

Zaza People are NOT Kurds

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The issue of the Zaza people being Kurds was born from efforts by Kurdish nationalists in Türkiye from the 1980s to convince everyone that such was the case. The vision of Kurdish politicians and nationalists has been to consolidate various ethnic and linguistic groups under a single Kurdish national umbrella. This perspective is largely driven by the Kurdish leader's desire to create a cohesive demographic and political front in the face of regional state policies. By framing the Zaza as Kurds, the Kurdish leaders aim to strengthen the Kurdish movement's legitimacy and territorial claims.¹ The Zaza population is estimated to be between 2 and 4 million, with a significant diaspora residing in Western Europe, particularly in Germany, following the political shifts of the late 20th century. It is no wonder that the Kurdish nationalists always attempted to harbor and include the Zaza people and this large population under the Kurdishness concept.

The Zaza people are an ethnic group primarily residing in the eastern and southeastern regions of Turkey. They possess a history characterized by complex migrations and a distinct cultural identity.² Historical linguists suggest that the ancestors of the Zaza people likely migrated from the Daylam region near the southern shores of the Caspian Sea into the highlands of Anatolia, where the language evolved independently while maintaining its core Indo-European characteristics.³ Historical documentation, including references in medieval Armenian records to "delmik" or "dlmik" (derived from the Middle Iranian *dēlmīk*), further corroborates the connection between the Zaza and the historical Daylamites.⁴

There is a misconception that the Zaza people are synonymous with Alevism. This is false, because Alevism is simply a religious identity held by a majority of the Zaza population, while the remaining of the population adhere to Sunni Islam.⁵

As we know, a unique language is one of the main characteristic of distinct people. But, in this case, the linguistic distinction between Zaza (also known as Zazaki or Dimli) and Kurdish is rooted in their classification within the Iranian language family, their grammatical structures, and their historical development. The Zaza and Kurdish languages belong to different branches of the Northwestern Iranian group.⁶ Zaza language is a distinct member of the Indo-European

¹ Mehmed S., Kaya. *The Zaza Kurds of Turkey: A Middle Eastern Minority in a Globalised Society*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2011, xii.

² Asatrian, Garnik. *The Zaza People: A History of Migration and Identity*.

³ Halbuki Linguist Cooperative.

⁴ Asatrian.

⁵ Joshua Project. *Zaza, Northern in Türkiye*. https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/10252/TU

⁶ Windfuhr, Gernot, ed. *The Iranian Languages*. Routledge, 2009.

language family, specifically situated within the Northwestern Iranian branch.⁷ It shares significant linguistic affinities with languages such as Tati, Talysh, Sangsari, Semnani, Mazandarani, and Gilaki. In fact, Zaza is characterized by significant phonetic and morphological differences that render it mutually unintelligible with the typically known as Kurdish languages: Kurmanji and Sorani.

Most importantly, Zaza leaders reject Kurdish claims and emphasize linguistic, historical, and ancestral differences, highlighting the distinct origins of the Zaza language and the historical migration of their ancestors from the Daylam region of northern Iran.

Let's examine the following sources that substantiate the uniqueness of the Zaza:

1. Kurmanji (one of Kurdish languages) and Zaza are both Iranian languages, but few, if any, Kurmanji speakers understand Zaza.⁸
2. The language of the Zaza, while a pure Iranian tongue, has little in common with Kurdish in grammatical construction and choice of words, but shows a few common features with the Guran and Lurish.⁹
3. The people who claim that Zazas are Kurds should answer: Are Kurds Turkmens?¹⁰
4. In general, the relationship between Kurdish and Median are not closer than the affinities between the latter and other North Western dialects — Baluchi, Talishi, South Caspian, Zaza, Gurani, etc."¹¹
5. Other scholars have traced how the attempted assimilation of Alevi religious practices to Turkishness sparked a counter-history by Kurdish intellectuals, leading to the politicization of Zaza- and Kurmanji-speaking Alevi groups (referring to Leezenberg 2003).¹²
6. Linguistically, the Zaza language belongs to the Northwestern Iranian branch of the Iranian language family, showing a closer phylogenetic affinity to Caspian languages such as Tati, Talysh, Gilaki, and Mazandarani than to the Kurmanji Kurdish dialect.¹³

⁷ Encyclopedia Britannica. *The Indo-European Languages*.

⁸ Bruinessen, Martin van. *The Ethnic Identity of the Kurds in Turkey*. In Peter A. Andrews (ed.), *Ethnic groups in the Republic of Turkey*, 1989.

⁹ Soane, E. B. *Grammar of the Kurmanji or Kurdish Language*. London, Lozac & Co.1913.

¹⁰ Redway, Jacques W. *All Around Asia; A Geographical Reader*. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910, p. 287.

¹¹ Garnik Asatrian. *Prolegomena to the Study of the Kurds*.

¹² Houston, Christopher. *Anthropology of Kurdistan*. Department of Anthropology, Macquarie University, Sydney. *Oxford Bibliographies series*. 2017.

¹³ Ludwig, Paul. *Zazaki: Grammatik und Versuch einer Dialektologie*. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Third Series, Vol. 10, No. 2 (July 2000), pp. 255-257*

7. Many linguists consider Zaza language (Zazaki) and Gurani as distinct languages from Kurdish (See MACKENZIE). These linguists agree that Zazaki, spoken in central East Anatolia, is a separate language (see SELCAN 1998 and PAUL 1998a, 1998b).¹⁴

8. Proponents of the distinct identity theory, such as Garnik Asatrian and Victoria Arakelova, argue that the Zaza possess a unique cultural and historical trajectory that is separate from the Kurdish national identity.¹⁵

9. The flaws of our narrow perspective become immediately apparent when one takes a closer look at Zazaki, Gorani, and Hawrami. If we check the features discussed so far, we notice that Zazaki agrees in many respects with Kurmanji. Both of them retained case and gender distinctions, and both of them lost enclitic pronouns. The ergative construction is generally preserved in Zazaki, as it is in Kurmanji. On the other hand, Sorani, Gorani, and Hawrami share the article system and the peculiar agreement patterns in the past of transitive verbs. Thus, we may erroneously conclude that Zazaki and Kurmanji on the one hand, and Sorani, Gorani, and Hawrami on the other, are more closely related. In fact, this conclusion is incorrect as it ignores other features which clearly separate Zazaki, Gorani, and Hawrami from Kurmanji and Sorani.¹⁶

The Kurdish politicians make many claims that are not proven. Consider the Kurdish nationalists and politicians' claims that Yezidis are Kurds, Medes are Kurds, Halaf, Kardu, Kardukh, Mitannis, Hurrians, Gutians, Sumerians, Sassanids, etc. etc. being Kurds. Imagine the trivial and meaningless claims that the Kurds are the descendants of all these different people who spoke so many different language, used several different writing scripts, and practiced different religious and cultural traits.

It should be noted that some Zaza people identify as Kurds. This is similar to certain Yezidis, Failys, and others who are members of Kurdish political parties, receive generous compensation, and enjoy comfortable lives. However, these individuals do not represent the views of the majority in their communities.

Kurdish leaders have politicized many issues but have not succeeded in having their claims accepted by most reputable scholars.

¹⁴ HAIG, Geoffrey and Yaron Matras. *Kurdish linguistics: a brief overview. Sprachtypol. Univ. Forsch. (STUF). Berlin 55 (2002).*

¹⁵ Mehmed S, Kaya. 2011.

¹⁶ Jügel, Thomas. *On the linguistic history of Kurdish. Kurdish Studies Archive 2 (2014).*