

Drivers of Rural Depopulation in Afrin, Syria: A Pre-2010 Analysis

Introduction

The Afrin district, situated in the northwestern corner of Syria's Aleppo governorate along the border with Turkey, has historically been recognized as a predominantly Kurdish region.¹

Comprising numerous villages set within an agricultural landscape, Afrin existed for decades under the complex political and social dynamics of Ba'athist Syria.¹ Before the transformative conflicts that engulfed Syria after 2011, the region's population was overwhelmingly Kurdish, with some estimates suggesting Kurds constituted as much as 96 percent of the inhabitants prior to the war², forming part of Syria's overall Kurdish minority, estimated at roughly 10 percent of the national population pre-2011.³

This report aims to analyze the multifaceted and interconnected factors that contributed to significant emigration, displacement, and the potential abandonment of villages within the Afrin region specifically during the period *before 2010*. The analysis focuses on identifying the systemic pressures—political, socio-economic, security-related, and environmental—originating primarily from Syrian state policies and practices that impacted the Kurdish population of Afrin during this timeframe. It seeks to demonstrate that the conditions fostering depopulation were deeply entrenched long before the outbreak of the Syrian civil war.

The findings presented here are based exclusively on an analysis of provided research materials. The scope is strictly limited to the pre-2010 period and the geographical area of Afrin, acknowledging that data often pertains to Syrian Kurds more broadly but has direct relevance to the conditions within Afrin. Rigorous filtering has been applied to exclude information pertaining to events after December 31, 2009. All sources utilized are explicitly cited according to the required format [User Query].

I. Systemic State Discrimination and Repression Against Kurds (Pre-2010): The Foundational Context

The pressures contributing to the depopulation of Afrin's villages before 2010 were rooted in a long history of systemic discrimination and repression directed by the Syrian state against its Kurdish minority. This environment was characterized by the denial of fundamental rights, suppression of cultural identity, political persecution, and pervasive security force abuses, creating conditions inimical to stable community life.

- **A. The Legacy of Statelessness**

A pivotal act of state-sponsored discrimination occurred in 1962 with a special census conducted solely in the al-Hasakeh province, another Kurdish-majority region. This census arbitrarily stripped approximately 120,000 Syrian-born Kurds of their citizenship, classifying them either as *ajanib* (foreigners) or *maktumin* (unregistered).⁴ This act of denationalization was not rectified in subsequent decades; due to the hereditary nature of statelessness under Syrian law, the number of affected Kurds grew significantly. By 2010, estimates placed the

number of stateless Kurds in Syria at around 300,000.⁴

While the 1962 census specifically targeted al-Hasakeh, the legal status it created and the discriminatory framework it represented had profound implications for Kurds throughout Syria, including Afrin. Statelessness resulted in the denial of a wide array of basic civil, political, economic, and social rights. Stateless Kurds faced severe obstacles in accessing formal employment, as they were prohibited from working in the public sector and faced increasing restrictions in the private sector.⁴ Access to essential state services like healthcare was curtailed; for instance, a 2007 regulation reportedly limited access to state hospitals based on health books unavailable to the stateless.⁴ In education, while primary schooling was compulsory, stateless children often faced barriers to enrollment and could not receive official school certificates, effectively blocking pathways to higher education and professional careers.⁴ Furthermore, statelessness severely impacted rights related to property ownership, political participation, and freedom of movement.⁴ This legally codified marginalization created a substantial segment of the Kurdish population living in perpetual insecurity and disadvantage.

- **B. Suppression of Kurdish Identity**

The Syrian state, under the Ba'ath party, adhered to a strict Arab nationalist ideology that actively sought to suppress non-Arab identities.¹ This manifested in numerous policies targeting Kurdish language and culture. The teaching of the Kurdish language in schools was prohibited⁵, and severe restrictions were placed on the publication of materials in Kurdish.⁸ The celebration of significant Kurdish cultural events, most notably Nowruz (the Kurdish New Year), was frequently restricted or banned, with security forces often dispersing gatherings, sometimes using violence.⁴ Furthermore, the state engaged in the Arabization of place names in Kurdish areas, including villages in Afrin, erasing Kurdish geographical heritage.¹ Even seemingly innocuous expressions of cultural identity, such as displaying Kurdish symbols or engaging in Kurdish arts, could be interpreted by authorities as political acts, leading to criminalization and persecution.⁴ This systematic suppression aimed to erase Kurdish cultural distinctiveness and enforce assimilation into the state-defined Arab identity.

- **C. Political Persecution and Lack of Representation**

The political environment in Syria before 2010 was heavily constrained by the State of Emergency, which had been continuously in force since March 1963.⁹ This emergency legislation suspended many constitutional rights and provided the legal justification for widespread repression, particularly against perceived political opponents.⁸ It allowed security forces extensive powers of arrest and detention, bypassing normal legal procedures.⁸ Notably, the Syrian government reportedly never fulfilled its international obligation under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to notify the UN of its derogation from the treaty's provisions under the state of emergency.¹⁰ The entrenched nature of the emergency law demonstrated it was not a temporary measure but a permanent tool of governance used to suppress dissent.⁹

Within this repressive climate, Kurdish political aspirations were actively suppressed. Kurdish political parties were banned, although numerous groups existed clandestinely or

semi-secretly (around 14 by 2010, including the PYD formed in 2003).³ Any form of political activity, even possessing Kurdish newspapers or holding private meetings, could result in arrest and prosecution.⁴ Security agencies regularly detained Kurdish activists demanding political rights and cultural recognition.⁷ Trials were often conducted before exceptional courts, such as the Supreme State Security Court (SSSC) or military courts, which lacked basic standards of fairness and due process.⁴ Activists faced vague charges like "weakening national sentiment," "spreading false information," "inciting sectarian or racial strife," or attempting "to cut off part of Syrian land".⁵ Examples include the sentencing of members of the Kurdish Azadi Party in 2009 for articles criticizing discrimination⁹ and the sentencing or pending trials of members of the Yekiti Party in 2010.¹²

- **D. Security Apparatus Abuses and Impunity**

The Syrian state maintained control through a pervasive and feared network of security agencies, commonly known as the *mukhabarat*.⁵ These agencies operated with extensive power and minimal oversight. Arbitrary detention was a common practice, with security forces arresting individuals without warrants, often holding them incommunicado for extended periods, sometimes weeks or months, and refusing to disclose their whereabouts to families.⁴ Enforced disappearance was a documented tactic used against political opponents, including Kurds, with a long legacy dating back to the mass disappearances of the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁸ A specific pre-2010 example cited is the disappearance of Hozan Nawaf Rashed in May 2009 after his arrest by the General Intelligence Directorate.⁸

Torture and ill-treatment were reported by numerous human rights organizations to be systematic and widespread in detention centers operated by the security services.⁴ Former detainees and human rights groups consistently reported horrific methods, including electrical shocks, pulling out fingernails, beatings on the soles of the feet (*falaqa*), beatings while suspended (*shabeh*), forcing objects into the rectum, burning genitalia, the use of a contorting device known as the 'German chair', encasing the victim in a tire for beatings (*dulab*), and strapping victims to a foldable board (*bisat al-rih* or 'flying carpet').⁴ Torture was frequently used to extract confessions, punish dissent, or obtain information.⁸ Specific cases involving Kurds include the reported torture of Jakarkhon 'Ali and Khaled Kenjo in 2009.⁹ Crucially, these abuses were committed with near-total impunity. Legislation, such as Legislative Decree No. 14 and Legislative Decree No. 69 of 2008, granted immunity from prosecution to members of various security services for offenses committed in the line of duty.⁴ This legal shield ensured that victims had virtually no recourse to justice and that perpetrators were not held accountable.

Further contributing to the climate of fear were the suspicious deaths of young Kurdish men during their compulsory military service. Human rights observers documented numerous cases (nearly 40 between roughly 2007 and 2010) where Kurdish conscripts died under questionable circumstances, often officially ruled as suicides or accidents despite evidence suggesting otherwise (e.g., multiple bullet wounds).⁸ The death of Riyadh Ahmed Khalil in custody in August 2010 after being arrested two months prior is one such documented case.⁸ The confluence of statelessness, cultural suppression, political persecution, and brutal

security practices created a deeply insecure and hostile environment for Kurds in Syria. This was not merely discrimination but a multi-pronged state strategy that fostered alienation and vulnerability. The normalization of arbitrary rule under the State of Emergency removed legal safeguards and institutionalized insecurity. For many Kurds in Afrin and elsewhere, emigration emerged not just as a desire for better opportunities, but as a rational response to pervasive fear and the lack of a secure future within the Syrian state.

II. Land Policies, Property Rights, and Demographic Engineering (Pre-2010)

Parallel to direct repression, the Syrian state employed discriminatory land policies and property restrictions as tools to control Kurdish regions, undermine their inhabitants' connection to the land, and, in some cases, actively alter the demographic composition of strategic areas like Afrin.

- **A. Historical Context: Securitization of Border Regions**

Following independence, Syrian governments consistently viewed border regions, particularly the long frontier with Turkey where Afrin is located, through a security lens.¹ This perspective informed policies that restricted development and property rights in these areas. As early as 1952, a government decree imposed prohibitions on building, transferring ownership, or improving land in designated border zones, measures that disproportionately affected the Kurdish communities who predominantly inhabited these regions.¹ These types of restrictions on housing, land, and property (HLP) transactions under the guise of 'securitization' persisted in various forms right up until 2011.¹

- **B. The "Arab Belt" / "Greenbelt" Policies**

Beginning in the 1960s, during the period of the United Arab Republic (UAR) with Egypt (1958-1961) and continuing under the subsequent Ba'ath regime, the Syrian state pursued policies explicitly aimed at changing the demographic makeup of Kurdish-majority border regions.¹ Known colloquially as the "Arab Belt" or "Greenbelt" policies, the strategy involved settling Arab populations in Kurdish areas while displacing or marginalizing the existing Kurdish inhabitants.⁴

Methods included the confiscation of lands owned by Kurds and their redistribution to Arab families brought in from other parts of Syria.¹ While a large-scale plan to displace 140,000 Kurds from 332 villages along the border in al-Hasakeh province was reportedly halted in 1976, the underlying policy objective remained.⁴ Evidence indicates these policies were implemented in Afrin as well. During the UAR period, following local land reforms, Arab families from the 'Amirat tribe east of Aleppo and the Bubana tribe near Menbij were resettled in Afrin city, the Jandaris subdistrict, and villages previously inhabited solely by Kurds.¹ The government also authorized nomadic Arab herders, who had traditionally passed through the area seasonally, to settle permanently.¹

These demographic policies were often coupled with economic measures designed to disadvantage Kurdish areas. For example, development was deliberately limited in regions like Al Jazera (in the northeast), restricting production primarily to agriculture (wheat and oil) and prohibiting the establishment of factories or industries.¹¹ This economic underdevelopment aimed to ensure Kurdish dependence and make settlement more attractive for Arabs receiving redistributed land and state support.¹¹

- **C. Decree 49 (September 2008): Intensifying Property Restrictions**

In September 2008, the Syrian government issued Legislative Decree No. 49, which significantly intensified existing restrictions on property rights in border regions.¹ The decree mandated that any transaction involving real estate—including selling, buying, inheriting, or even building and making improvements—within 25 kilometers of Syria's international borders required prior security approval from the central government in Damascus.¹

Afrin, with its extensive border with Turkey, fell squarely within the scope of this decree and was severely impacted.¹ Crucially, security permissions required by Decree 49 were reportedly almost never granted to Kurds.¹ This made it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, for Kurdish homeowners in Afrin to obtain official property deeds (*tabu akhdar*), which are essential for legally proving ownership.¹ The decree effectively froze the legal property market for Kurds in the region, preventing them from selling land, securing loans using property as collateral, or legally passing property to their heirs.⁴ It fueled widespread fear among the Kurdish population of eventual forced displacement or expropriation, as their hold on their land became increasingly precarious.⁴ Protests erupted against the decree, leading to arrests of demonstrators, including Kurds and members of the Communist Party who opposed the measure.⁷

- **D. Consequences for Rural Communities**

The cumulative effect of these historical and contemporary land policies was devastating for Kurdish rural communities in Afrin. The long-standing restrictions, the targeted resettlement of Arab populations onto confiscated lands, and the near-total freeze on legal property transactions imposed by Decree 49 systematically undermined Kurdish tenure security.¹ Without official deeds, properties were vulnerable to disputes and potential state confiscation.¹ The inability to legally build, improve, or transfer property discouraged investment in agriculture and rural infrastructure, contributing to economic stagnation and decay in villages.¹

These land and property laws functioned as deliberate instruments of state control, extending beyond mere security concerns. They represented a strategy of demographic engineering aimed at diluting the Kurdish presence in strategic border zones like Afrin. By attacking both historical ownership claims (through confiscation and resettlement) and the ability to secure future tenure (through legal restrictions like Decree 49), the state created profound insecurity around the most fundamental asset for rural communities: land. This assault on land rights made agricultural livelihoods increasingly difficult and village life fundamentally precarious, directly contributing to the pressures forcing Kurds to leave their ancestral homes.

III. Socio-Economic Marginalization and Environmental Stress (Pre-2010)

Compounding the political repression and land insecurity, Kurds in Afrin faced significant socio-economic marginalization and environmental pressures prior to 2010, further contributing to the untenability of rural life.

- **A. Economic Underdevelopment and Neglect**

Reports from the period indicate that Kurdish-majority regions in Syria, particularly the northeast which often served as a proxy indicator in reports discussing Kurdish areas, suffered from systemic economic neglect.⁴ These areas exhibited higher rates of poverty,

illiteracy, and unemployment compared to other parts of the country.⁴ State policies actively hindered industrial development in Kurdish regions, limiting economic diversification and opportunity.⁴ While broader agrarian reforms occurred under the Ba'ath regime (1963-2000) followed by counter-reforms (2000-2010) aimed at consolidating state control over agriculture¹³, their implementation within a context of systemic discrimination likely disadvantaged Kurdish farmers, particularly given the severe restrictions on land ownership and improvement in border areas like Afrin.

- **B. Poverty, Unemployment, and Lack of Opportunity**

The combination of deliberate underdevelopment, restrictions on land use, and the specific barriers faced by stateless Kurds (who were barred from many public and private sector jobs⁴) resulted in severely limited livelihood options within Afrin's villages. Lack of economic opportunity, particularly for younger generations, acted as a powerful push factor, compelling many to seek work and a more hopeful future in larger Syrian cities like Aleppo and Damascus, or even to emigrate abroad.⁴ This economic despair was not simply a byproduct of geography but intertwined with the state's discriminatory policies. The resulting economic pressure formed a key component of the triad—alongside political repression and land insecurity—that rendered village life increasingly unsustainable for many Kurdish families in Afrin.

- **C. Agricultural Vulnerability and Drought**

Afrin's economy was significantly based on agriculture, with olive cultivation being particularly important (though specific pre-2010 details on olive farming are limited in the provided sources). This agricultural base made the region vulnerable to environmental shocks. In the years leading up to 2010, Syria experienced a severe and prolonged drought, particularly impacting the eastern and northeastern parts of the country.⁴ While one report from 2010 suggested Afrin was less severely affected by the drought than the al-Hasakeh province⁴, it is highly likely that the drought conditions still placed significant strain on agricultural production and water resources across northern Syria, including Afrin.

The scale of the crisis in nearby regions was immense, with reports indicating over 1.3 million people affected and more than 800,000 losing their employment in eastern Syria due to crop failures over successive harvests.¹⁴ The government's response to this crisis was described as minimal, offering little relief to struggling agricultural communities.⁴ Furthermore, pre-existing tensions over water resources with Turkey, which controls the headwaters of major rivers flowing into Syria, added another layer of vulnerability, as Turkey had historically used water flow as political leverage.¹⁵ This devastating drought acted as an acute stressor on agricultural communities already weakened by chronic political marginalization and economic neglect. For many farming families in Afrin facing dwindling harvests and income on top of existing pressures, the drought likely served as a tipping point, accelerating migration decisions.

- **D. Disparities in Basic Services**

Access to basic public services was another area where Kurds faced discrimination. As previously noted, stateless Kurds encountered significant difficulties accessing state healthcare and obtaining educational qualifications.⁴ While specific data on the quality and availability of services like electricity, clean water, and schooling in rural Afrin villages before 2010 is scarce in the provided materials, the documented pattern of state neglect in Kurdish

areas strongly suggests that these communities likely suffered from deficiencies in infrastructure and service provision compared to regions favored by the regime.⁴ This lack of basic amenities would have further diminished the quality of life in rural areas and contributed to the desire to relocate.

IV. The 2004 Qamishli Uprising: A Catalyst for Increased Repression

A specific event that significantly impacted the security climate for Kurds across Syria, including Afrin, was the uprising that began in Qamishli in March 2004.

- **A. Context and Events**

The unrest started during a football match between a local Kurdish team and an Arab team from Deir ez-Zor, escalating into riots after Syrian security forces reportedly fired on Kurdish fans.⁴ The violence intensified during subsequent funeral processions for those killed.⁴ The protests, fueled by long-simmering grievances against discrimination and repression, quickly spread to other Kurdish towns and cities in the northeast, as well as Kobanê.⁴

- **B. State Response and Consequences**

The Syrian state responded to the demonstrations with brutal force. Security forces used live ammunition against protesters, resulting in the deaths of at least 36 people, mostly Kurds, and injuries to over 160 others.⁴ A massive wave of arrests followed, with more than 2,000 individuals detained.⁴ There were widespread and credible reports of torture and ill-treatment of those detained in the aftermath of the uprising.⁵

- **C. Impact on Security Climate**

The 2004 Qamishli events marked a watershed moment, leading to a significant intensification of state repression against the Kurdish minority throughout Syria.⁵ In the years following the uprising, security services increased their harassment of Kurds, imposed stricter bans on Kurdish political and cultural gatherings, and stepped up the arrests and prosecution of Kurdish political activists.⁵ The state's violent reaction sent a clear message that any form of collective Kurdish expression or mobilization would be met with overwhelming force. This crackdown likely shattered any residual hopes among Kurds for meaningful reform or increased rights under the Assad regime. Paradoxically, the heightened repression may have also spurred greater political organization, as evidenced by the formation of seven new Kurdish political parties between 2004 and 2010.³ However, the primary impact was the creation of an even more fearful and oppressive atmosphere, solidifying the perception of the Syrian state as an antagonist and making the prospect of remaining in the country seem increasingly untenable and dangerous for many Kurds, likely accelerating decisions to emigrate from regions like Afrin.

V. Evidence of Pre-2010 Depopulation and Migration from Afrin

Direct evidence confirms that significant emigration and depopulation affecting Afrin's villages were occurring before 2010, driven by the cumulative pressures outlined above.

- **A. Documented Trends**

A joint fact-finding mission report by the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) and the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD), published in May 2010, explicitly documented migration trends among Syrian Kurds prior to that date.⁴ The report noted both internal migration, with Kurds moving from rural areas to cities like

Damascus and Aleppo, and external migration out of Syria altogether. These movements were directly attributed to the systemic discrimination, the severe drought affecting northern regions, and restrictive government policies, particularly Decree 49 of 2008.⁴

Crucially, the 2010 report specifically mentions Afrin in this context. While acknowledging that Afrin had been less severely impacted by the drought compared to the northeastern province of al-Hasakeh, the report states unequivocally that Afrin "is also facing emigration".⁴ The primary reasons cited for this emigration from Afrin were the "lack of work and intense security pressure".⁴

The report further quantifies the scale of this movement based on information from sources interviewed during the mission. A prominent Kurdish political leader informed the mission that in the two years preceding the report (approximately 2008-2009), an estimated 300,000 Kurds had emigrated from the northern and northeastern regions of Syria.⁴ This emigration was reportedly reflected in a significant drop in primary school enrollment in these areas, leading to the closure of some schools.⁴ While this figure covers a broader area than just Afrin, it indicates the massive scale of Kurdish out-migration during this period. Specific estimates for internal displacement from al-Hasakeh province alone ranged from 30,000 to 35,000 families moving to other parts of Syria, with some towns and villages being completely emptied.⁴

- **B. Push Factors Analysis**

The observed migration and depopulation trends from Afrin and other Kurdish areas before 2010 were a direct consequence of the multiple push factors systematically applied by the Syrian state over decades.⁴ As summarized in the table below, these factors spanned political, security, land/property, socio-economic, and environmental domains, creating a complex web of pressures that made life increasingly difficult and insecure for Kurdish inhabitants.

Factor Category	Specific Push Factor	Supporting Evidence
Political/Security	Statelessness (denial of citizenship & rights)	⁴
	Suppression of Kurdish Language & Culture	⁴
	Ban on Kurdish Political Parties & Activism	⁴
	Arbitrary Arrests & Unfair Trials (SSSC, Military Courts)	⁴
	Pervasive Surveillance & Harassment by Security Services	⁴
	Systematic Torture & Ill-Treatment in Detention	⁴
	Impunity for Security Force Abuses	⁴

	Suspicious Deaths of Kurdish Conscripts	⁸
	Intensified Repression after 2004 Qamishli Uprising	⁵
Land/Property	Historical Land Restrictions in Border Areas	¹
	"Arab Belt" Policy: Land Confiscation & Arab Resettlement	¹
	Decree 49 (2008): Freeze on Property Transactions for Kurds	¹
	Difficulty Obtaining Official Property Deeds (<i>tabu akhdar</i>)	¹
	Undermining of Tenure Security & Agricultural Investment	¹
Socio-Economic	Systemic Economic Neglect & Underdevelopment	⁴
	High Rates of Poverty & Unemployment	⁴
	Restrictions on Employment for Stateless Kurds	⁴
	Lack of Economic Opportunity / Limited Livelihoods	⁴
	Deficiencies in Basic Services (Healthcare, Education)	⁴
Environmental	Severe Drought (late 2000s) impacting Agriculture	⁴
	Minimal Government Response to Drought Crisis	⁴

The emigration was not a sudden phenomenon triggered by a single event but rather a continuous process driven by these cumulative pressures. This process appears to have accelerated in the late 2000s, coinciding with the implementation of Decree 49 and the peak years of the severe drought.⁴ The substantial emigration figures reported by 2010 suggest that these long-term state policies were effectively achieving an implicit or explicit goal: encouraging the depopulation of Kurds from strategic northern border regions like Afrin. This demographic shift was being accomplished through sustained, multi-faceted pressure, laying the groundwork for displacement long before the overt conflicts that began in 2011.

Conclusion

The analysis of conditions in the Afrin region prior to 2010 reveals that the abandonment or significant depopulation of its villages was not a consequence of natural migration patterns or

isolated incidents. Instead, it was the cumulative result of decades of deliberate and systemic Syrian state policies aimed at the political, social, economic, and cultural marginalization of the Kurdish population.

Key drivers included:

- **Pervasive Political Repression:** The denial of basic rights through statelessness, the suppression of Kurdish identity and language, the banning of political activity, arbitrary arrests, unfair trials, systematic torture, and the impunity of security forces created an environment of constant fear and insecurity.
- **Discriminatory Land Policies:** Historical restrictions, the implementation of "Arab Belt" resettlement policies, and the crippling effects of Decree 49 systematically undermined Kurdish land tenure, property rights, and attachment to ancestral lands, making rural livelihoods precarious.
- **Socio-Economic Marginalization:** Deliberate economic neglect, high unemployment, lack of opportunity (especially for the stateless), and disparities in basic services diminished the quality of life and pushed residents to seek alternatives elsewhere.
- **Exacerbating Factors:** Specific events like the brutal state response to the 2004 Qamishli uprising and the severe drought in the late 2000s acted as catalysts, intensifying existing vulnerabilities and likely accelerating emigration decisions.

Together, these factors constituted a sustained assault on the viability of Kurdish communities in Afrin. The Syrian state, through a combination of direct repression and structural discrimination, effectively engineered conditions that made emigration a necessary strategy for many Kurdish families seeking security, dignity, and a future for their children. The emptying of villages in Afrin before 2010 was, therefore, a direct outcome of Ba'athist state policies. Understanding this pre-conflict history of state-driven pressure and displacement is crucial for comprehending the subsequent trajectory of the region and the deep-seated grievances of its population. The foundations for the profound demographic shifts and conflicts observed after 2011 were laid much earlier, embedded in the discriminatory structures of the Syrian state.

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