

Afrin and Aleppo: A Pre-2010 Nexus of Administration, Economy, and Society

Introduction

The relationship between the Afrin region and the city of Aleppo in northern Syria, prior to the transformative events of 2010 and the subsequent Syrian Civil War, was multifaceted, characterized by deep-seated administrative, economic, and socio-demographic interconnections. As a distinct district within the Aleppo Governorate, Afrin's destiny was intrinsically linked to the urban, economic, and political center of Aleppo. This report examines the nature of these ties, exploring the governance structures, economic exchanges with a particular focus on the pivotal olive industry, and the social and demographic bonds that defined their pre-2010 relationship. Understanding this historical nexus is crucial for contextualizing the subsequent developments that have profoundly reshaped the region.

I. Administrative and Governance Framework

A. Afrin District within Aleppo Governorate

Prior to 2010, the Afrin District was an integral administrative unit of the Aleppo Governorate, Syrian Arab Republic.¹ The city of Afrin served as the administrative seat for the district, which encompassed numerous subdistricts and villages.² This formal administrative hierarchy placed Afrin under the direct authority of the governorate centered in Aleppo, approximately 63 kilometers away.³ The drawing of the Syria-Turkey border in 1923, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, had detached Afrin from the Kilis Province and incorporated it into French-administered Syria, initially as part of the State of Aleppo.⁴ This historical administrative linkage with Aleppo was maintained after Syria gained full independence and continued throughout the Ba'athist era leading up to 2010. The Ottoman Empire had previously recognized the Afrin plateau as the "Sancak of the Kurds," indicating a historical acknowledgment of its distinct Kurdish character even before its incorporation into modern Syria.⁵

B. Local Governance in Afrin and State Control

Despite its formal administrative integration, governance in Afrin before 2011 reflected the centralized nature of the Syrian Ba'athist state. The central government in Damascus, often acting through the governorate in Aleppo, maintained control via appointed officials, police, and extensive security service units, many of whom originated from central Syria rather than the local Kurdish population.⁶ Key positions in the regional civil administrative bureaucracy, education, and even skilled labor in sectors like oil production (though less prominent in Afrin itself compared to other Kurdish regions) were often filled by non-Kurds.⁶ This system, while

ensuring state authority, also fostered a sense of marginalization among the local Kurdish populace. The state's approach combined repression with targeted political co-optation, with the Ba'ath Party at the helm, ideologically promoting Arab nationalism and often viewing expressions of distinct Kurdish identity with suspicion.⁶ While local intermediaries and traditional power structures existed, they operated within the overarching framework of state control.⁷

C. Political Currents and Influence (Pre-2011)

The political landscape of Afrin, even under Ba'athist rule, was influenced by Kurdish nationalist sentiments. Historically, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) maintained a significant presence and influence in Afrin from its founding in the late 1970s until the Adana Agreement of 1998, which compelled its leadership to leave Syria.⁸ During this two-decade period, the PKK is reported to have largely dominated local politics in Afrin, building strong organizational capacity and enjoying considerable public support.⁸ Following the PKK's formal departure, its ideological influence persisted, notably through the formation of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) underground in 2003 by local former PKK members.⁶ While overt political activity by non-Ba'athist parties was suppressed, these undercurrents shaped local consciousness and interactions with state authorities. The Syrian government, wary of Kurdish political aspirations, often responded with repressive measures, as seen in the 2004 Qamishli events, which had repercussions in other Kurdish areas, including instances of unrest in Afrin where Syrian police actions led to fatalities.⁴

II. Economic Interdependence

A. The Olive Economy: A Symbiotic Relationship

The economic relationship between Afrin and Aleppo before 2010 was most prominently characterized by the olive industry. Afrin, known as "Kurd Dagħ" or the Mountain of the Kurds, is renowned for its vast olive groves, with an estimated 14 million trees, some centuries old.⁶ This region was a primary producer of high-quality olives and olive oil, considered among the best in Syria.⁶ A significant portion of this olive oil was traditionally destined for Aleppo, where it formed the essential ingredient for the world-renowned Aleppo soap, a product with centuries of history.⁴ Soap-making families in Aleppo relied on olives from the surrounding countryside, including Afrin, for their craft.¹² Before 2011, an estimated 75% of Afrin's population worked in agriculture, with olive cultivation and processing being central to its economy.⁶ This created a strong economic linkage, where Afrin served as a key supplier of raw materials to Aleppo's artisanal and industrial sectors. Industries related to olives, such as oil extraction and soap production, were also present within Afrin itself.³

B. Broader Agricultural and Trade Links

Beyond olives, Afrin's fertile lands produced a variety of other agricultural goods, including citrus fruits and pomegranates, contributing to its role as an economic supplier for Aleppo.⁶

Before the Syrian crisis, Afrin was described as the main economic supplier for the city of Aleppo.¹³ Aleppo, as the major economic and administrative hub of northern Syria, naturally drew agricultural products from its hinterlands, including Afrin.¹⁴ The town of Afrin itself was founded as a market in the 19th century, underscoring its historical role as a trading center for the surrounding agricultural region.⁴ While Aleppo was the primary industrial and manufacturing center of Syria¹⁴, Afrin's economy was predominantly agricultural, but also included local industries like textiles⁴ and traditional handicrafts such as carpet making.³ The economic dynamism of Aleppo, with its established business class and manufacturing capacity, created a demand that Afrin's agricultural output helped meet.¹⁴

C. Labor Mobility and Economic Opportunities

The economic connection between Afrin and Aleppo also manifested in labor mobility. Aleppo, being a major urban and industrial center, attracted labor from its rural peripheries, including Afrin. It was common for men from the Kurd Dagħ region to travel to Aleppo to work as manual laborers, often returning to their villages during weekends or for peak agricultural seasons like the olive harvest.¹⁶ This continuous flux of people not only represented an economic linkage but also fostered ongoing social and cultural exchanges. While specific pre-2011 statistics on labor migration from Afrin to Aleppo are scarce, the general pattern of rural-to-urban labor movement towards major economic centers like Aleppo was a well-established feature of Syria's political economy.¹⁴ The pre-2011 Syrian economy faced rising unemployment and poverty, particularly in rural areas, which would have further incentivized such migration for economic opportunities.¹⁷

III. Socio-Demographic Fabric

A. Population Dynamics and Ethnic Composition

The Afrin District was characterized by an overwhelmingly Kurdish population prior to 2010. Estimates suggest that Kurds constituted between 90% to 97% of the district's inhabitants.² The district was often described as "homogeneously Kurdish".² Official Syrian census data from 2004 indicated a population of 172,095 for Afrin District², while another Syrian census from 2010 reported a significantly higher figure of 523,258 for the district, noting a predominantly Kurdish population.³ It's important to note that Syrian state censuses did not typically include data on ethnic composition, as Kurds were not officially recognized as a distinct ethnic group.¹⁸ The remaining small percentage of Afrin's population included Arabs, primarily concentrated in certain villages, some of whom had migrated from nearby areas like Manbij, as well as Turkmens, Armenians, and Yazidis.¹ In the 1930s, Kurdish Alevis fleeing persecution in Turkey also settled in the Maabatli subdistrict of Afrin.² Aleppo city, in contrast, was a diverse metropolis but also home to a significant Kurdish population, concentrated in neighborhoods such as al-Ashrafiya and Sheikh Maqsood.⁵ These urban Kurdish communities maintained connections with rural Kurdish areas like Afrin. The

historical presence of Kurds in both Afrin (Kurd Dagħ) and Aleppo has been documented for centuries, with the Afrin plateau even being referred to as the "Sancak of the Kurds" in Ottoman records.⁵

B. Social Interactions, Kinship, and Access to Services

Social connections between Afrin and Aleppo were maintained through various channels. Kinship-based networks were strong and played a seminal role in social institutions across Syria, facilitating access to resources and services.²⁰ These networks likely extended between Afrin's rural communities and their urban counterparts or relatives in Aleppo. Sufi religious networks also served as conduits for social and cultural exchange, connecting rural areas like Afrin with urban centers like Aleppo. Zawiyas (Sufi lodges) in both locations facilitated the circulation of people, goods, and ideas, helping new migrants from rural areas integrate into the urban environment while maintaining ties to their origins.¹⁶

Aleppo, as the major regional city, served as a hub for specialized services that might have been less available in Afrin. This included higher education, with many Kurdish students from Afrin pursuing their studies in Aleppo, a journey of about 50 km that was relatively straightforward before the conflict.¹⁰ Access to specialized healthcare facilities in Aleppo was also a likely pattern for residents of Afrin and other surrounding rural areas, a common characteristic of regional healthcare access in Syria where more advanced services are concentrated in major urban centers. While specific pre-2011 data on Afrin residents' access to Aleppo's services is limited, the general infrastructure and service disparities between urban centers and peripheral regions suggest such a dependency.²²

C. Cultural Life and Shared Heritage

The Kurdish communities in Afrin and Aleppo shared a common cultural heritage, primarily speaking the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish.⁵ Despite state policies that suppressed the public expression of Kurdish culture and language—banning Kurdish in public schools and replacing Kurdish geographical names with Arabic ones⁶—Kurdish cultural life persisted. In Aleppo, the Ashrafiyya neighborhood was a notable center of Kurdish social and cultural life, where Kurdish music and language were prevalent.¹⁶ The continuous movement of people between Afrin and Aleppo for work, education, and family reasons ensured ongoing cultural exchange and reinforcement of shared identities.¹⁶ Traditional celebrations, such as Newroz (Kurdish New Year), were important cultural markers, though sometimes met with state repression.⁴ The historical presence of diverse religious communities in Afrin, including Sunni Muslims (the majority), Yazidis, and Alevis, contributed to the region's unique cultural tapestry.¹

IV. Pre-2010 Syrian Context: Underlying Factors

A. National Economic and Political Climate

The relationship between Afrin and Aleppo before 2010 existed within the broader context of Syria's national economic and political climate. By the late 2000s, Syria was experiencing

rising poverty and unemployment, with significant disparities between rural and urban areas.¹⁷ Economic liberalization efforts had not uniformly benefited rural populations, and issues like corruption, an inadequately educated workforce, and insufficient infrastructure (such as electricity) were prevalent.¹⁷ From 2006 to 2010, Syria also endured a severe drought, which exacerbated existing socio-economic pressures, particularly in agricultural regions.²⁵ These national economic challenges would have influenced livelihood strategies and migration patterns, including those between Afrin and Aleppo. Politically, the period after Bashar al-Assad assumed the presidency in 2000 saw slow political reforms and increasing frictions.¹⁷ The state maintained a strong security apparatus and limited space for political dissent.⁶

B. Policies Towards Kurdish Regions

Successive Syrian governments implemented policies of Arabization and assimilation aimed at suppressing non-Arab identities, particularly targeting the Kurdish population.² These policies included restrictions on the Kurdish language and culture, demographic manipulation through censuses that rendered many Kurds stateless (particularly in the Jazira region, though Afrin was less affected by statelessness campaigns), and the resettlement of Arabs in some Kurdish areas to alter the demographic balance (the "Arab Belt" project, primarily in Jazira).⁶ While Afrin was spared some of the more aggressive Arabization campaigns that affected other Kurdish regions like Jazira and Kobani, it was still subject to the general state policies of marginalization and suppression of Kurdish rights.⁶ The regime administered Kurdish regions through security services and officials often from outside these areas, limiting local Kurdish participation in governance.⁶ This created an environment of underlying tension and contributed to the resilience of local Kurdish identity and informal political networks.

V. Conclusion

Prior to 2010, Afrin's relationship with Aleppo was a complex tapestry woven from formal administrative subordination, vital economic interdependence, and deep socio-cultural connections. Administratively, Afrin was a district within the Aleppo Governorate, subject to the centralized control of the Ba'athist state, yet it retained a distinct and overwhelmingly Kurdish demographic character with its own local political undercurrents, historically influenced by the PKK and later the PYD.

Economically, Afrin was a crucial agricultural hinterland for Aleppo, most notably supplying the olives essential for the iconic Aleppo soap. This agricultural symbiosis extended to other products and was complemented by labor migration from Afrin to the economic opportunities in Aleppo. However, Afrin also maintained a degree of local economic self-sufficiency, particularly in agriculture.

Socially and demographically, the overwhelmingly Kurdish population of Afrin interacted with Aleppo through educational pursuits, access to specialized services, and strong kinship and cultural networks that bridged the rural-urban divide. Kurdish neighborhoods in Aleppo served as important nodes in this social fabric. These interactions occurred against a

backdrop of state policies that often sought to suppress or marginalize Kurdish identity, fostering a resilient local culture in Afrin.

The pre-2010 period, therefore, established a dynamic where Afrin, while integrated into the administrative and economic sphere of Aleppo and under the authority of the Syrian state, also cultivated strong local socio-political structures and a robust agricultural economy. These underlying characteristics would significantly influence Afrin's trajectory when the Syrian conflict began to unfold after 2010, allowing for a degree of autonomous organization when central state control weakened. The historical ties to Aleppo, however, underscore the profound impact that the subsequent fragmentation of Syria would have on both entities.

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