

The Kilis-Afrin Connection: A Pre-2010 Analysis of a Syrian-Turkish Borderland

I. Introduction

The border separating the Republic of Turkey and the Syrian Arab Republic, particularly the segment between Turkey's Kilis province and Syria's Afrin district, serves as a compelling case study for understanding the complex interplay of history, politics, demographics, and economics in the modern Middle East. Forged in the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire's collapse, this borderland has witnessed periods of tension, illicit cross-border activity, and, notably in the decade preceding 2010, an unprecedented era of rapprochement and cooperation. Analyzing the multifaceted connections between Kilis and Afrin *before* the transformative events triggered by the Syrian uprising in 2011 is crucial for establishing a baseline against which subsequent dramatic changes – including mass displacement, conflict, and direct foreign intervention – can be understood.¹

The period leading up to 2010, especially the first decade of the 21st century, stands out as a unique phase where the border's significance as a source of friction temporarily receded.²¹

This era of improved relations between Ankara and Damascus fostered increased formal trade, cross-border movement, and even local-level cooperation initiatives, contrasting sharply with the historical legacy of division and the conflict that would later engulf the region.²¹ Understanding the dynamics of this specific border segment – characterized by its distinct demographic makeup, its deeply rooted informal economy, and its sensitivity to shifts in national-level politics – provides valuable context for the region's turbulent recent history.

This report aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Kilis-Afrin connection prior to 2010, drawing upon historical records, demographic data, socio-economic studies, and political analyses. It will examine the historical formation of the border, the demographic landscapes on both sides, the nature of cross-border economic and social interactions (including the pervasive role of smuggling), and the influence of the broader Turkish-Syrian political framework. By synthesizing available information, this report seeks to illuminate the complex reality of this borderland before the Syrian conflict fundamentally reshaped its character and connections. The analysis proceeds by first outlining the historical creation of the border, then examining the pre-2010 demographics of Kilis and Afrin, followed by an exploration of socio-economic interactions across the divide, and finally considering the overarching political context of Turkish-Syrian relations during this period.

II. The Drawing of the Line: Historical Context and Border Formation

The modern border between Kilis and Afrin is a relatively recent imposition, a product of early 20th-century geopolitical shifts that fundamentally altered the administrative and social

landscape of a region previously unified under Ottoman rule. Understanding the process of its creation is essential to grasping the subsequent dynamics of connection and division.

A. From Ottoman Vilayets to National Borders

Prior to the First World War, the areas now constituting Kilis province in Turkey and Afrin district in Syria were part of the same broader administrative and social space within the Ottoman Empire, largely falling under the Aleppo Vilayet.²⁶ Kilis itself was a historically significant town, serving administrative and commercial functions within this structure.²⁶ Crucially, historical records indicate that the Afrin region, often referred to as Kurd Dagħ (Mountain of the Kurds) or Çiyayêkurmênc, was administratively linked to Kilis, which in turn was subordinate to Aleppo.²⁸ This pre-existing integration meant the subsequent border cut through established lines of authority and community.

The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire following World War I set the stage for the region's division. Initial plans, such as those outlined in the unratified Treaty of Sèvres (1920), envisioned a partition of Anatolia that would have placed the Syrian-Turkish frontier further north than its current position, potentially allowing for some form of Kurdish autonomy or statehood, an aspiration deeply held by Kurdish nationalists.³⁰ However, the success of the Turkish War of Independence rendered Sèvres obsolete.³⁰

The definitive alignment of the border segment relevant to Kilis and Afrin was established primarily through the Treaty of Ankara (1921) between France (the mandatory power in Syria) and the emerging Turkish nationalist government, and subsequently confirmed by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923).³⁰ The Treaty of Lausanne formally recognized the independence of the Republic of Turkey and established a new territorial settlement. As part of this agreement, Turkey formally renounced claims to former Ottoman Arab lands, including Syria.³⁰ This act solidified the separation: Kilis remained within the new Turkish Republic, while the Afrin region became part of French Mandate Syria.³⁰ Subsequent agreements between France and Turkey further refined the border's demarcation between Meidan Ekbiş (near Afrin) and Nusaybin in 1926, and eastward to the Iraqi tripoint in 1929. A Final Delimitation Protocol covering the boundary east of Hatay was deposited with the League of Nations in 1930.³⁰ The controversial annexation of the Sanjak of Alexandretta by Turkey as Hatay Province in 1939 finalized another major segment of the western Syrian-Turkish border, though this remained a point of contention with independent Syria for decades.²¹

B. Impact on Local Administration and Kurdish Identity

The imposition of the new international border had immediate and profound consequences for local administration and identity. The historical administrative link between Afrin and Kilis was severed.²⁸ Under the French Mandate, Syrian authorities established a new administrative district centered on Afrin, initially named "Kurd Dagħ".²⁸

From the perspective of the Kurdish population, who constituted the vast majority in the Afrin region and had significant communities in areas remaining within Turkey (including Kilis province), the Treaty of Lausanne represented a profound historical setback. Sources reflecting this viewpoint describe Lausanne as a "historical injustice" and even an "international genocide treaty".³¹ This perspective argues that Lausanne deliberately ignored

Kurdish aspirations for self-determination, which had been acknowledged to some extent in the earlier Treaty of Sèvres, and instead formalized the division of the Kurdish homeland (Kurdistan) among four newly configured or consolidated nation-states: Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran.³¹ This division fragmented the Kurdish people, prevented the establishment of a unified political entity, and, according to these sources, laid the groundwork for subsequent state policies aimed at assimilation and the suppression of Kurdish identity and rights in each country.³¹

The creation of the Kilis-Afrin border, therefore, cannot be viewed merely as the drawing of an administrative line. It was a fundamental disruption driven by external powers and the nascent Turkish state, imposing a new political reality onto a region with deep-rooted historical, administrative, and ethnic connections.²⁸ This act disregarded the existing demographic distribution, particularly the concentration of Kurds in Afrin and their presence across the newly drawn line in Turkey.³¹ It severed established administrative pathways²⁸ and fragmented communities that may have previously shared kinship or tribal ties.³⁵ This foundational disruption inevitably created long-term grievances, particularly among the Kurdish population who saw their aspirations denied and their homeland divided.³¹ This sense of injustice and the perceived illegitimacy of the border shaped subsequent cross-border dynamics, fostering both political resistance and social and economic adaptations, such as smuggling, to navigate the imposed division.

C. Mid-20th Century Solidification and Early Tensions

The newly established border was not merely a line on paper; its physical and political reality was actively enforced, though often imperfectly. As early as the 1960s, Turkey took measures to solidify its control and curtail cross-border movement, particularly the widespread smuggling that emerged almost immediately as a response to the new economic and political divisions. These measures included fencing off the border, laying extensive minefields, and placing border areas under martial law.²¹ While these actions aimed to assert state control and curb illicit flows, they also underscored the inherently contested and porous nature of the border from its early days, highlighting the immediate practical challenges and the rise of shadow economies spawned by the division.

III. Demographic Landscapes on Either Side (Pre-2010)

The Kilis-Afrin border, before 2010, separated two areas with markedly different demographic profiles. Understanding these distinct population characteristics is essential for analyzing the nature of their interaction.

A. Kilis Province (Turkey): A Mixed Border Province

Kilis province is a relatively recent administrative entity, having been carved out of the larger Gaziantep province in 1995.²⁶ Situated in extreme southern Turkey, directly abutting the Syrian border, its population shortly before 2010 was estimated to be around 120,000 to 130,000 inhabitants.³⁷ A significant majority of the province's population resided in the city of Kilis itself³⁶, with a notable urban concentration.³⁹

Ethnically, Kilis province reflected the broader diversity of southeastern Turkey, albeit with its

own local specificities. While precise pre-2010 provincial figures are scarce in the provided material, national estimates suggest Turks constituted the largest group (70–75% nationally), with Kurds forming the most significant minority (around 19% nationally).⁴⁰ Arabs and other smaller minority groups also resided in the province.⁴⁰ Historical accounts from the 19th and early 20th centuries paint a picture of Kilis town and its surrounding kaza (district) as predominantly populated by Turkomans, but also including significant numbers of Armenians and Kurds, alongside smaller groups of Osmanlis (ethnic Turks associated with the state apparatus), Arabs, Circassians, and Jews.²⁶ By the end of the 19th century, Kilis city hosted mosques, churches, and a synagogue, reflecting its multi-religious past.²⁶ However, over the course of the 20th century, particularly following the events surrounding World War I and the formation of the Republic, the non-Muslim populations significantly diminished.²⁶ Pre-2010 Kilis province was thus primarily Turkish and Kurdish, with an Arab minority presence.

B. Afrin District (Syria): A Predominantly Kurdish Enclave

Across the border, the Afrin district (Mantîqat Afrîn), administratively part of Syria's Aleppo Governorate², presented a strikingly different demographic picture. Population estimates vary slightly: the 2004 Syrian census recorded 172,095 people in the district², while other sources referencing the same census give figures around 200,000 for the slightly larger "Afrin Canton" area used by later Kurdish administrations.¹ A 2010 estimate cited in multiple sources places the district's population significantly higher, at approximately 523,000.³ The main urban centers were Afrin city and Jindires.¹

The defining demographic characteristic of Afrin before 2010 was its overwhelming Kurdish majority. Numerous sources describe the district as "homogeneously Kurdish" or estimate the Kurdish population at 95% to 97%.¹ This Kurdish presence has deep historical roots in the area, known as Kurd Dagħ (Kurd Mountains), dating back potentially to antiquity.¹

Despite this homogeneity, small non-Kurdish communities existed in Afrin prior to 2010. A small Arab population resided primarily in specific villages like Maryamin, including families belonging to clans such as al-Bubanna and al-Omeyrat, some of whom had historical ties to the Manbij area or arrived during the French Mandate period.³ A Turkmen minority was also present.³ The Yazidi community, with a presence dating back to at least the 13th century, maintained shrines and villages, though their numbers had likely decreased from historical estimates of 5,000–15,000 to perhaps a few thousand by the late 2000s.⁴³ A distinct community of Kurdish-speaking Alevis, numbering possibly a few thousand, lived mainly in the Maabatli subdistrict, descendants of groups who fled persecution in Anatolia, including refugees from the 1938 Dersim events in Turkey.² Lastly, a small, relatively recent community of Kurdish converts to Evangelical Christianity existed.⁴³ Importantly, unlike other Kurdish-populated regions in Syria (like Jazira), the Afrin district was largely spared the systematic Arabization policies implemented by the Ba'athist government in Damascus before the 2011 uprising.¹

C. Juxtaposition and Implications

The demographic contrast across the Kilis-Afrin border before 2010 was stark. While cross-border kinship and tribal ties undoubtedly existed³⁵, the political boundary separated a

nationally diverse Turkish province, albeit with significant Kurdish and Arab populations, from a Syrian district characterized by its exceptional Kurdish homogeneity.¹ This demographic asymmetry likely had significant implications. For Afrin's Kurdish population, the proximity of the Turkish state, representing a different national and ethnic majority across a border perceived by many Kurds as illegitimate, may have served to reinforce a distinct sense of Kurdish identity within the Syrian context, particularly given the historical narrative surrounding the Treaty of Lausanne.¹ Conversely, for residents of Kilis, their immediate neighbor to the south was a region overwhelmingly populated by a single ethnic group (Kurds), which would have shaped local perceptions, interactions, and the nature of cross-border economic and social exchange. The border thus functioned as a sharp demographic interface, influencing identity formation and the specific character of local relationships in ways that went beyond simple administrative division or economic necessity.

Table 1: Comparative Demographics of Kilis Province and Afrin District (Pre-2010 Estimates)

Feature	Kilis Province (Turkey)	Afrin District (Syria)	Key Sources
Est. Population (c. 2009/2010)	~120,000-130,000	~172,000 (2004 Census) to ~523,000 (2010 est.)	¹
Predominant Ethnicity	Turkish	Kurdish (~95-97%)	¹
Significant Minorities	Kurdish (~19% nationally), Arab	Arab (small %), Turkmen (small %)	³
Historical/Other Minorities	Armenian, Jewish, Greek Orthodox (diminished), Circassian	Yazidi (~2,000-15,000), Alevi (~few thousand), Christian converts (small, recent)	²
Key Urban Centers	Kilis City	Afrin City, Jindires	¹

IV. Cross-Border Interactions: Economy and Society (Pre-2010)

The relationship between Kilis and Afrin before 2010 was heavily defined by cross-border flows, both formal and informal. The shadow economy, particularly smuggling, was a long-standing feature, while the political rapprochement of the 2000s introduced new layers of formal economic and social exchange.

A. The Pervasive Shadow Economy: Smuggling Across the Border

For much of the period following the border's creation, smuggling constituted a dominant feature of the economic landscape along the Kilis-Syria frontier.²¹ Kilis, strategically located, emerged as a significant hub for this illicit trade.⁴⁹ The monetary value of smuggling across

the entire Syrian-Turkish border was estimated, even as late as 1981, to surpass that of legal trade, indicating its scale and economic importance.²¹ The types of goods moved illegally were diverse, reflecting demand on both sides and opportunities created by differing price structures and state regulations. Commonly smuggled items included consumer goods unavailable or expensive in Turkey during periods of protectionism (such as kitchen utensils, electrical appliances, electronics, cosmetics, watches, playing cards), gold and foreign currency (often flowing between Beirut, Kilis, and Istanbul), and agricultural or subsidized products like tea, tobacco, and Syrian fuel.²¹ While Afrin is renowned for its olive oil, and post-2018 reports detail systematic looting by Turkish-backed forces¹⁰, specific evidence for large-scale *pre-2010* smuggling of Afrin olives *into* Kilis is less prominent in the provided sources compared to other goods. Livestock and weapons were also mentioned as potential contraband items historically.⁵⁰

The mechanisms facilitating this shadow economy were varied and deeply embedded in the local context. Kinship networks spanning the border were crucial, providing the trust and connections necessary for illicit operations.³⁵ Smugglers employed porters (known locally) who navigated difficult terrain, sometimes crossing minefields laid specifically to deter them.²¹ Later, transportation companies utilized trucks with hidden compartments.⁴⁹ Manipulation of customs procedures, such as creating fraudulent invoices or declaring goods as being in transit while diverting them to the Turkish market, was another tactic.⁴⁹ The entire system thrived on exploiting price differentials between Syria and Turkey, differing currency exchange rates, and circumventing high import tariffs or state regulations on items like gold.⁴⁹ Kilis served as a key node, connecting sources like Aleppo or Beirut to major Turkish markets, notably the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul for gold and currency.⁴⁹

This extensive smuggling was more than just criminal activity; it became woven into the social and economic fabric of Kilis. In a region often characterized by limited formal employment opportunities, particularly during Turkey's era of import-substituting industrialization (1960s-1980s), many residents viewed smuggling not as inherently illicit but as a necessary means of livelihood.⁴⁹ It offered pathways for social mobility, allowing individuals and families, sometimes from rural backgrounds, to accumulate wealth and gain local prominence.⁴⁹ The town's physical landscape was shaped by this trade, with the construction of warehouses and arcades dedicated to storing and selling contraband.⁴⁹ Kilis even earned the moniker "Little Beirut," reflecting its reputation as a bustling, albeit largely informal, marketplace.⁴⁹ The prevalence and deep-rooted nature of smuggling demonstrate how the artificiality of the border, cutting across established economic spaces and creating regulatory disparities, directly generated a significant informal economy. This shadow economy was not merely a reaction to the border but actively shaped the development, social structure, and identity of Kilis for decades.

B. The Rapprochement Era (2000s): Formalization and Increased Flows

The first decade of the 21st century witnessed a dramatic shift in the official relationship between Turkey and Syria, moving from decades of tension to a period of active cooperation. This rapprochement had a tangible impact on the Kilis-Afrin borderland, fostering increased

formal interactions alongside the persistent informal ones. Key policy changes included the signing of a bilateral Free Trade Agreement (which came into effect in 2007) and, perhaps most significantly for ordinary people, the abolition of visa requirements between the two countries in 2009.²¹ High-level political engagement became routine, with joint cabinet meetings and the establishment of a High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council.²⁴

These political developments translated into a surge in formal economic activity. Bilateral trade between Turkey and Syria grew substantially, rising from around \$600 million in 1998 to \$2.3 billion by 2010.²¹ Turkey became a major exporter to Syria and the largest single foreign investor by 2007.²¹ This investment was felt near the border region, with significant Turkish capital flowing into industrial zones like Sheikh Najjar in Aleppo, geographically close to Kilis and Afrin.²¹

Cross-border movement of people also increased dramatically, particularly after the visa liberalization. The number of Turkish nationals visiting Syria jumped from 170,000 in 1998 to 1.45 million in 2010, while the number of Syrians entering Turkey rose from around 100,000 to 900,000 over the same period.²¹ The Öncüpınar border crossing in Kilis became a primary conduit for this intensified flow of people and goods.²⁶ However, this era of formalization did not necessarily eradicate the shadow economy. Sources indicate that smuggling, particularly of goods with persistent price differentials like subsidized Syrian fuel, continued and perhaps even adapted to the new environment.²¹ The increased volume of legitimate cross-border traffic (trucks and travelers) may have inadvertently provided easier cover for illicit activities. Furthermore, the expansion of formal Turkish business operations in Syria might have created new demands for informal cross-border labor or services. Thus, the 2000s likely saw a complex coexistence and interplay between formal and informal economies, rather than a simple substitution of one by the other. The political opening created a more dynamic and multifaceted border environment.

C. Social Fabric Across the Divide

The Kilis-Afrin border cut across a landscape where familial and tribal ties often transcended the new political geography.³⁵ While specific pre-2010 tribal connections directly linking Kilis and Afrin populations are not detailed in the provided snippets⁷⁹, the general principle of divided communities fostering natural cross-border social networks holds true for the Syrian-Turkish borderlands. These kinship links and the social trust they engendered were vital for navigating daily life and were instrumental in facilitating the cross-border shadow economy.⁴⁹

The visa liberalization of 2009 was particularly impactful at the social level, dramatically easing movement for ordinary people and allowing for the strengthening of existing family ties and the formation of new social and commercial connections.²¹ While Kilis and Afrin possessed distinct majority ethnic identities (Turkish/Kurdish vs. overwhelmingly Kurdish), shared regional customs and perhaps a lingering Ottoman cultural heritage provided common ground.²⁶ Afrin, however, maintained its specific cultural characteristics, including strong Kurdish traditions and distinctive Sufi religious practices.¹

D. Agricultural Dimensions

Agriculture formed a significant part of the economy on both sides of the border. Afrin was particularly renowned for its extensive olive cultivation, with estimates suggesting over 18 million trees, forming the backbone of the local economy.⁴³ Kilis province also had a notable agricultural sector, producing olives, grapes, and pistachios.⁵⁸

Despite the geographical proximity and the agricultural nature of both regions, the provided research material offers little specific information about *cross-border agricultural interactions* between Kilis and Afrin *before 2010*. There is no detailed account of seasonal agricultural laborers crossing from Afrin to Kilis (or vice versa) during this period, nor specific data on the formal or informal trade in agricultural produce (like Afrin's olives) across this particular border segment prior to the conflict. While post-2011 sources extensively discuss the role of Syrian refugees (many presumably arriving via Kilis) as agricultural labor in Turkey⁵⁹, the pre-war pattern remains largely undocumented in these sources. This suggests that, compared to the well-documented smuggling of consumer goods, fuel, and currency, or the later flows of refugees, direct agricultural interdependence between Kilis and Afrin might have been less prominent or simply falls into a gap in the available information for the pre-2010 period.

V. The Broader Political Framework: Turkish-Syrian Relations (Pre-2010)

The nature of the Kilis-Afrin connection was profoundly influenced by the state of relations between Ankara and Damascus. The decade leading up to 2010 marked a historic shift from decades of hostility to a period of intensive cooperation, directly impacting the border region.

A. From Confrontation to Détente

For most of the late 20th century, relations between Turkey and Syria were fraught with tension. Disagreements stemmed from Cold War alignments (Turkey in NATO, Syria allied with the USSR), disputes over shared water resources (the Euphrates River), Syria's non-recognition of Turkey's sovereignty over Hatay province, and, most critically for Ankara, Syria's harboring and support for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which waged an insurgency against the Turkish state.²⁵ Tensions reached a peak in 1998 when Turkey amassed troops on the border and threatened military action unless Syria expelled PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and ceased its support for the group.²⁵

Syria swiftly complied, leading to the signing of the Adana Accord in October 1998.²⁵ This agreement was pivotal: Syria officially designated the PKK as a terrorist organization, pledged to prevent its activities on Syrian soil, and established mechanisms for security cooperation with Turkey.²⁵ By addressing Turkey's primary security concern, the Adana Accord removed the main obstacle to improved relations and paved the way for the subsequent détente.

B. Drivers of the 2000s Rapprochement

Several converging factors drove the dramatic improvement in Turkish-Syrian relations during the 2000s:

- **Security:** Syria's continued adherence to the Adana Accord regarding the PKK was fundamental for Turkey.²¹ Additionally, the rise of Kurdish autonomy in post-Saddam Iraq

created shared concerns in both Ankara and Damascus, further incentivizing cooperation.²¹

- **Economic:** The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which came to power in Turkey in 2002, pursued an active policy of economic engagement with its neighbors, viewing the Middle East as a vital market for Turkish goods and investment and a sphere for increasing Turkish influence.²³ Turkey's booming economy sought new outlets, and Syria represented a significant opportunity.²⁵ For Syria, under Bashar al-Assad who initiated partial economic liberalization, Turkey offered a crucial gateway to the global economy, a source of needed investment, and a model for development.²¹ Neoliberal economic reforms undertaken somewhat simultaneously in both countries created a more conducive environment for partnership.⁶⁶
- **Political/Geopolitical:** The AKP government's foreign policy doctrine, often termed "zero problems with neighbors," aimed to enhance Turkey's regional standing and project soft power.²⁴ Syria, facing international isolation, particularly after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and accusations related to Lebanon, saw rapprochement with the rising regional power Turkey as strategically advantageous.²⁴ Improved ties with Ankara helped Syria mitigate pressure from the West and reintegrate regionally.²⁴

C. Manifestations of Cooperation Impacting the Border Zone

The national-level rapprochement translated into concrete forms of cooperation, many of which directly affected the Kilis-Afrin border zone and its inhabitants. High-level political symbolism was abundant, including frequent leadership visits (with Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan famously holidaying with President Assad), joint cabinet meetings, and the creation of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council.²⁴

More tangibly, the implementation of the Free Trade Agreement in 2007 and the abolition of visa requirements in 2009 directly facilitated cross-border trade and travel, significantly impacting daily life and economic activity in border towns like Kilis.²¹ Beyond these framework agreements, specific local-level cooperation initiatives emerged. In 2010, a joint Turkish-Syrian military exercise involving border units was conducted at the Yüksektepe and İnanlı border posts near Kilis – the last such joint military activity before relations deteriorated.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the governors of Kilis and Aleppo participated actively in the Turkey-Syria Cross-Border Cooperation Program. A notable meeting of this program's steering committee took place in Aleppo in March 2010, attended by both governors and other high-ranking officials, to discuss and approve projects aimed at regional development, including the establishment of an Emergency Response Center on the Aleppo-Azaz road, a key route connecting to the Kilis border area.⁷⁰

These examples demonstrate that the political thaw at the national level was not merely rhetorical; it actively fostered and enabled increased interaction and formal cooperation at the local level. While cross-border social ties and informal economic activities had long existed, driven by proximity and necessity, the political rapprochement of the 2000s fundamentally altered the context. It removed official barriers, encouraged legitimate exchange, and created formal channels for collaboration between authorities on both sides of the Kilis-Afrin border, contributing to a significantly different, more open atmosphere in the

decade immediately preceding the Syrian conflict.

VI. Conclusion

The connection between Kilis province in Turkey and Afrin district in Syria before 2010 presents a complex tapestry woven from threads of historical contingency, demographic divergence, persistent informal economies, and fluctuating political relations. The border, established through post-Ottoman treaties, represented an artificial division imposed upon a region with prior administrative and social linkages.²⁸ This act not only separated communities but also created a stark demographic contrast: the mixed Turkish-Kurdish-Arab province of Kilis faced the overwhelmingly Kurdish enclave of Afrin.¹ This division fueled grievances, particularly among the Kurdish population, and simultaneously generated conditions ripe for cross-border smuggling, which became a defining characteristic of the local economy for decades.²¹

However, the decade leading up to 2010 marked a significant departure from previous antagonism. Driven by converging security, economic, and political interests at the national level, Turkey and Syria embarked on an unprecedented rapprochement.²¹ This top-down political shift dramatically reshaped the reality on the ground in the Kilis-Afrin borderland. Formal trade surged, visa requirements were lifted leading to a boom in cross-border travel, and tangible local cooperation initiatives, involving provincial governors and even joint military exercises, took place.²¹ This period demonstrated how political will could temporarily override the divisive legacy of the border, fostering licit interaction alongside the enduring shadow economy.

Therefore, the Kilis-Afrin connection before 2010 cannot be characterized simply. It was a zone marked by the legacy of political partition and demographic difference, yet simultaneously a space of intense human interaction – shaped by the enduring logic of the informal economy and, in its final decade, facilitated by a unique political climate of cooperation. This intricate pre-2010 baseline, with its specific historical context, demographic makeup, economic duality, and the memory of recent openness, is indispensable for understanding the profound transformations and traumas the region would experience following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011. The established connections, divisions, and grievances inevitably influenced the trajectory of conflict, displacement, and intervention that came to define the Kilis-Afrin borderland in the subsequent era.

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