

# **The Interwoven Tapestry: Geography and Lifeways in Pre-2010 Afrin**

## **I. Introduction: The Geographical Canvas of Afrin**

### **A. Defining the Region: Afrin and Kurd Dagħ (Çiyayê Kurmênc)**

The Afrin region, nestled in the northwestern reaches of Syria, presents a distinct geographical and cultural enclave, historically and intimately known as Kurd Dagħ (Çiyayê Kurmênc), the "Mountain of the Kurds".<sup>1</sup> This appellation itself is a profound testament to a long-standing, deeply etched association between a specific highland territory and the Kurdish people who have inhabited it for millennia.<sup>3</sup> The very name suggests that the mountainous landscape was not merely a passive backdrop but a formative element in the collective identity and cultural heritage of its residents. Situated approximately 63 kilometers from the major urban center of Aleppo, the Afrin region is geographically demarcated by the "Deep Plain" proximate to Iskenderun and the Black River to its west, the strategic railway line extending towards Kilis in the north, the Izaz Plain to its east, and the slopes of Mount Samaan to its south.<sup>5</sup> This specific positioning, at the crossroads of varied topographical features and near established routes, historically facilitated pathways for trade, human movement, and cultural interchange, all of which were invariably mediated and shaped by the geographical contours of the land. The enduring presence of Kurdish communities in this area since antiquity points to a significant co-evolutionary relationship between the environment and the cultural practices developed therein.<sup>3</sup>

### **B. Anthropological Approach: The Human-Environment Nexus in Pre-2010 Afrin**

This report endeavors to explore, from an anthropological perspective, the intricate and reciprocal relationship between the distinctive geographical characteristics of the Afrin region—its varied terrain, the vital Afrin River system, its Mediterranean climate, the composition of its soils, and the array of natural resources it harbors—and the traditional lifeways of its inhabitants prior to the transformative events of 2010. The focus remains steadfastly on how these geographical elements directly shaped, and were in turn shaped by, the economic activities, settlement patterns, vernacular architecture, social organization, and broader cultural practices of the people of Afrin. An anthropological lens allows for an understanding of culture and environment not as discrete, independent variables but as dynamically interacting and mutually constitutive components of a complex, integrated system. Such an approach moves beyond simplistic notions of environmental determinism, seeking instead to illuminate the nuanced processes of human adaptation, the development of resilience in the face of environmental challenges and opportunities, and the cultural

construction of the landscape itself—how the land is perceived, imbued with meaning, and utilized. Understanding this pre-2010 baseline, characterized by a relative stability in traditional practices, is crucial not only for appreciating the depth of accumulated local ecological knowledge and the ingenuity of human adaptation but also for contextualizing the profound impacts of subsequent socio-political and environmental shifts, although the specifics of post-2010 changes fall outside the scope of this study. The geographical position of Afrin, as a mountainous yet relatively accessible territory, particularly concerning Aleppo, likely nurtured a unique socio-economic fabric characterized by a blend of localized self-sufficiency, rooted in the direct exploitation of mountain and valley resources, and a degree of regional economic integration facilitated by trade and labor connections.<sup>5</sup> This duality is fundamental to comprehending the distinctive character of its pre-2010 lifeways.

## **II. The Land and Its Resources: Foundations of Life in Afrin**

The lifeways of any population are fundamentally rooted in the physical characteristics of the land they inhabit. In Afrin, the interplay of topography, hydrology, climate, soil, and available natural resources created a unique environmental canvas upon which human societies have painted their existence for centuries.

### **A. Topography and Terrain: The Influence of Kurd Mountain (Çiyayê Kurmênc) and River Valleys**

The dominant topographical feature of the Afrin region is Kurd Mountain (Çiyayê Kurmênc), a highland area that forms part of the Limestone Massif of northwestern Syria and represents a southern extension of the highlands found on the western Aintab plateau.<sup>1</sup> The underlying limestone geology is a critical determinant of the region's environmental character, directly influencing soil types, water filtration and retention capacities, and the ready availability of stone as a primary building material.<sup>1</sup> This geological foundation has shaped agricultural possibilities, favoring crops adapted to such conditions, and has provided the raw materials for constructing shelters and landscape modifications like terracing.

While distinctly mountainous, the elevations in the Afrin portion of Kurd Dagh generally do not exceed 1,000 meters.<sup>1</sup> This presents a landscape less formidable than higher ranges like the Zagros Mountains but still offers a varied terrain of "heavily treed hills" and "lush valleys".<sup>2</sup> Such topographical diversity creates a mosaic of micro-environments, each with its own potential for resource exploitation, from terraced agriculture on slopes to more intensive cultivation in fertile valley bottoms. These varied ecological niches would have supported a broader range of resources and livelihood strategies than a more uniform landscape. The Afrin River valley plays a crucial role in this topography, encircling Kurd Mountain to the east and south and thereby demarcating it from adjacent geographical features such as the A'zāz plain and Mount Simeon.<sup>1</sup> River valleys like these typically serve as fertile corridors, concentrating resources and becoming focal points for agriculture and human settlement.

## **B. The Afrin River: Lifeline and Boundary**

The Afrin River is the primary hydrological feature of the region, originating in the Kartal Mountains of Turkey and flowing southwards through the city of Afrin in Syria before eventually re-entering Turkey to join the Orontes River system.<sup>8</sup> With a total length of 131 kilometers, 54 of which traverse Syrian territory, the Afrin River and its tributaries, such as Sabun Suyu, Deliçay, and Kinacık Creeks, constitute the vital hydrographic network that sustains the region.<sup>8</sup>

The river's long-term importance as a water source is underscored by its succession of ancient names—Aprē (Assyrian), Oinoparas (Seleucid era), Ufrenus (Roman era), and Nahr Ifrīn (Arab vernacular)—each testifying to its recognized significance through different historical epochs.<sup>8</sup> The construction of the Afrin Dam to the north of Afrin city, primarily for irrigation purposes, further highlights the river's central role in the agricultural economy and the human efforts to manage and harness its waters.<sup>8</sup> The river's course directly impacts human settlement, most notably by dividing the city of Afrin into two distinct halves, a clear geographical imprint on urban morphology.<sup>11</sup> While the water quality was generally good in its upper reaches, it tended to deteriorate downstream due to agricultural runoff, urban, and industrial activities—an environmental concern linked to human use patterns that was observable even before 2010.<sup>9</sup> This indicates that the river was not merely a passive resource but an active and dynamic element in the landscape, requiring management and adaptation from the local populations who depended on it.

## **C. Climate, Soil, and Natural Resources**

The Afrin region experiences a Mediterranean climate, characterized by warm, wet winters and hot, dry summers.<sup>12</sup> This climatic pattern is particularly conducive to the cultivation of iconic Mediterranean crops such as olives and grapes, which have historically thrived in the area.

The soils of the region, particularly in the valleys, are described as "fertile red soil," renowned for supporting excellent fruit and nut production.<sup>2</sup> The underlying limestone bedrock of Kurd Mountain weathers to contribute to this soil composition, creating conditions suitable for drought-resistant Mediterranean flora.<sup>1</sup> An intriguing piece of local environmental lore, the assertion that "no snakes or scorpions are said to inhabit this soil," reflects a culturally perceived benign quality of the land, hinting at a close and detailed observation of the local environment by its inhabitants.<sup>2</sup>

Water resources, crucial for sustaining life and agriculture, are reported to be abundant, with "water flows in abundance".<sup>2</sup> The Afrin River and its network of tributaries are the primary surface water sources.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the presence of springs, some associated with local shrines like the Sultan Barbaush shrine, indicates the availability of groundwater resources, further enhancing the region's capacity to support its population.<sup>5</sup>

The natural vegetation reflects both the climate and topography, with "heavily treed hills" being a characteristic feature.<sup>2</sup> Pine trees are noted on specific elevations like Qazaqli

Mountain.<sup>5</sup> However, the most dominant and economically significant vegetation is the extensive olive groves that define much of the agricultural landscape.<sup>1</sup> These forests and cultivated woodlands provided timber, fuel (especially for charcoal production), and opportunities for foraging. While mineral deposits are mentioned for the broader Hatay area<sup>12</sup>, the primary natural resource wealth of Afrin, as depicted in the available information, lay in its fertile soils, abundant water, and vegetative cover, particularly its olive trees. This confluence of Mediterranean climate, specific soil types, and plentiful water created an exceptionally favorable ecological niche for a specialized agricultural system deeply rooted in the local geography. The successful and sustained exploitation of this niche, particularly for crops like olives, fruits, and nuts, implies a sophisticated, generationally transmitted local ecological knowledge encompassing soil types, water management, and the nuances of microclimates within the varied topography.

The following table summarizes the key geographical features of Afrin and their influence on traditional lifeways:

**Table 1: Key Geographical Features of Afrin and their Influence on Traditional Lifeways (Pre-2010)**

Geographical Feature	Key Characteristics	Influence on Livelihoods	Influence on Settlement/Culture
Kurd Mountain (Limestone Massif)	Hilly/Mountainous terrain, limestone bedrock, varied micro-environments	Suited for terraced olive/fruit cultivation, grazing, source of building stone (limestone), charcoal production from forests	Dispersed or clustered village settlements on slopes/hilltops, use of stone in vernacular architecture, terracing for agriculture
Afrin River & Associated Valleys	Primary water course, alluvial deposits in valleys, seasonal flow variations	Source of water for irrigation (supporting olives, wheat, fruits), potential for fishing, fertile land for intensive crops	Linear settlements along riverbanks, river as a transportation corridor or boundary, Afrin city bisected by the river
Fertile Red Soil Zones (in valleys)	Rich in specific nutrients, good water retention	Supports high-yield cultivation of olives, renowned fruits, nuts, and vegetables	Concentration of agricultural activity and denser rural populations in valley areas
Mediterranean Climate	Hot, dry summers; mild, wet winters	Dictates specific growing seasons, favors drought-resistant crops (olives, grapes, figs), influences	Architectural adaptations for seasonal temperature variations (thermal mass, ventilation), seasonal work cycles,

		pastoral movements	food preservation
Natural Vegetation (Treed Hills, Forests)	Pine forests, oak (inferred for charcoal), diverse flora	Source of timber for construction and fuel, charcoal production, foraging (wild edibles, honey - inferred), grazing	Influence on local crafts (woodwork), traditional medicine (herbal remedies - inferred)

### III. Sustaining Life: Traditional Livelihoods and Economic Adaptations to the Afrin Landscape

The unique geographical endowment of the Afrin region—its mountains, valleys, river, climate, and soils—profoundly shaped the traditional livelihoods and economic strategies of its inhabitants. Prior to 2010, these adaptations resulted in a resilient, diversified economy primarily rooted in agriculture but also incorporating resource extraction, craftsmanship, and regional trade.

#### A. The Olive Economy: Cultivation, Traditional Practices, and Socio-Economic Significance

The olive tree was more than just a crop in Afrin; it was the veritable cornerstone of the regional economy and a deep-seated cultural symbol. The region was, and remains, renowned for its extensive olive groves, with its produce often considered the "best in Syria".<sup>2</sup> Olive cultivation was not merely an economic activity but the "most important traditional agricultural activity" in the area.<sup>13</sup> This tradition has ancient roots, with Syria itself believed to be one of the cradles of olive cultivation, dating back to around 2400 B.C..<sup>13</sup> Personal accounts, such as a great-grandfather planting 300 olive trees with the oldest tree exceeding 200 years, vividly illustrate the deep familial and generational ties to olive farming in Afrin.<sup>14</sup> Traditional olive cultivation in Afrin was highly adapted to the local environment. Approximately 90% of Syrian olive cultivation relied on rain-fed agriculture, predominantly in areas like Afrin that receive more than 350 mm of annual rainfall, aligning with its Mediterranean climate.<sup>13</sup> Given the hilly and mountainous terrain of Kurd Dagħ, terracing and the construction of stone walls were essential techniques. These methods, passed down through generations, served to protect precious soil and water resources, reduce erosion on slopes, and enhance moisture retention for the trees.<sup>13</sup> Other traditional practices included maintaining vegetation strips along contours and creating V-shaped ground leveling around trees to optimize water capture and infiltration.<sup>15</sup> These techniques demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of local ecological dynamics and a commitment to sustainable land management.

The socio-economic importance of the olive was paramount. It provided a primary source of livelihood for thousands of families.<sup>16</sup> A significant portion of the olive harvest—around 80% in

Syria generally—was processed into olive oil, a key product for both local consumption and trade.<sup>13</sup> Afrin's olive oil, characterized by its fruity, buttery, and peppery notes, was particularly esteemed and formed a major commodity in the markets of Aleppo.<sup>6</sup> The olive sector was a crucial source of income and employment, encompassing cultivation, oil processing, storage, transport, and export.<sup>13</sup> Despite land reforms earlier in Syria's history, much of the agricultural land, including the vital olive groves, remained privately owned. In these hilly regions, the average cultivated land area per owner was often smaller than the national average, suggesting either a high dependence on income from non-agricultural sources or, more likely in the context of valuable olive groves, very intensive and productive use of the land.<sup>13</sup> The seasonal rhythm of the olive harvest was a major event, even drawing labor back from urban centers like Aleppo.<sup>6</sup>

## **B. Beyond Olives: Diversified Agriculture (Fruits, Nuts, Grains) and Animal Husbandry**

While olives dominated the agricultural landscape, the Afrin region also supported a diversified range of other agricultural products, reflecting a resilient livelihood strategy adapted to the varied micro-topographies and climatic nuances of Kurd Dagħ. The area was renowned for its "excellent fruit and nut produce," which likely included figs, pomegranates, grapes, and various nuts suited to the Mediterranean climate.<sup>2</sup>

Alongside these horticultural crops, there was an increasing focus on wheat production, supplementing the traditional reliance on olives.<sup>18</sup> Prior to 2011, Syria as a whole had achieved self-sufficiency in staple grains like wheat and barley, benefiting from improvements in land and crop management practices.<sup>19</sup> It is probable that Afrin contributed to this, particularly in its flatter valley areas. Other crops typical of Syrian agriculture, such as legumes, cherries, and citrus fruits, may also have been cultivated in suitable microclimates within the region.<sup>20</sup> Animal husbandry formed another integral component of the traditional economy. The Kurdish inhabitants of Kurd Dagħ, like other Western Kurds in Syria, traditionally owned large herds of sheep and goats.<sup>21</sup> These animals were well-adapted to grazing on the steeper slopes and less arable lands of the mountainous terrain, converting vegetation otherwise unusable for direct human consumption into valuable products. This pastoral activity yielded essential dairy products (milk, yogurt, cheese) for local consumption and potentially for trade, and also provided wool for textiles.<sup>21</sup> This diversification into both crop cultivation and livestock rearing reduced reliance on any single resource and represented an efficient use of the varied landscape.

## **C. Utilizing Mountain and Forest Resources: Charcoal Production and Foraging**

The "heavily treed hills" of Kurd Dagħ offered resources beyond timber for construction.<sup>2</sup> Charcoal production was a known economic activity in the area, with charcoal being exported, indicating a systematic utilization of forest wood.<sup>1</sup> This practice would have required specific knowledge of wood types suitable for charcoal and sustainable harvesting methods to ensure

long-term availability, although the specifics of such management are not detailed. Foraging in the mountains and forests for wild plants, edible mushrooms, and perhaps wild honey would have also supplemented local diets and incomes, a common practice in such environments, though explicit evidence for Afrin is sparse in the provided sources. The mention of "Strawberry tree honey" in a different regional context within Syria suggests that apiculture and honey collection were known practices.<sup>22</sup>

## **D. Craftsmanship and Local Industries: Weaving and the Legacy of Aleppo Soap**

Local craftsmanship provided another avenue for economic activity and cultural expression. Many Western Kurds, including those in Afrin, were skilled in the art of weaving kilims—distinctive patterned, flat-woven wool rugs.<sup>21</sup> This craft would have utilized the wool from locally raised sheep, transforming a raw agricultural product into a valuable textile item for domestic use and trade.

Afrin also played a crucial role in a renowned regional industry: the production of Aleppo soap. The Afrin District was historically a significant source of olive oil—the primary ingredient—for this famous hard soap, a tradition dating back to antiquity.<sup>18</sup> Aleppo soap, distinguished by its use of olive oil, lye, and laurel oil, has been made using traditional techniques passed down for many centuries.<sup>18</sup> Afrin's high-quality olive oil was thus essential to maintaining this heritage industry, linking its agricultural output directly to a widely recognized artisanal product.

## **E. Traditional Resource Management: Indigenous Knowledge in Harmony with Nature**

The traditional livelihoods in Afrin, particularly its sophisticated olive cultivation systems, embodied principles of sustainable resource management long before the term gained global currency. The elaborate terracing, construction of stone walls, and maintenance of vegetation strips were not merely agricultural techniques but also effective methods of soil and water conservation, demonstrating an intimate, generationally-honed understanding of ecological processes in a challenging hilly, rain-fed environment.<sup>13</sup> These practices represent a form of indigenous ecological wisdom, crucial for the long-term viability of agriculture in the region. The initiation of a UNDP project in 2008 in the "Mountains of Afrin," aimed at promoting sustainable land and water resource use, suggests an external recognition of both the value of existing traditional systems and, perhaps, emerging pressures that necessitated support for their continuation or adaptation.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, a sentiment of respect for nature is reflected in accounts stating that, traditionally, "The people didn't build any factories around Afrin to protect the environment, and they kept the streets clean and garbage-free. The residents respected all the beautiful gifts of nature and tried to protect them".<sup>14</sup> This indicates a cultural ethic that valued environmental stewardship as part of the community's way of life. The production of value-added goods like high-quality olive oil, charcoal, and woven kilims, alongside supplying essential raw materials for industries like Aleppo soap, demonstrates a

level of economic sophistication beyond simple subsistence. These activities integrated Afrin into wider regional markets, particularly with Aleppo as a key commercial hub, indicating a degree of specialization and market orientation operating within the traditional socio-economic framework.<sup>1</sup>

The following table links dominant traditional livelihoods in Afrin to their geographical determinants:

**Table 2: Dominant Traditional Livelihoods in Afrin (Pre-2010) and their Geographical Determinants**

<b>Livelihood Activity</b>	<b>Primary Geographical Enablers</b>	<b>Key Traditional Practices/Products</b>
Olive Cultivation & Oil Production	Mediterranean climate, fertile limestone-derived soils on hills and valleys, adequate rainfall	Rain-fed farming, extensive terracing, stone retaining walls, pruning, hand-harvesting; production of distinct Afrin olive oil
Fruit & Nut Farming	Suitable microclimates in valleys and on sheltered slopes, fertile soils	Cultivation of diverse species (e.g., figs, grapes, pomegranates, nuts), traditional propagation and harvesting methods
Wheat & Other Grain Cultivation	Flatter valley areas, less rocky soils, seasonal rainfall	Cultivation of local wheat varieties, possibly barley; traditional ploughing and harvesting techniques
Sheep/Goat Pastoralism & Dairy	Pasture available on less arable slopes and in fallow fields, access to water sources	Herding of local breeds, seasonal transhumance (possibly limited), production of yogurt, cheese, ghee
Charcoal Production	Forest resources from "heavily treed hills," availability of suitable wood types	Traditional charcoal kilns/pits, knowledge of wood selection and carbonization process (inferred)
Kilim Weaving	Availability of wool from local sheep herds, cultural tradition of weaving	Hand-weaving on looms, use of traditional Kurdish patterns and motifs, natural dyes (inferred)
Supplying Olive Oil for Aleppo Soap	Abundant high-quality olive oil production	Providing a key raw material for a significant regional artisanal industry

## **IV. Human Imprints: Settlement, Shelter, and Social**

# Fabric in a Geographical Context

The enduring interaction between the people of Afrin and their specific geographical environment left indelible imprints on the landscape, manifested in patterns of settlement, the characteristics of their dwellings, and the very structure of their society.

## A. "Where the People Dwell": Geographical Influences on Village and Town Placement

The distribution and nature of human settlements in Afrin were strategically shaped by the opportunities and constraints presented by the local geography. Afrin town itself, with a pre-2010 population of around 20,000, served as the primary economic and administrative hub for the Kurd Dagħ region.<sup>6</sup> Its development at a historical junction of trade routes and its distinctive bisection by the Afrin River underscore the direct influence of geographical factors on urban morphology and function.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond the main town, the region was characterized by a dense network of rural villages. Accounts mention around 360 "thriving Kurdish villages" in Kurd Dagħ and a total of 366 villages spread across seven main areas within the broader Afrin region.<sup>2</sup> This high density of settlements indicates a landscape capable of supporting a substantial rural population, primarily through intensive agricultural practices. The placement of these villages was likely dictated by several key geographical considerations: proximity to reliable water sources such as springs and river courses, access to fertile arable land predominantly found in the valleys and on terraced slopes, and, in earlier historical periods, potentially defensible positions on hillslopes or hilltops. The widespread distribution of religious shrines, often located at prominent natural sites, might also mark ancient settlement foci or delineate sacred geographies that influenced community placement.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, some villages in Afrin were noted for their mixed ethnic or religious composition, such as Basutah and Bablet, suggesting shared resource landscapes and complex histories of cohabitation and interaction among diverse groups.<sup>5</sup> The careful selection of settlement sites, optimizing access to resources while navigating the challenges of a mountainous environment, is a universal characteristic of human adaptation, clearly evident in pre-2010 Afrin.

## B. Vernacular Architecture: Building with the Land

While detailed pre-2010 architectural surveys specific to Afrin are not abundant in the provided materials, strong inferences about its vernacular architecture can be drawn from the known local geography, climate, and by examining regional parallels in similar Levantine and Kurdish mountainous areas. Traditional building practices invariably reflect an intimate understanding of locally available materials and adaptations to environmental conditions.

### Locally Sourced Materials:

The Kurd Mountain's geology, being a limestone massif, strongly suggests that stone was the principal building material for walls, foundations, and potentially even roofing elements.<sup>1</sup> This aligns with common practices in the vernacular architecture of mountainous regions across

the Levant and Kurdistan, where stone is abundant and durable.<sup>26</sup> The descriptions of "traditional buildings" for shrines, such as the "small, square-shaped room" of the Qazikli Shrine or the "traditional building" of the Sultan Barbaush shrine, further imply an established tradition of stone construction.<sup>5</sup>

Mud and earth, likely mixed with straw for tensile strength, would have been widely used for mortar between stones, as plaster for walls, and possibly in the construction of flat roofs, a common technique in many Middle Eastern regions.<sup>26</sup>

Wood, sourced from the "heavily treed hills" of the region, would have been employed for roofing beams, doors, windows, and internal structural supports.<sup>2</sup> However, high-quality, large-dimension timber might have been a more valuable resource, possibly supplemented by imports for specific structural needs, as noted in comparable regional contexts.<sup>26</sup>

#### Climatic Adaptations in Design:

The Mediterranean climate, with its hot summers and cool, wet winters, would have necessitated specific architectural adaptations. Thick stone walls are a hallmark of such adaptations, providing significant thermal mass that helps to moderate internal temperatures, keeping interiors cooler in summer and warmer in winter.<sup>26</sup>

Courtyards, a common feature in traditional Middle Eastern and Kurdish domestic architecture, likely played a role in Afrin's dwellings. They offer private outdoor living space while facilitating natural light and cross-ventilation, crucial for comfort in a warm climate.<sup>27</sup> Roof design would have also responded to climatic factors. Flat roofs, common in drier Middle Eastern areas, could provide additional outdoor living or sleeping space during warm, dry periods. Alternatively, slightly sloped or vaulted roofs might have been used, particularly if winter rainfall was substantial enough to require more efficient drainage; vaulted stone roofs are noted for their durability in Lebanese mountain architecture.<sup>26</sup> The observation that some traditional buildings used as health centers in Rojava were chilly in winter and relatively warm in summer points to the basic but often effective thermal performance of such vernacular structures.<sup>24</sup>

Strategic orientation of buildings and placement of windows would have been employed to maximize passive solar gain in winter, minimize direct sun exposure in summer, and promote natural airflow.<sup>27</sup>

#### Responses to Mountainous Terrain:

Building in a mountainous region like Kurd Dagħ necessitates specific construction techniques. Houses were likely built with terraced foundations or split-level designs to accommodate the natural slopes of the land.<sup>26</sup> In some instances, dwellings might have been built directly into hillsides, utilizing the earth for stability and additional thermal insulation.<sup>26</sup> The creation of level ground for both building and agriculture often involved the construction of stone retaining walls, similar to the "Jlelet" described in Lebanon.<sup>26</sup> This results in a built environment that is intrinsically of its place, shaped by and harmonizing with the local topography and material availability.

### **C. The Social Landscape: How Geography Interacted with Ethnic Composition and Community Structures**

The geography of Afrin also played a role in shaping its social fabric. The region was predominantly Kurdish, with Kurds constituting the majority in the Kurd Dagħ mountainous heartland.<sup>2</sup> This demographic concentration in a geographically defined area likely contributed to the reinforcement and preservation of shared cultural practices that were well-adapted to that specific environment.

However, Afrin was not entirely homogenous. Small communities of Arabs (around 1% of the population in 1998), Christians (approximately 250 families), Yazidis (inhabiting around 22 villages), and Alawis also resided in the region.<sup>5</sup> Their settlement in particular villages or within mixed communities points to complex historical processes of migration, interaction, and resource sharing, possibly influenced by access to specific ecological niches, trade routes, or historical agreements.

An interesting characteristic of the social organization in Kurd Dagħ was the relatively weak role of overarching tribal identities compared to other Kurdish regions.<sup>6</sup> This social feature may be partly attributable to the geographically bounded, sedentary agricultural lifestyle centered on the intensive cultivation of perennial crops like olives. Such a lifestyle tends to foster strong village-based loyalties and ties to specific plots of land, contrasting with the more mobile, extensive land-use patterns of pastoral economies where larger tribal affiliations often play a more critical role in resource management and social cohesion. The rugged, dissected terrain of Kurd Dagħ might also have naturally segmented populations, making village-level organization more practical and immediate than large-scale tribal confederations. In this context, other forms of social networking and organization gained prominence. Sufi communities, such as the Rifa'i zawiya in Afrin town, had a strong presence and served as important conduits connecting the rural communities of Kurd Dagħ with the urban center of Aleppo.<sup>6</sup> These religious networks facilitated not only spiritual life but also economic exchanges, such as organizing channels for the olive trade, and cultural interaction. This suggests that Sufi orders provided an alternative or complementary social organizing principle to tribalism, one perhaps better suited to the region's specific economic orientation and its geographical connection to a major urban market.

Finally, the landscape of Afrin was deeply imbued with spiritual significance through the widespread presence of shrines and holy sites associated with the diverse religious communities inhabiting the region.<sup>5</sup> These sacred places were often situated at prominent geographical features—on mountaintops like Qazaqli Mountain (Christian/Stylite association) and Mount Sheikh Barakat (Yazidi), or near vital springs like the one beside the Sultan Barbaush shrine (Alawi). This practice of locating sacred sites in striking natural locations transformed the physical landscape into a cultural and spiritual one, creating a sacred geography that overlaid and gave deeper meaning to the everyday environment for all communities.

## **V. Cultural Rhythms: Daily Life, Diet, and Traditions Shaped by the Environment**

The daily lives, dietary habits, and cultural traditions of the people of Afrin prior to 2010 were

deeply attuned to the rhythms of their natural environment and the resources it provided. This intimate connection fostered a distinctive local culture, expressed through foodways, seasonal celebrations, and communal practices.

## **A. The Taste of the Land: Traditional Diet and Foodways linked to Local Produce**

The traditional diet in Afrin was a direct reflection of its rich agricultural bounty and the characteristics of its Mediterranean environment. **Olive oil**, derived from the region's abundant and high-quality olive groves, was undoubtedly a central component of daily cuisine.<sup>2</sup> Described as "fruity, buttery, and peppery," Afrin's olive oil would have served as the primary culinary fat, used for cooking, dressing salads, and as a condiment for bread and other dishes.<sup>6</sup>

The local diet was further enriched by the consumption of a wide variety of **fresh fruits, nuts, and vegetables**, for which the region was renowned.<sup>2</sup> While specific varieties are not exhaustively listed for Afrin, produce common to Syrian and Mediterranean agriculture, such as figs, grapes, pomegranates, tomatoes, cucumbers, and various greens, would have featured prominently, consumed fresh in season.

**Grains** formed another pillar of the diet. Wheat was a significant crop<sup>18</sup>, and barley was also widely cultivated in Syria.<sup>19</sup> These grains would have been processed into flour for bread—a staple at most meals—and used to make bulgur, a common ingredient in dishes like kibbeh.<sup>30</sup>

**Dairy products**, derived from the herds of sheep and goats that grazed the mountain slopes, provided essential proteins and fats.<sup>21</sup> Yogurt, various types of cheese, and clarified butter (ghee) would have been common household items, produced using traditional methods.

**Legumes**, such as beans, lentils, and chickpeas, are staples in broader Syrian and Middle Eastern cuisines and were likely cultivated and consumed in Afrin, providing an important source of plant-based protein.<sup>30</sup>

The flavors of Afrin's cuisine would have been enhanced by a variety of **wild and cultivated herbs** sourced from the mountainous region. Spices common in Syrian cooking, including allspice, cinnamon, mint, sumac, and cardamom, as well as spice blends like Baharat, would have been used to create distinctive local dishes.<sup>30</sup>

While direct evidence for Afrin-specific food preservation techniques is limited in the provided sources, it can be strongly inferred that methods such as **sun-drying fruits and vegetables (like figs and apricots), pickling vegetables, making fruit leathers or molasses (dibs), and preserving olives (curing in brine or oil)** were essential practices. These techniques, common throughout the Mediterranean and Middle East, allowed communities to utilize seasonal abundance throughout the year, ensuring food security during leaner months.<sup>13</sup>

Although specific, uniquely Afrin recipes are not detailed, the available ingredients—abundant olive oil, fresh produce, grains, dairy, and local flavorings—would have heavily influenced culinary preparations, likely resulting in dishes similar to those found in Aleppo and other parts of northern Syria, but with their own local variations and nuances. Examples of broader Syrian dishes include kibbeh (bulgur and meat patties), muhammara (red pepper and walnut

spread), *fattah* (layered dishes with bread, yogurt, and other ingredients), and various stuffed vegetables (*mehshi*).<sup>30</sup>

## **B. Cycles of Nature, Cycles of Life: Seasonal Rhythms, Agricultural Calendars, and Communal Celebrations**

Life in pre-2010 Afrin was profoundly structured by the cycles of nature, particularly the agricultural calendar. The changing seasons dictated the rhythm of work, social activities, and communal celebrations. The agricultural year would have revolved around the distinct phases of planting, tending, and harvesting olives, grains, fruits, and vegetables. The **olive harvest season**, in particular, was a period of intense activity and socio-economic significance, often involving the entire community and even drawing individuals back from urban employment in places like Aleppo to participate.<sup>6</sup>

A major cultural and seasonal marker for the Kurdish population of Afrin, as well as for other communities in the broader region, was **Nowruz**, the New Year celebration occurring around the spring equinox.<sup>37</sup> Nowruz, with ancient roots often associated with Zoroastrianism, symbolizes the rebirth of nature, the beginning of spring, and is traditionally linked to the sowing of seeds and the renewal of life.<sup>37</sup> This festival would have been a time of significant communal gathering, feasting, traditional rituals, and expressions of cultural identity. While its public celebration faced restrictions at times under various state policies<sup>38</sup>, its cultural importance as a deeply embedded tradition predating these political contexts remained profound for the people.

It is also highly probable that other **harvest festivals**, tied to the successful gathering of key crops like olives or wheat, were part of the annual cycle of celebrations, though not explicitly detailed for Afrin. Such festivals are common in agricultural societies worldwide, serving as occasions for communal thanksgiving, feasting, and reinforcing social bonds.<sup>39</sup>

The religious life of Afrin's diverse communities was also tied to seasonal rhythms and specific locations within the landscape. The numerous **shrines** dedicated to various faiths and figures, scattered throughout the region, served as focal points for religious observances, pilgrimages, and festivals at particular times of the year.<sup>5</sup> For instance, the Yazidi community celebrated their New Year at the Sheikh Barakat Shrine, and Christians made pilgrimages to sites like the Qaziqli Shrine on various important occasions.<sup>5</sup> These practices not only reinforced communal religious identity but also deepened the connection between the people and the sacred sites embedded within their geographical environment.

Implicitly, the lifeways deeply connected to this specific landscape would have generated a rich tapestry of **folklore, oral traditions, songs, and stories** related to the environment, local flora and fauna, and prominent geographical features. The local saying about the soil being free of "snakes or scorpions" offers a small glimpse into this world of local environmental perception and narrative.<sup>2</sup> These cultural expressions would have served to transmit knowledge, values, and a sense of place across generations. The dense network of multi-faith shrines and their deliberate integration into prominent geographical features of the landscape—mountains, springs—indicates that spiritual life was not an abstract domain but

was actively lived and engaged with in the context of the everyday environment. This process imbued the physical landscape with layers of sacred meaning, transforming it into a lived, spiritual geography that was central to the identity and communal life of Afrin's people.

## **VI. Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of Geography on Afrin's Pre-2010 Lifeways**

The preceding analysis demonstrates unequivocally that the geography of the Afrin region—encompassing its defining Kurd Mountain range with its limestone base, its fertile river valleys, the vital Afrin River, and its characteristic Mediterranean climate—was far more than a passive stage for human activity prior to 2010. Instead, these geographical elements were active, formative forces, intricately and inextricably woven into the economic, social, and cultural fabric of the lives of its inhabitants. The pre-2010 lifeways in Afrin stand as a compelling testament to a highly successful, long-term human adaptation to a specific Levantine mountainous environment, an adaptation that fostered a distinct regional culture deeply intertwined with its unique geographical attributes.

Traditional livelihoods, most notably the olive-centric agricultural economy, were a direct response to the climatic conditions and soil types that favored olive cultivation, while the mountainous terrain necessitated ingenious land management techniques such as terracing. The diversity of agricultural pursuits, including fruit and nut farming, grain cultivation, and animal husbandry, reflected a resilient strategy tailored to the varied micro-topographies of Kurd Dagħ. Settlement patterns, from the dense network of rural villages to the central town of Afrin, were strategically determined by access to water, arable land, and historical trade routes. Vernacular architecture, heavily reliant on locally sourced stone, mud, and wood, incorporated design features thoughtfully adapted to the Mediterranean climate and the challenges of building on sloping terrain.

The social organization of the region also bore the imprint of its geography. The predominantly sedentary, agriculture-focused lifestyle in a geographically defined area appears to have contributed to the relatively weaker role of broad tribal affiliations compared to other Kurdish regions, fostering instead strong village-based communities and alternative social networks like Sufi orders that effectively bridged rural-urban divides, particularly with Aleppo. Furthermore, the landscape itself was imbued with deep spiritual significance, with numerous multi-faith shrines located at prominent natural features, creating a sacred geography that coexisted with and enriched the physical environment. Cultural rhythms, from the daily diet reflecting local agricultural bounty to seasonal festivals like Nowruz and the agricultural calendar, were profoundly shaped by the natural cycles of the land.

The traditional lifeways of Afrin before 2010 showcased a remarkable resilience and ingenuity, born from a deep, multi-generational accumulation of local ecological knowledge and the practice of sustainable resource management. This human-environment system was not static but represented a dynamic interplay of resource utilization, social structuring, and cultural expression, all finely tuned to the specificities of the Afrin landscape. Understanding this intricate and deeply rooted pre-2010 human-environment system is essential, not only for historical and anthropological scholarship but also for appreciating the profound sense of

place and the rich cultural heritage that was, and remains, intrinsically tied to this particular land and its people. The connection between land and life in Afrin was, and is, a fundamental aspect of its identity.

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