

Afrin and the Surrounding Region in Ottoman Times: An Administrative, Socio-Economic, and Historical Analysis (c. 1516-1918)

I. Introduction: The Afrin Region (Kurd Dagh) in the Ottoman Context

A. Geographical and Historical Significance

The region commonly known today as Afrin, located in northwestern Syria, possesses a rich and complex history deeply intertwined with the broader narrative of the Levant and Anatolia. Geographically, it is centered around the Afrin River valley and the surrounding highlands, historically known as Kurd Dagh (Mountain of the Kurds) or, in Arabic, Cebel-i Ekrad.¹ This mountainous area, part of the Limestone Massif, forms a distinct geographical entity separating the Aleppo plateau from the Amanus mountains to the west.² The historical nomenclature itself, Kurd Dagh, used in Ottoman Turkish, Kurdish (Çiyayê Kurmênc), and Arabic, strongly underscores the region's long-standing identification as a predominantly Kurdish area, a recognition that predates modern nationalist movements.¹ This contrasts sharply with later, post-Ottoman attempts by Turkish authorities to rename the area "Kurt Dağı" (Wolf Mountain), a linguistic distortion indicative of political efforts to obscure or erase the region's established Kurdish identity.²

Before its incorporation into the Ottoman Empire around 1516 following the Battle of Marj Dabiq¹, the Afrin region had witnessed millennia of human settlement and imperial transitions. Archaeological evidence points to Syro-Hittite settlements like Ain Dara⁸, and the region formed part of various ancient administrative and cultural zones, including Chalybonitis, Chalcidice, and Cyrrhestica.⁹ Its strategic location made it significant for successive empires: the Neo-Assyrians, Neo-Babylonians, Achaemenids, Seleucids (who knew the river as Oinoparas), Romans (who used Cyrrhus as a military base and knew the river as Ufrenus, the likely origin of 'Afrin'), Byzantines, and early Islamic Caliphates (under Jund Qinnasrin).⁷ This long history positioned Afrin as a crossroads and often a frontier zone, situated on or near vital trade routes connecting the Mediterranean to Mesopotamia and Anatolia.⁸ Such a position fostered a complex socio-economic environment and necessitated constant negotiation between local populations and larger imperial powers, shaping the region's character long before the Ottomans arrived. The Ottoman period, lasting roughly four centuries until the empire's dissolution after World War I (c. 1918-1922), forms the central

focus of this report.¹

B. Scope and Structure of the Report

This report aims to provide a comprehensive, multi-faceted historical analysis of the Afrin region (Kurd Dagħ) during the Ottoman era. It addresses key aspects including the evolution of administrative divisions, demographic composition and shifts, prevailing economic activities, social structures and land tenure systems, significant historical events and periods of conflict or stability, the impact of late Ottoman modernization policies (Tanzimat), the complex relationship between the local population and state authorities, and the relevant historical sources upon which this analysis is based. The structure follows these thematic areas, examining the region within the broader context of the Ottoman Vilayet of Aleppo.

C. Note on Sources and Challenges

Constructing a detailed history of a specific sub-region within the vast Ottoman Empire necessitates drawing upon a diverse range of sources. This report utilizes information gleaned from Ottoman archival materials where possible, including references to administrative yearbooks (Salnames)¹², cadastral surveys (Tahrir Defters)²¹, and court records (Sicils)²³, though specific documents pertaining solely to Kurd Dagħ are often difficult to isolate. Chronicles, such as the 16th-century Kurdish history *Sherefname*³⁰, provide valuable narrative context. European travel accounts, from early observers like William Biddulph (1599)⁸ to later figures like Carsten Niebuhr (1764)³³ and H.F.B. Lynch (1901)³⁴, offer external perspectives, albeit often coloured by their own biases and potential misunderstandings.³² Modern academic studies, including works by specialists in Ottoman history, Kurdish studies, and Syrian history (such as Thomas Schmidinger, Roger Lescot, Martin van Bruinessen, David McDowall, Jordi Tejel, Bruce Masters, and others)⁴, provide critical analysis and synthesis, often drawing on sources in multiple languages as requested by the user query. However, researching Ottoman Kurd Dagħ presents challenges. Sources specifically and exclusively focused on this relatively small Kaza (district) within the larger Vilayet of Aleppo are scarce. Much information must be carefully extrapolated from studies concerning the Aleppo Vilayet, the nearby town and Sanjak of Kilis, or broader Kurdish and Ottoman history. Furthermore, both colonial-era and nationalist sources require critical evaluation for potential biases. The available secondary literature, while rich in ethnographic detail, often relies on research from the French Mandate period or later, necessitating careful contextualization when applying these findings to the Ottoman centuries.⁴ Consequently, a multi-source triangulation approach is essential to construct a nuanced understanding, acknowledging gaps where evidence is limited.

II. Administrative Framework: Afrin within the Vilayet of Aleppo

A. Early Ottoman Structures (16th-18th Centuries): Eyalet System

Following the Ottoman conquest of Syria from the Mamluks in 1516⁸, the Afrin region, or Kurd Dagħ, was integrated into the empire's administrative structure. Initially, it likely fell under the large Eyalet (province) of Damascus, but with the formal establishment of the Eyalet of Aleppo by 1534⁶⁵, the region became part of this northern Syrian administrative unit. The Eyalet system represented the primary administrative division of the early-to-mid Ottoman Empire. A significant development occurred around 1527 with the formation of a distinct administrative unit known as the "Ekrâd Sancağı" (Sanjak of the Kurds).⁶⁷ A Sanjak was a standard sub-provincial administrative division, often translated as a district or county.⁶⁸ This particular Sanjak, initially attached to the Damascus Beylerbeylik (provincial governorship) but clearly encompassing the Kilis and A'zaz area north of Aleppo, was explicitly named for the Kurdish tribes (Ekrâd tâifeleri) residing within it.⁶⁷

The governance of this early Sanjak exemplifies typical Ottoman practice in newly conquered or frontier regions. The administration appointed İzzeddin Bey, a prominent local Kurdish tribal chieftain (aşiret reisi), as the Sanjakkbey (governor of the Sanjak).²¹ İzzeddin Bey held considerable regional influence even before this appointment.⁷² This strategy of co-opting established local power structures served multiple purposes: it facilitated the integration of the region, ensured a degree of stability, secured tax revenues (particularly from the numerous and mobile nomadic or semi-nomadic Kurdish groups, subsequently known as "Ekrad-ı İzzeddinli" or "Ekrad-ı Okçu İzzeddinli" Yörüks²¹), and maintained loyalty on a sensitive borderland facing the rival Safavid Empire.²¹ After İzzeddin Bey's death (around a decade later), the governorship reportedly passed to Beys from Adıyaman and later, by 1550-51, to Budak Bey, the former Bey of Duhak.²¹ This early administrative history highlights a period where local Kurdish leadership played a recognized role within the Ottoman system, suggesting a degree of negotiated autonomy.

Throughout the Ottoman period, the Kurd Dagħ region maintained a strong administrative and socio-economic connection with the town of Kilis.⁴ While the precise terminology might vary (Kilis being referred to as a Province⁸, Sanjak²², or Kaza within the Aintab Sanjak¹²), the linkage remained constant until the post-World War I border severed this connection, separating Afrin/Kurd Dagħ from its long-standing center of influence in Kilis.⁴

B. Late Ottoman Structures (19th Century - Dissolution): Vilayet System

The 19th century witnessed significant administrative restructuring across the Ottoman Empire, driven by the Tanzimat reforms aimed at modernization and centralization.¹² The Vilayet Law of 1864 (fully implemented by 1867/1884) replaced the older Eyalet system with a more standardized hierarchy.⁶⁹ This structure consisted of the Vilayet (province) headed by a centrally appointed Vali, subdivided into Sanjaks (or Livas, sub-provinces/counties) governed by a Mutasarrıf, which were further divided into Kazas (districts) under a Kaymakam, and finally Nahiyes (sub-districts or communes) led by a Müdür.⁶⁸

Under this system, the Afrin/Kurd Dagħ region was unequivocally part of the Vilayet of Aleppo.² The Vilayet of Aleppo itself underwent changes in its internal Sanjak divisions over

time. Around 1876, sources list six Sanjaks: Aleppo, Aintab (Gaziantep), Cebelisemaan (Mount Simeon), Marash, Urfa, and Zor (later independent).¹² By 1892, this may have been reduced to three (Aleppo, Urfa, Marash).¹³ Before World War I, the structure commonly cited included five Sanjaks: Aleppo, Maraş, Ayntab (Antep), Urfa, and Antioch (Antakya).¹³

Pinpointing Afrin/Kurd Dagħ within this late Ottoman framework points consistently towards the Kaza (district) level. While sometimes linked generally to the Kilis Province⁸ or the Sanjak of Aintab¹², the most specific designation appears to be the *Kaza of Kurd Dagħ* (or Cebel-i Ekrad / Jabal al-Akrad).² This Kaza was administratively tied to the Sanjak of Kilis, which, particularly in later periods, was often considered part of or subordinate to the Sanjak of Aintab (Gaziantep), all within the overarching Vilayet of Aleppo.¹² The existence of the Kurd Dagħ Kaza as a distinct administrative unit is supported by post-Ottoman data, such as the 1922 census conducted under the French Mandate's State of Aleppo, which recorded a population of 21,823 for the Kaza of Kurd Dagħ.² Information regarding the specific *Nahiyes* within the Kurd Dagħ Kaza during the Ottoman period is lacking in the reviewed sources², although the Nahiye level was a standard part of the Vilayet system's structure.⁶⁸

The administrative evolution of Kurd Dagħ, from the relatively autonomous Ekrâd Sancağı under a local Kurdish Bey in the 16th century to a standardized Kaza within the centralized Vilayet system of the late 19th century, mirrors the broader trajectory of Ottoman governance. This transition from pragmatic co-option of local power to direct administration through appointed officials likely had significant implications for the relationship between the region's inhabitants and the central state, diminishing the formal autonomy previously enjoyed by local leaders and potentially creating new points of friction, a theme explored further in subsequent sections.

The following table summarizes the administrative placement of the Kurd Dagħ/Afrin region during the Ottoman era:

Table 1: Ottoman Administrative Divisions Encompassing Kurd Dagħ/Afrin (c. 1516-1918)

Period (Century/Era)	Higher Unit (Eyalet/Vilayet)	Intermediate Unit (Sanjak/Liva)	Local Unit (Kaza/Nahiye)	Key Sources & Notes
16th Century (c. 1527)	Eyalet of Damascus/Aleppo	Ekrâd Sancağı (Kilis/A'zaz)	(Kurd Dagħ area implied)	²¹ Named for Kurdish tribes; Governed initially by local Kurdish chieftain İzzeddin Bey.
Late 19th/Early 20th Century	Vilayet of Aleppo	Sanjak of Kilis / Aintab	Kaza of Kurd Dagħ	² Kilis Sanjak often associated with or part of Aintab Sanjak within Aleppo Vilayet.

The enduring administrative connection between Kurd Dagh and Kilis throughout the Ottoman centuries suggests a deeply intertwined socio-economic reality. Kilis served as the primary urban center and market for the Kurd Dagh hinterland.⁴ Consequently, the imposition of the Syria-Turkey border after World War I, which placed Kilis in Turkey and Afrin/Kurd Dagh in French Mandate Syria, represented more than just a political division; it was a fundamental disruption of centuries-old economic relationships, land ownership patterns, and social networks, inevitably causing significant hardship and contributing to the region's later challenges.⁴

III. The People of Kurd Dagh: Demographics and Migrations

A. Ethnic Composition

The defining demographic characteristic of the Kurd Dagh region throughout the Ottoman period was its overwhelmingly Kurdish population. Sources consistently describe the area as "homogeneously Kurdish" or note its historical designation as the "Mountain of the Kurds" or even "The Kurdish City" by Ottoman officials.¹ By the early 20th century, it is assumed that almost the entire population was Kurdish-speaking (Kurmanji dialect).²

While Kurds formed the vast majority, other ethnic and religious groups were present, often integrated into the local society or forming smaller, distinct communities:

- **Arabs:** Arab populations existed in the wider Aleppo Vilayet and within the Afrin region itself. Some sources suggest these populations were relatively small in Kurd Dagh proper and often historically integrated into the local Kurdish society, potentially including Arabized Kurds.⁹ Ottoman policies sometimes involved settling Arab tribes in northern Syria, and interactions, both cooperative and conflictual (e.g., Ottoman use of Shammar Arabs against Kurds refusing taxes), occurred.⁴⁵
- **Turkmen:** Turkmen tribes were a known component of the Aleppo Vilayet's population², particularly on the plains and steppe lands surrounding the core Kurd Dagh highlands. Their specific presence within the mountainous Kaza itself requires further clarification.
- **Yazidis:** A significant and historically rooted minority, the Yazidis inhabited specific villages and areas within Kurd Dagh, particularly noted in the southeastern Jebel Seman / Çiyayê Lêlûn area.² Ethnically Kurdish but religiously distinct, their relationship with the Sunni majority and the Ottoman state was complex, marked by periods of coexistence and persecution.⁸ Early European travelers sometimes mistakenly conflated all Kurds with Yazidis, whom they often inaccurately described as "devil-worshippers".⁸
- **Alevi:** While Alevism exists among Kurds, specific evidence points to Alevi settlement in Kurd Dagh primarily occurring later, with refugees fleeing the Dersim Massacre in Turkey during the 1930s settling in areas like Mabeta.² Their presence during the Ottoman period itself appears less documented in the provided sources.
- **Armenians:** Armenians constituted a significant minority within the broader Aleppo

Vilayet.¹² While interactions and conflicts over land occurred between Kurds and Armenians in other parts of the Empire³⁴, evidence for a substantial Armenian population *within* the Kurd Dagħ Kaza during the Ottoman era is less clear. However, the region's proximity meant it was impacted by the Armenian Genocide (1915), serving as a location for transit camps (e.g., Katma, Rajo) for deportees from Anatolia.¹³ Armenian refugees subsequently settled in the area after World War I and the establishment of the French Mandate.⁵⁶

- **Circassians and Chechens:** These groups are noted, particularly in the city of Manbij⁹, which lies in the eastern part of the modern, expanded definition of the Afrin region, potentially outside the core Ottoman-era Kurd Dagħ Kaza. Their presence relates to broader Ottoman policies of resettling Muslim refugees from the Caucasus in the 19th century.¹⁰³

B. Religious Landscape

The religious composition of Ottoman Kurd Dagħ reflected its ethnic makeup, with Sunni Islam being predominant. Sources indicate the Kurds of Kurd Dagħ largely followed the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, distinguishing them from the Shafi'i school common among many other Syrian and Anatolian Kurds.² Sufism, particularly the Qadiriyya, Naqshbandiyya, and Rifa'iyya orders, exerted a strong influence on local Islamic practice and social life.⁴⁸

The most significant religious minority was the Yazidi community.² Their ancient, distinct faith, often misunderstood and misrepresented by outsiders, set them apart. Despite facing historical persecution campaigns sanctioned by the Ottoman state or carried out by local actors elsewhere⁶⁰, the persistence of Yazidi communities in Kurd Dagħ into the modern era suggests a complex local dynamic. Factors such as shared Kurdish ethnicity with the majority, specific inter-tribal relationships (like the reported protectorate role of the Robariya tribe over Yazidi villages⁴⁷), or local accommodations allowed for a degree of coexistence not always found in other regions.⁶⁰

Alevi Kurds were also present, though perhaps in smaller numbers during the Ottoman period proper, with more significant settlement occurring post-Ottoman Empire.² Christian communities existed in the wider Vilayet¹², but their specific presence within the Kurd Dagħ Kaza during Ottoman times, beyond the later context of Armenian refugees, needs further evidence.

C. Population Dynamics

The Kurdish presence in the Kurd Dagħ region appears to be long-established, with documentation dating back to at least the 16th and 17th centuries.⁷ This contrasts with the demographic history of other major Kurdish areas in Syria, such as the Jazira region in the northeast. Jazira witnessed substantial waves of Kurdish immigration, primarily from Turkey, in the 1920s following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the establishment of the Turkish Republic, and the suppression of Kurdish uprisings like the Sheikh Said rebellion.³³ While Kurd Dagħ also saw some population movements, including the settlement of groups like the

Reshwan confederation (originally from Adiyaman) in the broader northern Syrian area ⁹, its core Kurdish population seems more deeply rooted compared to the relatively recent large-scale migrations into Jazira. This difference in settlement history likely influenced variations in land tenure patterns, the strength and nature of tribal structures, and the historical relationship with state authorities between the two regions.

Precise population figures for the Kurd Dagħ Kaza during the Ottoman era are difficult to ascertain. Data for the larger Aleppo Vilayet exists (e.g., a preliminary 1885 census figure of 1.5 million ¹², and a 1914 estimate showing 576,320 Muslims, 40,843 Armenians, and 21,954 Greeks ¹²), but applying these broadly to the specific Kaza is problematic. The most relevant figure comes from the 1922 census under the State of Aleppo, which recorded 21,823 inhabitants (10,434 males, 11,389 females) for the Kaza of Kurd Dagħ.² While post-Ottoman, this figure provides a baseline estimate for the population size in the period immediately following Ottoman rule. Mid-20th-century estimates placed the Kurd Dagħ population around 110,000, part of a larger Syrian Kurdish population estimated at roughly half a million.⁸⁶

Internal migration certainly occurred, with movement between rural Kurd Dagħ and the urban centers of Aleppo and Kilis being a notable feature, driven by economic opportunities (work, trade) and social ties.² The Ottoman state also engaged in population management, including deportations of Kurds from eastern Anatolian regions like Bitlis and Erzurum during World War I, though it is unclear if Kurd Dagħ was a destination for these deportees.⁷³ Conversely, the settlement of Circassian and Chechen refugees occurred in areas like Manbij ⁹, reflecting broader imperial policies towards refugees from Russia.¹⁰³

IV. Economic Life in Ottoman Afrin

A. Agrarian Economy

The economy of Ottoman Kurd Dagħ was fundamentally agrarian, characterized by a fertile landscape suitable for diverse cultivation.⁹ Central to both the economy and the region's identity was olive cultivation.² Olive groves dominated the hillsides, with olive oil production being a primary activity. This oil was a key commodity traded towards the major markets of Aleppo and Kilis ¹⁰, and likely supplied the renowned soap-making industry in Aleppo.¹⁶ The practice of olive cultivation in the region has ancient roots, possibly dating back millennia.⁷ Beyond olives, the region's farmers cultivated a variety of other crops, including figs, grapes, cereals (like wheat and barley), vegetables, and notably, pistachios, with the "Aleppo pistachio" (fustuq Ḥalabī) being a recognized product.¹⁰ Tobacco and aniseed were also potentially grown.¹⁵

Alongside settled agriculture, pastoralism played a significant role, particularly in the earlier Ottoman centuries. Nomadic and semi-nomadic Kurdish groups (konar-göçer), such as the Ekrâd-ı İzzeddinli associated with the early Sanjakbey İzzeddin Bey, utilized the region's pastures for their extensive herds of sheep and goats.¹⁶ These pastoral groups represented a substantial economic asset and a key source of tax revenue for the Ottoman administration.²¹ A symbiotic relationship existed between these pastoralists and the settled populations of

villages and towns, involving the exchange of animal products (wool, meat, rugs) for urban manufactures (tents, tools, saddles) and agricultural goods.¹⁶ The Ottoman state implemented various policies towards nomadic tribes throughout its history, including efforts at sedentarization, specific taxation methods, and attempts to exert control, which sometimes led to conflict.⁴⁶ The combination of intensive, long-established olive farming and significant pastoral activity suggests a dual economy within Kurd Dagħ. This internal diversity likely fostered complex local social dynamics and necessitated flexible administrative and taxation strategies from the Ottoman authorities, differing from regions dominated solely by agriculture or nomadism.

B. Crafts and Local Industry

Information on specific crafts and industries within Ottoman Kurd Dagħ itself is somewhat limited in the available sources. However, logical connections can be drawn. Activities related to the primary agricultural products, such as olive oil pressing and potentially soap making (given the proximity and supply to Aleppo's industry ¹⁶), were likely present. Pastoralism would have supported crafts based on wool (textiles, rugs ¹⁶). Charcoal production is also mentioned as an activity in the region.² Nearby Kilis was known for textile production, copper tools, and rugs ⁷⁷, while Marash also had commercial and craft activities ¹¹⁴, suggesting a regional context of artisanal production that Kurd Dagħ likely participated in or traded with.

C. Trade and Routes

Kurd Dagħ's economic fortunes were inextricably linked to the major commercial center of Aleppo.¹¹ Aleppo served as a crucial hub on trans-regional trade routes, including branches of the Silk Road, connecting the Mediterranean with Mesopotamia, Persia, and beyond.¹¹ Kurd Dagħ, lying within Aleppo's hinterland and sphere of influence, channeled its products, primarily olive oil and other agricultural goods, towards Aleppo and also Kilis, its closer market town.⁴

Trade relied heavily on caravan transport, making the security of routes a paramount concern for both merchants and the Ottoman authorities.¹⁶ Goods passing through Aleppo included not only regional agricultural products but also high-value items like spices from the East, silk from Persia, and textiles from various origins.¹⁶ The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 dealt a significant blow to Aleppo's prominence as an overland trade center, diverting much commerce to maritime routes.¹¹ This decline undoubtedly had ripple effects on the economy of its hinterland, including Kurd Dagħ, reducing demand and potentially impacting prices for local products. This economic vulnerability underscores the region's dependence on the political stability and commercial vitality of its associated urban centers (Aleppo and Kilis) and the broader Ottoman trade network. Disruptions to these centers or routes, whether through political events, conflict, or shifts in global trade patterns, would directly affect the livelihoods of the people in Kurd Dagħ.

D. Taxation System

The Ottoman taxation system evolved over the centuries. In the early period (16th-17th centuries) in Kurd Dagħ, tax collection appears to have been managed through local intermediaries, exemplified by the Sanjakbey İzzeddin Bey.²¹ Revenues derived from village agricultural production and, significantly, from taxes levied on the livestock of the nomadic and semi-nomadic Kurdish groups (Ekrâd-ı İzzeddinli) under his jurisdiction.²¹ In line with common Ottoman practice for securing loyalty and service, particularly on frontiers, certain groups or leaders might have received tax exemptions or preferential treatment.⁷³

The later Ottoman period, especially during the Tanzimat era, saw concerted efforts to reform and centralize the taxation system.⁴⁶ This involved attempts to apply more standardized taxes across the empire, such as the 'ushr (a tithe, typically 10%, on agricultural produce)¹¹⁵, various land taxes, and potentially the jizya (poll tax on non-Muslims, though its application to Yazidis could be complex). While specific details for Kurd Dagħ are scarce, the Tanzimat reforms aimed to replace indirect collection methods like tax farming (iltizam) or reliance on local notables with more direct assessment and collection by state officials. The creation of detailed revenue registers like the Temettuat defterleri was part of this effort to record assets and income for tax purposes²⁴, although evidence of their specific compilation or use in Kurd Dagħ is not present in the reviewed materials. Such reforms, aiming to increase state revenue and control, often met resistance, and refusal to pay taxes was a recurring source of conflict between communities and the state.⁴⁶

V. Social Structure and Daily Life in Ottoman Afrin

A. Tribal Affiliations and Dynamics

Kurdish society in the Ottoman Empire was often characterized by tribal structures, although the nature and strength of these affiliations varied significantly by region and period. For Kurd Dagħ, sources identify several key Kurdish tribes historically present. Based primarily on the Mandate-era ethnographic work of Roger Lescot, later referenced by Thomas Schmidinger, the five major tribes (eşiret) were the Amikan, Biyan, Sheikhan (Şêxan), Shikakan (Şikakan), and Jam (Cums).⁴⁵ Smaller tribes mentioned include the Robariya, Kharzan, and Kastiyân.⁴⁵ Notably, the Muslim Robariya tribe reportedly exercised a form of protectorate over the Yazidi villages in the region.⁴⁷ Internal tribal dynamics existed, including historical conflicts between the Şêxan and Biyan tribes.⁶⁴

Other tribal groups are mentioned in the broader context of northern Syria and the Aleppo Vilayet. The Reshwan confederation, originally centered in Adıyaman, settled widely, including in areas near Kurd Dagħ.⁹ The Milli tribes were also prominent in northern Syria.³³ The early Sanjakbey İzzeddin Bey was associated with the "İzzeddinli" group.²¹ The powerful Janbulad (Canpolat) family, historically linked to Kilis and Aleppo, also had Kurdish origins and played a significant role in the region's early Ottoman history.²²

However, the political and social significance of tribal identity in Kurd Dagħ may have diminished over the Ottoman period compared to more pastoral or remote Kurdish regions. Some analyses suggest that by the French Mandate period, tribal affiliations played a less

dominant role in local organization.⁴⁸ The region's strong base in settled agriculture, particularly olive cultivation, likely contributed to this shift. As traditional tribal leaders (Aghas) transitioned into becoming significant landowners, their power base may have shifted from purely kinship and pastoral leadership towards control over land and agricultural resources.⁵⁶ This suggests a hybrid social structure in Ottoman Kurd Dagħ, influenced by both tribal heritage and the socio-economic realities of settled agrarian life, potentially leading to different internal stratifications compared to purely nomadic societies.

B. Notable Families and Local Leadership

Local leadership in Ottoman Kurd Dagħ involved various figures. In the early period, tribal chieftains like İzzeddin Bey held formal administrative positions (Sanjakbey) under the Ottomans.²¹ Families with historical regional influence, like the Janbulads in Kilis, also wielded power.²²

Throughout Kurdish society, Aghas (tribal leaders, often becoming landowners) and Sheikhs (religious figures, often leaders of Sufi orders) were key figures of authority and influence.³⁰ In Kurd Dagħ, as noted, the role of the Agha likely evolved with the increasing importance of land ownership.⁵⁶ Sheikhs associated with Sufi orders like the Qadiriyya, Naqshbandiyya, and Rifa'iyya also played important social and religious roles.⁴⁸

Interaction with the urban notables (a'yan) of Aleppo and Kilis was also crucial. These elite families often dominated the political and economic life of the cities and frequently collaborated with the Ottoman administration.⁶⁶ Leaders from Kurd Dagħ would have necessarily interacted with these urban elites for trade, administration, and political negotiation.

C. Land Tenure Systems

The Ottoman Empire had a complex system of land tenure. The primary categories included:

- **Miri:** State-owned land, the most common category, especially for agricultural land. Cultivators held rights of usufruct (tasarruf) – the right to use and benefit from the land – but not full ownership. These rights were inheritable but subject to state regulation and taxation.¹¹⁵ Cereal lands were often classified as Miri.¹²²
- **Mulk:** Privately owned land, granting full ownership rights, including the right to sell, bequeath, or convert to Waqf. This category was less common for agricultural land but could apply to orchards, vineyards, and urban property.¹¹⁵ Olive groves in Kurd Dagħ might potentially have fallen under this category or represented a complex interplay between Miri land and Mulk trees.
- **Waqf:** Property (land, buildings) endowed for religious or charitable purposes (supporting mosques, schools, fountains, etc.). Once endowed, Waqf property was typically inalienable.⁸⁵

In Kurd Dagħ, it is likely that Miri land constituted the bulk of the arable land used for cereals and other field crops. Olive groves, representing long-term investment and potentially existing before Ottoman conquest, might have had a more complex status, possibly involving elements

of private ownership (Mulk) or long-term usufruct rights on Miri land. Waqf properties undoubtedly existed to support local mosques and potentially other community institutions. The **Ottoman Land Code of 1858** was a major piece of Tanzimat legislation aimed at clarifying land rights, registering ownership/usufruct, increasing tax revenues, and facilitating state control.¹⁰ Its implementation across the empire was uneven and often fraught with difficulty due to lack of trained personnel and local resistance or manipulation.¹²³ In Kurd Dagħ, the Land Code's impact remains unclear due to lack of specific data. However, based on patterns elsewhere, it is plausible that the registration process benefited those already in positions of power – the landowning Aghas (potentially former tribal leaders) who could navigate the bureaucracy and formalize their control over lands, possibly at the expense of peasants holding traditional, unwritten usufruct rights.⁵⁶ This could have exacerbated existing social inequalities and potentially led to land disputes, a common issue in the late Ottoman period, often involving conflicts between different ethnic or tribal groups vying for resources.³⁴ The lack of specific court records (Sicils) or tax registers (Temettuat) detailing land cases from Kurd Dagħ in the reviewed sources²⁴ makes it difficult to assess the precise local impact of the 1858 Code, suggesting its effects were likely mediated by existing local power dynamics.

D. Aspects of Daily Life and Local Customs

Reconstructing the nuances of daily life centuries ago is challenging, but sources offer glimpses. Rural life revolved around the agricultural calendar, especially the olive harvest, which brought communities together.⁴⁸ Village structures provided the basic social unit. Strong ties connected the rural hinterland of Kurd Dagħ with the urban centers of Aleppo and Kilis, with frequent movement for seasonal labor, trade, and maintaining social connections.² Kurdish culture was maintained through language (the local Kurmanji dialect)², music, and folklore.³⁰ Kinship ties remained important social organizers.⁵⁰ Hospitality, potentially centered around the Agha's guesthouse (Diwaxan)⁷⁵, was likely a significant social value. Religion permeated daily life, with Sunni Islam influenced by Sufi practices being dominant⁴⁸, alongside the distinct traditions of the Yazidi minority.³⁷ While much detailed ethnography comes from the post-Ottoman period¹³², these later observations may reflect continuities from the Ottoman era, albeit requiring cautious interpretation.

VI. Significant Historical Events and Developments

A. Ottoman Conquest and Early Period (16th-17th Centuries)

The integration of Kurd Dagħ into the Ottoman Empire followed the decisive Battle of Marj Dabiq in 1516, which transferred control of Syria from the Mamluks to the Ottomans.¹ Situated in a strategic borderland zone, the region's incorporation occurred within the context of intense Ottoman rivalry with the Safavid Empire in Persia. Kurdish tribes in the border regions generally aligned themselves with the Sunni Ottomans against the Shi'a Safavids, playing a role in Ottoman campaigns and consolidation of control.³⁰

The establishment of the Ekrâd Sancağı around 1527, governed by the local Kurdish leader İzzeddin Bey, can be understood as a strategic Ottoman move to secure this vital frontier.²¹ By granting recognized status and authority to local figures, the Ottomans aimed to ensure loyalty, leverage local military potential (Kurds were known for their martial capabilities ⁶⁰), and administer the territory effectively with minimal direct imperial investment. This arrangement created a loyal buffer zone populated by groups invested in the Ottoman order against external threats (Safavids) and potential internal challenges (like remnants of Mamluk power or local dissent).³⁰ However, local power could also challenge central authority; the early 17th century saw the Kurdish Canpolad (Janbulad) dynasty, based in Kilis, attempt to establish hereditary rule over Aleppo, a move ultimately crushed by the Ottoman state.⁹²

B. Periods of Conflict and Stability (17th-19th Centuries)

Following the initial consolidation phase, some historical accounts suggest that the system of granting broad autonomy to Kurdish principalities (hukumets) assured several centuries of relative peace and stability in many Kurdish regions, including potentially Kurd Dagħ.³⁰ During this time, the Ottomans controlled strategic garrisons, but local Kurdish lords managed internal affairs.³⁰

This period was not devoid of conflict, however. Localized disputes occurred, such as inter-tribal warfare (the Şêxan versus Biyan conflict in northern Kurd Dagħ is mentioned ⁶⁴). The Yazidi minority faced periodic pressure or persecution, both from state campaigns (though major documented campaigns focused on Shingal and Sheikhan, their direct impact on Kurd Dagħ Yazidis is less clear ⁶⁰) and potentially from local Sunni neighbors.⁶⁰ Insecurity on trade routes due to banditry or tribal raiding was also a potential issue in the broader region.³⁴

Notably, during the 19th century, a period marked by major Kurdish uprisings against Ottoman centralization policies in eastern Anatolia and Iraqi Kurdistan (led by figures like Mir Muhammad of Rawanduz, Badr Khan Beg of Botan, and Sheikh Ubeydullah of Nehri ⁴³), Kurd Dagħ appears conspicuously absent from participation in these large-scale revolts. The available sources do not indicate significant involvement of the Afrin region Kurds in these specific challenges to Ottoman authority. This relative quiescence during a turbulent century for many other Kurdish communities suggests a different dynamic in Kurd Dagħ's relationship with the centralizing Ottoman state, possibly due to its settled agrarian base, strong economic ties to Aleppo and Kilis, or different strategies adopted by its local leadership compared to the powerful tribal confederations further east.

C. Late Ottoman Period (Late 19th - Early 20th Century)

The late Ottoman era brought new pressures and transformations. The formation of the Hamidiye Light Cavalry Regiments in the 1890s, primarily recruiting from Kurdish tribes in Eastern Anatolia, aimed to integrate tribal warriors into the state system and use them as a counterforce against Armenian nationalism and Russian influence.⁴⁶ While the Hamidiye gained notoriety for their brutality, particularly during the anti-Armenian massacres of

1894-96⁷³, their direct impact or recruitment within the Kurd Dagħ region seems to have been limited compared to the eastern vilayets.

The Armenian Genocide of 1915 profoundly affected the region. Although Kurd Dagħ itself was not a primary site of massacres like those in the eastern provinces, its location placed it near major deportation routes originating from Anatolia. Transit and concentration camps were established nearby, including at Katma and Rajo within or adjacent to the Kurd Dagħ area, where Armenian deportees suffered horrific conditions.¹³ The role of Kurds in the Genocide was complex and varied regionally; while some tribes participated in attacks, others offered assistance or remained neutral.³⁴

World War I marked the final chapter of Ottoman rule. The empire's entry into the war, subsequent military struggles on multiple fronts, and eventual defeat led to its dissolution.¹ The final military engagements in northern Syria occurred near Kurd Dagħ, with retreating Ottoman forces making a stand around Haritan and Katma against advancing Arab and British forces in late 1918.¹ This marked the end of four centuries of Ottoman administration in the region.

VII. Impact of Late Ottoman Modernization (Tanzimat)

The Tanzimat era (roughly 1839-1876, with reforms continuing thereafter) represented a concerted effort by the Ottoman state to modernize its military, administration, legal system, and economy, primarily to strengthen the empire against internal fragmentation and external pressures.¹⁸ These reforms had profound, though unevenly implemented and often contradictory, impacts on provincial societies like Kurd Dagħ.

A. Centralization Policies

A core objective of the Tanzimat was centralization – consolidating power in Istanbul and standardizing governance across the diverse provinces. The replacement of the Eyalet system with the Vilayet system (discussed in Section II.B) was the primary administrative manifestation of this goal.¹² This involved appointing officials like Valis, Mutasarrifs, and Kaymakams directly from the center, who were meant to implement imperial decrees and oversee local affairs, thereby replacing or diminishing the authority of traditional hereditary leaders, local notables, or autonomous tribal chiefs.⁶⁹

For regions like Kurd Dagħ, which likely enjoyed a degree of de facto or even de jure autonomy in earlier centuries under arrangements like the Ekrâd Sancağı³⁰, this centralization drive represented a fundamental shift. The erosion of local autonomy and the imposition of direct rule were major catalysts for resistance and revolt in many Kurdish areas further east.⁴⁴ While Kurd Dagħ itself did not experience large-scale uprisings during this period, the Tanzimat policies nonetheless fundamentally altered the established relationship between the local population and the Ottoman state, challenging long-standing power structures and practices.

B. Economic Impacts

Tanzimat reforms also targeted the economy. The Ottoman Land Code of 1858 aimed to

register landholdings, clarify titles (primarily confirming state ownership of Miri land while regulating usufruct rights), and increase tax revenues.¹⁰ As discussed (Section V.C), the impact in Kurd Dagħ was likely complex. While potentially offering security of tenure for some, the registration process could also have facilitated the consolidation of land in the hands of powerful local figures (landowning Aghas) who could navigate the system, potentially displacing smaller cultivators or challenging traditional communal land use patterns.⁵⁶ Taxation reforms sought to move away from inefficient methods like tax farming towards more standardized, direct collection by state officials.⁴⁶ This could have increased the perceived tax burden or disrupted local economic arrangements. Simultaneously, reforms and international treaties (like the 1838 Balta Limanı Commercial Convention⁸³) fostered deeper integration of the Ottoman provinces into the global capitalist economy. This integration likely benefited producers of export-oriented cash crops like olives and pistachios in Kurd Dagħ, as well as merchants in Aleppo and Kilis connected to these networks.¹⁰ However, it could also have negatively impacted local artisans and craftsmen who faced increased competition from cheaper European manufactured goods entering the market.⁸³ This economic differentiation, driven by Tanzimat-era policies and global economic shifts, likely exacerbated existing social inequalities, potentially benefiting landowning elites and traders while disadvantaging smallholders and traditional craftspeople, thereby potentially weakening older forms of social cohesion based on kinship or tribal ties.

C. Social and Political Impacts

One of the most socially disruptive Tanzimat policies was the introduction or stricter enforcement of military conscription.⁸¹ For communities like the Kurds, who may have previously enjoyed exemptions or provided military service under their own leaders⁷³, universal conscription into the regular Ottoman army was often deeply resented. It removed young men from agricultural labor, challenged traditional notions of honor and autonomy, and was a frequent cause of friction, resistance, desertion, or attempts to pay the exemption tax (bedel-i askeri).⁹⁰ The Yazidi community, in particular, resisted conscription efforts.⁹⁰ Other social aspects of modernization, such as the potential establishment of state schools⁷⁸ or the rise of a new class of state-educated bureaucrats³⁹, likely had a limited impact in rural areas like Kurd Dagħ compared to major urban centers during the Ottoman period itself. The Tanzimat's legal reforms, such as the Edict of Gülhane (1839) and the Reform Edict (Islahat Fermanı, 1856), proclaimed equality for all Ottoman subjects regardless of religion.⁷⁸ While intended to foster Ottoman unity (Ottomanism), these reforms often failed to translate into practice and could sometimes exacerbate tensions between communities by altering traditional hierarchies or failing to provide genuine security for minorities.³⁴ Overall, the Tanzimat reforms represented a period of profound change, attempting to impose a modern, centralized state structure onto the diverse realities of the Ottoman provinces. In Kurd Dagħ, these policies challenged established local power dynamics, traditional economic practices, and social norms, fundamentally reshaping the relationship between the region and the imperial center, even in the absence of overt, large-scale rebellion.

VIII. State-Local Relations: Negotiation, Coexistence, and Conflict

The relationship between the Ottoman state and the inhabitants of Kurd Dagħ evolved significantly over four centuries, marked by periods of pragmatic cooperation, relative stability, and underlying tensions.

A. Ottoman State and Kurdish Population

The early Ottoman approach (roughly 16th-18th centuries) appears to have been based on a form of negotiated autonomy. Following the conquest, the Ottomans recognized the strategic importance of the Kurdish-populated borderlands and the influence of local leaders. By establishing the Ekrâd Sancağı under a local Kurdish Bey like İzzeddin ²¹, and likely granting tax and military service exemptions or privileges in exchange for loyalty and frontier defense (especially against the Safavids), the state secured the region with minimal direct intervention.³⁰ This mirrored the *hukümet* system applied to some larger Kurdish principalities elsewhere, allowing considerable internal self-governance.³⁰

The Tanzimat era marked a decisive shift away from this model towards direct rule and centralization.⁴⁴ Policies aimed at standardizing administration, imposing universal conscription, centralizing tax collection, and registering land directly challenged the bases of the earlier autonomy and the power of local elites (Aghas and Sheikhs).³⁴ While these changes provoked widespread Kurdish resistance and major revolts in eastern Anatolia and Iraq, Kurd Dagħ remained relatively quiescent during the 19th century's main waves of rebellion. This suggests a potentially different local response, possibly rooted in the region's settled agrarian economy, its strong integration with the nearby urban centers of Aleppo and Kilis, or a strategic calculation by local elites who perhaps saw more advantage in accommodating Ottoman reforms than in outright confrontation.⁴ The Ottoman state, in turn, likely managed Kurd Dagħ primarily as part of the broader administrative and economic sphere of the Aleppo Vilayet and its crucial connection to Kilis. Its policies were probably driven more by the need to maintain provincial order, secure trade routes, and extract resources for the Vilayet capital, rather than by specific concerns about Kurdish separatism, which appeared less potent in this region compared to others during most of the Ottoman period.

B. Relations with Other Local Groups

The internal social dynamics of Kurd Dagħ involved interactions between the majority Kurdish Sunni population and resident minorities. The relationship with the Yazidis was particularly complex, involving long-term coexistence and possibly protective arrangements by certain Muslim tribes ⁴⁷, but also existing within a broader history of suspicion and periodic persecution directed at Yazidis by both state authorities and some Sunni neighbors.⁸

Interactions with Armenians, particularly in the late Ottoman period, were overshadowed by the broader conflicts and violence associated with the Hamidiye regiments and the Armenian

Genocide, although direct conflict within Kurd Dagh itself seems less documented than land disputes or violence in eastern provinces.¹³ Relations with Arab and Turkmen groups in the surrounding plains and steppe lands were likely shaped by competition for resources (grazing land, water), trade interactions, and occasional state manipulation (e.g., using Arab tribes to enforce tax collection on Kurds⁴⁵).

C. Local Responses to Ottoman Rule

The population of Kurd Dagh responded to Ottoman rule in various ways. There is clear evidence of adaptation and accommodation, seen in the participation of local leaders in the administrative system (like İzzeddin Bey) and the region's integration into the Ottoman economic network centered on Aleppo and Kilis. However, resistance also occurred, though perhaps on a smaller scale than elsewhere. This might have included tax evasion, avoidance of conscription, localized disputes that drew in Ottoman authorities, or participation in banditry.⁵⁶ The ability of the local population to maintain its distinct Kurdish language, cultural practices, and social structures throughout centuries of Ottoman rule demonstrates a significant degree of cultural resilience and the persistence of local identity despite imperial governance and later modernization efforts.³⁸

IX. Historiography and Sources

Understanding the history of Afrin/Kurd Dagh during the Ottoman period relies on piecing together evidence from a variety of primary and secondary sources, as dedicated, comprehensive accounts from the period itself are rare.

A. Key Primary Sources

- **Ottoman Archives:** The central Ottoman archives in Istanbul (Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi) hold potentially relevant material, though identifying documents specific to the Kaza of Kurd Dagh requires targeted searching. Key document types include:
 - *Salnames* (Provincial Yearbooks): Provide administrative structures, lists of officials, and sometimes demographic or economic summaries for Vilayets and Sanjaks.¹²
 - *Tahrir Defters* (Cadastral Surveys): Early Ottoman surveys recording population, land use, and tax obligations, crucial for the 16th century (the 1536 defter mentioning İzzeddin Bey is cited²¹).
 - *Şer'iye Sicilleri* (Islamic Court Records): Records from courts in Aleppo or Kilis might contain cases involving individuals, property, or disputes originating in Kurd Dagh, offering insights into social and economic life.²³
 - *Fermanlar* (Imperial Orders) and *Mühimme Defterleri* (Registers of Important Affairs): Might contain decrees or correspondence related to administration, security, or specific events in the region.²⁸
 - *Temettuat Defterleri* (Revenue/Tax Registers): Mid-19th century registers detailing household assets and income, potentially invaluable for social and economic

history if available for Kurd Dagħ.²⁴

- **Chronicles:** Works like Sharaf Khan Bidlisi's *Sherefname* (late 16th century) offer a Kurdish perspective on the history of Kurdish emirates and tribes, relevant for the early Ottoman context.³⁰
- **Travel Accounts:** European travelers occasionally passed through or near the region. William Biddulph (1599) provides an early, though somewhat confused, mention of "Coords" near Aleppo, likely Yazidis.⁸ Carsten Niebuhr (1764) documented Kurdish tribes in the Jazira, adjacent to Kurd Dagħ.³³ Later travelers like H.F.B. Lynch (early 20th century) commented on Kurdish-Armenian relations, mainly further east.³⁴ These accounts offer valuable external observations but must be read critically, considering potential biases, reliance on hearsay, and focus on the "exotic".³²

B. Key Secondary Sources (Modern Academic Studies)

Modern scholarship provides essential analysis and synthesis. Key contributors whose work touches upon Ottoman Kurd Dagħ or relevant contexts include:

- **Kurdish History and Society:** Martin van Bruinessen (on social/political structures, Alevi, modern developments)⁵, David McDowall (general Kurdish history, modern period)⁵, Jordi Tejel (Syrian Kurds, Mandate period).³⁸
- **Afrin/Kurd Dagħ Specific:** Thomas Schmidinger (recent history, ethnography, drawing on earlier sources)⁴, Roger Lescot (Mandate-era ethnography, particularly on Yazidis and tribes).³⁷
- **Ottoman Aleppo and Syria:** Bruce Masters (social/cultural history of Ottoman Arabs, Aleppo's economy)¹², Abraham Marcus (18th C Aleppo social history)²⁸, Philip Khoury (Mandate Syria, nationalism).³⁸
- **Ottoman Administration and Land:** Gökhan Çetinsaya (late Ottoman Iraq administration)⁸⁰, Suraiya Faroqhi (general Ottoman economic/social history).²⁹
- Turkish scholarship on the region's Ottoman history, particularly concerning Kilis and the Ekrân Sancağı, also exists.²¹

C. Gaps and Future Research Directions

Despite the available sources, significant gaps remain in our understanding of Ottoman Kurd Dagħ. Detailed ethnographic accounts *from* the Ottoman period itself are lacking. Specific land tenure records (like Temettuat defterleri or detailed Sicil case analyses focusing on Kurd Dagħ property) are needed to fully understand the impact of the 1858 Land Code. Granular demographic data beyond the 1922 census is scarce. Future research could involve systematic searches within the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi for records pertaining specifically to the Kaza of Kurd Dagħ or the Sanjak of Kilis. Detailed analysis of Aleppo's Şer'iye Sicilleri might uncover court cases involving individuals or property from Kurd Dagħ, shedding light on social relations, economic activities, and legal practices. Further investigation into local chronicles or oral histories, if accessible, could also enrich the narrative.

X. Conclusion

The history of the Afrin region, or Kurd Dagħ, during the Ottoman Empire (c. 1516–1918) reveals a complex interplay of local dynamics and imperial administration. Consistently identified as a predominantly Kurdish area, its strategic location on the empire's northern Syrian frontier shaped its administrative and socio-economic trajectory.

Initially incorporated through pragmatic co-option, with the establishment of the Ekrâd Sancağı under local Kurdish leadership like İzzeddin Bey, the region enjoyed a degree of autonomy within the early Ottoman system. This arrangement secured loyalty and facilitated administration on a sensitive border. The region's economy was characterized by a blend of ancient olive cultivation, providing crucial trade goods for Aleppo and Kilis, and significant pastoralism, managed through distinct tribal structures like the Amikan, Biyan, and Sheikhan. The late Ottoman period, particularly the Tanzimat era, brought significant changes.

Centralization policies led to the integration of Kurd Dagħ as a Kaza within the standardized Vilayet of Aleppo, eroding earlier autonomy. Modernization efforts, including land registration attempts via the 1858 Land Code and the imposition of universal military conscription, fundamentally altered the relationship between the state and the local population, challenging traditional practices and potentially exacerbating social inequalities, even though Kurd Dagħ did not erupt in the large-scale anti-Ottoman revolts seen in other Kurdish regions during the 19th century. Its relative stability might be attributed to its settled agrarian base, strong economic ties to Aleppo and Kilis, and perhaps different strategies pursued by its local leadership.

Throughout the Ottoman centuries, Kurd Dagħ maintained its distinct character, shaped by its Kurdish majority, the persistent presence of minorities like the Yazidis, its specific economic orientation towards olive cultivation and pastoralism, and its close ties to Kilis and Aleppo. The end of Ottoman rule after World War I and the subsequent drawing of the Turkish-Syrian border, severing Afrin from Kilis, marked a traumatic rupture of long-established administrative, economic, and social connections, setting the stage for the region's turbulent 20th and 21st-century history. Understanding the Ottoman legacy – the administrative frameworks, the demographic composition, the economic foundations, the social structures, and the complex history of state-local relations – is crucial for comprehending the subsequent developments and contemporary challenges faced by Afrin and its people.

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