The Circassians of Northern Syria: A History of Displacement, Resilience, and Political Precarity

Part I: The Circassian Odyssey - From Homeland to a New Frontier

Foundations of a Nation: The Adyghe People of the Caucasus

The people known to the world as Circassians refer to themselves as the Adyghe (Адыгэхэр). They are an indigenous people of the Northwest Caucasus, a region they have inhabited since antiquity.[2] The term "Circassian" is an exonym, a name given by outsiders, with its origins disputed among Turkic, Mongolian, and Persian roots. Before the 19th century, "Historical Circassia" was a formidable nation, the largest in the Caucasus, spanning approximately 100,000 square kilometers with a population reaching an estimated 1.7 million by the 17th century.

The Circassian national identity is deeply rooted in a confederation of twelve distinct tribes, including the Abzakh, Besleney, Bzhedugh, Kabardians, Shapsugh, and Ubykh.[1] This tribal structure, symbolized by the twelve stars on the Circassian flag, was shaped by the rugged, mountainous terrain of their homeland, which fostered both unity and regional distinction.[1] This traditional organization was later undermined by Soviet policies that deliberately divided the remaining Circassians into four separate administrative peoples, a move aimed at weakening their collective identity.

Culturally, the Circassians are defined by a unique synthesis of religious belief and an ancient code of conduct. While Sunni Islam became the dominant religion around the 17th century, a process influenced by the Ottoman and Crimean Tatars, their society is fundamentally governed by an older ethnic religion and moral philosophy known as *Adyghe Khabze*.[1] The Khabze is a comprehensive worldview that dictates social etiquette, honor, and personal conduct, remaining a cornerstone of Circassian identity even after the widespread adoption of Islam.[1] Earlier periods of their history also saw the influence of Orthodox Christianity,

introduced by the Byzantine Empire between the 3rd and 5th centuries.[9] Genetically, the Circassian people show a prevalence of the G2-YY1215 SNP haplotype, and their language, Adyghe, is part of the Northwest Caucasian language family, bearing no relation to the Semitic or Slavic languages of the regions they would later inhabit.[1]

The Unrecognized Genocide and the Great Exile (1864)

The presence of the Circassian people in Syria is not the result of voluntary migration but the direct consequence of a century-long, existential conflict with an expanding empire. The Russo-Circassian War, which raged from 1763 to 1864, was sparked by the Russian Empire's relentless push into the Caucasus.[2] The war culminated in a campaign of systematic destruction and forced deportation that is widely recognized by Circassians and a growing number of scholars as the Circassian Genocide.[2] Russian military documents from the period explicitly referred to their campaigns as
ochishchenie (cleansing), and imperial generals justified the wholesale slaughter of civilians by describing Circassians as "subhuman filth".[8]
The human cost was catastrophic. At least 600,000 people perished from massacres, starvation, and exposure to the elements, with some estimates placing the total number of deaths between one and two million.[2] By the war's end in 1864, an estimated three-fourths of the entire Circassian population had been annihilated. The vast majority of survivors, up to 1.5 million people, were forcibly expelled from their homeland and deported to the Ottoman Empire.[2] The exodus across the Black Sea was itself a humanitarian disaster; packed onto overcrowded ships, thousands died from disease, starvation, and drowning when vessels sank in storms.[8] Ottoman archives from 1879 document the arrival of over a million refugees from the Caucasus, noting that nearly half were found dying on the Black Sea shores upon arrival. This cataclysm rendered the Circassians one of the first stateless peoples of the modern era.

Strategic Resettlement in Ottoman Syria

The arrival of Circassian refugees coincided with specific geopolitical objectives of the Ottoman Empire. The Sublime Porte actively encouraged the immigration of displaced Muslim populations, both to compensate for manpower shortages and to strategically bolster the Muslim presence in sparsely populated or politically restive regions of the empire.[3] The Circassians, renowned for their martial skills and loyalty, were deemed ideal candidates for this imperial project.[9]
The Ottoman authorities settled the Circassians on the frontiers of Ottoman Syria (the Levant), using them as a bulwark to establish firmer state control, pacify nomadic Bedouin tribes, and create a buffer between other powerful local groups, particularly the Druze.[3] This policy created what has been described as the "Circassian Nalmes Line," a chain of

settlements stretching from Manbij in the northern Aleppo Vilayet, southward through Homs, the areas around Damascus, the Golan Heights, and into what is now Jordan.[16]
The primary zones of Circassian settlement in Syria were the Golan Heights, where they established the city of Quneitra and between 11 and 16 surrounding villages, becoming the largest ethnic minority in southern Syria.[2] Other major communities were founded in the governorates of Homs and Hama, and in the Damascus countryside, in towns like Marj al-Sultan.[11] Crucially, Circassian settlements were also established in the northern Aleppo region, including the towns of Manbij and Khanasir.[11]
This history establishes a foundational theme of the Circassian experience in Syria: a cycle of repeated, violent displacement. The 1864 genocide and exile was the first trauma. The second occurred in 1967, when the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights led to another forced expulsion, destroying their main communities in Syria.[2] The third began with the Syrian Civil War in 2011, which once again devastated their villages and scattered their population.[11] This pattern of recurring loss and uprooting is not merely a historical footnote but a central, defining feature of their collective identity and political consciousness, shaping their deep-seated desire for security and their cautious relationship with state power.

Part II: Locating the Circassians of Northern Syria

The Afrin Enigma: A Historical Trace or a Modern Misnomer?

An investigation into the presence of a Circassian community in the Afrin district of Syria reveals a significant discrepancy between historical settlement patterns and modern political geography. The Afrin district, a mountainous area in the northwestern corner of the Aleppo Governorate, is described in numerous sources as having been overwhelmingly and "homogeneously Kurdish" prior to the Turkish invasion in 2018. Pre-war population estimates for the district stood at over 500,000, the vast majority of whom were ethnic Kurds, a fact substantiated by demographic maps of the area.[23]
A thorough review of historical records detailing the Ottoman resettlement of Circassians in the 19th century shows no evidence of established Circassian villages within the Afrin district itself.[11] The primary northern settlements were located further east in the Aleppo governorate, in towns such as Manbij and Khanasir.[11] One source makes an isolated reference to a Circassian community in the "Afrin valley" dating to the 12th century, but this claim stands apart from the main body of evidence concerning the modern diaspora and its well-documented arrival after 1864.
The most logical explanation for the query connecting Circassians to Afrin lies in the administrative structures created during the Syrian Civil War. In 2014, the Kurdish-led

Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its allies established the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). This entity was divided into several de facto cantons, or regions. The westernmost of these was designated the "Afrin Region".[22] This administrative region, for a time, encompassed not only the Kurdish-majority Afrin district but also the adjacent Shahba region and maintained close political and military ties with the city of Manbij.[22] As will be detailed, both Shahba and Manbij have documented Circassian populations. Therefore, the term "Circassians of Afrin" is less a statement of historical demography and more a reflection of a recent, de facto geopolitical reality created by the AANES federalist project. The query itself is a product of this modern political map, not the Ottoman-era settlement map.

Manbij: A Circassian Anchor in the North

The city of Manbij, located northeast of Aleppo, represents a key historical anchor for the Circassian presence in northern Syria. Following their exile from the Caucasus, Circassian refugees were resettled in Manbij by the Ottoman government in 1878, where they were a foundational population of the modern city.[19] By 1911, the city's 1,500 inhabitants were reported to be entirely Circassian.

Over the course of the 20th century, Manbij evolved into a diverse, multi-ethnic urban center. By 2004, its population had grown to nearly 100,000, composed of a largely Arab population alongside significant Kurdish, Turkmen, Circassian, and Chechen minorities.[35] While the Circassian community remains an integral part of the city's social fabric, its demographic weight has diminished over time, with some analysts describing their presence today as being at "symbolic levels".

Despite their small numbers, Circassians have maintained a visible political role in Manbij, particularly following the city's liberation from ISIS by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in 2016. Under the inclusive governance model of the AANES, the Circassian community was granted representation in the newly formed administrative bodies. In the 132-member Manbij City Council, eight seats were allocated to Circassian representatives, and they were also included as a component of the Manbij Military Council.[36] This demonstrates a deliberate policy by the AANES to grant political space to minorities, often disproportionate to their population size, in order to foster a multi-ethnic coalition.

The Broader Northern Aleppo Footprint: Shahba and Khanasir

Beyond Manbij, a Circassian presence is documented in other parts of the northern Aleppo countryside, particularly in the Shahba region. This area, situated between the cities of Azaz, al-Bab, and Manbij, is geographically adjacent to the Afrin district. The original ethnic composition of the Shahba region is estimated to have been approximately 65% Kurdish, 25% Arab, 5% Turkmen, and a combined 5% Circassian and Arnaout (an archaic term for

Albanians). This confirms a small but historically documented Circassian population in the immediate vicinity of Afrin. Following the 2018 Turkish invasion, the Shahba region became the "last free region of the Afrin canton" and a primary destination for hundreds of thousands of displaced Kurds fleeing Afrin, dramatically altering its demographics and security environment.

Another important Circassian settlement in the region was Khanasir, located southeast of Aleppo. The town was re-established in the early 20th century by Circassians who had originally migrated from Manbij.[11] In 1970, Khanasir had a Circassian population of 2,500. Like many other communities in Syria, the town was largely depopulated during the civil war.[12]

Part III: Navigating the Syrian Maelstrom

A Precarious Neutrality in the Civil War

With the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011, the Circassian community adopted an official stance of neutrality, a position shaped by a long history of navigating the complex power dynamics of the region. In practice, however, the community was fragmented. Given their historical integration into the state apparatus, a significant number of Circassians served in the Syrian military and security services, a legacy of both Ottoman and French Mandate policies that valued their loyalty and martial skills.[1] Yet, this was not a monolithic allegiance. Other Circassians defected from the regime, joined opposition ranks, or voiced support for the uprising. The Adyghe Caucasus Association, an organization representing Syrian Circassians who had fled to Turkey, explicitly framed the conflict as a "popular revolution" against oppression and reported that over 200 Circassians had been detained by the Assad regime.

This precarious position ensured that neutrality offered no sanctuary. Circassian-majority villages, such as Marj al-Sultan near Damascus and the resettled communities of Beer Ajam and Bariqa in the Golan, became intense battlegrounds.[11] The devastation of these areas marked the third major traumatic displacement in their 150-year history in Syria, forcing tens of thousands to flee once again. Many sought refuge with established diaspora communities in Turkey and Jordan, while a significant number began to pursue the long-held dream of repatriation to their ancestral homeland in the Caucasus.[11]

The Geopolitical Rupture of 'Operation Olive Branch' (2018)

In January 2018, the security landscape of northern Syria was violently redrawn. Turkey,

alongside its allied Syrian National Army (SNA) factions, launched "Operation Olive Branch," a full-scale invasion of the Afrin district.[42] The operation's official justification was to combat "terrorism"—a reference to the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG)—and to establish a border "safe zone".[43] However, rhetoric from Turkish officials about returning Afrin to its "rightful owners" signaled an intention to enact demographic change, and the operation's name was widely criticized by observers as "Orwellian".[42]

The invasion precipitated a humanitarian catastrophe in Afrin. The fighting led to the deaths of hundreds of civilians and the forced displacement of an estimated 300,000 Kurdish residents.[42] Numerous human rights organizations have since documented a pattern of widespread and systematic violations committed by the Turkish-backed SNA factions that now control the area. These abuses include looting, the seizure of homes and agricultural lands, arbitrary detention, torture, and other war crimes.[43]

While the Circassian community was not the direct target of the operation, its consequences had a profound and destabilizing impact. The mass exodus of Afrin's displaced population flowed directly into the adjacent Shahba region, an area with a small but long-standing Circassian minority. This sudden influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees created immense pressure on local resources and established a new, highly volatile security environment on the doorstep of Circassian communities. The transformation of Afrin into a zone of lawlessness and impunity, governed by unaccountable militias, created a source of perpetual instability that threatened the security of all groups in the surrounding regions.

A Minority within a Minority-Led Project: Circassians and the AANES

In the territories controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Circassian community found itself in the unique position of being a minority within a political project led by another minority, the Kurds. The governing framework of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) is based on a "Social Contract" that explicitly promotes a pluralistic, decentralized model of governance.[30] This ideology celebrates the region's ethnic and religious mosaic and formally guarantees political representation for all constituent communities, including Arabs, Kurds, Syriacs, Turkmen, and Circassians.[31]

This policy of formal inclusion has been most evident in the city of Manbij. As shown in the table below, Circassians were integrated into the city's post-ISIS governance structures, a clear attempt by the AANES to demonstrate the viability of its multi-ethnic model.[36] Furthermore, the SDF has made public appeals for Circassian youth to join its military ranks, underscoring their symbolic importance to the coalition.

Administrative Body	Date of Establishment/Election	Total Seats/Members	Circassian Seats/Members	Source(s)
Manbij City Council	2017	132	8	[36]
Manbij Military	2016	N/A	Included as a	

Council			component	

Despite this formal representation, the power dynamics reflect the demographic reality. The Circassians remain a very small minority, lacking the population size or political leverage of the region's dominant Kurdish and Arab communities. Their security and political standing are therefore largely contingent on the strategic calculations and goodwill of the Kurdish-led administration. Their position is that of a protected and symbolically important minority, rather than an independent power broker. This situation highlights a recurring paradox in Circassian history: their reputation and distinct identity have often made them strategically valuable to larger powers—from the Ottomans and the French to the Ba'athist state and now the AANES. They have been valued as loyal soldiers, buffers, or symbols of pluralism. However, this strategic value is always conferred by an external power, and their small numbers render them politically vulnerable. Their security is thus perpetually contingent, shifting with the prevailing winds of regional power balances.

Part IV: Identity, Rights, and an Uncertain Future

The Human Rights Black Hole: Post-2018 Afrin and Regional Insecurity

Since the 2018 Turkish occupation, the Afrin district has become a black hole for human rights, characterized by a climate of violence and impunity that poses a grave and persistent threat to the entire northern Syrian region. Comprehensive reports by international and Syrian human rights organizations, including Ceasefire, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ), and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), have extensively documented systematic violations committed by the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) factions.[43]
The abuses are widespread and severe. They include arbitrary detention and torture in a network of official and secret prisons, such as the notorious "Black Prison" near Raju.[46] Kidnapping for ransom has become a rampant criminal enterprise, and the region is plagued by forced disappearances, sexual and gender-based violence, and the recruitment of child soldiers.[43] While the primary targets of this persecution have been Kurdish civilians, often accused of affiliation with the former AANES administration, the pervasive lawlessness affects all residents and creates a deeply insecure environment.[46]
These violations are coupled with a systematic policy of demographic engineering. The homes and properties of the hundreds of thousands of displaced Kurds have been seized and given to Arab and Turkmen families resettled from other parts of Syria.[42] The region's economic backbone—its vast olive groves—has been systematically expropriated, with harvests stolen and trees cut down, destroying local livelihoods. Furthermore, there has been a deliberate

campaign of cultural destruction, with Yazidi, Alevi, and other historical and religious sites being looted or demolished. For the small Circassian communities in the adjacent Shahba and Manbij regions, the establishment of this violent and predatory regime in Afrin represents a constant, looming threat that underscores the fragility of security for all of Syria's minority groups.

The Soul of a People: Cultural Survival in the Diaspora

In the face of repeated displacement and the threat of assimilation, the Circassian community has relied on deep-rooted cultural institutions to preserve its identity. Central to this is the *Adyghe Khabze*, an unwritten code of ethics and social conduct that functions as the bedrock of Circassian society.[6] This code governs all aspects of life, from social interactions to personal honor, emphasizing profound respect for elders and women, bravery, and hospitality.[6] For a people who have lost their homeland, the Khabze acts as a "portable homeland"—a shared set of values and traditions that provides social cohesion and maintains a distinct identity across the global diaspora.[7]

A primary challenge to this cultural survival is the erosion of the Adyghe language. With no formal state-supported education in their mother tongue in Syria, and due to their dispersal and integration into Arab society, fluency in Adyghe is declining rapidly, especially among younger generations who primarily speak Arabic.[11] This language attrition is a source of great anxiety for community leaders, who view it as a critical threat to the core of their identity.

The community's gender dynamics present a complex picture. The *Adyghe Khabze* promotes a powerful cultural discourse of respect for women, who are seen as pillars of honor and are traditionally empowered to mediate disputes.[6] However, some academic analyses suggest that the diasporic experience has also led to a reinforcement of patriarchal norms, with women's roles often centered on the domestic sphere as transmitters of culture, while men dominate public and political life.[56] This traditional structure has been challenged in AANES-controlled areas, where the influential Kurdish women's movement and policies of mandated female co-leadership have created new opportunities for Circassian women to participate in governance and public life.[48]

After Assad: Navigating the New Syrian Landscape (Post-December 2024)

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 marked a watershed moment for Syria's minorities, opening a period of both unprecedented opportunity and profound uncertainty. For the Circassian community, this shift was immediately apparent. On May 21, 2025, for the first time in Syrian history, Circassians held a public "Day of Mourning" in Damascus to commemorate the 1864 genocide.[15] This was a deeply symbolic act that would have been

unthinkable under the previous regime due to its close alliance with Russia, the state responsible for the genocide.[15]

This newfound freedom of expression was accompanied by statements from community organizations, such as the Circassian Charity Association, which celebrated the end of an era of "injustice and oppression" and affirmed the community's commitment to helping build a "free and proud Syria" founded on justice and law.[34] These declarations underscore a dual identity: a people fiercely protective of their unique heritage, yet also deeply integrated into the Syrian national fabric.

However, this optimism is tempered by deep-seated anxiety. As a small, non-Arab Sunni minority, the Circassians lack the demographic weight of Arabs or the organized political and military power of the Kurds. Their future security is contingent on the character of the new Syrian state. The critical question is whether it will evolve into a genuinely pluralistic democracy that protects all its components, or whether it will fall under a new form of majoritarian rule that marginalizes minorities.[62] Furthermore, their historical, albeit nuanced, role within the Ba'athist state's security structures could potentially make them targets for retribution in a volatile transitional period. The ability of this small community to publicly mourn its foundational trauma demonstrates how deeply their freedom of expression is tied to global geopolitical currents; the weakening of the Russia-Syria alliance was a direct prerequisite for this act of public memory.

The Global Nation: Diaspora Solidarity and the Call of the Homeland

The Circassian nation is a transnational one, and the global diaspora plays a critical role in the survival of its Syrian branch. The civil war that began in 2011 created a new wave of Circassian refugees who fled primarily to Turkey and Jordan, nations that already hosted large and well-established Circassian communities descended from the 19th-century exile.[11] These diaspora networks, through formal organizations like the Federation of Caucasian Associations (KAFFED) and informal kinship ties, provided a crucial support system. They helped Syrian Circassian refugees navigate the challenges of displacement, offering aid and solidarity that allowed them to avoid some of the worst hardships faced by other refugee groups.[21]

For many Circassians, the ultimate aspiration remains the return to their ancestral homeland in the North Caucasus, to the republics of Adygea, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachay-Cherkessia.[11] The war in Syria dramatically intensified calls for repatriation. However, the path home has been fraught with obstacles. The Russian government has been largely uncooperative, viewing Circassian activism with suspicion and citing fears of potential Islamist infiltration and the disruption of delicate ethnic balances in the Caucasus.[41] Despite numerous appeals from international Circassian organizations, only a few thousand of the tens of thousands of Syrian Circassians who fled the war have been permitted to resettle in their historical homeland.[11] In contrast, the partially recognized Republic of Abkhazia has been more welcoming, establishing a repatriation fund and actively facilitating the resettlement of

Syrian Circassians and Abkhazians.[20]

Part V: Conclusion and Expert Recommendations

Synthesis of Findings

This analysis has established that the query "Circassians of Afrin" is best understood not as a reference to a historical demographic reality, but as a product of the modern political geography created by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), which administratively linked the Kurdish-majority Afrin district with the nearby, Circassian-inhabited areas of Shahba and Manbij.

The history of Syria's Circassian community is one defined by a cycle of layered trauma, beginning with the 19th-century genocide and exile by the Russian Empire, followed by forced displacement from the Golan Heights in 1967, and culminating in the devastation and dispersal caused by the Syrian Civil War since 2011. This history has forged a resilient collective identity, centered on the cultural code of the *Adyghe Khabze*, but has also left the community in a state of profound political precarity.

In northern Syria, they exist as a small minority navigating complex power dynamics, afforded symbolic inclusion by the AANES but possessing little independent leverage. The 2018 Turkish invasion and ongoing occupation of Afrin has created a human rights black hole on their doorstep, representing an indirect but severe threat to regional stability. The post-2024 political transition in Syria offers new freedoms for cultural expression, as evidenced by the first public commemoration of the Circassian Day of Mourning, but it also carries significant risks for a small community navigating a volatile power vacuum. Their fate remains inextricably linked to the actions of larger regional and international powers.

Recommendations for Stakeholders

Based on this comprehensive analysis, the following recommendations are directed at key stakeholders to address the vulnerabilities and support the rights of the Circassian community in Syria:

1. **For International Human Rights Bodies (e.g., UN Commission of Inquiry, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International):**
    - **Recommendation:** Commission specific, targeted research on the protection gaps and human rights situations of small, non-belligerent minorities in northern Syria, including Circassians, Chechens, Turkmen, and Yazidis.
    - **Justification:** Current reporting often concentrates on the primary conflict

actors. A dedicated focus is essential to ensure the unique vulnerabilities of smaller groups are not overlooked. Monitoring must be conducted across all zones of control—Turkish-occupied territories, AANES-administered areas, and regions under the new transitional government—to protect their rights to property, security, and cultural practice.

2. **For Circassian Diaspora Organizations (e.g., KAFFED, International Circassian Association):**
    - **Recommendation:** Establish a unified international fund and advocacy platform focused specifically on the legal and cultural needs of the Syrian Circassian community.
    - **Justification:** A coordinated global effort is required. This platform should prioritize funding for urgent language preservation programs, including online and community-based education. It must also provide legal aid for documenting and pursuing the restitution of property lost during the conflict, particularly in depopulated areas like Marj al-Sultan and Khanasir. Finally, it should lead a sustained diplomatic campaign to lobby Russia and the North Caucasian republics for more streamlined and supportive repatriation pathways for those who wish to return to their ancestral homeland.
3. **For International Policy Makers (e.g., United States, European Union) and Future Syrian Governance Bodies:**
    - **Recommendation:** Insist that any process of constitutional reform or political settlement in Syria includes an explicit and robust "Minority Rights Charter."
    - **Justification:** To prevent Syria from reverting to either Ba'athist Arab-nationalist centralism or a new form of majoritarian tyranny, the country's future stability depends on the legal codification and protection of the rights of all its ethnic and religious components. Such a charter must move beyond vague platitudes to guarantee specific, enforceable rights for cultural expression, mother-tongue education, and equitable political representation for groups like the Circassians, Assyrians, Druze, and others. This is a prerequisite for a lasting and inclusive peace.

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