

Village Abandonment in Afrin Before 2010: An Analysis of Historical, Political, Socio-Economic, and Environmental Factors

I. Introduction

A. The Afrin Region (Kurd Dagħ): A Brief Overview

The Afrin region, historically and culturally known as Kurd Dagħ, meaning "Mountain of the Kurds," is a geographically distinct and fertile area situated in northwestern Syria, immediately adjacent to the Turkish border.¹ Characterized by its mountainous terrain, extensive olive groves, and the life-giving Afrin River, the region has long been recognized for its agricultural bounty and strategic importance.¹ Prior to 2012, the Afrin district was administratively part of the Aleppo governorate within the Syrian Arab Republic.⁷ The region is a tapestry of numerous villages, historically constituting the most densely Kurdish-populated part of Syria.¹ Geographically, it covers an area of approximately 3,850 square kilometers and, prior to later administrative changes, comprised seven sub-districts (Afrin center, Sharran, Bulbul, Rajo, Maabatli, Jandaris, and Sheikh Hadid) encompassing around 366 villages.⁵ This unique geographical and demographic composition has profoundly shaped its history and the experiences of its inhabitants.

B. The Inquiry: Village Abandonment in Afrin Before 2010

This report undertakes an investigation into the phenomenon of village depopulation and, in some instances, complete abandonment within the Afrin region, focusing specifically on the period preceding the Syrian Civil War, which commenced in March 2011.⁹ The core objective is to identify and analyze the complex, often interwoven, factors that contributed to this trend before the transformative and widely documented events of the post-2010 era. For the purposes of this analysis, "abandonment" will encompass not only the complete desertion of village sites but also significant and sustained depopulation leading to the erosion of community viability and the cessation of traditional village life.

C. Thesis Statement

The depopulation and abandonment of villages in the Afrin region before 2010 were not the result of a single, acute event but rather a protracted and multifaceted process. This trend was driven by a confluence of long-term Syrian state policies pertaining to land ownership and demographic engineering, systemic socio-economic marginalization and neglect of rural

areas, and escalating environmental pressures, most notably a period of severe and prolonged drought. These elements, operating in concert over decades, progressively undermined the sustainability of village life, compelling many inhabitants to seek livelihoods and security elsewhere, leading to a gradual emptying of parts of the rural landscape.

D. Methodology and Scope

This report synthesizes information from a variety of sources, including academic research, reports from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and journalistic accounts, to construct a comprehensive analysis of pre-2010 village abandonment in Afrin. The temporal scope is strictly limited to the period before 2010, examining historical trends, state policies, socio-economic conditions, and environmental factors that shaped the region prior to the widespread conflict that began in 2011. The inquiry seeks to understand the scale and nature of this abandonment, moving beyond anecdotal evidence to assess the systemic drivers. The perception of "so many villages" being abandoned necessitates a critical evaluation of both specific documented cases and the broader, often less visible, processes of rural out-migration that contributed to this phenomenon.

II. The Historical and Demographic Tapestry of Afrin (Pre-2010)

A. Afrin: A Predominantly Kurdish Enclave

The Afrin region, or Kurd Dagħ, has an enduring identity as a predominantly ethnic Kurdish area.¹ Historical estimates of the Kurdish population share vary, ranging from approximately 75% to figures exceeding 97% prior to the significant demographic shifts that intensified after 2011.¹ The historical record indicates Kurdish settlement in the area by at least the 18th century, with some scholarly accounts suggesting a presence dating back to antiquity.² Significantly, Ottoman administrative documents referred to the Afrin Plateau as the "Sancak of the Kurds," underscoring the long-standing Kurdish demographic and cultural imprint on the region.² This deep-rooted Kurdish identity is fundamental to understanding the region's socio-political dynamics and the impact of state policies, many of which disproportionately affected this community.

B. Other Ethnic and Religious Communities

While overwhelmingly Kurdish, Afrin was not ethnically monolithic. The region also hosted Arab communities, some of whom had migrated from nearby districts such as Manbij (notably the al-Bubanna and al-Omeyrat clans), as well as smaller Armenian and Turkmen minorities.⁷ The religious landscape was similarly diverse, with Sunni Islam being the majority faith. However, significant communities of Alevi Kurds, primarily concentrated in the Maabatli sub-district, Yazidi Kurds, with notable populations in specific villages particularly in the Sharran and Shayrawa areas, and Christians also formed part of Afrin's societal fabric.¹ For instance, before 2018, an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 Yazidis and around 1,200 Christians

(200-250 families) resided in Afrin.¹⁶ The presence of these diverse groups, and the interplay of their relationships and experiences, contributed to the complex social tapestry of the region.

C. Traditional Village Life and Socio-Economic Structures

The economic backbone of Afrin's villages was traditionally agriculture. The region was renowned for its olive cultivation, with an estimated 14 million olive trees, some centuries old, making olive oil a central product.³ Wheat production was also a significant agricultural activity.⁴ Indeed, before 2011, approximately 75% of Afrin's population was engaged in agriculture.³ Land tenure systems evolved over time, with historical accounts noting the presence of large landowners, referred to as "Aghawat" or "feudal lords," prior to state-implemented land reforms in the mid-20th century.²⁰ Village life was typically characterized by close-knit communities, often structured around tribal affiliations or extended family networks.⁸ This heavy reliance on agriculture, however, rendered the villages and their inhabitants particularly vulnerable to the vagaries of climate, market fluctuations, and shifts in state agricultural policies.

D. Population Trends and Rural-Urban Dynamics (Pre-2010)

A notable demographic trend in the Afrin region before 2010 was the growth of its administrative center, Afrin city. The city experienced significant expansion, particularly after the 1960s, largely fueled by migration from the surrounding villages.¹⁵ This indicates that factors prompting people to leave their ancestral villages were operative for decades, well before the major crises of the 21st century. This long-term rural-to-urban drift suggests underlying issues such as limited economic opportunities in villages, or a desire for better access to services and education available in the urban center.

Population data for Afrin city illustrates this growth: from 19,914 inhabitants in 1981, it grew to 28,698 in 1994, reached 36,562 by the 2004 census, and was estimated at 41,794 in 2009.¹⁵ The total population for the entire Afrin district was recorded as 172,095 in the 2004 census.² Some sources provide a significantly higher estimate of 523,258 for the Afrin region by December 31, 2010.⁵ This latter figure represents a substantial increase from the 2004 census data. While some natural population growth would be expected, a nearly threefold increase in just over six years is considerable and may reflect different geographical definitions (e.g., district versus a broader conceptualization of the Afrin region/canton), or potentially the early, less-documented influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from other parts of Syria seeking refuge in Afrin due to its relative stability even in the period immediately preceding the full escalation of the Syrian Civil War.²⁴ However, for the specific focus on pre-2010 village abandonment, the critical aspect is the evidence of out-migration from rural areas, irrespective of net population changes in the district that might be influenced by in-migration to Afrin city.

The following table provides a consolidated demographic overview:

Table 1: Demographic Overview of Afrin District (Pre-2010)

Demographic Indicator	Data	Source(s)
Total Population (Afrin District)	172,095 (2004 Census)	²
	523,258 (Dec 2010 Estimate - see note below)	⁵
Population of Afrin City	19,914 (1981); 28,698 (1994); 36,562 (2004); 41,794 (2009 Estimate)	¹⁵
Primary Ethnic Composition	Kurdish: ~75% to >97% (pre-2011 estimates)	¹
	Arab: ~25% (some estimates)	⁷
	Other (Armenian, Turkmen): ~1%	⁷
Main Religious Groups	Sunni Islam: ~89%	⁷
	Alevism: ~4% (mainly in Maabatli)	⁷
	Yazidism: ~1% (concentrated in specific villages)	⁷
	Christianity: ~6%	⁷
Number of Villages	Approx. 360-366	¹

Note on 2010 Population Estimate: The significant increase from the 2004 census figure requires careful interpretation and may reflect differing regional definitions or early IDP movements.

This demographic baseline underscores Afrin's strong Kurdish identity and agricultural orientation, providing essential context for understanding the scale and impact of factors leading to village depopulation.

III. Syrian State Policies and Their Impact on Afrin's Villages

Syrian state policies, enacted over several decades prior to 2010, played a significant role in shaping the rural landscape of Afrin, often contributing to conditions that precipitated village depopulation and abandonment. These policies ranged from direct interventions in land ownership and demographic composition to systemic neglect of rural development.

A. Land and Demographic Engineering: Reshaping Rural Afrin

A critical dimension of state impact involved policies that directly affected land tenure and the ethnic makeup of rural communities. These interventions were not isolated events but formed part of a broader pattern of state action that created chronic instability and insecurity for many of Afrin's original inhabitants, particularly its Kurdish population.

1. The 1958 Agrarian Reform Law (No. 161)

Promulgated during the period of union between Egypt and Syria (the United Arab Republic), Agrarian Reform Law No. 161 aimed officially at redistributing agricultural land by expropriating holdings that exceeded legally defined ceilings, often from individuals described as "feudal lords".²⁰ The law stipulated maximum ownership limits based on factors such as irrigation methods and average rainfall.²⁵

While the stated intent was socio-economic reform, its application in Kurdish-majority areas, including Afrin and the Hasakah governorate, has been reported by various sources as being politically motivated, with a particular focus on dispossessing Kurdish landowners.²⁶ In the Afrin region, this law led to the expropriation of thousands of hectares of land. Crucially, this expropriated land was then often redistributed to Arab families who were deliberately brought into the area from other Syrian regions.⁸ New settlements were established for these relocated families, with notable concentrations along the banks of the Afrin River, particularly within the administrative boundaries of the Jandaris subdistrict.⁸ Specific Arab tribes, such as the 'Amirat from the countryside east of Aleppo and the Bubana from the Menbij area, are documented as having been settled in Afrin villages under this program.⁸

The impact on the original Kurdish inhabitants was profound, often leading to their displacement and the loss of ancestral property. Villages that had been home to a few large, intermarrying Kurdish families for generations witnessed the introduction of new Arab settler families, fundamentally altering the local demographic and social structure.⁸ Some villages experienced a complete transformation. For example, Mehmediye Sharqi in the Jandaris subdistrict, originally inhabited by Kurdish (Mehmediye family) and Armenian communities, was entirely repopulated by new farming families who benefited from the agrarian reform, with none of the original inhabitants remaining.²⁷ Similarly, the village of Fîlik, also in Jandaris, was reportedly abandoned by its original inhabitants in the 1970s following the application of the agrarian reform law.²⁸ The agricultural lands of Burj Kamush in Jandaris were also redistributed under the reform.²¹ This policy, therefore, was a direct and often disruptive intervention that initiated demographic shifts and dispossessed segments of the indigenous rural population in Afrin.

2. Decree 49 (2008)

Issued in October 2008, Decree 49 represented another state measure with significant implications for land ownership in border regions. The decree ostensibly aimed to regulate property in border areas but was widely perceived as a tool to evict inhabitants, disproportionately affecting the Kurdish minority.²⁹ Kurds already faced systemic restrictions on their ability to buy, sell, or legally bequeath property.²²

Afrin, sharing a long and sensitive border with Turkey, was particularly vulnerable to the implications of Decree 49. The law made it exceedingly difficult for homeowners in these border regions, including Afrin's villages, to obtain official housing deeds (known as *tabu akhdar* or "green taboo"), which are crucial for proving legal ownership and securing tenure.⁸ This lack of secure legal title to their lands and homes created an environment of profound insecurity for Kurdish property owners. Issued shortly before the 2010 cut-off date of this report's focus, Decree 49 added a fresh layer of uncertainty and potential threat of

dispossession, likely contributing to considerations of out-migration among affected villagers who feared eviction or the inability to secure their property for future generations.

3. Broader Arabization Policies and Discriminatory Practices

Beyond specific land laws, successive Syrian governments pursued broader policies of ethnic discrimination and national persecution against the Kurdish population. A 1971 report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights noted that Syrian governments had adopted policies depriving Kurds of their national, democratic, and human rights, imposing ethnically-based exclusionary measures in political, economic, social, and cultural spheres.³⁰ These practices included restrictions on the use of the Kurdish language and celebration of Kurdish culture, the denial of Syrian citizenship to a significant number of Kurds (most notably following a special census in 1962 which primarily affected Kurds in the Jazira region but was indicative of the state's broader stance²²), and limitations on property ownership, educational opportunities, and eligibility for certain careers.²²

While some sources suggest that Afrin was spared the most overt and large-scale "Arab Belt" style Arabization campaigns that were implemented in other Kurdish regions like Jazira (where Arab settlers were systematically moved into Kurdish areas along the border¹¹), the general atmosphere of discrimination and the impact of specific land policies like the 1958 reform and Decree 49 nevertheless constituted a significant form of demographic and socio-political pressure on Afrin's Kurds. Government pressure on Kurdish land rights, often exacerbated by environmental factors like drought (particularly in the late 1990s), reportedly accelerated the trend of Kurdish urbanization as rural livelihoods became increasingly precarious.²⁹ These policies collectively fostered an environment in which Kurdish communities often felt marginalized and insecure in their own homeland, potentially viewing migration as a means to escape systemic discrimination or to secure a more stable future for their children, even if not directly forced from their homes by a specific eviction order at a particular moment.

The cumulative effect of these state interventions in land and demographic affairs was the creation of chronic instability and insecurity of tenure in many of Afrin's villages. This long-term pattern of disadvantage weakened the original communities' connection to and control over their land, rendering villages more susceptible to depopulation when other pressures, such as economic hardship or environmental crises, intensified. It cultivated a pervasive sense of precariousness regarding their future in their ancestral lands.

B. Governance and Development: Neglect of Rural Afrin

Beyond active policies of land and demographic engineering, the Syrian state's approach to governance and development in rural Afrin also contributed significantly to the pressures forcing villagers to leave. This often manifested as systemic neglect and underinvestment, creating an environment where village life became increasingly difficult to sustain.

1. Underinvestment in Essential Services and Infrastructure

Multiple accounts suggest that the Ba'athist regime systematically neglected and marginalized the Afrin region, resulting in poor socio-economic conditions.¹⁷ This neglect likely translated into chronic underinvestment in essential public services and infrastructure within Afrin's villages. While specific, comprehensive pre-2010 statistics detailing service levels

(such as access to reliable water supplies, electricity, adequately equipped schools, and accessible healthcare facilities) for individual Afrin villages are scarce in the available documentation, general reports on Syria during that period indicate that rural areas frequently lagged behind urban centers in terms of infrastructure development and service provision. Although some state efforts were made under Hafez al-Assad to expand health and education services to rural areas nationally ³², subsequent policies under Bashar al-Assad, particularly the reduction of subsidies, often harmed rural populations.³²

A Syrian government document concerning rural development strategies (though not specific to Afrin in the pre-2010 period) acknowledges widespread issues of poverty, unemployment, and low income in rural Syria generally, alongside the need for improved basic services.³⁵ This implies that such deficiencies were prevalent across the country's rural areas, including Afrin. The need for Afrin's Kurdish students to travel to Aleppo for higher education before 2012 further suggests a lack of sufficient educational facilities within the Afrin region itself, a likely consequence of this developmental neglect.¹ Post-conflict assessments often highlight the need to repair or establish basic infrastructure, implying pre-existing deficits or significant degradation over time.³⁶

2. Consequences of Underdevelopment

The lack of sustained investment in rural Afrin had tangible negative consequences for its village inhabitants. These included:

- **Poor living standards:** Making daily life a struggle and diminishing the quality of life compared to urban areas.
- **Limited access to quality education and healthcare:** This often compelled families to relocate to cities like Afrin city or Aleppo to secure better educational opportunities for their children or to access more advanced medical care.
- **A weakened agricultural sector:** Despite being the mainstay of the local economy, agriculture suffered from a lack of state investment in modern irrigation systems, adequate rural road networks for transporting produce, and agricultural support services.
- **Increased vulnerability:** The underdeveloped state of the villages left their communities more exposed and less resilient to economic shocks, such as price fluctuations for agricultural products, and environmental challenges, particularly drought.

This pattern of neglect functioned as a significant "push" factor, making village abandonment or out-migration a rational, and often necessary, choice for many individuals and families seeking better livelihoods, improved services, and a more promising future. This "passive" approach to governance, characterized by inaction and a failure to invest, contributed as effectively to rural depopulation as more active, coercive policies.

The following table summarizes key state policies and their impacts:

Table 2: Key Syrian State Policies Impacting Rural Afrin (Pre-2010)

Policy	Description	Documented Impact in Afrin	Source(s)
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1958 Agrarian Reform Law (No. 161)	Expropriation of land from large landowners; redistribution.	Targeted Kurdish landowners; resettlement of Arab families (e.g., 'Amirat, Bubana tribes) in areas like Jandaris subdistrict (villages like Mehmediye Sharqi, Fîlik, Burj Kamush affected); displacement/replace ment of original Kurdish/Armenian inhabitants.	8
General Arabization Policies & Discriminatory Practices	Restrictions on Kurdish language, culture, citizenship; limitations on property rights, employment.	Created an environment of insecurity and marginalization; contributed to pressure on Kurdish land rights and accelerated urbanization.	11
Decree 49 (2008)	Aimed to evict inhabitants of border areas from their lands; made obtaining official housing deeds difficult.	Badly affected Afrin due to its border location; increased property insecurity for Kurdish homeowners.	8
Neglect of Rural Development & Infrastructure (Ongoing pre-2010)	Systemic underinvestment in essential services (water, electricity, schools, healthcare) and infrastructure.	Poor economic conditions, limited opportunities, forced migration for education/livelihoods.	1

IV. Socio-Economic Drivers of Rural Exodus

The socio-economic environment in Afrin's villages prior to 2010 was characterized by a vulnerable agrarian base, limited non-agricultural opportunities, and the impacts of broader national economic policies. These factors collectively created significant "push" pressures, encouraging out-migration and contributing to the gradual depopulation of rural communities.

A. The Vulnerable Agrarian Economy of Afrin

Afrin's economy was overwhelmingly reliant on agriculture, with olives, olive oil, and wheat being cornerstone products.³ Nationally, before the Syrian Civil War, agriculture constituted a substantial part of Syria's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) – around 26% in earlier years, though this figure dropped to approximately 17% by 2008, largely due to the severe drought – and employed a significant portion of the total labor force.³³ As a prime agricultural zone, Afrin mirrored this national dependency. Before 2011, an estimated 75% of Afrin's own population was directly engaged in agricultural activities.³ This heavy dependence on a single sector made the rural economy inherently susceptible to a range of risks, including fluctuations in market prices for agricultural commodities, variations in climate patterns (especially rainfall), and changes in state agricultural support policies or lack thereof.¹⁸ Any significant downturn in the agricultural sector would thus have immediate and widespread consequences for the livelihoods of the vast majority of village inhabitants.

B. Limited Non-Agricultural Opportunities in Villages

A critical factor contributing to rural out-migration was the pronounced lack of diverse economic activities and employment options outside of farming within most of Afrin's villages. The rural economy offered few alternative pathways for income generation. This economic homogeneity meant that younger generations, individuals seeking different career paths, or those unable to sustain a viable livelihood solely from agriculture were compelled to look elsewhere for employment.¹⁷ Common destinations included the district's urban center, Afrin city, larger Syrian metropolitan areas such as Aleppo and Damascus, or even international migration in search of better prospects.¹⁷ This scarcity of local, non-farm employment opportunities is a classic driver of rural depopulation globally, and Afrin's villages were clearly affected by this dynamic.

C. Impact of National Economic Policies

Broader shifts in Syria's national economic policies also had repercussions for the rural economy of Afrin. The country underwent a gradual transition from a predominantly state-controlled, socialist-oriented economy towards a more liberalized market system. This process, often referred to as the second "infatih" (opening), began in the mid-1980s and gained further momentum under Bashar al-Assad in the 2000s.³² While these reforms aimed to encourage private sector growth, the benefits were often not evenly distributed, tending to concentrate among individuals and groups with strong connections to the ruling regime.³² For many ordinary Syrians, particularly those in rural areas, certain aspects of this economic liberalization had adverse effects. The reduction or removal of state subsidies for essential commodities like fuel and food, along with the dismantling of price ceilings for agricultural inputs and products, placed considerable financial strain on rural peasant households and urban laborers.³² Furthermore, state budgetary priorities often favored current expenditures, such as public sector salaries and administrative costs, over substantial long-term investments in productive sectors within rural areas, thereby limiting opportunities for

sustainable local economic growth and diversification.³⁷ These national economic policies, even if not specifically designed to target Afrin, could inadvertently exacerbate existing economic hardships in its villages, making them less economically viable and attractive as places to live and work.

D. Poverty, Economic Hardship, and Migration as a Coping Strategy

The confluence of a vulnerable agricultural base, scarce local non-farm opportunities, and the often-negative impacts of national economic policies resulted in significant economic hardship and, in many cases, poverty for rural families in Afrin. Faced with these challenges, migration emerged as a crucial coping strategy. This took various forms, including internal migration from villages to urban centers within Syria (Afrin city, Aleppo, Damascus) and international migration to other countries. Such movements were often undertaken to diversify household income through remittances sent back to the village, to access more stable employment, or simply to seek a more secure and promising livelihood for the family.¹⁷ The chronic lack of diverse economic opportunities, coupled with the state's failure to invest adequately in rural development, likely led to a gradual "hollowing out" of villages. This process involved the out-migration of the most economically active, often younger and more educated, segments of the population. Their departure would, in turn, further weaken the economic vitality and social resilience of these communities, making them even more susceptible to other shocks and potentially accelerating a cycle of decline.

V. Environmental Pressures and Village Viability

Environmental factors, particularly a severe and prolonged drought exacerbated by long-term resource mismanagement, played a critical role in undermining the viability of agricultural livelihoods in Afrin's villages before 2010. This environmental stress acted as a powerful catalyst for depopulation, especially in a region so heavily dependent on agriculture.

A. The Severe Drought of 2006-2010/2011

Syria endured a devastating multi-year drought from approximately 2006 to 2010 (some sources extend this to 2011), widely regarded as one of the most severe droughts in its modern history.³² This period was characterized by drastically reduced rainfall, unusually high temperatures, and a consequential widespread failure of agricultural production across the country. While the northeastern regions of Syria were often highlighted as the most acutely affected, the drought's impact was felt in virtually all agricultural zones, including the fertile lands of Afrin.

The agricultural sector suffered catastrophic losses. Wheat production, a staple crop, plummeted to the extent that Syria, traditionally self-sufficient and even an exporter of wheat, was forced to import large quantities for the first time in many years.¹⁸ Livestock herds were decimated due to the lack of pasture and fodder, with some reports indicating herders lost up to 80% of their animals.⁴² Nationally, the contribution of agriculture to Syria's GDP saw a significant decline during this period, falling from around 25% to 17% by 2008.³⁴ The socio-economic consequences were dire. Hundreds of thousands of Syrians,

predominantly from rural farming communities, lost their primary livelihoods.⁴¹ Food prices, particularly for grains and meat, increased sharply, leading to widespread food insecurity and rising rates of malnutrition, especially among children.³⁴ School dropout rates also increased as families struggled to cope and children were sometimes put to work.³⁹

A major outcome of the drought was a significant wave of internal migration. Estimates vary, but tens of thousands of families, potentially numbering up to 1.5 million individuals, were forced to abandon their rural homes and lands, moving towards urban centers such as Damascus, Hama, Aleppo, and Dara'a in search of alternative means of survival.³² Given Afrin's agrarian economy and its geographical location within the broader drought-affected Levant, it is highly probable that its villages contributed to this flow of displaced populations, even if specific data for Afrin is not always disaggregated in national-level reports. The drought acted as an acute shock upon an already stressed agricultural system, pushing many farming families beyond their capacity to cope and making village abandonment an unavoidable outcome.

B. Long-Term Water Mismanagement and Resource Degradation

The devastating impact of the 2006–2010 drought was significantly amplified by pre-existing conditions of long-term water mismanagement and broader natural resource degradation, for which successive Syrian governments bear responsibility.³⁴ Unsustainable agricultural policies, implemented over decades, had encouraged high levels of production and the expansion of cultivation into marginal lands. These policies, sometimes coupled with land redistribution programs that did not always consider sustainable water use, led to the over-extraction of groundwater resources.³⁴ This over-pumping depleted aquifers, causing water shortages and increased salinization in some areas even before the onset of the severe drought.

Furthermore, a lack of investment in modernizing irrigation infrastructure, coupled with inefficient traditional irrigation practices, contributed to water wastage and further degradation of available water resources. Challenges such as the high cost of fuel needed for pumping irrigation water, uncontrolled and often illegal drilling of wells, and the general deterioration of existing water pumps and weak irrigation systems were prevalent, likely predating 2011 but certainly exacerbated by the drought and later conflict.⁴⁶ This legacy of resource mismanagement meant that when the severe drought struck, the agricultural system and the rural communities dependent upon it had diminished resilience and fewer coping mechanisms. The drought, therefore, did not occur in an environmental vacuum but rather fell upon a rural system already weakened by chronic stresses stemming from decades of state neglect, discriminatory policies, economic marginalization, and unsustainable resource management. This combination of chronic underlying vulnerability and acute environmental shock proved untenable for many of Afrin's villages, accelerating pre-existing trends of out-migration and leading to more widespread and, in some cases, permanent depopulation.

VI. Patterns and Manifestations of Village

Abandonment (Pre-2010)

The abandonment of villages in Afrin before 2010 was not a uniform event but manifested through various patterns, ranging from gradual out-migration to more complete desertion of specific settlements. These patterns were driven by a combination of the "push" factors within the villages and the "pull" factors of urban centers or opportunities abroad.

A. Documented Rural-to-Urban Migration and Emigration

As previously noted (Section II.D), a significant and long-term demographic trend in the Afrin region was the growth of Afrin city, largely fueled by migration from its surrounding villages, a process that began in the 1960s.¹⁵ This indicates a continuous, albeit perhaps slow, drain of population from rural areas towards the district's main urban hub.

Beyond movement to Afrin city, migration from the wider Afrin region to larger Syrian cities like Aleppo and Damascus, and even internationally, was a recognized phenomenon.¹⁷ This was often driven by economic hardship, limited local opportunities resulting from perceived Ba'athist state neglect, and the pursuit of better educational prospects, with many Afrin Kurds historically seeking higher education in Aleppo.¹

The severe drought of 2006-2010 acted as a significant accelerant to these existing migration patterns. Across Syria, rural populations were displaced in large numbers, with Aleppo being one of the key urban destinations for those fleeing agricultural collapse.³⁹ It is highly probable that Afrin's villages, with their agrarian economies, contributed to this drought-induced flow of migrants towards urban centers. These varied migration streams demonstrate that leaving villages was an ongoing coping mechanism and a strategy for advancement for many Afrin residents well before 2010.

B. Specific Examples of Depopulated or Abandoned Villages (Pre-2010)

While comprehensive statistics on village-by-village depopulation are scarce, several specific instances of significant depopulation or complete abandonment in the Afrin region prior to 2010 are documented:

- **Mehmediye Sharqi (محمديّة شرقي)**, Jandarîs subdistrict: This village provides a stark example of demographic replacement. Originally inhabited by the Kurdish Mehmediye family and an Armenian community, the 1958 Agrarian Reform led to the redistribution of its lands to new Arab farming families. Sources explicitly state that "none of the original inhabitants remain in the village".²⁷ This constitutes a complete abandonment by the original community, directly attributable to state policy.
- **Fîlik (فيلك / Gundî Fîlik)**, Jandarîs subdistrict: This small village or farm was reportedly "abandoned by its inhabitants in the 1970s after the application of the Agrarian Reform Law" (28) ^{هجرها السكان في سبعينات القرن الماضي بعد تطبيق قانون الإصلاح الزراعي}. It is currently described as agricultural land with no inhabitants, a clear case of complete village desertion linked to the land reforms.
- **Burj Kamush (برج كموش)**, Jandarîs subdistrict: The fields of this small village were also distributed under the Agrarian Reform.²¹ While the sources do not explicitly state complete abandonment, the loss and redistribution of its primary agricultural base

would have profoundly disrupted the community and likely led to significant depopulation.

- **Anqele (انقلة)**, Sheikh Hadid subdistrict: This village was reportedly "abandoned by its inhabitants in the early 20th century" (47). Although this abandonment predates the primary focus period by several decades, it illustrates a historical precedent for village desertion within the broader Afrin area.
- **Pelûsank (بللورية / Balorsank)**, Sharran subdistrict: This village was reportedly "abandoned by its inhabitants after the death of its Agha [local leader] in the 1960s" (48). Later information suggests it was reduced to ruins but then minimally re-inhabited by a single family. This case shows a near-complete abandonment followed by very limited re-occupation.

These documented cases provide concrete evidence that village abandonment and significant depopulation, often directly linked to state policies such as the Agrarian Reform or other local socio-economic dynamics, were occurring in Afrin well before the 2010 watershed.

C. Analysis of Push and Pull Factors

The decision for individuals and families to leave their villages was driven by a complex interplay of "push" factors (negative conditions within the villages) and "pull" factors (perceived attractions of alternative locations):

Push Factors (from Afrin's villages):

- **Land Confiscation and Demographic Change:** The 1958 Agrarian Reform directly led to land loss and the introduction of new populations, displacing original inhabitants.⁸
- **Property Insecurity:** Discriminatory laws and decrees, such as Decree 49 (2008), undermined secure land tenure, particularly for Kurds in border areas.⁸
- **State Neglect and Poor Services:** Systemic underinvestment resulted in inadequate essential services (water, electricity, schools, healthcare) and poor infrastructure, diminishing the quality of life.¹⁷
- **Limited Economic Opportunities and Poverty:** Lack of diverse employment outside of vulnerable agriculture led to economic hardship.¹⁷
- **Agricultural Decline:** The severe drought of 2006-2010, compounded by long-term water mismanagement, devastated agricultural livelihoods.³⁴
- **Atmosphere of Discrimination:** Broader state policies of discrimination against Kurds created an environment of marginalization and insecurity.²²

Pull Factors (to urban centers/abroad):

- **Perceived Better Economic Opportunities:** Cities and foreign countries offered the prospect of more diverse and stable employment.¹⁷
- **Access to Better Education and Healthcare:** Urban centers provided superior educational facilities and healthcare services.¹
- **Greater Anonymity or Security:** Cities might have offered a degree of respite from direct state scrutiny prevalent in smaller, homogenous rural communities (though this is more speculative).
- **Established Migrant Networks:** The presence of relatives or community members who

had previously migrated could facilitate further departures. Much of the pre-2010 village abandonment in Afrin may not have been characterized by dramatic, en-masse flights, but rather by a slower, attritional process. Families and individuals likely left over extended periods, driven by the cumulative weight of these various pressures. This "silent" abandonment, a gradual hollowing out of communities, can be more challenging to document than overt, conflict-induced displacement but is equally significant in reshaping the rural demographic and social landscape. The growth of Afrin city from the 1960s due to rural migration is a testament to this steady, long-term outflow. While the 1958 Agrarian Reform caused more direct and immediate displacement in certain villages, in many others, the impact was likely a slower decline in viability, accelerated by later shocks like the 2006-2010 drought.

The following table summarizes the documented instances:

Table 3: Documented Instances of Village Depopulation/Abandonment in Afrin (Pre-2010)

Village Name (Kurdish/Arabic)	Subdistrict	Approx. Period of Depopulation/ Abandonment	Primary Cited Reason(s)	Nature of Abandonment	Source(s)
Mehmediye Sharqi (محمديّة شرقي)	Jandaris	Post-1958 (ongoing)	1958 Agrarian Reform, settlement of new population	Complete replacement of original inhabitants	²⁷
Fîlik (فيلك / Gundî Fîlik)	Jandaris	1970s	1958 Agrarian Reform Law application	Complete abandonment, now agricultural land	²⁸
Burj Kamush (برج كموش)	Jandaris	Post-1958	1958 Agrarian Reform (land distribution)	Significant disruption (full abandonment not explicit)	²¹
Anqeale (أنقلة)	Sheikh Hadid	Early 20th Century	Not specified (historical)	Complete abandonment	⁴⁷
Pelûsank (بلورية / Balorsank)	Sharran	1960s	Death of local Agha	Near abandonment, later minimal re-habitation	⁴⁸

VII. Conclusion

A. Synthesis of Interconnected Causes

The abandonment and depopulation of villages in the Afrin region before 2010 were driven by a complex interplay of deeply rooted factors that progressively undermined the viability of rural life. These causes were not independent but rather interconnected, creating a cumulative burden on village communities over several decades.

- **Syrian State Policies** were a primary driver. Deliberate interventions such as the **1958 Agrarian Reform Law (No. 161)** directly caused displacement of original Kurdish and Armenian inhabitants in some villages and initiated demographic shifts through the settlement of Arab families, particularly in the Jandaris subdistrict. This policy, along with subsequent measures like **Decree 49 (2008)** which heightened property insecurity in border areas, and broader, long-standing **discriminatory practices and Arabization efforts** against the Kurdish population, created an environment of marginalization and precarious land tenure.
- **Socio-Economic Marginalization and Neglect** formed another critical layer. Decades of insufficient state investment in Afrin's rural development resulted in poor essential services (water, electricity, schools, healthcare) and inadequate infrastructure. This neglect limited economic opportunities beyond a **vulnerable agricultural sector**, fostering poverty and compelling many, especially younger generations, to seek livelihoods and better prospects in urban centers or abroad.
- **Environmental Degradation and Shocks** significantly exacerbated these existing vulnerabilities. Long-term **water mismanagement** by state authorities depleted resources and weakened agricultural resilience. The impact of the **severe and prolonged drought of 2006-2010/2011** was therefore catastrophic for an already stressed agrarian system, rendering farming unsustainable for many and acting as a powerful catalyst for out-migration.

No single factor operated in isolation. State policies created insecurity and altered demographics; socio-economic neglect bred hardship and limited futures; and environmental pressures delivered acute shocks to a system already struggling. It was the combined and reinforcing effect of these elements that led to the gradual emptying of villages.

B. The Nature of Pre-2010 Village Abandonment

The process of village abandonment in Afrin before 2010 was multifaceted. In some specific instances, particularly in villages directly affected by the 1958 Agrarian Reform (e.g., Mehmediye Sharqi, Fîlik), there was overt displacement and replacement of the original communities. However, a more widespread phenomenon was likely a gradual "hollowing out" of numerous other villages. This occurred through a steady, attritional out-migration of individuals and families over years and decades, driven by chronic economic pressures, lack of opportunities, and the desire for better services and security. This "silent abandonment" was less dramatic than mass, conflict-induced displacements but equally effective in eroding the demographic and social fabric of rural Afrin. The severe drought of 2006-2010 then acted as an accelerant, intensifying these pre-existing trends and leading to more significant and visible depopulation in its wake.

C. The Resulting Landscape on the Eve of the 2011 Conflict

By 2010, the cumulative impact of these long-term pressures meant that many villages in the Afrin region were likely already in a weakened state. They faced reduced populations, particularly a loss of their younger and more economically active members, strained local resources, and communities that had endured decades of political marginalization, economic neglect, and environmental stress. This pre-existing vulnerability, and the historical legacy of displacement and socio-economic fragility, profoundly shaped the demographic and political landscape of Afrin as it entered the tumultuous period of the Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011. The unresolved grievances and the socio-economic weaknesses fostered by these pre-2010 trends undoubtedly interacted with, and were often amplified by, the new and devastating dynamics of the ensuing conflict. The pre-2010 abandonment and depopulation of villages in Afrin were not merely isolated local occurrences but symptomatic of deeper, systemic issues within the Syrian state concerning minority rights, equitable rural development, and sustainable resource management. These unaddressed, long-standing problems contributed to the underlying fragility of Syrian society and the state itself, vulnerabilities that became starkly apparent with the onset of the 2011 uprising and the subsequent decade of conflict.

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