The Alevi Community of Afrin Before 2010: History, Identity, and Context

1. Introduction: Situating the Alevi Community of Afrin Before 2010

The Afrin region (Kurdish: Efrîn), located in the northwestern corner of Syria bordering Turkey [1], has historically been a predominantly Kurdish area, often referred to as "Kurd Dagh" or the "Mountain of the Kurds".[2] Characterized by its hilly landscape, fertile valleys, and extensive olive groves [1], the region enjoyed relative stability compared to other parts of Syria in the decades preceding the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011.[3] Administratively part of the Aleppo Governorate [3], Afrin maintained significant economic and social ties with Syria's second city, Aleppo.[6]

Within this largely Kurdish Sunni Muslim landscape [5], a distinct ethno-religious minority, the Alevis, resided, primarily concentrated in specific areas within the Afrin district.[8] This report aims to provide a comprehensive profile of this Alevi community, focusing specifically on their history, identity, culture, and socio-political circumstances during the period *before 2010*. Understanding this era is crucial for establishing a baseline prior to the profound transformations brought by the Syrian Civil War, the emergence of autonomous administration structures from 2012 onwards [3], and subsequent military interventions that dramatically altered the region's demographic and social composition.[3]

A critical point of clarification is the distinction between the Alevis of Afrin and Syria's Alawite community. These two groups are frequently confused due to the similarity in their names, both deriving from a reverence for Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad.[10] However, they represent distinct ethno-religious groups with different histories, theologies, and practices. Afrin's Alevis are generally considered part of the broader Anatolian Alevi tradition, with Turkish and Kurdish ethno-linguistic roots.[8] They primarily speak the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish, similar to their neighbors in Afrin.[8] Their religious practices center around the Cem ceremony (though its practice in Afrin faced challenges, as discussed later), often incorporate Turkish language elements in worship, and emphasize gender equality in religious settings.[8] In contrast, Syria's Alawites are predominantly ethnically Arab, concentrated historically in the coastal mountains (Latakia, Tartus) [12], and use Arabic in their distinct religious rituals.[10] Their theology involves esoteric beliefs, including viewing Ali as a divine manifestation, which differs significantly from Alevi perspectives.[10] Furthermore, the Alawite community attained significant political power within the Syrian state under the Assad family, a trajectory starkly different from the experiences of the Alevi minority in Afrin.[12] Misidentifying Afrin's Alevis as Alawites obscures their unique history as a minority group subject to, rather than wielding, state power in the pre-2010 period.[1]

The geographical position of Afrin, adjacent to Turkey and proximate to Aleppo, placed its Alevi community at a nexus of influences. Their historical and cultural ties likely leaned towards Anatolia, the heartland of Alevism [9], while their daily lives were embedded within the Syrian administrative system centered in Aleppo [3] and the regional economy dominated by that city.[6] This suggests a pre-2010 existence shaped by complex cross-border cultural connections and regional Syrian dynamics.

2. Historical Roots and Settlement Patterns

The presence of the Alevi community in the Afrin region predates the political upheavals of the 21st century, with settlement narratives pointing primarily towards Anatolia.

Migration Narratives and Origins:

Sources offer slightly varying accounts regarding the specific origins and timing of Alevi settlement in Afrin. One perspective suggests that Alevis in Afrin trace their origins to the Malatya, Maraş, and Elbistan regions of Anatolia (modern-day Turkey). This account posits that settlement occurred mainly after the 1850s, involving groups primarily from the İzzeddinli tribe transitioning to a settled agricultural life.[9]

However, several other sources highlight a significant influx linked to a specific, traumatic event in Turkish and Kurdish Alevi history: the Dersim Massacre (1937-1938). These accounts state that Kurdish Alevis fleeing persecution and massacres perpetrated by the Turkish military in the Dersim (now Tunceli) region found refuge and settled in the Maabatli sub-district of Afrin during the 1930s.[2] The Dersim events represent a period of intense state violence against Kurdish Alevis in Turkey.[16] The presence and subsequent burial near Afrin of Dr. Nuri Dersimi (1892-1973), a prominent Alevi Kurdish intellectual and leader whose relatives were killed in the massacres, serves as a poignant testament to this connection. Dr. Dersimi lived and worked as a veterinarian in Aleppo for years before settling near Afrin.[8]

It is noteworthy that one source explicitly contradicts the Dersim origin narrative, claiming no Alevi population in Afrin originated from Dersim/Tunceli.[9] This discrepancy might reflect different waves of migration arriving at different times and driven by distinct pressures – perhaps distinguishing between earlier, possibly more economically motivated settlement (post-1850s) and later influxes driven by the acute need to escape state violence (1930s). It could also point to differing local oral traditions within the community itself. Regardless of the precise sequence, the narratives firmly root the Afrin Alevi community's origins in Anatolia. The fact that Alevis fleeing the Dersim massacres sought refuge in Afrin implies that, despite being under Syrian administration (initially French Mandate, later the Syrian Republic) which also practiced discrimination against Kurds [1], Afrin was perceived as offering relative safety compared to the immediate, lethal threat they faced in Turkey at that specific historical juncture. This underscores the complex, cross-border realities of Kurdish and Alevi experiences with state power in the region.

Geographical Concentration and Place Names:

The Alevi population of Afrin was primarily, though perhaps not exclusively, concentrated in the Maabatli (also spelled Mabeta or Mobetan) sub-district, situated approximately 14 km

northwest of Afrin city.[8] The town of Maabatli served as the administrative center for this sub-district.[3]

Historical place names within the Afrin region also offer clues to the Alevi presence. The existence of a village reportedly named "Kızılbaş" is cited as significant evidence.[9] "Kızılbaş" (literally "Red Head") is a historical term, sometimes used pejoratively, associated with Alevis and related groups tracing back to the Safavid era. The subsequent alleged renaming of this village to "Ras El Ahmer" (Arabic for "Red Head") by the Syrian regime [9] aligns with the broader Arabization policies implemented by the Ba'athist state, which aimed to suppress non-Arab, particularly Kurdish, cultural and historical markers across Syria, including Afrin.[1] This renaming, if accurate, situates the Alevi experience within the larger context of state-sponsored assimilation efforts targeting Kurds before 2010. Furthermore, the prevalence of locations and shrines bearing the names "Dede" or "Baba" – terms commonly denoting Alevi spiritual leaders or revered figures – points to a significant historical Alevi footprint in the wider Afrin landscape, even in areas where the population may have later converted to Sunni Islam.[8]

3. Demographics and Social Fabric

Prior to 2010, the Alevi community constituted a distinct demographic and social element within the predominantly Kurdish Afrin district.

Population Estimates:

Pinpointing exact numbers for the Alevi population before 2010 is challenging, but available data provides estimates:

- **Maabatli Sub-district:** The official Syrian census of 2004 recorded a total population of 11,741 for the entire Maabatli sub-district.[3] One account suggests that before the Syrian revolt began (circa 2011), the population of the Maabatli sub-district was around 12,000 people, and that *most* of these inhabitants were of the Alevi faith.[8] Another source, focusing perhaps more narrowly on the town of Maabatli itself (population 1,941 in 2004), suggests that perhaps only half the town's residents were Alevi, with the remainder being Sunni, and notes a potential population decrease even before 2018 due to economic factors.[9] While seemingly slightly contradictory, the figures likely indicate a high concentration of Alevis within the Maabatli sub-district overall, encompassing the main town and surrounding villages.
- **Afrin District/Canton:** The total population of the Afrin District was recorded as 172,095 in the 2004 census.[3] An estimate from 2014 (post-dating the pre-2010 focus but potentially reflecting earlier distributions) suggested Alevis made up approximately 4% of the population of the Afrin *canton*.[5] This confirms their status as a relatively small, distinct minority within the broader regional population.[8]

Ethno-Linguistic Identity and Social Structure:

The Alevis of Afrin strongly identified as Kurds.[8] They shared the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish with the majority Sunni Kurdish population of Afrin, fostering a sense of shared linguistic and cultural connection.[8] Afrin itself was historically considered the most densely

Kurdish-populated region in Syria before subsequent conflicts led to major demographic shifts.[2]

A notable feature of the social structure in the Kurd Dagh region, including Afrin, was the relative weakness of tribal identities, particularly when compared to other Kurdish areas in Syria like the Jazira region.[6] Sources indicate that tribal affiliations have not played a significant role in local social or political organization since the era of the French Mandate.[6] In the absence of strong tribal structures, other forms of identity likely gained prominence. Shared Kurdish ethnicity, the common Kurmanji language [8], ties to specific villages or the Maabatli locality [8], and potentially the distinct Alevi religious identity itself likely served as the primary markers for community belonging and social organization among Afrin's Alevis before 2010.

Connection to Aleppo:

The economy and social life of Afrin were closely intertwined with Aleppo, Syria's major northern metropolis.[6] Aleppo served as the primary market for Afrin's agricultural products, particularly olive oil [6], and was a significant destination for migrants from the Afrin region seeking work or education. This migration contributed to a large Kurdish community within Aleppo itself, concentrated in neighborhoods like Ashrafiyya and Sheikh Maqsud.[6] While specific data on Alevi migration patterns to Aleppo is scarce in the provided materials, they were part of this broader rural-urban dynamic connecting Afrin to the regional center. Religious networks, such as Sufi orders (though the sources focus on Sunni examples), also played a role in mediating connections between the rural hinterland of Afrin and the urban environment of Aleppo.[6]

The combination of geographic concentration in the Maabatli area [8], a shared language and Kurdish identity [8], distinct religious practices [8], and the experience of external pressures (discussed later) likely fostered a strong sense of local community identity among Afrin's Alevis. This identity was distinct from both the surrounding Sunni Kurds and the geographically and theologically distant Syrian Alawites, persisting despite assimilation trends or state policies.

4. Distinct Religious Beliefs and Cultural Practices

The Alevi community of Afrin maintained a distinct religious identity rooted in Anatolian Alevism, setting them apart from both the Sunni majority in the region and the Alawite minority elsewhere in Syria.

Core Beliefs and Relationship to Islam:

Afrin's Alevis navigated a complex relationship with Islam. Many identified culturally as Muslims but simultaneously sought recognition for Alevism as an independent religion or distinct path.[8] Alevism itself is often classified by scholars as a heterodox, syncretic tradition related to Shi'ism but with substantial theological and practical divergences.[12] Central to their belief is a deep reverence for Ali ibn Abi Talib.[10] A defining characteristic was the strict rejection of Islamic Sharia law as understood and applied in mainstream Sunni or Shia Islam; conventional Islamic rituals, dietary laws, and sanitary practices generally played no

significant role in their religious life.[8]

A key social and religious tenet highlighted in the sources is the principle of gender equality.[8] In contrast to more conservative Islamic traditions, Alevi men and women typically pray together in communal ceremonies, and women are not traditionally required to wear headscarves.[8] This emphasis on gender equality likely served as a significant cultural marker, distinguishing them within the broader social landscape of northern Syria.

Rituals, Traditions, and Leadership:

The central communal worship gathering in Alevism is the Cem ceremony, a complex ritual involving prayer, music (often featuring the bağlama/saz), mystical poetry (deyiş), and communal reconciliation.[8] However, a significant disruption in this core practice appears to have occurred in Afrin well before 2010. One source specifically focusing on Maabatli reports that the Cem ceremony had not been performed there for approximately 40 years prior to 2018, indicating a cessation around 1978.[9] This cessation points towards a potential internal crisis or significant external pressures impacting the community long before the Syrian Civil War. Plausible contributing factors include the disruption of visits by traditional Alevi religious leaders (Dedes or Pirs) from Turkey due to deteriorating Syria-Turkey political relations, which severed crucial ties to leadership and knowledge centers.[9] Assimilation pressures from the surrounding Sunni environment or Syrian state policies, coupled with a potential decline in internal religious knowledge, may also have played a role.[1] The absence of the regular Cem likely led to an increased reliance on other forms of religious expression, such as visiting local shrines.

While Afrin's Alevis spoke Kurmanji in daily life [8], the language used in historical Cem ceremonies is not specified, though Alevi traditions heavily feature Turkish due to their Anatolian origins.[10] Despite political borders and the apparent decline in formal Cem practices, Afrin's Alevis maintained connections to the traditional Alevi lineage system based on "Ocaks" (sacred hereditary lineages) originating in Turkey. Evidence suggests affiliations with the Hızır Uryan Ocak based in Adıyaman, whose Pir (spiritual leader) had visited Afrin in the past before the war made travel impossible.[9] The presence of shrines dedicated to "Yağmur Dede" also points to a connection with the Yağmur Dede Ocak.[9] These enduring links to Anatolian Ocaks underscore the resilience of transnational religious networks and the importance of lineage identity, further reinforcing their cultural distinction from Syrian Alawites who possess different historical origins and religious structures.[12]

In the potential absence or decline of formal Cem ceremonies, local shrines served as important focal points for religious life. Specific sites mentioned include Yağmur Dede and Berberoj in the Maabatli area.[9] The Yağmur Dede shrine was reportedly visited particularly on Fridays, where devotees would distribute sacrificial food (lokma) and offer prayers, potentially for rain.[9] Other Alevi shrines noted in the broader Afrin region include Aslan Dadeh, Ali Dadeh, Maryam Dadeh, Sultan Berbash, Sheikh Hammo, and Sheikh Ma'am.[18] The term "Dede" itself, appearing in several shrine names, signifies the historical presence and influence of Alevi religious figures.[8]

While Alevism is often characterized by its strong oral tradition, research, particularly in

Turkey, has uncovered a rich written culture, including manuscript notebooks (cönks) containing poetry and religious notes, as well as foundational texts like Buyruks, preserved within Dede families.[20] The extent to which such written materials were present or utilized among Afrin's Alevis before 2010 is not detailed in the available sources, but their connection to the Ocak system suggests a potential link to this broader literate tradition.

To clarify the distinctions discussed, the following table summarizes key differences between Afrin's Alevis and Syria's Alawites in the pre-2010 context:

Table 1: Key Differences Between Afrin Alevis and Syrian Alawites (Pre-2010 Context)

Feature	Afrin Alevis (Pre-2010)	Syrian Alawites
Ethnicity	Primarily Kurdish [8]	Primarily Arab [10]
Language (Worship)	Primarily Turkish influence (Anatolian roots), Kurmanji in daily life [8]	Arabic [10]
Primary Location (Syria)	Afrin District (esp. Maabatli sub-district) [8]	Coastal Mountains (Latakia, Tartus), some urban centers [12]
Core Theology (View of Ali)	Deep reverence, part of "Allah-Muhammad-Ali" concept, not typically seen as divine [10]	Viewed as a divine manifestation or incarnation of God; part of a Trinity concept (Ma'na, Ism, Bab) [10]
Key Rituals	Cem ceremony (communal gathering with music, poetry, dance) [8]	Distinct esoteric rituals, secrecy, some Christian influences (e.g., celebrating Mass) [10]
Role of Women (Worship)	Pray alongside men, gender equality emphasized [8]	Faith traditionally not taught to women; limited role in communal worship [10]
Relationship with Quran	Recognized, but often interpreted non-literally; focus on inner meaning [10]	Reportedly believe mainstream Quran is distorted; possess own interpretations/texts [10]
Historical Origins	Anatolian Sufi/heterodox movements (13th-14th C onwards) [19]	Founded by Ibn Nusayr (9th C Iraq), distinct development in Syrian mountains [12]

The following table lists some of the specific Alevi shrines mentioned as being significant in the Afrin region, serving as tangible markers of their religious geography and practice before 2010:

Table 2: Documented Alevi Shrines in the Afrin Region (Pre-2010 Significance)

Shrine Name	Location/Association	Significance/Notes	Sources
Yağmur Dede	Maabatli area	Visited on Fridays, prayers for rain,	[9]

		distribution of lokma. Suggests connection to Yağmur Dede Ocak.	
Berberoj	Maabatli area	Local pilgrimage site.	[9]
Aslan Dadeh	Afrin region	Presence indicates historical Alevi influence ("Dadeh" title).	[18]
Ali Dadeh	Afrin region	Presence indicates historical Alevi influence ("Dadeh" title).	[18]
Maryam Dadeh	Afrin region	Presence indicates historical Alevi influence ("Dadeh" title).	[18]
Sultan Berbash	Afrin region	Known shrine in the area.	[18]
Sheikh Hammo	Afrin region	Known shrine in the area.	[18]
Sheikh Ma'am	Afrin region	Known shrine in the area.	[18]
"Dede"/"Baba" Sites	Afrin region	General presence of sites with these names indicates widespread historical Alevi settlement/influence.	[8]

5. Navigating Life in Pre-War Syria: Politics and Economy

The Alevi community of Afrin, prior to 2010, existed within the political and economic framework of Ba'athist Syria, facing challenges common to the region's Kurds while also navigating issues specific to their religious identity.

Political and Economic Participation:

Despite constituting a minority, Afrin's Alevis were not politically or economically invisible. Sources indicate they played a role in the political, cultural, and economic life of the region.[8] An early example of political engagement is Muhammad Ali Khojah (1916-1965), an Alevi figure noted as one of the founders of the first "Kurdish Democratic Party" in Syria.[8] While this predates the specific timeframe of this report, it establishes a historical precedent for Alevi participation in Kurdish political organization. Economically, they were integrated into Afrin's predominantly agricultural economy, centered heavily on olive cultivation [1], and participated in

the trade networks connecting the region to Aleppo's markets.[6] Some individuals pursued professional careers, such as Dr. Nuri Dersimi working as a veterinarian in Aleppo.[8]

Relationship with the Syrian State:

As part of Syria's Kurdish population, the Alevis of Afrin experienced the systematic discrimination and marginalization characteristic of the Ba'ath regime's policies towards Kurds.[1] These policies included the suppression of the Kurdish language in official spheres and education, the repression of cultural celebrations, and significant restrictions on property rights, including obtaining deeds or permits for building and repairs, particularly in border areas like Afrin.[1] Although the mass denaturalization of Kurds primarily occurred in the northeastern Jazira region in the 1960s, rendering hundreds of thousands stateless [2], the underlying state ideology of Arab nationalism fostered an environment of suspicion and control over Kurdish populations nationwide.

Afrin was also subject to the state's Arabization policies, which sought to alter the demographic and cultural landscape of Kurdish regions.[1] This involved changing Kurdish place names to Arabic ones, as potentially exemplified by the renaming of the "Kızılbaş" village.[9] While large-scale, state-sponsored settlement of Arab families onto Kurdish lands was more extensively documented in Jazira, it was part of a broader national strategy.[1] Furthermore, key administrative, security (police and secret service), and professional positions (engineers, teachers) in Kurdish regions like Afrin were often filled by non-Kurds, typically Arabs loyal to the Ba'ath party, dispatched from central Syria.[2]

Beyond the general anti-Kurdish policies, there is an indication that the Syrian state may have attempted to manipulate the Alevi community's specific religious identity. One source suggests that after political tensions between Syria and Turkey severed the connection between Afrin's Alevis and their traditional religious leadership (Pirs) in Turkey, Syrian authorities sought to exploit this vacuum by attempting to shift the community's religious orientation towards the Syrian coast – the heartland of the politically dominant Alawites.[18] If accurate, this suggests a pre-2010 state strategy aimed at co-opting or neutralizing the Alevi minority's distinct identity, potentially to weaken their ties to external influences (Turkey) and perhaps align them more closely with the Alawite-dominated state apparatus.

Historical Pressures and Local Tensions:

The community's collective memory likely included experiences of historical pressure predating the Ba'ath regime. Alevi communities faced discrimination and periods of persecution under the Ottoman Empire [18], and memories of events like the 16th-century massacre in Aleppo might have lingered.[18] More recent historical friction is evidenced by an account of an armed attack on the Alevi center of Maabatli in 1920. This attack was reportedly carried out by residents of neighboring villages and fueled by religiously motivated smear campaigns, indicating a history of local tensions based on religious difference that existed even during the French Mandate period.[18]

The overall experience of Afrin's Alevis before 2010 appears to have been shaped by a complex intersection of pressures. They faced systemic discrimination as Kurds under the Syrian state's Arab nationalist policies, a pressure shared with their Sunni Kurdish neighbors.

Simultaneously, they navigated historical and potentially ongoing local tensions related specifically to their distinct Alevi religious identity and practices. This dual status as both an ethnic and a religious minority likely shaped their community strategies and political outlook in ways distinct from both Sunni Kurds and the politically ascendant Syrian Alawites.

6. Conclusion: Profile of Afrin's Alevis on the Eve of Conflict

As Syria stood on the brink of civil war in 2010, the Alevi community of Afrin represented a long-established, culturally distinct minority embedded within the region's predominantly Kurdish landscape. Concentrated primarily in the Maabatli sub-district [8], they carried a history intertwined with Anatolia, with origins traced to migrations from regions like Malatya, Maraş, and Elbistan, and significantly, through refugees escaping the traumatic Dersim Massacre in Turkey during the 1930s.[3] They identified strongly as Kurds and spoke the local Kurmanji dialect, sharing a linguistic bond with their neighbors.[8]

Their religious identity was firmly rooted in Anatolian Alevism, characterized by reverence for Ali, the rejection of Sharia law, an emphasis on gender equality in worship, and connection to traditional Alevi Ocaks (sacred lineages) in Turkey.[8] This identity and associated practices clearly differentiated them from Syria's politically dominant, Arabic-speaking Alawite community.[10] While the central Cem ceremony reportedly faced significant decline in Maabatli decades before 2010 [9], local shrines like Yağmur Dede served as important focal points for religious life, demonstrating the resilience of their traditions.[9]

Socially and politically, Afrin's Alevis navigated a complex reality. They were integrated into the local agricultural economy, particularly centered around olive cultivation, and maintained connections with the regional hub of Aleppo.[6] Unlike some other Kurdish areas, tribal structures were weak in Afrin, likely placing greater emphasis on shared locality, language, and religious identity.[6] However, as part of Syria's Kurdish population, they endured the systemic discrimination and Arabization policies of the Ba'athist state.[1] They also faced distinct historical and local pressures related to their specific Alevi faith.[18]

In essence, the Alevis of Afrin entered the tumultuous second decade of the 21st century as a unique community shaped by migration, historical persecution, assimilation pressures under the Syrian state, and enduring, distinct religious traditions linked to Anatolia rather than the Levant. They were a minority within a minority region, whose specific history and identity positioned them uniquely within the complex ethno-religious mosaic of northern Syria, on the verge of changes that would profoundly reshape their existence and the region they inhabited.

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