

Türkiye and Syria earthquakes:

rapid overview of language issues

February 2023

In **Türkiye**, the most widely spoken languages are **Turkish and Kurdish (Kurmanji)**. Arabic is also widely used by the Syrian refugee population in Türkiye. In **Syria** the most widely spoken languages are **Levantine Arabic and Kurdish (Kurmanji)**.

Both countries are linguistically diverse. **Several minority and marginalized languages are used in the areas affected by the earthquakes.** These include Armenian, Azerbaijani, Chechen, Domari, Circassian (Kabardian), Farsi, Levantine Arabic Sign Language, Turkmen, Turkish Sign Language, and Zazaki.

Address language and communication issues to support minority and marginalized language speakers in the response

- **Kurdish (Kurmanji) is an important language for the response in both countries.** Kurds are the largest minority group in both countries, making up an estimated [15-20%](#) of the Turkish population and an estimated [10%](#) of the Syrian population. Not all Kurdish speakers speak a second language. Some native Kurdish speakers cannot read or write in Kurdish and are instead literate in Arabic or Turkish. Kurmanji is written using the Latin alphabet in Syria and Türkiye, though other alphabets exist.
 - **Plan for communication in Arabic, Turkish and Kurdish Kurmanji at a minimum to ensure information and support reaches as many people as possible.**
 - **[Collect data](#) on people's language preferences for spoken and written communication.**
- **Some groups are less literate and will struggle to read written information or provide feedback in writing. Older women and Syrian children are especially affected.** Though the average literacy rate in Turkey is very high (97%), rates are lowest in parts of the earthquake-affected region. In Syria, the literacy rate is 86%. Many Syrian children and youth have faced educational disruption; for some, this has [affected literacy levels](#).
 - In both countries, women are more likely than men to be illiterate, especially among older adults. Some marginalized language speakers may only be literate in the language of education and may prefer to receive spoken information in their first language but written information in Arabic or Turkish.
 - **Use a range of formats and prioritize audio and visual communication, including child-friendly versions.**

- **Data on the number of users of signed languages is incomplete.** Estimates say between 150,000 and 330,000 people in Türkiye use Turkish Sign Language, but signs may vary between users. Data on Levantine Arabic Sign Language users in Syria, or Kurdish signed languages, is lacking.
 - [Collect data](#) on language and communication preferences for people with disabilities.
 - [Plan for signed language interpreting.](#)
- **Data on marginalized language use is also incomplete.** At least 15 languages are used across Syria and about 40 are used across Türkiye, yet there is insufficient operational data on marginalized language use in areas most impacted by the earthquakes.
 - Approximately [2-3 million Zazaki speakers](#) live in eastern Türkiye, and almost all use either Kurdish or Turkish as a second language.
 - Though the majority of Roma in Türkiye speak Turkish, [some Roma communities in earthquake-affected areas still use their mother tongue, Domari](#), as their main language.
 - Extreme marginalization has impacted the size of the Yazidi population in both countries; those remaining use Kurdish and may not fully understand Turkish or Arabic.
 - [Collect data](#) on language and communication preferences and factor this into communication planning.
 - Apply [plain language principles](#) to make information clear and accessible, especially for people accessing information in a second language.



How CLEAR Global can help

CLEAR Global's mission is to help people get vital information and be heard, whatever language they speak. We help our partner organizations to listen to and communicate effectively with the communities they serve. We translate messages and documents into local languages, support audio translations and pictorial information, train staff and volunteers, and advise on two-way communication. We also work with partners to field test and revise materials to improve comprehension and impact.

Through our **Emergency Community Translation Partnership program**, we offer **free translation support** for eligible nonprofits, local organizations, community groups and individuals. Read more about the program and check your eligibility on our [website](#).

Existing resources to support effective two-way communication between people affected by earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria are available here:

- Pre-formatted [questions](#) on language and communication preferences, available in English, Turkish and Arabic
- Multilingual [PSEA glossary](#), including three Kurdish dialects and Arabic
- “No Excuse for Abuse” – PSEA training in [Arabic](#), [Kurdish Kurmanji](#), and [Turkish](#)
- [Plain-language PSEA principles](#) in 100+ languages, including [Arabic](#), [Kurdish Kurmanji](#), and [Turkish](#)
- Safeguarding Resource and Support Hub, in [Arabic](#)
- [Kurdish Language Factsheet](#)
- [20+ language tips for effective humanitarian data collection](#), also in [Arabic](#)
- [Field guide for humanitarian interpreting and cultural mediation](#), also in [Arabic](#)
- [Tipsheet on interpreting for sensitive topics](#), also in [Arabic](#)

We also provide training to support effective humanitarian communication (topics include humanitarian interpreting, communication in emergencies, and plain language). For more information visit our [website](#) or contact us at info@clearglobal.org.