A Place of Refuge, A Fading Presence: Armenian Accounts of the Afrin District Before 2010

Introduction

The history of the Armenian presence in the Afrin district of northwestern Syria before 2010 is not a story of ancient settlement but a direct and enduring legacy of the 20th century's first genocide. The small, scattered Armenian communities that existed in this predominantly Kurdish region were forged in the crucible of survival, established by refugees and orphans fleeing the systematic annihilation campaign perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire between 1915 and 1923. Their existence in the decades that followed was defined by a generally peaceful and symbiotic relationship with the majority Kurdish population, a shared experience of marginalization by the Syrian state, and a gradual, pre-war demographic decline driven by socio-economic pressures and a lack of robust, centralized institutions. By the eve of the Syrian Civil War, the Armenian presence in Afrin was more a testament to a historical memory of refuge than a thriving demographic reality.

This report synthesizes a diverse body of evidence to reconstruct the history of this specific micro-community. The analysis draws upon academic histories of the Armenian Genocide, journalistic accounts from Armenian and international media, demographic data from Syrian and other sources, and crucial, albeit fragmented, personal and oral histories. The scarcity of dedicated scholarship on the Armenians of Afrin necessitates a methodology of triangulation, piecing together disparate sources to form a coherent narrative. This approach acknowledges the limitations of the available data while leveraging each source for its unique contribution, from broad historical context to intimate family stories. The official Turkish state narrative of the 1915 events, which frames them as a necessary wartime relocation rather than a planned extermination, is also addressed as a critical element of the post-Genocide political environment that survivors and their descendants had to navigate.

The analysis is strictly confined to the period before the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, a conflict that irrevocably transformed the region and its peoples. The report is structured in three parts. Part I establishes the foundational context of the Armenian Genocide and the subsequent flight of survivors into northern Syria, explaining how the region became both a killing field and a sanctuary. Part II maps the specific settlement patterns and key communities within the Afrin district and its immediate environs, focusing on the town of Azaz and the village of Haj Khalil as case studies. Part III analyzes the socio-cultural,

economic, and inter-communal fabric of Armenian life in the region, examining how the community preserved its identity while coexisting with its neighbors. The report concludes by summarizing the state of the community on the eve of the 2011 conflict, highlighting a story of quiet persistence and slow decline that would soon be overshadowed by a new chapter of violence and displacement.

Part I: Forged in Tragedy: The Armenian Genocide and the Flight to Northern Syria

The Armenian presence in the Afrin district is incomprehensible without a thorough understanding of the cataclysm of 1915. The community was not formed by gradual migration for economic opportunity but was born directly from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire's attempt to annihilate its Armenian population. The survivors who found their way to the Kurd-Dagh (Mountain of the Kurds) were the remnants of a nation systematically uprooted from its historic homeland.

The Annihilation of a People: The Armenian Genocide (1915-1923)

In 1915, the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire was estimated at around two million people. As a significant Christian minority with a rich cultural, religious, and linguistic heritage, they were concentrated in their ancestral lands in Eastern Anatolia but also had prominent communities in major urban centers.[3] Despite centuries of coexistence under the Ottoman millet system, which granted religious communities a degree of autonomy, the late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the rise of an aggressive Turkish nationalism that viewed the empire's Christian minorities with increasing suspicion and hostility. This growing intolerance, fueled by military defeats and the contraction of the empire, culminated in the Hamidian massacres of 1894-1896, which claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Armenians and served as what one historian called a "dress rehearsal" for the events to come.

With the outbreak of World War I, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) government embarked upon a systematic plan to eradicate the Armenian population.[2] The campaign began on April 24, 1915, with the arrest and subsequent murder of some 250 Armenian intellectuals and community leaders in Constantinople.[3] This was followed by the mass execution of able-bodied Armenian men who had been conscripted into the Ottoman army. The final stage was the implementation of the Tehcir Law (Law on Deportation), which ordered the forced removal of the remaining Armenian population—overwhelmingly women, children, and the elderly—from virtually every corner of Anatolia.[2]

The Ottoman government's official rationale was that the deportations were a necessary security measure to relocate a potentially disloyal population away from war zones. However, the overwhelming body of evidence from eyewitnesses—including American diplomats like

Henry Morgenthau, German officials, missionaries, and the survivors themselves—documents a clear genocidal intent.[2] The deportation convoys were not relocation efforts but death marches. Driven for hundreds of miles towards the Syrian desert, the deportees were systematically subjected to starvation, dehydration, disease, and brutal violence at the hands of gendarme escorts and paramilitary groups.[2] By 1923, an estimated one and a half million Armenians had perished, and the Armenian presence in their historic homeland of Anatolia had been virtually extinguished.[2]

Syria: A Land of Killing Fields and a Haven of Refuge

The historical record presents a fundamental paradox for the Armenian experience in Syria. While the Ottoman state designated the Syrian desert as the terminal destination for the death marches, cities like Aleppo simultaneously emerged as vital centers of survival and community rebirth. This duality of Syria as both tomb and cradle is central to understanding the collective memory of the communities that subsequently formed in northern Syria, including in the Afrin district.

The main killing fields for the Armenian Genocide were located in the Syrian desert, particularly in the areas surrounding Deir ez-Zor and Ras al-Ain in the Euphrates Valley.[7] These locations were not intended as refugee camps but as concentration camps and extermination sites. Survivor accounts describe these areas as vast abattoirs where the last remnants of the deportation caravans were slaughtered or left to die of hunger and thirst.[7] Arpiar Massikian, a survivor from Kessab, recalled the camp at Meskeneh on the Euphrates as a "horrible, horrible place" where "60,000 Armenians had been buried under the sand" and where bones were everywhere.

In stark contrast to the desert killing fields, the city of Aleppo became a crucial hub for humanitarian aid and a precarious sanctuary for those who managed to reach it. The city's existing small Armenian community, along with the native Arab population and Western missionaries, mobilized to help the destitute survivors. An Armenian-led humanitarian resistance network formed, distributing aid and funds to deportees huddled in church and school courtyards. This network was instrumental in saving thousands of lives, anchoring them in Aleppo and other towns, and helping them survive the war. The support from local Arabs was a significant factor, fostering a sense of affinity between the two peoples who had both suffered under Ottoman rule.

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the French Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon, the status of the Armenian survivors began to stabilize. In 1924, the French authorities offered Syrian citizenship to the Armenian refugees, granting them a permanent and legal status in their host country. This act was a turning point, allowing the survivors to transition from being stateless refugees to becoming an organized community. With the support of international aid organizations like Near East Relief and diasporan institutions like the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), the community began to rebuild.[2] They established their own schools, churches, and cultural centers, primarily in

Aleppo, which became the vibrant heart of the Syrian-Armenian diaspora, but also in smaller settlements throughout northern Syria, including in the region of Afrin. These new communities were built literally in the shadow of the genocide, a constant and defining presence in their collective consciousness.

Part II: A Foothold in the Kurd-Dagh: Armenian Settlement in the Afrin District

The Armenian presence in the Afrin district was not a monolith but a collection of micro-communities. Their story is not one of large-scale, organized settlement but of scattered families and small groups finding a foothold in a region overwhelmingly defined by its Kurdish identity. The available evidence, though fragmented, allows for a reconstruction of this presence through a demographic overview and specific case studies, which reveal a pattern of both clustered and dispersed settlement.

The Demographic Landscape of Afrin Before 2010

The Afrin district, known locally and historically as Kurd-Dagh ("Mountain of the Kurds"), was, prior to the Syrian Civil War, one of the most ethnically homogeneous regions in Syria.[15] Multiple sources describe the area as "overwhelmingly ethnic Kurdish" or "homogeneously Kurdish". The official Syrian census of 2004 recorded a total population of 172,095 for the district, which was divided into seven subdistricts with Afrin city as the administrative center. Despite its Kurdish character, Afrin was also home to a mosaic of other minority groups. These included Arabs, Turkmen, and significant communities of Yezidis and Alevis, many of whom had also sought refuge in the region from persecution elsewhere.[17] Within this context, Armenians constituted a "smaller minority". While the Syrian census did not record ethnicity or religion, estimates suggest that before 2010, Armenians, along with other small groups, made up approximately 1% of the population. The Christian population as a whole was estimated at around 6%. This small demographic footprint is crucial for understanding the nature of the Armenian community in Afrin; it was a community whose story is preserved more in personal memory and anecdotal accounts than in official records or the foundations of large institutions.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Afrin District & Environs (Pre-2010 Estimates)

Category	Data	Source(s)
Total Population (Afrin District, 2004)	172,095	
Ethnic Composition (Afrin Canton, est.)	Kurdish: ~75-97%	[22]
	Arab: ~25%	

	Other (incl. Armenian, Turkmen): ~1-3%	[21]
Religious Composition (Afrin Canton, est.)	Sunni Islam: 89%	
	Christianity (all sects): 6%	
	Alevism: 4%	
	Yezidism & Other: 1%	

Note: The Syrian census did not record ethnicity or religion, so figures for composition are estimates from various sources. The "Christian" category includes Armenians, Assyrians, and other denominations.

Afrin as a Place of Refuge: Accounts of Settlement

The narrative of Afrin as a sanctuary for Armenians fleeing the Genocide is a consistent theme across multiple accounts. It was a place where survivors sought to "live in peace among their Kurdish brothers and all other peoples and sects living in the area". This portrayal suggests that the region's relative isolation and tolerant local culture made it an attractive destination for those who had escaped the death marches.

The Armenian presence appears to have been scattered rather than concentrated in a single large enclave. Sources from the period just before the Syrian Civil War mention "three Armenian families" living in the city of Afrin itself. This small number stands in contrast to the larger, more organized community in Aleppo. An entry in the Armenian-language Wikipedia on "Armenians in Syria" lists Afrin as one of several communities that "gradually faded" (in Armenian: *աստիճանաբար մարել են*) over time, implying a decline from a previously more substantial, though likely still modest, population. This suggests a process of gradual emigration and assimilation in the decades leading up to 2010.

The following table consolidates the fragmented evidence of Armenian settlement across the Afrin district and the closely linked town of Azaz, creating a structured geographic reference from the available data.

Table 2: Documented Armenian Presence in the Afrin District and Environs (Pre-2010)

Location	Subdistrict (if known)	Nature of Presence	Source(s)
Afrin City	Afrin	Small community; home of the Konis family (Genocide survivors' descendants); "three Armenian families" noted pre-2011.	
Azaz	Azaz	"Sizable Armenian community"; home of	[24]

		educator Zarmine Boghosian and her family.	
Haj Khalil village	Rajo	Settlement of the Garib family patriarch, a Genocide survivor adopted by a local Kurdish family.	
Rajo (town)	Rajo	Mention of a Christian church serving approximately 45 families (denomination not specified, but likely includes Armenians).	
Maabatli (town)	Maabatli	Mention of a Christian church serving approximately 15 families (denomination not specified).	
Afrin (General)	N/A	Described as a community that "gradually faded" over the decades.	

Case Study 1: The "Sizable Community" of Azaz

The town of Azaz, located in the district adjacent to Afrin but historically and socially intertwined with it, is consistently described as having hosted a "sizable Armenian community" before the civil war. The town's history includes interactions with Armenians dating back to the medieval period, when the Crusader Principality of Antioch allied with the Armenian prince Leo I to capture the fortress of Azaz in 1118.

The most significant evidence for the modern community comes from the life and work of Zarmine Boghosian, an educator from Azaz. In 2021, a collection of her writings was published under the title *From Azaz to America* (*Ազէզէն Ամերիկա*). The book is a compilation of her articles, essays, memoirs, and poetry, dating from the 1960s to recent years.[27] The very existence of such a volume from a local educator points to a community with a degree of institutional life. Boghosian's passionate advocacy for the importance of "our language, and the Armenian Schools in order to defend and fortify our church" strongly implies the presence of an Armenian school in Azaz where she likely taught, serving as a vital center for cultural and linguistic preservation for the families in the area.

The book's title, *From Azaz to America*, is itself a poignant summary of the trajectory of many Syrian-Armenian families. It encapsulates the story of emigration that characterized the gradual decline of these smaller diasporic communities. The pursuit of education, economic stability, and reunification with family in the West was a powerful force that drew people away from towns like Azaz. The fact that the "sizable" community of Azaz is barely mentioned in post-2010 sources suggests that its demographic weight had already significantly diminished by the eve of the Syrian Civil War.

Case Study 2: The Garib Family and the Village of Haj Khalil

In contrast to the more organized community in Azaz, the story of the Garib family offers a rare, intimate glimpse into Armenian life in a rural Afrin village. This personal narrative, captured in an interview in 2018, provides a powerful oral history of settlement and coexistence. The family's patriarch was an orphaned survivor of the Armenian Genocide who, as a 12-year-old boy, fled from Turkey into Syria. He found refuge in the village of Haj Khalil, located in the Rajo subdistrict, where he was adopted and raised by a local Kurdish family.
The family's account is layered with inter-generational memory and trauma. The grandchildren, like Diana Garib, grew up hearing their grandfather's stories of the "brutal practices committed by the Ottoman Empire". This direct transmission of survivor testimony was a core element of identity for families founded in the aftermath of the Genocide. Their story vividly illustrates the theme of finding safety and a new life among the Kurds. The name of the village, Haj Khalil, is itself evocative. While a separate account from the Zoryan Institute tells the story of a Turkish businessman named Haji Khalil who heroically sheltered an Armenian family in his home , the Garib family's story places a village of the same name in a Kurdish area as the site of their salvation by a Kurdish family. This suggests the name may have become a regional touchstone, a symbol of righteous individuals who protected the persecuted, regardless of their own ethnicity.
The life the Garib family built in Haj Khalil was, by their own account, one of tranquility. Jamil Garib stated, "we were living in peace and enjoyed all our rights". This statement encapsulates the pre-2010 experience for many in the community—a life of quiet coexistence that stood in stark contrast to the persecution their ancestors had fled and the devastating violence that would later engulf the entire region. Their story highlights a model of integration based not on formal institutions, but on personal relationships and the bonds forged between a refugee family and their adoptive community.

Part III: The Fabric of a Precarious Existence: Armenian Life Before 2010

The daily life of Armenians in the Afrin district before 2010 was shaped by a triad of influences: the internal drive to preserve a distinct cultural identity, the economic realities of

rural Syria, and the overarching social and political context of living as a small Christian minority within a larger Kurdish society under the authority of an Arab nationalist state.

Socio-Cultural Life and Identity Preservation

While specific institutional records for the Armenian community in Afrin are scarce, its socio-cultural life can be reconstructed by examining the broader patterns of the Syrian-Armenian diaspora and the specific clues available for the region. Throughout Syria, the twin pillars of Armenian cultural preservation were the church and the school.[11] The mention of Christian churches in the towns of Rajo and Maabatli, serving approximately 45 and 15 families respectively, confirms the presence of these core institutions in the Afrin district. Although the denominations are not specified, it is highly probable that these congregations included the local Armenian families. Similarly, the work of Zarmine Boghosian as a passionate educator in Azaz points to the existence of an Armenian school, which would have been the primary vehicle for transmitting the Armenian language, history, and traditions to the next generation.[26]

Life in Afrin necessitated multilingualism. Armenian would have been the language of the home and community institutions. Kurdish would have been the language of daily interaction with neighbors and in the local marketplace. Arabic was the official language of the state, required for dealing with government bureaucracy and for commerce outside the immediate region. The local culture of Afrin, described as being influenced by a more tolerant and less conservative form of Sufi Islam, provided a relatively open environment for this cultural expression to exist without significant friction. This contrasted with more religiously conservative parts of Syria.

However, the preservation of identity was not always overt. The work of the Armenian Social Council, established after 2011, to conduct a census of Armenians in northeastern Syria revealed a complex picture. It found that many families of Armenian descent had intermarried with Kurds, Arabs, and Yezidis over the generations. In some cases, Armenian identity was latent, preserved privately or only acknowledged within the family. This phenomenon mirrors the experience of "secret Armenians" in Turkey, who outwardly assimilated into the majority culture while privately maintaining their heritage. Before 2010, the Syrian state only officially recognized the Armenian community through its church structures, meaning that families who were not formally registered with a church were often invisible in official records. This suggests that alongside the visible, institutionally-connected community in places like Azaz, there was likely a spectrum of assimilation and hidden identity among the descendants of Genocide survivors scattered across the Afrin countryside.

Economic Realities in an Agrarian Region

The economic life of Afrin's Armenians cannot be separated from the broader economic

context of Syria before 2010. The national economy was fraught with challenges, including high unemployment (around 16% in 2010), a chronic housing shortage, and pervasive poverty, which stood at 50% in 2010. Government salaries were insufficient to support a family, and many Syrians sought work abroad in the Gulf or Lebanon to make ends meet. While basic foodstuffs were generally affordable, larger purchases like appliances were a luxury, and owning a home was a distant dream for many.

Afrin's local economy was overwhelmingly agrarian, renowned for its olive groves, which were the backbone of the region's industry and a key source for Aleppo's famous soap production.[15] It is highly probable that the Armenian families in the district were integrated into this rural economy. Following patterns seen in other Armenian communities across the Middle East, they likely worked as farmers, small landowners, artisans (such as tailors or silversmiths), and merchants serving the agricultural population.

These difficult national economic conditions, combined with the limited opportunities available in a rural district like Afrin, were a powerful driver of emigration. This economic pressure was a primary cause of the "fading" of the community noted in Armenian sources. As in the rest of Syria, the pursuit of higher education and better professional prospects would have drawn many young Armenians from Afrin and Azaz to the major city of Aleppo or to diasporic centers in Lebanon, Europe, and North America. This outflow, often permanent, steadily drained the community of its youth and contributed to its slow, pre-war decline. The traditional one-breadwinner family model, common in the Syrian Armenian community, faced challenges in a post-Soviet country like Armenia, where a two-earner model was more prevalent, making even repatriation a difficult economic adjustment for those who considered it.

Inter-Communal Relations: Coexistence with the Kurds

Perhaps the most defining characteristic of the Armenian experience in Afrin before 2010 was the overwhelmingly positive and peaceful nature of their relationship with the region's Kurdish majority. The accounts that exist consistently emphasize a dynamic of solidarity and mutual respect. The sentiment expressed by a descendant of survivors—that their ancestors fled to Afrin "to live in peace among their Kurdish brothers"—is emblematic of this relationship. The most powerful illustration of this bond is the oral history of the Garib family, whose patriarch was not only sheltered but adopted and raised by a Kurdish family in the village of Haj Khalil.

This positive dynamic was not an accident of history but a product of specific political conditions in 20th-century Syria. It was largely forged by a shared experience of marginalization under the Ba'athist state. From the 1960s onward, the Syrian government in Damascus pursued aggressive Arabization policies aimed at suppressing non-Arab identities. These policies were particularly aimed at the Kurds, involving the replacement of Kurdish geographical names with Arabic ones and the manipulation of census data to render the Kurdish population statistically invisible and stateless.[23] As a non-Arab Christian minority, Armenians were also positioned as "other" by the state's nationalist ideology. This shared

status as minorities under pressure from the central government likely fostered a strong sense of local solidarity.
This bond was reinforced by the distinct local culture of Afrin. The region was known for a more tolerant, secular, and less conservative social fabric, influenced by Sufism, which allowed religious minorities like Christians, Yezidis, and Alevis to thrive in relative peace. In this environment, the Kurds, as the dominant local group, set a tone of coexistence, and the Armenians, as a small, refugee-descended community, found a secure niche within this local power structure, which was itself often in quiet opposition to the central state. This specific context explains why the relationship in Afrin was so positive. It stands in contrast to the more complex and often fraught history between Armenians and Kurds in their ancestral Anatolian homeland, where during the Genocide, some Kurdish tribes collaborated with the Ottoman authorities in carrying out massacres, while others offered protection.[40] In 20th-century Afrin, the shared political reality of life in Syria superseded those more complicated historical precedents, creating a localized history of profound and peaceful coexistence.

Conclusion: A Fading Presence on the Eve of Conflict

The Armenian community of the Afrin district before 2010 was a small, scattered, but resilient population, born from the ashes of the 1915 Genocide. Its character was indelibly shaped by the initial trauma of displacement, the subsequent refuge found among the region's Kurdish majority, and the persistent socio-economic pressures of life in rural Syria. It was a community whose origins were steeped in tragedy but whose existence for nearly a century was marked by a quiet peace.
The available evidence points conclusively to a process of slow demographic decline that long predated the Syrian Civil War. An Armenian-language source explicitly states the community was "gradually fading" (*աստիճանաբար մարել են*). This was not a story of persecution within Afrin; on the contrary, all accounts suggest a life of security and positive inter-communal relations.[24] Rather, the decline was driven by the universal forces of assimilation and emigration. The lack of significant economic and higher educational opportunities in a rural district, coupled with the pull of larger, more established Armenian communities in Aleppo and the West, led to a steady outflow of the younger generation. The community's small size and lack of major institutional anchors, outside of a few small churches and perhaps a school in Azaz, made it particularly vulnerable to this demographic attrition.
By 2010, the Armenian presence in Afrin was more a testament to a historical memory of refuge than a thriving demographic reality. It existed in the stories passed down through families like the Garibs of Haj Khalil, in the life's work of dedicated educators like Zarmine Boghosian of Azaz, and in the small Christian congregations of Rajo and Maabatli.[26] It was a community that had found a peaceful haven, a place to rebuild after an unspeakable catastrophe. Their tragic origins, however, were about to be echoed by a new wave of violence that would once again threaten their very existence in the region. The fears articulated by Armenian commentators after 2011—that the tragedy of 1915 could be

repeated—were rooted in this deep historical consciousness of persecution and survival.[43] Significant gaps remain in the historical record of this micro-community. The full story of the "sizable" Armenian population of Azaz, for instance, remains largely untold, locked within the pages of memoirs like Boghosian's and the memories of its diaspora. Comprehensive oral history projects, similar to those conducted by the Zoryan Institute and the USC Shoah Foundation for other Armenian communities, are urgently needed to capture the memories of the last generation who lived in pre-war Afrin.[8] Without such efforts, the detailed accounts of this unique chapter of Armenian survival and coexistence risk fading completely, much like the community itself.

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