

The Battle for the Mountain of the Kurds

Self-Determination and
Ethnic Cleansing in the
Afrin Region of Rojava

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Christian and Islamic Rule

It was not just Antioch that belonged to the earliest Christian centers; the same was also true of its general surroundings. Thus, the hilly lands of the Kurd Dagh were already a key Christian refuge in the first centuries AD.

The region of Afrin is home to several archaeologically valuable early Christian ruins, among them the city of Cyrrhus, north of Afrin, the ruins of the monastery of St. Simeon, and another site near Bernabé in the south. As a part of the region that predominantly hosted Christian churches that were regarded as heretical and were in part persecuted by the imperial church after the ecclesiastical schisms at the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon, in 431 and 451, respectively, it was relatively easy for seventh-century Muslims to integrate the population – which nonetheless remained predominantly Christian for quite some time – into the Islamic Empire after the conquest of Syria under the caliphs Abu Bakr and Umar.

Under the rule of Caliph Umar, the region of Afrin was annexed to the Islamic Empire in 637. That was the year that a century under the prophet's companion Abu Ubayda Sa'ad b. al-Jarrah b. al-Jarrah of the Quraish clan of the Banu 'Umayr conquered the villages on the Kurd plain, after which the town of Cyrrhus submitted to the Muslims without resistance following an agreement between the military leader and a priest in Cyrrhus.⁷

In the late eleventh century today's region of Afrin became part of the Antioch principdom created by the crusaders. The Europeans used the former St. Simeon monastery in the south of the region as a crusader castle for their – ultimately unsuccessful – attacks on Hama.

However, more than a hundred years before the end of the principdom of Antioch in 1268, the region of Afrin had already been conquered by the Turkmen dynasty of the Zengids, under the leadership of 'Imād ad-Dīn Zangī, who succeeded in seizing large swathes of Mesopotamia and Aleppo after the fall of Mosul in 1128.⁸

After the victory of Saladin, a Kurdish prince from what is now central Iraq, over the Zengids near the River of Hama in April 1173 and

⁷ Ibid. 112.

⁸ Muhammad Asad, *Asad's History of the Arab World* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959), 112.

⁹ Ibid. 112. The Age of the Crusades: The Near East from the Eleventh Century to 1291 (London: Routledge, 2002), 40.