

Afrin and its Neighbors: A Historical Analysis from the French Mandate to 2010

Introduction

Afrin: Geographical and Historical Significance

The region of Afrin, historically known in the Kurdish language as *Kurd Dagh* (Kurd Mountain), stands as a distinct geographical and cultural entity in northwestern Syria, characterized by its predominantly Kurdish identity.¹ Its landscape, a tapestry of rolling hills and fertile valleys, has long been dominated by the cultivation of olives, a practice deeply embedded in its economy and historical interactions.² This agricultural bounty, coupled with its strategic location, has positioned Afrin as a natural extension towards the Sanjak of Alexandretta (later Hatay province) and as a historical corridor and occasional battleground between Eastern and Western powers.¹ The deep-rooted history of its nearly 336 ancient villages is further underscored by archaeological remnants that trace human presence back to antiquity, including the fall of the Medes, lending the region a profound historical depth.¹

Afrin's historical trajectory is, in many ways, a microcosm of the broader Kurdish experience in the Middle East. It represents a story of a historically distinct region and people whose destiny has been significantly shaped by the policies, agreements, and strategic interests of larger state and imperial entities. The repeated emphasis on Afrin as "Kurd Dagh," its acknowledged Kurdish majority, and the manner in which its historical connections were severed or reconfigured by external powers—most notably through the drawing of the Syria-Turkey border—reflect a pattern common to Kurdish populations across Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran.¹ This pattern, where external determination of borders and political status often disregarded local ethno-linguistic realities, makes Afrin's story not merely local but emblematic of a wider regional phenomenon.

Overview of Afrin's Evolving Relationships (French Mandate to 2010)

This report will analyze the complex and evolving relationships of the Afrin region with its neighbors, particularly Turkey and adjacent Syrian territories, from the establishment of the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon around 1920 through the year 2010. It will examine how international border delimitations, colonial administrative policies, Syrian state-building efforts, regional power dynamics, and the persistent Kurdish question have collectively shaped Afrin's trajectory and its interactions with the surrounding political and social landscape. The geographical characteristic of Afrin being "almost surrounded by the Syria-Turkey border" since the Turkish annexation of Hatay province in 1939 has been a

defining and enduring factor in its strategic vulnerability and its complex, often tense, relationship with Turkey.⁴ This near-encirclement implies a high degree of exposure to Turkish influence, border policies, and security concerns, ensuring that political or security developments within Afrin would almost inevitably draw Turkish attention, and conversely, Turkish policies would directly impact Afrin. This geographical reality set the stage for persistent security dilemmas and intricate cross-border interactions that have marked much of its modern history.

The analysis will proceed by first examining the French Mandate period, focusing on the establishment of borders, Afrin's administrative identity, and socio-economic life.

Subsequently, it will explore Afrin's position within independent Syria, detailing its relationship with the central government, the impact of state policies on its Kurdish population, and its continued, often fraught, interactions with the Turkish Republic and neighboring Syrian regions up to the cusp of the Syrian Civil War.

Part I: Afrin under the French Mandate (c. 1920 – 1946)

Section 1: The Shaping of Borders and Administrative Identity

The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire following World War I ushered in a new era for the Levant, with former Ottoman territories partitioned and redistributed under the nascent mandate system. For Afrin, this period was foundational, witnessing the drawing of new international frontiers and its incorporation into a new administrative and political entity under French control.

The Post-Ottoman Settlement and the Franco-Turkish Frontier

The groundwork for the new political map of the Middle East was laid by wartime agreements such as the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, which allocated Syria to French influence.⁷ Following the war, France was formally granted the Mandate for Syria and Lebanon by the League of Nations in July 1922.¹⁰ The initial post-war settlement envisioned by the Treaty of Sèvres in August 1920, which proposed a significantly smaller Turkey and even authorized the creation of an autonomous Kurdish state, was never fully implemented within Turkey due to the success of the Turkish War of Independence led by Mustafa Kemal.⁷ This conflict rendered Sèvres obsolete.

The redrawing of the Turkish-Syrian frontier was largely determined by the Franco-Turkish Treaty of Ankara, signed in October 1921.⁷ This agreement, negotiated between the French and the Turkish nationalist government, established a border more favorable to Turkey and formally ended the state of war between French forces and Turkish nationalists in Cilicia and northern Syria. The subsequent Treaty of Lausanne in July 1923 solidified Turkey's independence and its revised borders, with Turkey renouncing claims to former Ottoman Arab provinces, including Syria.⁷ Crucially for the Kurds, unlike Sèvres, Lausanne made no provision for Kurdish autonomy or statehood.¹²

The precise delimitation of the Syria-Turkey border occurred in stages. The section of the frontier running from Meidan Ekbis (a border point near Afrin) eastward to Nusaybin was

defined in 1926.⁷ A Final Delimitation Protocol covering the entire boundary east of the Sanjak of Alexandretta was confirmed and deposited with the League of Nations on May 3, 1930.⁷ This process formally detached the Afrin region from Kilis province, to which it had been administratively linked during the Ottoman era, and placed it within the territory of French-mandated Syria.⁴ These border delimitations were primarily driven by the geopolitical interests of France and the nascent Turkish Republic, often with limited consideration for the existing ethnic, linguistic, or economic ties of the local populations, particularly impacting the Kurdish communities who found themselves straddling the newly demarcated international frontier.

The process of border creation and administrative structuring during the French Mandate fundamentally reoriented Afrin's traditional connections. Before the Mandate, Afrin was an integral part of the Kilis Province within the Ottoman administrative system.⁴ The drawing of the Syria-Turkey border and Afrin's subsequent incorporation into the State of Aleppo under French administration were not organic developments but rather imposed geopolitical realities.⁴ This artificial separation from Kilis and integration into a new Syrian entity, governed according to French colonial interests, would have inevitably disrupted established socio-economic patterns and created new administrative dependencies, primarily orienting Afrin towards Aleppo. The very act of defining a formal international border where a more fluid administrative boundary had previously existed, especially through lands predominantly inhabited by Kurds, inherently created conditions for future cross-border tensions, smuggling activities, and identity politics linked to communities divided by the new frontier.

Afrin's (Kurd Dagħ) Administrative Status within Mandate Syria

The town of Afrin itself was founded in the early 1920s, during the initial years of the French Mandate, and subsequently developed as a local market town and an administrative center for the surrounding Kurd Dagħ region.¹ Under the French administrative framework for Syria, which involved the creation of several semi-autonomous statelets, the Kurd Dagħ region, including Afrin, was incorporated into the State of Aleppo.⁴ This was one of several entities, such as those for the Alawites and the Druze, established by the French in an effort to manage the diverse Syrian territory.¹⁰ Later, as French policy evolved towards a more unified Syrian entity, Afrin became part of the State of Syria (1924–1930) and subsequently the Syrian Republic (1930–1958) under the Mandate.⁴

The French mandatory administration was tasked with establishing and controlling the administration, developing the country's resources, and preparing it for eventual self-government.¹⁰ This involved constructive work, including the building of roads and improvements in town planning, which likely contributed to the growth and development of Afrin town.⁴

The French decision not to grant the Kurds a distinct autonomous region, similar to the arrangements made for the Alawite and Druze communities¹⁰, despite the clear Kurdish identity of Kurd Dagħ, is noteworthy. While the French created specific administrative zones for Alawites and Druze, acknowledging their unique communal identities and perhaps seeking to cultivate local allies, Kurdish areas like Afrin and the Jazira were integrated into larger, more

ethnically diverse entities such as the State of Aleppo or were subject to more direct forms of administration.⁴ This differential treatment could have stemmed from a variety of factors: the Kurdish population might have been perceived by the French as less politically cohesive at the time, or perhaps as less strategically critical for the establishment of a separate administrative unit. Alternatively, France may have been wary of antagonizing the newly assertive Turkish Republic, which was contending with its own large Kurdish population and was sensitive to any perceived encouragement of Kurdish nationalism along its borders. This lack of early, formal recognition of Kurdish autonomy at a structural level within the Mandate framework likely contributed to later Kurdish grievances and fueled demands for recognition and rights within the independent Syrian state.

The Hatay Question and its Ramifications for Afrin

A pivotal event during the Mandate period that profoundly affected Afrin's geopolitical standing was the ceding of the Sanjak of Alexandretta to Turkey. The Sanjak, a coastal region west of Afrin with a mixed population of Arabs, Turks, Armenians, and others, was initially part of French-mandated Syria.⁷ However, in the late 1930s, as international tensions escalated in Europe, France sought to secure Turkish neutrality or even alliance. For strategic reasons, France agreed to a process that led to the Sanjak's autonomy as the Hatay State in 1938, followed by a controversial referendum and its subsequent annexation by Turkey in 1939.⁷ The annexation of Hatay by Turkey dramatically altered the geography of the Syrian-Turkish border. For the Afrin district, this meant it became almost entirely surrounded by Turkish territory, with only its eastern and southeastern frontiers bordering other Syrian districts (Azaz and Mount Simeon respectively).⁴ The loss of Hatay was, and remains, a significant grievance for Syrian nationalists and a persistent point of contention in Syria-Turkey relations.¹³ For Afrin, its immediate neighbor to the west now became part of a different, and often historically antagonistic, state. This development served as an early and enduring lesson for Afrin's inhabitants and for Syrian policymakers regarding the strategic importance of their region and its acute vulnerability to larger geopolitical bargains. The transfer of Hatay was a clear demonstration of how territory could be exchanged by external powers for strategic advantage, often overriding local preferences or previous administrative arrangements. For Afrin, which became geographically more exposed to Turkey as a result, this event would have been a stark illustration of its precarious borderland position. It likely instilled a lasting sense of insecurity and a degree of mistrust concerning Turkish intentions and the reliability of international or mandatory power guarantees, thereby influencing local Kurdish attitudes and subsequent Syrian state policy towards this sensitive border region.

Table 1: Key International Agreements and Border Delimitations Affecting Afrin (French Mandate Period)

Agreement/Treaty Name	Year	Key Provisions Relevant to Afrin/Syria-Turkey Border	Signatories	Source Snippets

Franco-British "Syrian Agreement"	1919	Ceded Gaziantep, Kilis, Marash, Birecek, Urfa to French forces from British control.	France, UK	1
Treaty of Sèvres	1920	Proposed Syria-Turkey boundary placing it further north; authorized autonomous Kurdish state (never enforced in Turkey).	Allied Powers, Ottoman Empire	7
Franco-Turkish Treaty of Ankara	1921	Redrew Syria-Turkey border more favorably to Turkey, terminating state of war.	France, Turkey	7
Treaty of Lausanne	1923	Turkey's independence recognized; generous territorial settlement; Turkey renounced claims to Arab lands. No Kurdish state.	Turkey, Allied Powers	7
Franco-Turkish Convention	1926	Precisely delimited Syria-Turkey frontier between Meidan Ekbis (near Afrin) and Nusaybin.	France, Turkey	7
Final Delimitation Protocol	1930	Confirmed entire boundary east of Hatay; deposited with League of	France, Turkey	7

		Nations.		
Franco-Turkish Agreement (Hatay)	1938-39	Delimited Hatay boundary; Hatay State became autonomous, then annexed by Turkey.	France, Turkey	7

Section 2: Life and Relations in Mandate-Era Afrin

Life in Afrin during the French Mandate was shaped by the new administrative realities, the evolving policies of the mandatory power towards its diverse population, and the reconfigured relationships with neighboring areas, both within Syria and across the newly defined Turkish border.

French Governance and Local Development in the Afrin District

The French mandatory administration, in line with its obligations under the League of Nations, was responsible for establishing administrative structures, developing the country's resources, and ostensibly preparing Syria for future self-government.¹⁰ In Afrin, this translated into the development of the town itself, which grew from a population of 800 in 1929 to 7,000 by 1968, with the French playing a role in this growth.⁴ Infrastructure projects, such as road construction and town planning initiatives, were characteristic of French activities across Syria and likely extended to regional centers like Afrin.¹⁰ The Afrin district, encompassing the Kurd Dagħ massif, had the town of Afrin designated as its local administrative hub.⁵ While these development efforts brought some modernization, they were often intertwined with French colonial economic interests and the need to assert control, rather than being solely driven by altruistic local development goals.

The economic development of Afrin town as an administrative and market center under the French⁴, coupled with its agricultural hinterland's strong connection to Aleppo¹, likely solidified Afrin's regional economic role within the Syrian Mandate. This, however, also made it increasingly dependent on these new Mandate-era structures and markets, particularly Aleppo, rather than its older, cross-border Ottoman-era connections with areas like Kilis. The French development of Afrin town and improvements to infrastructure would have naturally oriented its economy inwards towards other parts of Syria. While pre-Mandate Afrin was part of Kilis province⁴, the new international border and the French administrative framework would have redirected trade flows and administrative focus. This reorientation, while fostering local development within a Syrian context, also served to sever or diminish older economic ties with areas that were now part of Turkey, making Afrin's economy more integrated into, and reliant upon, the Syrian system being constructed by the French.

The Kurdish Population: Demographics, Society, and French Policies

Afrin and the wider Kurd Dagħ region were historically and predominantly Kurdish in their demographic makeup.¹ The French Mandate period saw the continuation of this strong

Kurdish presence. In other parts of Syria, notably the Jazira region in the northeast, French authorities actively encouraged the immigration of Kurds fleeing persecution or unrest in Turkey, particularly after the failure of the Sheikh Said Revolt in 1925.¹² These refugees were often granted citizenship by the French Mandate authorities.¹⁷

A notable aspect of French policy during this era was a relative tolerance, at least for a time or in specific contexts, towards Kurdish cultural expression. For instance, French authorities permitted Kurdish intellectuals to publish periodicals in the Kurdish language.⁸ This was a significant departure from the later assimilationist policies of the independent Syrian state and may have inadvertently nurtured a nascent Kurdish political and cultural consciousness. This space for cultural expression, however limited or strategically motivated by the French, could have provided an outlet for Kurdish intellectuals and helped foster a sense of distinct identity. This contrasts sharply with the subsequent Ba'athist era, which saw widespread suppression of the Kurdish language and culture.² The Mandate period, therefore, might represent a brief window of relative cultural latitude that, once closed, made subsequent restrictions feel even more acute and possibly fueled later Kurdish demands for rights. Interactions between Kurdish notables, tribal leaders, and the French administration certainly occurred, particularly in the Jazira region where issues of refugee settlement, land allocation for agriculture, and political status were negotiated.¹⁶ While specific details for Afrin are less abundant in the provided materials, similar dynamics of engagement between local Kurdish figures and French officials likely existed. The founding members of the first Syrian Kurdish political party in 1957 (post-Mandate), Rashid Hamo and Shukt Hanan, hailed from the Afrin region, indicating that their formative political experiences and education occurred under the Mandate system.¹⁹

The influx of Kurdish refugees from Turkey into French Mandate Syria¹², while primarily documented for the Jazira region, likely had some demographic and political resonance in other significant Kurdish areas like Afrin. These refugees, fleeing Turkish state policies and the aftermath of failed rebellions, would not only have bolstered the Kurdish population but also carried with them direct experiences of Turkish state nationalism and Kurdish resistance. Such experiences and narratives could have influenced the political outlook and activism of Syrian Kurds more broadly, including those in Afrin, potentially reinforcing its Kurdish identity and introducing new political ideas or grievances derived from the Turkish Kurdish experience. French policy towards the Kurds was often complex and ambivalent, balancing strategic interests—such as utilizing Kurdish refugees as a demographic buffer or for agricultural development in regions like Jazira¹⁶—with the need to maintain stable relations with Turkey and manage the aspirations of Syrian Arab nationalists.

Early Interactions: Afrin, Aleppo, and the Turkish Borderlands

Prior to the major Syrian crisis that began in 2011, Afrin was recognized as a primary economic supplier for the city of Aleppo, northern Syria's largest urban center and economic engine.¹ This suggests that during the Mandate period, strong economic ties with Aleppo were already established or significantly reinforced, with Afrin's agricultural surplus, particularly olives and other produce, finding its main market in Aleppo.

The drawing of the international border between Syria and Turkey would have inevitably impacted traditional cross-border movement and trade patterns with areas like Kilis and Gaziantep, which became part of the Turkish Republic. While specific details regarding the nature and volume of Afrin's cross-border trade during the Mandate period are scarce in the provided sources, general border dynamics would have entailed some level of local trade, possible smuggling, and continued social interaction across the new frontier, albeit now subject to new regulations and political controls. The Franco-British "Syrian Agreement" of 1919 had initially ceded Gaziantep and Kilis to French forces (from British control).¹ This meant that these areas, which directly neighbored the Afrin region, were under the same mandatory power (France) for a period before the final border settlement with Turkey. This temporary unified administration might have facilitated some level of interaction and movement before the border became a more permanent international division.

Aleppo was the undisputed major urban and economic hub of northern Syria. Afrin's geographical proximity and its agricultural productivity naturally linked it to Aleppo's markets and administrative oversight. The new international border with Turkey would have formalized, and in many ways restricted, previously more fluid interactions with towns like Kilis, which had historical connections to the Kurd Dagħ region.

Part II: Afrin in Independent Syria: Navigating National and Regional Currents (1946 – 2010)

Following Syria's attainment of full independence in April 1946¹⁰, the Afrin region, like other parts of the country, embarked on a new chapter within a sovereign Syrian state. This period, extending to 2010, was characterized by Afrin's attempts to navigate its relationship with a centralizing government in Damascus, the persistent and often discriminatory state policies towards its Kurdish population, and the complex, fluctuating dynamics along the sensitive Turkish border.

Section 3: Afrin within the Syrian State

The integration of Afrin into the newly independent Syrian state brought with it a new set of administrative, political, and socio-economic realities, largely dictated by the central government in Damascus.

Administrative Framework and Governance from Damascus

Upon Syria's independence, Afrin was formally incorporated as a district within the Syrian state, administratively falling under the jurisdiction of the Aleppo Governorate.⁴ Local governance structures in Afrin, as in other regions, would have been subordinate to the central authorities in Damascus. Particularly after the Ba'ath Party consolidated power in 1963, Syria developed into a highly centralized state. This meant that significant decision-making power, resource allocation, and the appointment of key officials, even at the local level, were concentrated in the hands of the central government. It was common for administrative and security officials in regions like Afrin to be appointed from outside the local area, often from

central Syria, a practice that could limit local autonomy and foster a sense of disconnect between the populace and the governing authorities.²

State Policies and the Kurdish Question in Afrin (Arabization, Citizenship, Cultural and Political Rights)

Successive Syrian governments, and most notably the Ba'athist regime, implemented a range of policies that resulted in systematic discrimination and attempts at Arabization targeting the Kurdish minority across the country, including in Afrin.² These policies aimed to promote a singular Arab nationalist identity and often viewed expressions of distinct Kurdish identity and political aspirations as a threat to national unity and territorial integrity.²

In the realm of **language and culture**, the Kurdish language faced severe suppression. Official use was prohibited, teaching Kurdish in schools was banned, and parents were often unable to register their children with Kurdish names. Businesses were also barred from using Kurdish names. The publication of materials in Kurdish, and even the performance of Kurdish songs at private festivities, were proscribed.⁸ Furthermore, a policy of Arabizing place names saw Kurdish village names changed to Arabic ones.¹⁸

A critical issue was **citizenship**. A controversial census conducted exclusively in the Jazira (Al-Hasakah) governorate in 1962 resulted in approximately 120,000 Kurds being stripped of their Syrian citizenship and classified as *ajanib* (foreigners) or *maktoumeen* (unregistered).² While Afrin was reportedly "spared the Arabization campaigns that affected other parts of Syrian Kurdistan" to the same intense degree as Jazira, and was considered the "least Arabized" of the Kurdish regions²¹, the general atmosphere of discrimination and the plight of stateless Kurds elsewhere created a climate of insecurity and grievance that undoubtedly impacted Afrin's Kurdish population. The Syrian state's narrative often portrayed Kurds as recent immigrants from Turkey, partly to justify these discriminatory measures.¹²

Regarding **land and property**, Arabization policies in other Kurdish regions, such as the creation of an "Arab Belt" in Jazira during the 1970s, involved the expropriation of Kurdish-owned lands and the resettlement of Arab families.² While Afrin may not have experienced such large-scale demographic engineering, residents in border areas like Afrin still faced restrictions on obtaining property deeds and on building or repairing their houses.¹⁸

Political repression was also a significant feature. Kurdish political parties, such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS) which was founded in 1957 and included founding members from the Afrin region like Rashid Hamo and Shukt Hanan¹⁹, were never legally recognized by the Syrian state and faced consistent suppression.¹² Kurdish political activists were often persecuted, arrested, and imprisoned.¹²

The Syrian state's policies of Arabization and suppression of Kurdish identity in Afrin and other Kurdish areas, rather than achieving the intended assimilation, likely had the counter-effect of strengthening Kurdish ethno-national consciousness and fostering a sense of collective grievance. Decades of denying fundamental language rights, cultural expression, and meaningful political participation² created a shared experience of marginalization among Syrian Kurds. When a group's core identity is actively and systematically suppressed by the

state, that identity often becomes a more salient, potent, and fiercely defended aspect of their collective being. The very act of banning Kurdish names, songs, or publications can transform these cultural markers into powerful symbols of resistance and distinctiveness. This shared experience of discrimination, felt across generations, can serve to unify a group, transcending other internal differences, and fuel collective demands for recognition, rights, and self-expression. This process laid the groundwork for future political mobilization and the eventual rise of more assertive Kurdish political movements and, in the context of the Syrian Civil War post-2010, aspirations for autonomy.

Afrin's relative "sparing" from the most intense forms of Arabization campaigns, particularly large-scale land expropriation and demographic resettlement, when compared to the Jazira region ²¹, might be attributable to several factors. Its distinct geography, characterized by more mountainous and rugged terrain rather than the expansive agricultural plains of Jazira, may have made large-scale resettlement of Arab farming communities less feasible or a lower strategic priority for the state.¹ Additionally, the "Arab Belt" policy was specifically designed to alter the demographic balance along the strategically vital and agriculturally rich borders with Turkey and Iraq in the Jazira region.² Afrin's more isolated geographical position in the northwest, though also bordering Turkey, may have presented different strategic calculations for Damascus. However, this relative "sparing" did not insulate Afrin from the overarching discriminatory legal and political framework that affected all Syrian Kurds. National laws and state practices restricting language, cultural expression, and political activity were applied universally, meaning that the experience of Kurds in Afrin was one of degree of intensity rather than a complete exception from state-sponsored discrimination.¹²

Table 2: Overview of Syrian State Policies Towards the Kurdish Population in Afrin (1946-2010)

Policy Area	Description	Approximate Period	Impact on Afrin Kurds (and Syrian Kurds generally)	Source Snippets
Language Rights	Ban on official use of Kurdish, teaching Kurdish, Kurdish names for children/businesses, Kurdish publications, Kurdish songs at festivities.	Ba'ath era (1963-2010)	Suppression of cultural identity, limited educational and public expression in mother tongue.	⁸
Citizenship	1962 census in Jazira rendered c. 120,000 Kurds stateless	From 1962 onwards	While Afrin less directly hit by mass denaturalization,	²

	(<i>ajanib/maktoumen</i>).		the policy created a class of disenfranchised Kurds, impacting national Kurdish identity and rights.	
Arabization	Changing Kurdish village names to Arabic. "Arab Belt" policy in Jazira (land expropriation, resettlement of Arabs).	Mainly 1970s (Arab Belt)	Cultural erasure, demographic shifts in some Kurdish areas. Afrin "spared" the most intense land-based Arabization but still faced naming changes and border area restrictions.	²
Land & Property	Restrictions on property deeds, building/repairing houses in border areas like Afrin. Land confiscation in other Kurdish areas.	Ba'ath era	Economic insecurity, limited development, obstacles to maintaining/improving homes.	¹⁸
Political Rights	Prohibition of Kurdish political parties (e.g., KDPS). Persecution and arrest of Kurdish activists.	Ba'ath era	Lack of political representation, suppression of dissent, inability to advocate for rights through formal channels.	¹²
Cultural Expression	Repression of cultural celebrations (e.g., Newroz after 1986).	Ba'ath era	Limitation on public expression of Kurdish heritage and traditions.	¹²
Economic Development	Perceived deliberate underdevelopment of Kurdish	Ba'ath era	Limited economic opportunities beyond agriculture, sense	²

	regions, lack of investment in industry, non-Kurdish personnel in key local jobs.		of marginalization and neglect.	
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Socio-Economic Landscape: Agriculture, Development, and Neglect

Throughout the post-independence period up to 2010, Afrin's economy remained overwhelmingly anchored in agriculture. The region was renowned for its vast olive groves, with an estimated 14 million trees, some of ancient lineage.² Olive cultivation and olive oil production were central to the livelihoods of its people, with reports indicating that prior to 2011, as much as 75% of Afrin's population was engaged in agriculture.² Besides olives, the fertile lands of Afrin also yielded citrus fruits and pomegranates.² Some local industries, naturally linked to its agricultural base, such as olive oil pressing, and also textiles, existed in the region.²⁴

Despite its agricultural productivity, there is substantial evidence suggesting that Kurdish regions in Syria, including Afrin, experienced a degree of deliberate underdevelopment and neglect from the central government.² Industrial development in Kurdish areas was reportedly hindered, and key administrative and skilled technical positions within the local bureaucracy and state-run enterprises were often filled by non-Kurdish individuals dispatched from central Syria.² This pattern reinforced a sense of economic marginalization among the Kurdish population.

Nevertheless, Afrin maintained its role as an important economic supplier to the city of Aleppo even before 2011.¹ Information on specific large-scale government-led infrastructure projects in the Afrin district between 1970 and 2000 is limited in the available documentation.²⁵

However, Syria as a whole did undergo periods of significant state-led development, particularly in irrigation, electricity, and road building.²⁹ One notable project mentioned, albeit in a source dated 2025 and thus referring to plans likely conceived or revived before 2010, was a strategic natural gas pipeline being jointly developed by Syria and Turkey, intended to run from Kilis in Turkey, through the Afrin region, to the Aleppo governorate.³¹ This suggests that Afrin was, at times, considered in larger infrastructure planning, especially during periods of improved Syria-Turkey relations.

The economic reliance of Afrin on its agricultural sector, particularly olives², combined with the perceived state neglect in terms of broader industrial development and local empowerment², likely created a degree of economic vulnerability. This situation fostered a sense that Afrin was primarily a resource provider, contributing its agricultural wealth to the wider Syrian economy and especially to the markets of Aleppo¹, without receiving proportionate investment, development in other sectors, or significant local benefit in return. Such economic disparities, when overlaid with ethnic discrimination and political marginalization, often serve as potent fuel for political discontent and demands for greater

regional autonomy and equitable development.

Section 4: Afrin and the Turkish Republic: A Contested Borderland

The relationship between Afrin and the Turkish Republic throughout the post-Syrian independence period until 2010 was complex and often fraught with tension, shaped by unresolved historical disputes, critical security concerns, and the sensitive issue of the Kurdish populations on both sides of the border.

Enduring Disputes: Hatay, Water Resources, and Cross-Border Dynamics

Several fundamental disputes cast a long shadow over Syria-Turkey relations, directly or indirectly impacting the Afrin borderland. The **Hatay dispute** remained a cornerstone of Syrian grievance. Turkey's annexation of the Sanjak of Alexandretta in 1939, which became Hatay Province, was never formally recognized by Syria. Damascus continued to depict Hatay as Syrian territory on its official maps, and this issue remained a persistent irritant in bilateral relations.¹³

Water resources constituted another major area of contention. Turkey's control over the headwaters of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, and its ambitious Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) involving the construction of numerous dams, raised serious concerns in downstream Syria about reduced water flow and its impact on agriculture and development.¹³ The Orontes River, which flows from Hatay into the Mediterranean, was also a subject of water-sharing disagreements.¹⁵ While the Afrin River itself is not highlighted as a major point of bilateral dispute in the provided materials, the general atmosphere of tension over shared water resources was a defining characteristic of the relationship.

Cross-border dynamics were also complex. Smuggling was a significant and persistent issue along the entire length of the Syrian-Turkish border. Given Afrin's extensive border with Turkey, it is highly probable that this region was also a conduit for such illicit activities.¹³ This smuggling reportedly involved various goods, including subsidized Syrian fuel, tea, and tobacco moving from Syria into Turkey.¹³ Alongside illicit trade, some level of local, often informal, cross-border trade likely occurred. Notably, before the Syrian war, northwestern Syria, with Afrin as a key producer, was a significant source of high-quality olive oil, some of which found its way to Turkish markets or was exported via Turkey.¹³ These underlying disputes and informal economic activities created a volatile mix, where periods of relative calm could quickly give way to heightened tensions.

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) Factor and the Adana Agreement (1998)

The most acute security challenge in Syria-Turkey relations for nearly two decades revolved around the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). From the late 1970s or early 1980s until 1998, Syria, under the leadership of Hafez al-Assad, provided significant support, sanctuary, and operational bases for the PKK, a Kurdish militant organization engaged in a protracted insurgency against the Turkish state.¹³ The PKK's founder and leader, Abdullah Öcalan, was based in Damascus for much of this period.³² The PKK established training camps in Syrian-controlled territory, including the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon, and recruited members

from among Syria's Kurdish population.³² Syria's support for the PKK was widely seen as a strategic lever used by Damascus against Ankara over outstanding issues such as the Hatay dispute and water rights.³²

The PKK's cross-border attacks and its presence in Syria led to severe and escalating tensions with Turkey, culminating in a crisis in 1998 that brought the two nations to the brink of armed conflict.¹⁵ Faced with credible Turkish military threats, Syria acquiesced to Turkish demands, expelling Öcalan and signing the **Adana Agreement** in October 1998.¹³ This security protocol committed Syria to cease all support for the PKK, to recognize it as a terrorist organization, and to prevent its members from using Syrian territory. Crucially, a provision of the Adana Agreement reportedly granted Turkey the right to take necessary security measures within a 5-kilometer depth of Syrian territory if Syria failed to uphold its commitments to prevent cross-border threats.¹³

While the provided materials do not offer extensive details on specific PKK activities based directly within the Afrin district during the 1980s and 1990s, the region's predominantly Kurdish population and its immediate proximity to the Turkish border made it an area of high sensitivity. One source, reflecting on the period before 2015, notes that the PKK had been a dominant influence in Afrin since the 1980s.³⁷ The Adana Agreement's provisions, particularly the allowance for Turkish cross-border operations, would have had direct and significant implications for the security dynamics along the Afrin border. This agreement fundamentally altered the sovereignty equation along the Syrian-Turkish border, granting Turkey a de facto, if conditional, right to intervene that would cast a long shadow over regions like Afrin, influencing security calculations long after 1998 and even before the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War. It effectively institutionalized a Turkish security prerogative on Syrian soil, shaping how both the Syrian government and Kurdish groups in the border areas would have to navigate their actions and policies vis-à-vis Turkey.

Fluctuating Bilateral Relations and Their Impact on the Afrin Region

Syria-Turkey relations were thus characterized by deep hostility and mistrust for much of the latter half of the 20th century. However, following the Adana Agreement and particularly from the early 2000s until 2010, a dramatic and unexpected rapprochement occurred.¹³ This period, sometimes referred to as a "golden era," saw a significant improvement in ties, marked by burgeoning economic cooperation, including the signing of a free trade agreement in 2004 and the establishment of visa-free travel.¹⁵ Turkey became a major foreign investor in Syria, with notable investments in Aleppo's industrial zone, which is geographically close to Afrin.¹³ There were even instances of military cooperation.¹⁵

This "good bond" ³⁸ between Damascus and Ankara likely translated into a more relaxed border regime, benefiting legitimate cross-border trade and movement in areas like Afrin. The aforementioned planned natural gas pipeline from Kilis in Turkey, traversing Afrin to supply the Aleppo governorate ³¹, is indicative of the depth of this cooperation. For the Afrin region, this decade of détente would have meant a period of relative stability and reduced tension along its Turkish border.

However, this dramatic improvement in Syria-Turkey relations in the 2000s, while

economically beneficial and reducing immediate border tensions for Afrin, might also have had the unintended consequence of dampening overt Syrian Kurdish political activism, particularly any that could be construed as linked to or supportive of the PKK or Kurdish aspirations in Turkey. With Damascus keen to preserve its newfound strategic partnership with Ankara, it would have been less tolerant of any activities within its borders, especially in sensitive Kurdish-populated border regions like Afrin, that could jeopardize this crucial relationship. This could have meant increased surveillance and pressure by Syrian authorities on Kurdish groups and activists in Afrin, paradoxically making the period of "friendly" relations with Turkey a more constrained one for certain types of Kurdish political expression. The historical dispute over Hatay, although a Syrian national issue, likely resonated particularly strongly in Afrin due to its geographical proximity and the precedent of territorial change involving a border region with a significant Kurdish population (within the broader Kurd Dagħ area historically).¹⁵ Hatay's annexation had directly impacted Afrin's geopolitical position, transforming it into a region almost encircled by the Turkish border.⁴ For the local Kurdish population, the historical example of a neighboring territory being absorbed by Turkey after a controversial process would have served as a constant reminder of border fluidity and the overriding power of Turkish state interests. This could have fostered a latent anxiety among Afrin's Kurds about potential Turkish irredentism or undue influence in northern Syria, especially in Kurdish-majority areas, irrespective of the prevailing state of official bilateral relations between Damascus and Ankara.

Table 3: Milestones in Syria-Turkey Relations and Their Impact on the Afrin Region (1946-2010)

Period/Event	Nature of Bilateral Relations	Specific Relevance/Impact on Afrin	Source Snippets
1946-1970s: Post-Independence Tensions	Strained due to Hatay dispute, water resource disagreements, Cold War alignments.	Afrin as a sensitive border region; potential for low-level border incidents (though not detailed); Syrian policies in Afrin likely influenced by perception of Turkish threat.	¹³
Late 1970s-1998: PKK Factor & Peak Hostility	Extremely tense; Syria supports PKK; Turkey views PKK as major security threat. Brink of war.	Afrin region's Kurdish population potentially sympathetic to or influenced by PKK; area becomes highly securitized; Syrian leverage via PKK against Turkey. PKK	¹³

		dominance in Afrin noted. ³⁷	
1998: Adana Agreement	Syria expels Öcalan, commits to end PKK support under Turkish military pressure.	Direct impact on security along Afrin border; grants Turkey potential right to cross-border operations (5km zone); likely increased Syrian state control over Kurdish activities in Afrin.	¹³
2000-2010: Rapprochement and "Golden Era"	Significant improvement: free trade, visa-free travel, economic & security cooperation.	Reduced border tensions for Afrin; increased legal cross-border economic activity (e.g., olive oil ¹³ , planned gas pipeline ³¹); potentially less overt Kurdish activism linked to Turkey.	¹³
Ongoing Issue: Water Disputes (GAP Project)	Persistent underlying tension despite periods of cooperation.	Indirect impact on Afrin as part of Syria, which faced water shortages due to Turkish dams on Euphrates. Less direct impact than on eastern Syrian regions.	¹³
Ongoing Issue: Hatay Dispute	Syria never recognized Turkish annexation; a latent source of diplomatic friction.	Afrin's proximity to Hatay keeps the issue geographically relevant; historical precedent of border change.	¹³

Section 5: Afrin's Relations with Neighboring Syrian Regions

Beyond its critical relationship with Turkey, Afrin's interactions with adjacent Syrian regions, particularly the economic hub of Aleppo and the neighboring district of Azaz, were also important facets of its existence within the Syrian state.

The Aleppo-Afrin Axis: Economic and Social Ties

Afrin's economy and social life were deeply intertwined with Aleppo, the largest city in northern Syria and a major commercial, industrial, and administrative center. Historically, Afrin served as a significant economic supplier to Aleppo, primarily providing agricultural products from its fertile lands.¹ The cultivation of olives and the production of olive oil were mainstays of this economic relationship.² Administratively, Afrin district was part of the Aleppo Governorate, which further solidified its links to Aleppo city, the governorate capital.⁴ This administrative and economic linkage naturally fostered considerable movement of people between Afrin and Aleppo for purposes of trade, labor, access to services, and education. The strong economic connection meant that Afrin's economic fortunes were intrinsically tied to the stability and economic policies centered in Aleppo. This dependency could make Afrin vulnerable to shifts in Aleppo's economy or administrative priorities determined at the governorate level. For instance, if Aleppo's economy thrived, demand for Afrin's agricultural products would likely be robust. Conversely, economic downturns in Aleppo, changes in agricultural procurement policies by Aleppo-based merchants or authorities, or disruptions to transportation routes could disproportionately affect Afrin's farmers and its local economy. This dynamic positioned Afrin not merely as an administrative subordinate within the Aleppo governorate but also, to a significant extent, as an economic hinterland serving the needs of the larger urban center. During the Syrian crisis that erupted after 2010 (which is beyond the timeframe of this report but indicative of pre-existing connections), many internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Aleppo city and its surroundings sought refuge in the relatively calmer Afrin region, highlighting the established social and logistical connections between the two areas.¹

Interactions with Azaz and Other Adjacent Areas

The Afrin district shares administrative borders with the Azaz District to its east and the Mount Simeon District (which includes parts of Aleppo city's environs) to its southeast.⁴ Pre-2011 interactions with these immediate Syrian neighbors are not extensively detailed in the provided research materials. However, it can be reasonably assumed that normal inter-district relations prevailed, involving local trade in agricultural produce and other goods, social connections through intermarriage or extended clan and family ties, and movement for administrative or personal reasons. The ethnic composition of areas to the east of the Afrin region (described as its central and eastern parts in one source referring to a later administrative entity) is noted as being mixed, including Arab Syrians, Arabized Kurds, as well as Circassian and Chechen populations, particularly in the city of Manbij (further east), and Syrian Turkmen.¹⁴ This ethnic diversity in the broader northern Aleppo countryside suggests a complex tapestry of local interactions.

The relative lack of detailed information in the available sources about significant pre-2011 conflicts or deep-seated animosities between Afrin and its immediate Syrian neighbors like Azaz suggests that, while routine local interactions certainly existed, these relationships were likely overshadowed in strategic importance by the more dominant axes of Afrin-Aleppo

(primarily economic) and Afrin-Turkey (geopolitical and security-focused). The conflicts and complex relationships involving different factions controlling various areas that emerged after 2010, particularly between Kurdish forces in Afrin and opposition groups in areas like Azaz³⁷, appear to have arisen from the specific dynamics and alignments of the Syrian Civil War itself, rather than necessarily stemming from profound historical animosities rooted in the pre-2010 period. Day-to-day life would have involved regular contact, but these local ties did not seem to carry the same weight in shaping Afrin's broader strategic position or its most pressing challenges as did its connections with Aleppo and the Turkish state.

Conclusion

The history of the Afrin region and its relationships with its neighbors from the French Mandate period through 2010 is a narrative of profound transformation, shaped by the interplay of colonial policies, nascent state-building, enduring ethno-national identities, and shifting regional power dynamics. Initially part of the Ottoman Empire, Afrin's destiny was irrevocably altered by the post-World War I settlement, which placed it within French-mandated Syria and, crucially, demarcated a new international border with the Turkish Republic. This act of border creation, followed by the French cession of the Sanjak of Alexandretta (Hatay) to Turkey in 1939, left Afrin almost entirely encircled by Turkish territory, a geographical reality that would heavily influence its subsequent history.

Throughout the French Mandate, Afrin developed as a local administrative center and an agricultural hub, economically tied to Aleppo. Its predominantly Kurdish population experienced a degree of cultural latitude not always seen elsewhere, though the Mandate authorities did not grant it a distinct autonomous status comparable to that of some other Syrian minorities. With Syria's independence in 1946, Afrin was formally integrated into the Syrian state as part of Aleppo Governorate. However, its Kurdish inhabitants, like Kurds elsewhere in Syria, faced decades of discriminatory policies under successive Syrian governments, particularly the Ba'athist regime. These policies included the suppression of the Kurdish language and culture, restrictions on political activity, and economic neglect, all aimed at fostering an Arab nationalist identity and quelling Kurdish aspirations for recognition and rights.

Afrin's relationship with the Turkish Republic was consistently complex and often tense. Historical disputes over Hatay and water resources, coupled with the highly sensitive issue of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – which Syria supported for a period – led to a volatile border environment. The 1998 Adana Agreement, which forced Syria to cease its support for the PKK, marked a turning point, but also underscored Turkey's significant security interests and influence in the border region. The subsequent decade (2000-2010) witnessed a remarkable, albeit ultimately fragile, rapprochement between Syria and Turkey, which brought a period of relative calm and economic opportunity to border areas like Afrin. Internally, Afrin's primary relationship within Syria was its economic linkage to Aleppo, serving as a key agricultural supplier.

The historical period from the French Mandate to 2010 reveals a consistent pattern where Afrin's local agency and the aspirations of its predominantly Kurdish population were largely

subordinated to the strategic interests of larger powers—France during the Mandate, the Syrian central government post-independence, and the Turkish Republic. Decisions regarding Afrin's borders, its administrative status, the fate of neighboring territories like Hatay, overarching security arrangements such as the Adana Agreement, and even the trajectory of its economic development were predominantly made by these external actors, often with little consultation or consideration for local desires. The Kurdish population's persistent desire for cultural and political rights was consistently met with state-led suppression or, at best, strategic manipulation. This continuous subordination created a fragile and often precarious status quo, highly susceptible to disruption when the regional balance of power shifted, as it dramatically did in the decade following 2010. This legacy of unresolved tensions and inherent vulnerabilities, cultivated over nearly a century, set the stage for the significant transformations and devastating conflicts that would later engulf Afrin and the wider Syrian region.

Furthermore, the interplay between Afrin's internal socio-economic structure—primarily agricultural and economically tethered to Aleppo—and the external political pressures it faced from Syrian state policies and Turkish security concerns created a unique and inherently unstable regional dynamic. Afrin was economically integrated into the Syrian national economy, yet its majority Kurdish population endured systematic political and cultural marginalization at the hands of the Syrian state. Simultaneously, its geographical position made it a constant focal point of Turkish security calculations and cross-border influences. This meant Afrin was perpetually pulled in multiple directions: economically Syrian, yet culturally and ethnically distinct (and often repressed for this distinctiveness), and geopolitically sensitive to its powerful northern neighbor. Such inherent contradictions, where economic integration coexists with profound political and cultural alienation, often lead to deep-seated grievances and become increasingly untenable over time, particularly when central state control weakens or external pressures intensify. The period leading up to 2010 essentially incubated these unresolved contradictions, which would later erupt with profound consequences for Afrin and its people.

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