

# ZAZA KURDS

*Unreached in Turkey*



## *Who are they?*

Zaza is a language, so anyone who speaks any of the many Zaza dialects is considered to be of the Zaza ethnicity. Who the Zaza people are, and where they came from, is highly debated and complicated. Their homeland is in the eastern part of Turkey (blue on the next page), but many have moved from their homeland and now live in big cities all over Turkey as well as in Europe.



## *How many are there?*

About 2-3 million Zaza are estimated to live in Turkey. There is a sizable diaspora community in Europe, primarily Germany, and only a few Zaza people in the USA.



## *Progress?*

As of 2022, there are several hundred Zaza Background Believers (ZBBs) spread out over the whole of Turkey, either living in places with no church at all or joining in non-Zaza churches, with only one house fellowship in the whole country made up entirely of ZBB believers.



# HISTORY

Most Zazas would identify themselves as Kurds, yet distinct from the more extensive group of Kurmanji-speaking Kurds in Turkey. They are split into two main groups by geography and their particular dialects:

1. Northern Zaza (Alevi Kurds), 2. Southern Zaza (Sunni Kurds). Even inside these two groups, some dialects are unique

and distinct and almost entirely unintelligible to one another. Until the last couple of decades, Zazas did not begin to write their language down, and even that was mainly Zaza in the diaspora trying to explain who they were to people in Europe. Most of the Zazas in Turkey struggle to read their language even though they can speak, hear, and understand it.

Language and geography are not the only markers of the different types of Zazas; religion is also. Northern Zazas are Alevi, a unique unorthodox interpretation of Islam that shares a devout love of Ali and a few other things familiar with other branches of Islam, specifically Shiite Islam. Southern Zazas are of the Sunni branch of Islam, like the Kurmanji Kurds and Conservative Turks.

In the history of the Republic of Turkey (1920-present), Zaza's Kurds have been treated mainly like the rest of the Kurdish population...ignored, repressed, afflicted, manipulated, and killed. In 1938 the Zaza people in modern-day Tunceli (Dersim) and the surrounding area were considered by the Turkish government of the time to be potentially rebellious, and the Turkish Armed Forces conducted a campaign in 1937 and 1938 against them leading to the Dersim massacre, sometimes called the Dersim genocide, of civilians. Thousands of Alevi Zazas died, and many others were exiled out of their homeland.

# OPPORTUNITIES?

Much of the Zaza population is severely underserved throughout all of Turkey and the central Zaza region. Therefore what is needed to properly engage the Zaza people are innovative, creative, and apostolic workers who want to be a part of something never done before and barely ever tried! However, there are a handful of creative ideas that would help a team gain access to this area of Turkey and the Zaza people and meet many practical needs that would serve the Zaza community.

- Musicians: primarily cultural contextual music.
- Film projects because the language is not read, or rarely read, at all. One current worker told us, "They would like that a lot!"
- Ethnological/Sociological researcher (for example...doctorate, author, journalist).
- Tourism, especially for the naturalist and outdoor enthusiast types, would have to be done with great respect and awareness of the ecological worldview of the residents.
- It is an economically depressed area...so what are business opportunities that could help? Ski resort, maybe. Some sort of industry that could give people jobs, you would be very popular, but it must be very ecologically aware. No mining that rips up and kills ground.
- A few business guys in Tunceli told us, "We think the best opportunities are the right type of agriculture projects (one idea: geothermal heating for agriculture, set up greenhouses supplied by geothermal activity)."

# HOW TO PRAY?

- There are two very divergent government officials in the central Zaza region and they are on opposite sides of each other. It is tough to get businesses approved that satisfy both parties. Pray for peace and a way through the political mess.
- Pray for the families that deal with the pains of brutal suffering at the hands of the government in the past while trying to find a way for their children to thrive in the future underneath that same government.
- Pray for the Zaza identity. This has been under attack in the past, politicized in the present, and is up in the air for the future. Pray that the Holy Spirit would draw people to himself and give a never changing and unshakeable identity in Jesus.

