to major external shocks like WWII.

4. Demographic Makeup

4.1. Ethnic Composition (Focus on Kurds)

The Afrin region, or Kurd-Dagh, was consistently described during the Mandate period and historically as a predominantly Kurdish area.⁸ Its very name, "Kurd Mountain," and its Ottoman designation as the "Sancak of the Kurds" reflect this long-standing demographic reality.¹² The French decision to establish a specific Qadha of Kurd Dagh was based on the recognition of this ethnic homogeneity.²¹ The primary language spoken was the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish.²¹ While overwhelmingly Kurdish, the region was not exclusively so. Sources indicate the presence of minority communities, most notably Yazidis, who have ancient roots in the area.⁸ Yazidi villages were concentrated particularly in the southern part of the region, near Jebel Seman/Çiyayê Lêlûn.⁶⁰ There were also mentions of Alevi (or Kizilbash) communities²¹, and potentially small numbers of Arabs, Turkmen, Armenians, and Christians, although their presence seems to have been less significant than in other parts of northern Syria like the Jazira.¹⁰ French Mandate policies, which often emphasized minority distinctions²⁴, likely contributed to the awareness and perhaps the political salience of these different groups within the region. The vast majority of the Kurdish population, like Kurds elsewhere in Syria, were Sunni Muslims.¹⁰

4.2. Population Estimates

Precise population figures for the Qadha of Kurd Dagh during the French Mandate period (1920–1946) are scarce in the provided materials. General estimates for the early 20th century mention an "unknown number" of Kurds living in the Kurd-Dagh region.¹⁶

The only specific figure relating directly to a settlement within the region is for the town of Afrin itself, which reportedly had 800 permanent residents in 1929.⁸ This figure provides a baseline, indicating that the urban center was relatively small at the beginning of the Mandate's consolidation phase. Its subsequent growth to 7,000 inhabitants by 1968⁸ demonstrates significant development occurring during and, more substantially, after the Mandate period.

Table 1: Population Growth of Afrin Town (Mandate Era and Beyond)

Year	Population Estimate	Source(s)
1929	800	⁸
1968	7,000	⁸

Note: This table illustrates the growth trajectory starting within the Mandate period.

While figures for the Jazira province in northeastern Syria show dramatic population increases during the Mandate, largely due to Kurdish immigration from Turkey (e.g., from 40,000 in 1929 to over 146,000 by 1943)⁸⁴, these numbers cannot be directly extrapolated to Kurd-Dagh. Post-Mandate and pre-civil war estimates for the entire Afrin district vary considerably

(ranging from around 200,000 ¹³ to over 500,000 in 2010 ⁵³), further highlighting the challenges in establishing accurate historical population data for the Mandate era specifically for Kurd Dagh. The overall population of Syria during the Mandate was likely in the range of 2.5 to 3.5 million, growing significantly after World War II. ⁵⁴ Kurd-Dagh constituted a small but distinct part of this total.

4.3. Migrations and Demographic Shifts

Kurdish presence in the Kurd-Dagh region predates the 20th century and the French Mandate. ⁸ However, the Mandate period witnessed demographic shifts influenced significantly by events in neighboring Turkey. The establishment of the Turkish Republic under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was accompanied by policies aimed at suppressing Kurdish identity and autonomy, leading to several failed Kurdish uprisings, notably the Sheikh Said rebellion (1925) and the Ararat rebellion (1927–1930). ¹⁵

The harsh repression associated with these events triggered a significant wave of Kurdish migration from Turkey into Syria during the 1920s and 1930s. ¹⁵ Estimates suggest that around 25,000 Kurds fled to Syria during this time. ¹⁶ French Mandate authorities actively encouraged this immigration. ¹⁶ They granted citizenship to the newcomers ¹⁶ and facilitated their settlement, particularly in the Jazira province where fertile land was available and the French sought to increase the non-Arab population. ¹⁵ French official reports documented the rapid increase in the number of Kurdish villages in Jazira during this period. ¹⁶

While Jazira was the primary destination for these large-scale settlement schemes, it is highly probable that the established Kurdish enclave of Kurd-Dagh, situated directly on the border, also received an influx of refugees from Turkey. ¹⁵ This migration would have reinforced the region's existing Kurdish character and likely increased its population density. The arrival of refugees from different regions of Turkish Kurdistan may also have contributed to a broadening of Kurdish identity beyond purely local or tribal affiliations, fostering elements of a shared "pan-Kurdish" consciousness, a process also influenced by the activities of nationalist intellectuals exiled in Syria. ¹⁵

Therefore, the demographic landscape of Kurd-Dagh during the French Mandate was likely shaped by both its long-standing Kurdish population and the addition of significant numbers of refugees from Turkey. This influx, facilitated by French policy, consolidated the region's Kurdish identity while potentially introducing new social dynamics between established inhabitants and recent arrivals. The French authorities utilized this migration both for economic development purposes and as part of their broader political strategy of managing Syria's diverse population.

5. Key Political Events, Resistance, and Conflicts

5.1. Early Resistance (Post-WWI / Early 1920s)

The transition from Ottoman rule to French control was not peaceful in northern Syria, including Kurd Dagh. The period immediately following World War I (1918–1921) was marked by

instability, uncertainty about the future borders, and armed resistance against the occupying powers (initially British, then French from late 1919).²¹ It took the French considerable effort, until approximately 1923, to quell insurgencies and establish full control over Syria.¹

In Kurd Dagħ, resistance manifested early, facilitated by the mountainous terrain which hindered French mechanized forces, the availability of firearms post-war, and the military experience of local men.²¹ Irregular armed bands, known locally as 'tchete' (Turkish/Kurdish) or 'isaba' (Arabic), emerged as the primary organizational form of this resistance.²¹ These groups, often led by local notables or figures with military backgrounds, engaged in guerrilla tactics, ambushing French supply caravans and sabotaging crucial infrastructure like the Baghdad Railway line.²¹ Prominent leaders of these early bands mentioned in sources include Meho Îbshashê (Muhammad Ibrahim), Tek Bîqli Haji, Ehmedê Rûtê, and Seydê Dîkê.²¹ This early resistance was significantly influenced and supported by the burgeoning Turkish National Movement (Kemalists) across the border.¹⁵ Turkish officers helped organize actions, and Kemalist propaganda was distributed among local tribes to foster anti-French sentiment.¹⁵ The cross-border movement of figures like Meho Îbshashê, who fought against both French and later Turkish patrols before seeking refuge back in Kurd Dagħ, illustrates the complex interplay between local resistance and Turkish nationalist aims.²¹ The French responded with military operations and eventually claimed "pacification" of the region, as noted by observers like Roger Lescot, although acknowledging that insecurity persisted for some time.²¹ A key element of the French strategy to consolidate control involved forging alliances with cooperative local Aghas, such as Koreşî.²¹

5.2. Demands for Autonomy and Political Mobilization

Alongside armed resistance, the Mandate period saw the emergence of Kurdish political demands articulated through formal channels. As early as 1924, Nuri Kandy (also spelled Kandy), identified as a delegate or deputy from Kurd Dagħ, submitted a petition to the French Mandate authorities requesting administrative autonomy for all Kurdish-majority regions within Syria.¹⁵ This represents one of the earliest documented expressions of Kurdish political aspirations for self-governance within the framework of the new Syrian state. Demands for autonomy were also voiced by other tribal leaders, such as those from the Barazi confederation.¹⁵

The establishment of the pan-Kurdish nationalist organization Xoybûn in Beirut in 1927, primarily by Kurdish intellectuals and leaders exiled from Turkey, provided an intellectual and organizational focal point for Kurdish nationalism in Syria.¹⁵ Xoybûn aimed to foster a Kurdish cultural renaissance and pursue political rights.¹⁵ Its influence extended to Kurd Dagħ, evidenced by the election of Xoybûn member Hassan Aouni as a deputy representing the region in the Syrian constituent assembly elections of 1931-1932.¹⁶ This indicates the growing political consciousness and organization among Syrian Kurds, including those in Afrin, during this period. The French authorities, while generally pursuing a 'divide and rule' strategy, sometimes showed complicity towards Kurdish cultural and political activities, particularly when they were oriented against Turkey or perceived as manageable within the Mandate

framework.¹³

5.3. The Mûrûd Movement (Mid-1930s - c. 1939)

A significant and distinct wave of local opposition emerged in Kurd Dagħ in the mid-1930s, known as the Mûrûd movement.²⁰ Led by Sheikh Ibrahim Khalil Soğukoğlu, a figure with religious authority (likely Sufi), the movement initially began as a religious brotherhood but rapidly evolved into a powerful socio-political and paramilitary force.²⁰ Sources suggest the movement gained momentum in the mid-1930s and was largely suppressed by the summer of 1939²⁰, coinciding with the finalization of Turkey's annexation of Hatay.²¹ Some accounts specifically mention a culmination or uprising in 1939.⁴¹

The Mûrûd movement had a dual character. It was staunchly anti-French, opposing the Mandate authority.²⁰ Simultaneously, and perhaps more significantly in terms of internal dynamics, it was a social revolt driven primarily by the poorer peasant population against the established Kurdish Agha class, particularly those landlords who had collaborated with the French.²⁰ The movement denounced the glaring economic inequalities and sought to dismantle the traditional tribal structures and the economic and social influence wielded by the Aghas, with the Sheikh Ismail Zada family (Koreşit's family) being a major target.²⁰

The movement also had external dimensions. French authorities strongly suspected, and evidence suggested, active support from Turkey, including propaganda, weapons, and volunteers, potentially aimed at destabilizing French Syria and fostering conditions for Kurd Dagħ's annexation.²¹ There were also reported connections between the Mûrûd and the Syrian nationalist National Bloc based in Damascus and Aleppo.²¹

The French response, in coordination with Syrian gendarmerie forces, was forceful suppression.⁴¹ This involved military clashes described as a "veritable war" and included the use of aerial bombardment against villages suspected of harboring or supporting the Mûrûd insurgents.²¹ The suppression was reportedly brutal.⁴¹

The consequences of the Mûrûd movement were significant. Although ultimately crushed by 1939, it led to considerable destruction in the region and, according to some sources, the deportation of inhabitants from Kurd-Dagħ and Afrin to Turkey.⁴¹ Socially, the movement's success in challenging and dismantling traditional Agha power and tribal structures contributed to a perception among Kurds from Kurd Dagħ that they were more "modern" compared to Kurds in regions like Jazira where such structures remained largely intact.²⁰

5.4. Tribal Dynamics

Tribal affiliations played a role in the social structure of Kurd Dagħ, but perhaps less centrally in political mobilization compared to the Jazira region.²¹ Power was concentrated in the hands of tribal Aghas, who were often major landowners.²¹ French policy engaged with these dynamics, both by co-opting influential Aghas to serve as intermediaries²¹ and by recruiting tribesmen into their local military forces.¹⁵ However, the Mûrûd movement represented a direct assault on this traditional tribal and Agha-based power structure, seeking to dismantle it in favor of a different social order based on religious leadership and peasant mobilization.²⁰ The

success of this challenge, even if temporary, indicates that tribal structures in Kurd Dagħ were perhaps less resilient or more contested than in other Kurdish areas of Syria during the Mandate.

The political landscape of Kurd Dagħ during the Mandate was thus shaped by a complex interplay of factors. Early resistance was influenced by the post-war chaos and Turkish nationalist ambitions. Later, the Mûrûd movement arose from deep-seated internal socio-economic grievances directed against the traditional Agha elite, intertwined with anti-French sentiment and possibly fueled by Turkish interference. Simultaneously, nascent Kurdish nationalist politics sought representation and autonomy within the Mandate system. These diverse and sometimes conflicting currents defined the region's political trajectory under French rule.

6. Relations with Central Authorities and Turkey

6.1. Relationship with French Mandate Authorities (High Commission)

The relationship between the Kurd Dagħ region and the central French Mandate authorities, represented by the High Commission in Beirut, was hierarchical and complex. As a Qadha within the State of Aleppo/Syria, Kurd Dagħ was subject to the ultimate authority of the High Commissioner.¹ French policy towards the region was ambivalent, characterized by a mix of control, suppression, co-option, and administrative management.

On one hand, the French asserted control through military presence, suppression of armed resistance (including the 'tchete' and the Mûrûd movement), and the establishment of administrative structures like the Qadha itself.²¹ On the other hand, they engaged with local actors through strategies of co-option, forming alliances with powerful Aghas²¹, making concessions on local administration (local recruitment, language use)²¹, recruiting Kurds into their military forces¹⁵, and managing demographic flows by encouraging Kurdish refugee settlement.¹⁵

Kurdish actors in Kurd Dagħ responded to French rule in varied ways, demonstrating agency within the constraints of the Mandate system. Some elites collaborated, leveraging French power for local influence.²¹ Others engaged in armed resistance, challenging French authority directly.²⁰ Still others pursued political goals through petitions for autonomy¹⁵ or participation in the limited electoral processes allowed by the French.¹⁶ This dynamic relationship reflected both the imposition of French colonial power and the active, albeit fragmented, responses of the local Kurdish population and its leadership.

6.2. Relationship with Syrian Nationalist Movement (Damascus/Aleppo)

The relationship between Kurd Dagħ and the burgeoning Syrian nationalist movement, centered primarily in Damascus and Aleppo, was complicated by French policies and Kurdish aspirations. The French strategy of 'divide and rule' actively sought to prevent alliances between minority groups like the Kurds and the predominantly Arab nationalist movement.¹

France positioned itself as a protector of minorities, implicitly or explicitly casting the nationalist movement as a potential threat to their interests.²⁴

Despite this, interactions occurred. The Mûrûd movement in Kurd Dagħ reportedly had connections with the National Bloc, the main Syrian nationalist organization based in Damascus and Aleppo.²¹ This suggests potential tactical alliances based on shared anti-French sentiment, even if underlying goals differed. However, the long-term trajectory of Syrian politics after independence, marked by Arabization policies and the suppression of Kurdish identity⁹, indicates that fundamental tensions likely existed even during the Mandate period. French fragmentation policies probably succeeded in hindering the development of a strong, unified anti-colonial front encompassing both Arab and Kurdish nationalists. Administratively and economically, Kurd Dagħ maintained strong ties with Aleppo throughout the Mandate.¹² The later administrative shifts that placed the region under the authority of the unified State of Syria/Syrian Republic, centered in Damascus¹, altered the formal political relationship but likely did not erase the deep-rooted regional connections to Aleppo.

6.3. Cross-Border Interactions with Turkey

The relationship with Turkey was a defining feature of Kurd Dagħ's experience during the French Mandate. The establishment of the international border by the Treaties of Ankara (1921) and Lausanne (1923) physically divided the Kurd Dagħ region, separating it from its northern part and the town of Kilis, which remained in Turkey.⁸ This border became a constant factor influencing politics, society, and economy.

Turkey exerted significant influence across this new border. It actively supported anti-French insurgents in Kurd Dagħ during the early 1920s, providing propaganda and possibly material aid.¹⁵ Later, during the Mûrûd movement in the 1930s, Turkey was again suspected by the French of providing support (arms, volunteers, propaganda) with the potential aim of destabilizing French Syria and perhaps annexing Kurd Dagħ, mirroring its successful strategy in the Sanjak of Alexandretta (Hatay).²¹ The border, despite formal controls, remained porous, allowing for the movement of insurgents, refugees, and smugglers.²¹

The flow of people was predominantly from Turkey into Syria during this period. Tens of thousands of Kurdish refugees fled Kemalist repression in Turkey and settled in Syria, with French encouragement.¹⁵ While many settled in Jazira, Kurd Dagħ's location on the border made it an inevitable recipient or transit point for these refugees.¹⁵

The annexation of Hatay by Turkey in 1939 had a direct impact on Kurd Dagħ's strategic position, leaving it almost entirely surrounded by Turkish territory.⁸ This event likely heightened French concerns about Turkish intentions towards Kurd Dagħ and coincided with the final suppression of the Mûrûd revolt.²¹

Kurd-Dagħ during the Mandate period can thus be understood as a contested borderland. It was subject to the overarching control of the French Mandate authorities, influenced by the development of Syrian Arab nationalism centered in Aleppo and Damascus, and profoundly shaped by its proximity to the assertive new Turkish Republic. Local Kurdish actors navigated this complex geopolitical environment, engaging in strategies of collaboration, resistance, and

political negotiation, while simultaneously dealing with internal social divisions and the disruptive effects of the newly imposed border. The region became a stage where imperial ambitions, nationalisms (Turkish, Arab, Kurdish), and local socio-economic struggles intersected.

7. Synthesis and Overview

The French Mandate period (c. 1920-1946) was a pivotal era in the history of the Afrin region, or Kurd-Dagh. Emerging from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire into a new political reality defined by French colonial control and the creation of modern Syria and Turkey, the region experienced profound administrative, social, political, and economic transformations. Its distinct Kurdish identity, recognized historically and formalized by the French through the creation of the Qadha of Kurd Dagh ²¹, placed it in a unique position within the complex mosaic of Mandate Syria.

French governance in Kurd Dagh embodied the characteristic dualities of Mandate rule: a combination of direct control, military suppression of resistance, and administrative fragmentation aimed at preventing unified opposition ¹, alongside pragmatic policies of co-opting local elites (Aghas) ²¹, managing demographic flows (Kurdish refugees from Turkey) ¹⁵, and making limited concessions to local identity (administrative recognition, language use). ²¹ This approach, while designed to maintain French dominance, inadvertently provided spaces for the articulation and consolidation of Kurdish political consciousness, even as it fostered internal divisions.

The Kurdish population of Kurd Dagh responded to French rule in diverse ways. Traditional elites often collaborated, seeking to preserve their status within the new system. ²¹

Simultaneously, armed resistance emerged, initially linked to the post-war instability and Turkish nationalist influences ²¹, and later culminating in the significant Mûrûd movement of the mid-1930s. ²⁰ This latter movement was particularly complex, combining anti-French sentiment with a powerful internal social challenge to the established Agha class, driven by peasant grievances. ²⁰ Alongside these dynamics, nascent Kurdish nationalist politics sought recognition and autonomy through petitions and participation in Mandate-era political structures. ¹⁵

Socio-economically, the region remained predominantly agricultural, centered on its valuable olive groves and linked to the market of Aleppo. ¹² However, the Mandate period introduced major disruptions. The imposition of the Turkish border severed traditional economic ties with Kilis and divided landholdings, creating hardship and fostering a frontier economy characterized by smuggling and cross-border tensions. ²¹ Internal conflicts over land and resources, particularly between the Agha class and the peasantry, were a significant source of instability, exploited and exacerbated by the political dynamics of the Mûrûd revolt. ²⁰ Crucially, Kurd Dagh existed as a contested borderland throughout the Mandate. It was caught between the administrative framework of French Syria, the pull of the developing Syrian Arab nationalist movement, and the persistent political and demographic pressure from the newly established Republic of Turkey. ²¹ Turkish influence was felt through propaganda,

support for insurgents, the influx of refugees, and the constant geopolitical pressure culminating in the annexation of Hatay.¹⁵

In conclusion, the French Mandate period was formative for Afrin/Kurd-Dagh. It established the region's administrative boundaries within the modern Syrian state while simultaneously embedding it in a legacy of internal social conflict and complex, often antagonistic, cross-border relations, particularly with Turkey. French policies, aimed at control and fragmentation, paradoxically contributed to the strengthening of a distinct local Kurdish identity and political awareness, even as they sought to manage and contain it. The unresolved issues of political status, economic viability in the face of border disruptions, and the management of internal social tensions, all shaped during these decades, continued to influence the region's trajectory long after the departure of the French in 1946. The Mandate laid the foundations for many of the challenges and dynamics that would define Afrin's place within independent Syria and the broader Kurdish question in the Middle East.

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