

The History of Kilis: A Frontier City and its Kurdish Connection

I. Introduction

This report provides a comprehensive historical analysis of Kilis, a city located in the South-Central region of Turkey, immediately adjacent to the Syrian border. The primary objective is to trace the city's development from antiquity to the contemporary era, paying particular attention to its enduring role as a strategic frontier settlement and exploring its multifaceted historical connections with Kurdish populations. The chronological scope encompasses millennia, beginning with the earliest evidence of settlement and extending through the successive rules of major empires, the complexities of the Ottoman period, the formation of the Turkish Republic, and the profound transformations experienced in the 21st century, notably the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis.

Kilis occupies a significant position geographically and historically. Situated in the fertile plain south of the Taurus Mountains' foothills, it forms the northern edge of the Syrian Plain, strategically located between the major historical centers of Gaziantep (formerly Ayntab) to the north and Aleppo (Halep) to the south.¹ This location has placed Kilis at a crossroads of cultures and civilizations, serving as a vital node on trade routes connecting Anatolia, Syria, and Mesopotamia, but also rendering it a contested borderland throughout much of its history.¹ Its history serves as a microcosm of the broader political, social, and demographic shifts that have characterized this volatile region.

A crucial dimension of Kilis's history involves its connection with Kurdish groups. This connection is complex and has manifested in various forms over the centuries, ranging from the establishment of a distinct Kurdish Emirate during the medieval period to the Ottoman administrative designation of the "Ekrad Sancağı" (Sanjak of the Kurds) and the presence of specific Kurdish tribes integrated into, yet sometimes clashing with, the imperial structure.⁴ Understanding this aspect requires navigating sensitive historical narratives and acknowledging the evolving nature of ethnic identity and state-tribe relations within the context of Ottoman and modern Turkish history.⁸

The analysis presented herein relies on a diverse range of sources. Archaeological findings, particularly from sites like Oylum Höyük, provide insights into the region's deep past.¹

Historical texts from Assyrian, Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, Crusader, and Ottoman periods offer narrative accounts and administrative details.¹ Ottoman administrative records, such as *tahrir defters* (tax/land survey registers), are particularly valuable for understanding demographics, economic life, and administrative structures, including those related to Kurdish populations.⁶ Contemporary reports and academic studies illuminate the modern era, especially the recent impacts of the Syrian conflict.¹⁵ All sources consulted are documented in the Works Cited section.

II. Ancient Kilis: From Prehistory to Byzantium (c. 3000 BC – 636 AD)

The history of human settlement in the Kilis region extends deep into prehistory, predating written records by millennia. Archaeological excavations, most notably at Oylum Höyük, provide tangible evidence of this long continuity.¹ Located within Kilis Province, Oylum Höyük ranks among the largest ancient settlement mounds (höyüks or tells) in Southeastern Turkey, Syria, and Mesopotamia.¹ Its extensive stratification reveals near-continuous occupation from the Chalcolithic period (Copper Age) and Early Bronze Age, dating back to at least the 4th millennium BC, through subsequent historical eras including the Middle Bronze Age, Late Bronze Age, Iron Age, Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods.¹ Oylum Höyük served as a significant regional center, strategically positioned on the boundary between the Anatolian plateau and the Syrian plain.¹ Its size and persistence underscore the enduring importance of the Kilis plain, likely owing to its fertile agricultural land watered by the Akpınar River (a headwater of the River Quweiq) and its command over ancient routes.¹ The mound's existence demonstrates that the area was a locus of organized human activity and regional interaction long before the rise of the historically documented empires.

As history began to be recorded, the Kilis region fell within the orbit of successive major powers that dominated Anatolia and the Near East. During the Bronze Age (c. 3000–1200 BC), the area experienced the influence of the **Hattians**, the indigenous people of central Anatolia, before the arrival of the **Hittites**.¹⁰ While not a Hittite capital, Kilis and its surroundings were part of the broader Hittite sphere of influence, which at its height in the 14th century BC encompassed central Anatolia and northern Syria.¹⁰ The nearby region of Kizzuwatna (roughly Cilicia) acted as a buffer and trade conduit between the Hittite heartland and Syria.¹⁰ Archaeological remains dating to the Hittite period have been found at sites near Kilis, such as Kuzeyne (Kuzuini).¹ The city itself, likely existing under a local name, would have interacted with Hittite administration and trade networks.

The **Assyrian Empire** played a significant role in the region, particularly through trade and later conquest. The name "Kilis" is widely believed to derive from "Kilisi," a city mentioned in Assyrian cuneiform texts, suggesting the settlement's existence and recognition during the periods of Assyrian influence, both during the Old Assyrian trade colony period (c. 2000–1750 BC) and the later Neo-Assyrian Empire (9th–7th centuries BC).¹ Old Assyrian merchants established trading posts (*karums*) in Anatolia, dealing in vital commodities like tin (for bronze production), silver, and textiles, and crucially, introducing cuneiform writing to the peninsula.¹⁰ Given its location on the route south towards Syria and Mesopotamia, Kilis was likely integrated into these extensive Assyrian commercial networks.

Following the collapse of the Hittite Empire around 1200 BC, the region witnessed the rise and fall of various Iron Age powers. Neo-Hittite city-states emerged in the aftermath¹⁰, followed by the influence or direct rule of groups like the Phrygians (known as Mushki to the Assyrians), and subsequently larger empires including the **Medes** and the **Achaemenid Persians** who

conquered Anatolia in the 6th century BC.¹

The conquests of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC brought the region into the **Hellenistic** world. After Alexander's death, Kilis came under the control of the **Seleucid Empire**, one of the successor states.²² During this period, Greek cultural influence spread. Some sources suggest that a city near present-day Kilis, possibly called Ürya Nebi (now in Syria), was either founded or renamed "Chrrhus" or "Kiris" (meaning 'lord' in Greek).²⁰ This name, Kiris, is considered by some to be another possible etymological root for Kilis.²⁰

Roman expansion incorporated Kilis and the surrounding territory into the Roman Empire by the 1st century BC.¹ Roman rule brought relative stability and infrastructure development. Archaeological evidence points to Roman presence, including remains at Kuzeyne ¹ and a significant Roman center identified at Korus (Kiriz), located 20 kilometers east of Kilis, featuring castle ruins, a temple, and a theatre.¹ The name "Ciliza Sive Urnagiganti" is also mentioned in connection with Kilis during the Roman era.¹³

With the division of the Roman Empire in 395 AD, Kilis became part of the Eastern Roman or **Byzantine Empire**.¹ It continued its role as a frontier town, facing the Sasanian Persian Empire to the east. Fortifications in the region, such as the one attributed to Emperor Justinian I (6th century CE) in nearby Gaziantep, highlight the strategic military importance of this border zone during the Byzantine period.² Kilis remained under Byzantine control until the arrival of Islamic armies in the 7th century. Throughout antiquity, Kilis's identity was shaped by its position on a critical juncture between Anatolia and Syria. Its name, appearing in Assyrian records, attests to its deep historical roots. It consistently served as a borderland settlement, its fortunes tied to the control of vital trade and military routes, experiencing the rise and fall of successive empires that sought dominion over this strategic corridor.

III. Medieval Kilis: Conquests and Crusades (c. 636 – 1516 AD)

The medieval period brought profound changes to Kilis, beginning with the expansion of Islam. In 636 AD, during the caliphate of **Umar ibn al-Khattab (Hz. Ömer)**, Arab Muslim forces conquered the region, ending centuries of Byzantine rule.¹ Kilis subsequently served as a forward outpost (*thughur*) for the Caliphate against the Byzantine Empire to the north.¹ The nearby Ravanda Castle (Ravendan), an important Byzantine fortification, was reportedly taken without a fight in 639 AD.²⁰ Later, during the **Abbasid Caliphate** (750-1258), Kilis remained under Islamic administration, with Abbasid-era remains found at sites like Kuzeyne.¹

The ethnic and political landscape of Anatolia began to shift significantly with the arrival of **Turkic peoples**. Following the pivotal **Battle of Manzikert in 1071**, where the Seljuk Turks defeated the Byzantine army, Turkic groups, primarily Oghuz tribes often referred to locally as Turkmens, began settling in Anatolia in large numbers.¹² A Seljuk Turkish state was established in the region, and after 1084, Turkish beys (chieftains) and nomadic clans (*oymaks*) were settled specifically in Kilis and its environs.²⁰ This marked the beginning of a long process of Turkification and Islamization in the area.

The late 11th century witnessed the arrival of the **Crusades**, launched from Europe with the stated aim of reclaiming Jerusalem and other holy sites from Muslim rule.²⁴ The First Crusade carved out several Crusader states in the Levant. Kilis, due to its location, became directly involved in the ensuing conflicts between Crusaders and regional Muslim powers, primarily the Seljuks.¹² For a period, Kilis was attached to the **Crusader County of Edessa (Urfa)**, one of the northernmost Crusader principalities.¹ Ravanda Castle, strategically positioned overlooking the routes to Aleppo, likely saw Crusader occupation or influence and particularly flourished as a stronghold during the 12th century.¹ The presence of the Crusaders added another layer of complexity to the region's political and military dynamics. The decline of the Seljuks and the eventual fall of the Crusader states paved the way for new regional powers. Kilis came under the control of the **Ayyubid dynasty**, founded by Saladin (Salah al-Din Yusuf ibn Ayyub), who was himself of Kurdish origin.⁴ The Ayyubids captured Aleppo in 1183, and Kilis likely fell under their sway around the same time or shortly after. Following the fragmentation of the Ayyubid realm and the rise of the **Mamluk Sultanate** based in Egypt and Syria (1250-1517), Kilis came under Mamluk dominion.¹ The Mamluks recognized the strategic importance of the area; Ravanda Castle served as a Mamluk stronghold.¹ The Mamluk period left a tangible architectural legacy in Kilis, evidenced by the construction of notable mosques such as the Akcurun Mosque (built by Seyyide Fatma in 1334) and the Ulu (Grand) Mosque (built by Abdullah Bin Hacı Halil, also in 1334), both displaying features of Mamluk architectural style.¹ The construction of these significant religious buildings suggests a period of relative stability, patronage, and established urban life under Mamluk administration before the Ottoman conquest. Throughout the medieval era, Kilis remained a strategically vital location, contested by successive powers – Byzantines, early Caliphates, Seljuks, Crusaders, Ayyubids, and Mamluks – all seeking to control the critical routes between northern Syria and Anatolia.

IV. The Emirate of Kilis: A Kurdish Principality (c. 12th/13th C – 1610)

Emerging during the turbulent transition between the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods and persisting into the early Ottoman era, the **Emirate of Kilis (Mîrektiya Kilîsê)** represents a distinct and significant chapter in the region's history, characterized by localized Kurdish rule.⁴ This principality governed a territory that included Kilis itself, the Afrin region to the west, and extended towards Aleppo.⁴

The origins of the emirate's ruling dynasty are traced back to **Sheikh Mend**, a figure identified as a leader from the Hakkari tribal region and, significantly, the son of **Sheikh Fakhraddin**.⁴ Sheikh Fakhraddin is described as one of the most important Yezidi philosophers and saintly figures.⁴ This lineage suggests that the ruling family, and possibly a significant portion of the emirate's initial core population or identity, was connected to the **Yezidi** faith, although Sunni Islam was also present among the Kurdish population of the region.⁴ This potential Yazidi connection adds a layer of religious complexity to the emirate's identity, distinguishing it from

purely Sunni Kurdish entities.

The establishment of the emirate appears linked to the policies of the Ayyubid dynasty. Sheikh Mend was reportedly appointed as the ruler of the principality in the late 12th or early 13th century, benefiting from good relations with the Ayyubid Sultan **Saladin**, who was himself of Kurdish background.⁴ This appointment likely reflects an Ayyubid strategy of utilizing loyal Kurdish chieftains to secure control over strategic frontier regions. Sheikh Mend gained considerable prominence, being referred to as the "**Mîrê Mîran**" (**Prince of Princes**) or "**Emir of Kurds**" in areas with significant Kurdish populations stretching from Aleppo and Damascus towards Kilis and Maraş.⁴ The Emirate of Kilis functioned as a vassal state of the Ayyubids from approximately 1181/1183 until the collapse of effective Ayyubid authority around 1260.⁵ Following the decline of the Ayyubids, the Mamluk Sultanate became the dominant power in Syria. The Mamluks initially appointed **Mend Kasım**, a descendant of Sheikh Mend, as the ruler of the Kilis emirate.⁴ Later, Mamluk support seems to have shifted towards a rival figure named İzzeddin, but attempts to remove Kasım from power with Mamluk backing were unsuccessful, indicating Kasım's entrenched local influence.⁴

The arrival of the Ottoman Empire under Sultan Selim I in the early 16th century marked another turning point. Mend Kasım initially offered support to the Ottomans during their conquest of the region from the Mamluks.⁴ However, this alliance proved short-lived. During a visit to the Ottoman capital, Istanbul, Kasım was executed by the Sultan. This execution was reportedly prompted by reports from the Ottoman governor of Aleppo, Karaca Bey, and Kasım's rival İzzeddin, warning of potential disorder should Kasım return to Kilis.⁴

Despite the execution of Mend Kasım, his family, known as the **Canpolat (Janbulad)** family or **Canpolatoğulları**, managed to retain influence.⁶ After a period of service to the Sultan, Kasım's son, **Canpolat Bey**, secured the right to govern Kilis, likely as an Ottoman sancakbey (governor), around 1515⁴ or the early 1550s⁶, ruling until his death in 1572.⁴ Canpolat Bey's rule appears to have been a period of consolidation and development; the Canpolat Mosque (also known as Tekke Mosque), a notable example of 16th-century Ottoman architecture in Kilis, was constructed during his era.²⁹

The governance of Kilis remained within the Canpolat family for several decades, but not without internal strife and conflict with Ottoman authority. Canpolat's son, **Hüseyin Bey**, succeeded him and expanded the family's influence towards Aleppo, but he was eventually executed by the local Ottoman pasha after being accused of murder.⁴ The leadership then passed to Hüseyin's nephew, **Ali Bey (later Ali Pasha Janbulad)**. Ali embarked on a campaign of revenge against rivals implicated in his uncle's death.⁴ His power grew significantly, leading to his appointment as the Beylerbey (Governor-General) of Aleppo.⁶ However, Ali Pasha ultimately launched a major rebellion against the Ottoman state around 1606-1607, seeking to establish an independent state centered in Northern Syria.⁶ This revolt represented a direct challenge to Ottoman centralization efforts. The Ottomans responded decisively, sending a large army under Grand Vizier Kuyucu Murad Pasha, which defeated Ali Pasha's forces. Ali fled but was eventually captured and executed in Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1610.⁴

The execution of Ali Pasha Janbulad marked the effective end of the Emirate of Kilis as a distinct political entity and the suppression of the Canpolat family's power within the Ottoman system. Despite Ali's defeat, his followers, possibly linked to tribal groups like the Okçu İzzeddinli, remained a source of unrest and banditry in the region for decades, into the late 17th century.⁵ The main branch of the Canpolat family fled the region, eventually settling in Lebanon around 1630.⁴ There, they integrated into the Druze community and became the prominent **Jumblatt** family, which has played a significant role in Lebanese politics ever since.⁴

The history of the Emirate of Kilis and the Canpolat family provides a compelling case study of local power dynamics on the Ottoman frontier. It demonstrates the persistence of a localized Kurdish leadership structure that bridged the Ayyubid/Mamluk and Ottoman periods. The trajectory of the Canpolat family—from Ottoman-sanctioned governors leveraging their position to build regional power, to ultimately challenging the central state in a bid for independence—illustrates the inherent tensions between imperial centralization and the autonomy of powerful local elites, particularly in strategically important and ethnically distinct border zones. The emirate's origins, potentially linked to Yazidism, also highlight the diverse religious landscape of the region during this era.

V. Ottoman Kilis: Administration, Society, and Kurdish Tribes (1516 – c. 1900)

Following the decisive Battle of Marj Dabiq in 1516, where the Ottoman army under Sultan Selim I defeated the Mamluk forces, Kilis and the surrounding region of Northern Syria were incorporated into the expanding Ottoman Empire.¹ At the time of the conquest, Kilis itself was described as a relatively small settlement, perhaps only a village or a small town with a few districts (*mahalles*) and a population of around 1,500 inhabitants in 1519.¹³ However, its strategic location ensured it would play a role in the Ottoman administrative system.

A key feature of Ottoman administration in this area was the recognition and management of the significant Kurdish tribal population. While initially recorded as a *nahiye* (sub-district) under the Vilayet of Aleppo in the first Ottoman *tahrir* (land survey) of 1519⁶, the Kilis region soon became associated with a distinct administrative unit frequently referred to in Ottoman records as the "**Ekrad Sancağı**" (Sanjak of the Kurds) or "**Liva-i Ekrad**".⁶ This administrative designation, appearing around 1527, often included the neighboring area of Azez and explicitly encompassed the Kurdish tribes (*Ekrad taifesi*) residing there.⁷ The creation of such a sanjak signifies a formal Ottoman acknowledgement of the area's demographic character and the implementation of a specific administrative framework tailored for this border region.

Furthermore, the administration of the Kilis Sanjak, including the Ekrad elements, was sometimes granted under a special status known as "**yurtluk-ocaklık**".⁶ This system often implied a degree of hereditary control vested in local families, suggesting a pragmatic Ottoman approach that balanced central authority with the need to co-opt and rely on established local elites for governance, tax collection, and security in this sensitive frontier zone.

One of the earliest and most prominent figures associated with the Ekrad Sancağı was **İzzeddin Bey**. Appointed as *sancakbey* (governor) around 1527, he held significant authority and personal revenue (*has*) derived from the sanjak.⁶ In the *tahrir defter* of 1536, he is explicitly named "Liva-i Ekrâd Mirlivası" (Governor of the Sanjak of the Kurds).⁶ İzzeddin Bey appears to have played a crucial role in unifying or managing the various nomadic and semi-nomadic groups within his jurisdiction.⁶ His influence was such that, even after his tenure (he reportedly died without a male heir after about ten years in office), the nomadic groups subject to the Kilis and Ekrad Sanjak continued to be referred to in official documents as "**Ekrad-ı İzzeddinli**" (Kurds of İzzeddinli) or variations thereof.⁶

These **İzzeddinli** tribes, also known as **Okçu İzzeddinli** (Archers of İzzeddinli), possibly due to İzzeddin Bey's leadership or their traditional craft of bow-making (*okçu* means archer), formed a significant component of the sanjak's population.⁶ They were identified as being part of the larger **Bozulus Turkmen** confederation in some records and followed a semi-nomadic lifestyle, utilizing summer pastures (*yaylak*) in mountainous areas like Kâfir Dağı and wintering grounds (*kışlak*) on the plains around Kilis and Azez.⁶ Their migrations were reportedly shorter than some other Turkmen groups, suggesting a potential integration of pastoralism with settled agriculture.³³ Estimates from the 16th and 18th centuries suggest a substantial nomadic population in the Kilis region, with the İzzeddinli estimated at 5,000 tents in the early 18th century and significant livestock holdings (nearly 600,000 sheep estimated for all nomadic groups in Kilis in 1570).³³

The relationship between the İzzeddinli tribes and the Ottoman state evolved over time. Initially integrated into the administrative and fiscal system, often under favorable terms (e.g., being attached to the lucrative Valide Sultan foundations, which sometimes granted tax exemptions), their status became more contentious in the 18th century.³³ Changes in Ottoman fiscal policy, particularly the expansion of the *malikâne* system (lifetime tax farming), led to new tax demands being placed on the tribes, including the *hazariye* (peacetime) and *seferiye* (wartime) taxes from which they claimed traditional exemption.³³ Their resistance to these new taxes, beginning around 1729 when the Kilis-Azaz *mukataa* (tax farm) was granted as a *malikâne*, resulted in chronic tax arrears and decades of friction with the state.³³ This tax resistance often escalated into banditry (*eşkiyalık*), disrupting security and trade routes between Aleppo and Anatolia, and prompting repeated, often unsuccessful, Ottoman efforts at suppression and forced resettlement (*iskân*), particularly to the Rakka region.⁷ The state's struggle to control the Okçu İzzeddinli highlights the challenges of imposing centralized fiscal demands on semi-nomadic groups with established traditions and perceived rights.

The **Canpolat family**, whose rise and fall as rulers of the Emirate of Kilis overlapped with the early Ottoman period, also functioned as Ottoman *sancakbeys* within this administrative framework, particularly after İzzeddin Bey.⁶ Their governance, starting perhaps in the 1550s, continued the pattern of relying on powerful local families, who were also held responsible for managing the nomadic populations within the sanjak.⁶ The Canpolat period saw increased construction and development in Kilis, but their eventual rebellion demonstrated the inherent instability in the balance between central control and local autonomy.⁶

Beyond administration and tribal dynamics, Ottoman Kilis developed as a regional center. Trade flourished, building on its ancient role, with goods like silk, cotton, and leather products being prominent.¹ Agriculture remained vital, with the fertile plain yielding grapes, olives (noted for their high quality grown at altitude), cereals, and pistachios.¹ The town itself acquired the character of a typical Ottoman urban center, featuring numerous mosques (including those built by the Canpolats and others like Hacı Derviş, Şeyhler, Murtaza, Cüneyne), mausoleums (*türbe*), dervish lodges (*tekke*), and public baths (*hamam*), reflecting its social, religious, and economic life.¹ Stone houses with distinctive courtyards and carved wooden fittings became characteristic of the local architecture.³⁰

However, the later Ottoman centuries also brought challenges. Kilis suffered from natural disasters, including a severe drought in 1818, an earthquake in the 1820s, and a devastating plague epidemic in 1826.²⁰ Internal strife, such as a conflict involving Egyptian forces under Ibrahim Pasha and local groups in 1831, compounded by famine and locust infestations, took a heavy toll.²⁰ Furthermore, the broader Ottoman modernization and centralization efforts of the 19th century (the Tanzimat reforms) likely impacted Kilis, potentially eroding the traditional autonomies enjoyed by local elites and tribal groups, contributing to the underlying tensions that occasionally surfaced as resistance or banditry.⁸

VI. Late Ottoman Kilis, WWI, and the Birth of the Republic (c. 1900 – 1923)

As the Ottoman Empire entered its final decades, Kilis remained a significant provincial town and administrative center (*kaza*) within the Aleppo Vilayet. At the turn of the 20th century, the town of Kilis had a population estimated around 20,000 inhabitants.¹³ It was described as a diverse and relatively prosperous center where production, commerce, and cultural functions were developed, processing agricultural goods from its hinterland and producing crafts like tinned copper tools, textiles, and rugs.¹³

The demographic composition of Kilis and its *kaza* reflected the multi-ethnic nature of the late Ottoman Empire. Sources from 1911 mention the town's population as being mainly composed of Turkomans, Arabs, and Circassians.³⁰ Official Ottoman statistics for the *kaza* of Kilis in 1914 recorded a population breakdown including 78,905 Muslims (a category that would have encompassed Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Circassians, and other Muslim groups), 3,934 Armenians (Gregorian), 434 Greeks (Orthodox), 775 Jews, 376 Armenian Catholics, and 390 Protestants.³⁰ While specific numbers for Kurds are often difficult to ascertain from Ottoman records which categorized primarily by religion, their historical presence through the Emirate and Ekrad Sancağı, along with references to Kurdish tribes and later administrative data²³, confirms their continued existence as part of the Muslim population. The town boasted significant infrastructure reflecting its diverse society, including 37 mosques, 14 smaller mosques (*mescit*), 4 Dervish lodges, 8 madrasahs (Islamic schools), 4 churches, 1 synagogue, numerous fountains, baths, and coffee houses.¹³

A substantial **Armenian community** resided primarily in the town of Kilis itself, numbering

around 6,000-8,000 people in the early 20th century.¹³ They were an integral part of the city's social and economic fabric, known for their crafts and trade. The community maintained its own religious and educational institutions, including the Surb Karapet (St. John the Baptist) Church and a school with approximately 380 students.¹³

This Armenian presence was tragically erased during the events of **1915**, amidst World War I. The deportations and massacres targeting Armenians across the Ottoman Empire, widely recognized as the **Armenian Genocide**, directly impacted the community in Kilis. According to detailed accounts, the process in Kilis followed a pattern seen elsewhere.¹³ Fahri Pasha, a high-ranking Ottoman military official, initially met with Armenian community leaders, assuring them of their safety. However, this was immediately followed by secret meetings between Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) leaders and local notables (held in the Mevlahane, a dervish lodge) where the decision to deport the Armenians was confirmed.¹³ Leading figures of the community, like Kevork Keshishian, were arrested and publicly humiliated shortly thereafter.¹³

The systematic deportation of Kilis Armenians began on **July 30, 1915**.¹³ Convoys of men, women, and children were forcibly marched out of the city, primarily towards a makeshift camp established near the Katma railway station.¹³ There, they joined the massive flow of deportees from other regions of Anatolia, facing brutal conditions, starvation, disease, and violence.¹³ While a small number of artisans (around 300) were initially permitted to stay, they too were eventually deported.¹³ The Armenian church was desecrated, stripped of its religious symbols and objects.¹³ Armenian properties were systematically seized by local CUP members and others after the owners were killed or deported.¹³ Kilis also gained notoriety during the war for the abduction of Armenian women from deportation convoys, who were forced into prostitution for local officials and soldiers.¹³ Survivors later compiled lists identifying individuals primarily responsible for the atrocities and the appropriation of Armenian wealth.¹³ The detailed, systematic nature of these events—involving official planning, targeted arrests, forced marches, property confiscation, and cultural destruction—places the experience of Kilis Armenians squarely within the historical context of the Armenian Genocide.

World War I brought the Ottoman Empire to collapse. Following the Armistice of Mudros in 1918, Allied forces occupied parts of the former empire. Kilis, located near the Syrian front where Ottoman armies had suffered defeat³⁵, was occupied first by British and subsequently by **French forces**.²

The occupation sparked resistance. Kilis became a significant center of the **Turkish nationalist movement** opposing foreign occupation during the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1922).² Local resistance forces, under commanders such as Colonel Polat Bey, engaged in struggles against the French occupiers.³⁶ The fate of Kilis was ultimately decided through diplomacy and military pressure. The **Ankara Agreement (Franco-Turkish Agreement)**, signed in October 1921, established a new border between Turkey and French-mandated Syria and provided for the withdrawal of French troops from Cilicia and surrounding areas, including Kilis.¹ Turkish forces officially entered and regained control of Kilis on **December 7, 1921**, an event still commemorated locally.¹

The establishment of the **Turkish Republic in 1923** and the subsequent **Treaty of Lausanne** (1923) solidified the new borders.⁸ For Kilis, this had profound consequences. The newly drawn Turkish-Syrian border cut the city off from its traditional southern hinterland, including important agricultural areas like olive groves and its long-standing economic and social connections with Aleppo.³⁵ This abrupt severance transformed Kilis from a regional hub connecting Anatolia and Syria into a peripheral border town within the new Turkish nation-state, fundamentally altering its socio-economic dynamics. Furthermore, the Lausanne Treaty finalized the division of the Kurdish-inhabited regions (Kurdistan) among Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.⁸ The new Turkish Republic, founded on a principle of unitary nationalism, officially denied the existence of distinct ethnic groups like the Kurds and suppressed aspirations for autonomy, despite potential earlier discussions or promises made during the War of Independence (referenced contextually in relation to the Amasya Protocol and the unratified Treaty of Sèvres).⁸ This set the stage for decades of complex and often fraught relations between the Turkish state and its Kurdish population, a dynamic that would also shape the context of life in border provinces like Kilis.

VII. Modern Kilis: Provincehood, Culture, and Economy (1921 – c. 2011)

Following its liberation in 1921 and incorporation into the Republic of Turkey, Kilis spent the majority of the 20th century as a district (*ilçe* or *kaza*) administratively attached to the neighboring province of Gaziantep.²⁰ This status changed significantly towards the end of the century. In recognition of its distinct identity, historical significance, and perhaps strategic border location, Kilis was elevated to the status of a province (*il*) on **June 6, 1995** (some sources state 1996), becoming Turkey's 79th province.¹ The new Kilis Province encompasses the central Kilis district along with three smaller surrounding districts: Elbeyli, Musabeyli, and Polateli.¹

The **economy** of Kilis Province throughout this period remained heavily reliant on **agriculture**, benefiting from the fertile lands of the Kilis Plain.³ Key agricultural products include olives (particularly noted for being grown at relatively high altitudes, yielding high-quality oil), grapes (used for consumption, pekmez/grape molasses, and wine), pistachio nuts, cotton, wheat, barley, figs, aniseed, and tobacco.¹ Olive oil production is a cornerstone of the local agricultural economy and cuisine.¹⁷ Livestock farming, including sheep and cattle, also contributes.²³ Industrial activity historically included silk and cotton manufacturing, leather products, and traditional crafts.¹ In more recent decades, efforts were made to boost industrial development through the establishment of an Organized Industrial Zone (OIZ).³⁶ Tourism was recognized as having potential, leveraging the province's historical sites like Ravanda Castle and Oylum Höyük, its Ottoman-era architecture, and its distinct local culture, although its development remained relatively limited compared to other regions.¹ The construction of improved road connections, such as a tunnel and road linking Kilis to Hatay, was seen as crucial for economic revitalization.³⁶

Kilis developed and maintained a distinct **regional culture**, shaped by its history as a crossroads and border city. This is evident in its **architecture**, characterized by Ottoman-era mosques (such as the Canpolat/Tekke Mosque, Ulu Mosque, Akcurun Mosque, Hacı Derviş Mosque, Şeyhler Mosque), mausoleums, dervish lodges, and numerous historical Turkish baths (*hamams*) like Koca Hamam (restored 1545), Eski Hamam, Paşa Hamamı, and Tuğlu Hamam.¹ Traditional stone houses featuring enclosed courtyards and intricate carved wooden elements also contribute to the city's architectural identity.¹⁷

Handicrafts, though perhaps diminished compared to past eras, continued to be part of the cultural landscape, including traditional duvet making (*yorgancılık*), kerchief embroidery (*yemenicilik*), and stone carving.¹³

Local **folklore and traditions** persist, reflected in beliefs associated with local shrines like Köfteci Baba and Küt Küt Dede, where practices such as distributing bread, tying rags, lighting candles, and seeking healing are observed.⁴¹ Oral traditions include folk poems known as *mani*, which encapsulate local dialect, customs, place names, agricultural life, and social values, serving as repositories of social memory.⁴² Food plays a central role in rituals surrounding life events (births, weddings, deaths) and religious holidays.⁴³ Folk songs also reflect the local culture, including themes related to cuisine.⁴⁴

Perhaps the most vibrant expression of Kilis's unique cultural blend is its **cuisine**. Widely recognized for its richness and distinctiveness, Kilis cuisine exhibits influences from neighboring Aleppo and the broader Syrian region, as well as Turkish and Mediterranean traditions.¹⁷ Even dishes sharing names with those in neighboring Gaziantep often have unique local variations.⁴⁶ Key ingredients include meat (predominantly lamb), bulgur, high-quality local olive oil, seasonal vegetables, and a characteristic array of spices such as pepper (red and black), mint, sumac, cumin, and coriander (*kuzbara*).⁴⁰

Signature dishes that define Kilis gastronomy include:

- **Main Courses:** *Kilis Tava* (a baked dish of spiced minced meat spread over sliced eggplant or potatoes), *Oruk* (a type of kebab or köfte made from bulgur and minced meat, often grilled on skewers), *Kübbülmüşviyye* (large bulgur shells stuffed with meat and fat, then boiled or steamed), *Ekşili Malhıta* (a sour red lentil soup), *Lebeniye* (a yogurt-based soup with rice, chickpeas, and meat), various *dolmas* (stuffed vegetables, including unique preparations like *Şihıl Mahşe* and stuffed tripe or ribs), and kebabs like *Patlıcan Kebabı* (eggplant kebab).¹⁷
- **Köftes:** Numerous varieties beyond Oruk exist, including *İçli Köfte* (fried bulgur shells stuffed with meat), *Mercimek Köftesi* (lentil patties), and *Zeytli Köfte* (olive oil-based patties).⁴⁰
- **Desserts:** *Katmer* (a flaky pastry, often filled with cream and pistachios), *Cennet Çamuru* ('Heaven's Mud', a dessert made with shredded *kadayıf* dough, sugar, and butter, served with clotted cream), *Peynir Helvası* (cheese halva), *Gerebiç* (semolina cookies often filled with pistachios or walnuts, especially popular during holidays), *Züngül* (a type of fried dough pastry), *Belluriye* (a pistachio dessert), and *Mayanalı Kahke* (aniseed-flavored biscuits).¹⁷

The emphasis on fresh ingredients, skillful use of spices, and the central role of olive oil characterize this rich culinary heritage.¹⁷ This distinct regional culture, particularly its cuisine, serves as a testament to Kilis's history as a melting pot, absorbing and adapting influences from the diverse peoples and traditions that have shaped its identity over centuries. While direct, specific Kurdish culinary contributions are not explicitly detailed in the provided sources for Kilis itself, the long historical presence of Kurdish groups makes cultural exchange, including in foodways, highly probable, likely subtly enriching the overall gastronomic tapestry of the region.

VIII. Contemporary Kilis: The Syrian Refugee Crisis (2011 – Present)

The outbreak of the **Syrian Civil War in 2011** triggered one of the largest forced displacement crises since World War II, profoundly impacting neighboring countries, none more so than Turkey. Kilis, due to its immediate proximity to the Syrian border and major conflict zones around Aleppo, became a primary entry point and host city for hundreds of thousands of Syrians fleeing violence and seeking refuge.¹⁵ Turkey adopted an "open door" policy initially and established a "Temporary Protection" regime for Syrian refugees, eventually hosting the largest refugee population in the world, numbering around 3.5 to 3.6 million registered Syrians by the late 2010s and early 2020s.¹⁵ While initially accommodated in camps, the vast majority (over 90-95%) of Syrian refugees in Turkey soon moved to live outside camps, primarily in urban centers, integrating into Turkish society to varying degrees.¹⁵ For Kilis, the scale of the influx was staggering and transformative. The city's pre-war population (estimated variously, with the province population around 124,000 in 2011, and the city itself likely somewhat smaller but often cited with higher figures including surrounding areas, e.g., 130,000 used in some reports⁵¹) was overwhelmed by the arrival of refugees. At the peak of the influx, the number of registered Syrian refugees residing in Kilis **exceeded the number of native Turkish residents**, a unique situation among Turkish cities.²³ This dramatic population boom placed immense strain on the city's infrastructure, resources, and social fabric.

This influx led to a fundamental **demographic transformation** of Kilis. The most striking change was the massive increase in the city's **Arab population**. While Kilis historically had some Arab presence, census data from the 1960s indicated it was less than 1% Arab. By the mid-to-late 2010s, estimates suggested that Arabs constituted nearly half (around 49%) of the city's de facto population due to the Syrian arrivals.⁵⁷ This rapid ethnic shift is distinct from the experience of other border provinces like Şanlıurfa and Mardin, which also received large numbers of refugees but had pre-existing large Kurdish majorities or pluralities and significant Arab minorities; the refugee influx increased the Arab proportion in those provinces but did not fundamentally alter the majority ethnic group as dramatically as in Kilis.⁵⁷ The Syrian refugee population was also characterized by a significantly younger age structure compared to the host Turkish population, with a higher proportion of children and young adults, and initially higher fertility rates, suggesting long-term demographic

implications.¹⁵

The following table attempts to illustrate the scale of demographic change by comparing early 20th-century estimates with the post-2011 reality, acknowledging the inherent difficulties in obtaining precise historical and contemporary ethnic data, especially for groups like Kurds who may not have been separately enumerated in all periods.

Table 1: Estimated Demographic Composition of Kilis (Kaza/Province)

| Ethnic/Linguistic Group | Estimated Pop./% (c. 1914 Kaza) | Estimated Pop./% (Post-2011 Province Context) | Notes |
|--------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Muslims (Total) | 78,905 (~92%) | - | 1914 category included Turks, Kurds, Arabs, Circassians, etc. |
| Turks | Not specified | Majority of non-Syrian population | Assumed primary component of 1914 Muslim pop. alongside Kurds/Arabs. |
| Kurds | Not specified | Present, but % unclear | Historically significant (Emirate, Sanjak), part of 1914 Muslim pop. Specific post-2011 % difficult to ascertain. |
| Arabs | Small % (part of Muslim pop.) | ~49% of city pop. (mid-2010s estimate) ⁵⁷ | Dramatic increase due to Syrian refugees. |
| Circassians | Present (part of Muslim pop.) ³⁰ | Likely small % | Mentioned in 1911 source. ³⁰ |
| Syrians (Refugees) | - | ~120,000+ (peak, exceeding native pop.) ²³ | Overwhelmingly Arab ethnicity. Province pop. 147,919 in 2022. ³⁹ |
| Armenians (Gregorian) | 3,934 (~4.6%) | Negligible | Community destroyed/deported in 1915. ¹³ |
| Greeks (Orthodox) | 434 (~0.5%) | Negligible | Likely left during/after population exchanges or earlier. |
| Jews | 775 (~0.9%) | Negligible | Community likely emigrated over the 20th century. |
| Armenian Catholics | 376 (~0.4%) | Negligible | Fate likely similar to Gregorian Armenians. |
| Protestants | 390 (~0.5%) | Negligible | Likely included |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------|---------|-----------------------|--|
| | | | converted Armenians/Greeks. |
| Total Kaza Pop. 1914 | ~84,814 | - | Based on summing ³⁰ figures. |
| Total Province Pop. 2022 | - | 147,919 ³⁹ | Includes native population and remaining refugees. |

Note: Percentages are approximate. Post-2011 figures are estimates reflecting the peak refugee impact and subsequent stabilization; precise current ethnic breakdown is unavailable.

The massive and rapid influx of Syrian refugees had complex and often contested **economic impacts** on Kilis and Turkey more broadly. A major factor was the refugees' participation in the **labor market**. Since access to formal work permits was initially non-existent and later restricted by quotas and bureaucratic hurdles, the vast majority of working Syrians entered the **informal sector**.⁵¹ This created a large supply shock of low-wage informal labor.

- Studies suggest this led to significant **displacement of native Turkish workers** from informal jobs, particularly those with lower education levels. One estimate suggested around 6 native informal workers were displaced for every 10 refugees employed informally.⁵³ Wages in the informal sector faced downward pressure.⁵³ Sectors heavily reliant on informal labor, such as agriculture, construction, textiles, and manufacturing, were most affected.⁵¹
- Conversely, some research indicated a potential positive effect on **formal employment** for certain segments of the native population, specifically low-skilled Turkish men. The availability of cheaper informal refugee labor may have allowed some businesses to expand or restructure, creating formal positions that natives could fill (a phenomenon termed "occupational upgrading").⁵³ However, high-skilled natives and women were generally found not to benefit from this dynamic, likely due to occupational segregation or lack of complementarity.⁵⁸
- The overall impact on **unemployment** remains debated. Some studies found an increase in native unemployment rates in refugee-concentrated regions ⁵³, while others found no significant net effect, arguing that the refugee influx discouraged internal migration of Turks into these areas, thus offsetting potential job losses.⁵³
- Refugee arrivals also impacted **prices**. While increased demand might be expected to raise prices, empirical studies found a mixed picture. Prices for **housing and rent** increased significantly due to heightened demand.⁵³ Food prices also saw upward pressure.⁵³ However, overall **consumer prices** for goods and services, particularly those produced with informal labor, tended to decrease, likely reflecting lower labor costs.⁵³
- Syrian refugees also contributed to the economy through **consumption and entrepreneurship**. They created demand for goods and services.⁵⁴ A notable number of Syrian entrepreneurs established new businesses in Turkey (thousands nationally), leveraging their skills and networks, which contributed to economic activity and, in

some cases, boosted exports to the Middle East.⁵¹

- At the macroeconomic level, some analyses incorporating intersectoral linkages estimated a modest positive impact on Turkey's overall GDP in the short and long term, despite the localized negative consequences for certain groups.⁵⁶ However, the influx also placed a significant burden on **public finances**, with the Turkish government spending substantial sums (estimated at 1% of GDP nationally at one point) on humanitarian aid, healthcare, education, and infrastructure to support the refugee population.⁵³ Local public services, especially hospitals and schools in border cities like Kilis, faced severe capacity challenges.⁵²

The economic effects cannot be viewed in isolation from the **social integration** process and its challenges. While the people of Kilis were initially praised for their hospitality towards the arriving Syrians, often drawing parallels to the historical Islamic concept of *Ansar* (helpers) welcoming *Muhajirun* (migrants)³⁶, the sheer scale and prolonged nature of the crisis inevitably led to social tensions.⁵² Over time, negative public perceptions grew in some segments of the host community, with refugees being blamed for economic problems like unemployment and price increases, overburdened public services, and perceived cultural differences.⁵²

Significant challenges persisted in ensuring adequate **service delivery** for the large refugee population. Access to **education** remained a concern, with a substantial proportion of Syrian children remaining out of school for various reasons, leading to risks of a "lost generation".⁵²

Accessing adequate **healthcare** and **housing** also posed difficulties.⁵² Reports of **child labor** and **early marriage** among the vulnerable refugee population highlighted ongoing protection concerns.⁵² The reliance on informal work left many refugees vulnerable to exploitation and precarious living conditions.⁵² Municipalities and civil society organizations found themselves on the front lines, grappling with these complex integration challenges with often limited resources.¹⁶ The Syrian refugee crisis thus represents the most recent and arguably most transformative chapter in Kilis's long history as a frontier city, fundamentally reshaping its demographics, economy, and social landscape in ways that continue to unfold.

IX. Conclusion

The history of Kilis is a narrative deeply interwoven with its geography. For millennia, its position on the cusp of Anatolia and Syria has defined its destiny as a strategic border city, a conduit for trade, a stage for imperial contests, and a crucible of cultural interaction. From its earliest traceable origins in the Neolithic era, evidenced by the remarkable mound of Oylum Höyük, through its mention in Assyrian records as Kilisi, and its subsequent absorption into the Hittite, Persian, Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine worlds, Kilis consistently served as a vital node on the periphery of empires.

The medieval period brought further transformations with the arrival of Islam, the settlement of Turkic tribes, the turbulent interlude of the Crusades where it was linked to the County of Edessa, and subsequent rule by the Ayyubids and Mamluks, the latter leaving a distinct architectural imprint. A unique chapter unfolded with the emergence of the Kurdish Emirate of

Kilis, possibly linked to the Yazidi faith through its ruling dynasty descended from Sheikh Fakhraddin. This emirate, navigating relations with Ayyubids, Mamluks, and early Ottomans, highlights a period of significant localized Kurdish political influence. The trajectory of the Canpolat family, rising from this emirate to become powerful Ottoman governors before ultimately rebelling, underscores the perennial tension between central imperial ambitions and the resilience of regional power centers in this borderland.

Under Ottoman rule, Kilis was formally integrated into the imperial system, often administered through the specifically designated "Ekracl Sancağı," acknowledging the prominent Kurdish tribal presence. Figures like İzzeddin Bey and tribes such as the Okçu İzzeddinli played significant roles, sometimes collaborating with and sometimes resisting Ottoman authority, particularly in response to changing fiscal demands. The Ottoman centuries saw Kilis develop as a regional urban center with characteristic architecture, crafts, and a rich culinary tradition blending diverse influences.

The tumultuous transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic in the early 20th century brought violence and radical change. The Armenian community, a vital part of the city's fabric, was destroyed during the 1915 Genocide. Following French occupation after World War I, Kilis became a site of Turkish nationalist resistance and was incorporated into the new republic in 1921. The establishment of the modern Turkish-Syrian border proved profoundly impactful, severing Kilis from its southern hinterland and redefining it as a national frontier city. The new republic's emphasis on national homogeneity also reshaped the context for the region's Kurdish population.

Elevated to provincial status in 1995, Kilis entered the 21st century facing the familiar challenges and opportunities of a border region. However, the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 unleashed unprecedented change. The influx of Syrian refugees, exceeding the native population at its peak, dramatically transformed the city's demographics, making it predominantly Arab in composition. This brought complex socio-economic consequences: strains on public services and housing, significant shifts in the informal labor market with displacement of some native workers, downward pressure on informal wages but potential formal sector gains for others, altered price structures, and the emergence of Syrian entrepreneurship. While initially met with hospitality, the sheer scale of the influx generated social tensions and integration challenges that continue to shape contemporary Kilis.

Throughout its long and often turbulent history, Kilis has embodied the characteristics of a frontier zone: resilience in the face of conquest and disaster, adaptation to shifting political landscapes, prolonged periods of coexistence punctuated by conflict, and a persistent role as a place where cultures meet and interact. From ancient Kilisi to the modern city grappling with the consequences of regional instability, Kilis remains a compelling testament to the enduring significance and complexities of life on the border.

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